

How effective was the foreign policy of Sir Edward Grey 1906-14?

Written by Alexander Stewart

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When Sir Edward Grey took office as Foreign Secretary, in early December, 1905, he did so at a crossroads in both British and European history. Britain had emerged from 'splendid isolation' under his predecessor Lord Lansdowne, making alliance with Japan in 1902, and signing the Entente Cordiale two years later. Consciously or not Britain had retaken its place as a European power, and was once again involved in continental affairs.[1] Prior to this, Britain had been estranged from the 'concert of Europe', and absent from the continental balance of power, her energies focused instead on empire, and her diplomacy exerted on imperial and colonial disputes. Britain had been exposed as powerless to intervene on the continent in the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, 1863, and this ineffectualness was underlined by her subsequent disinterest in the Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian wars. In the Austro-Prussian war Bismarck did not even regard it as necessary to buy British diplomatic support.[2] Disraeli rationalized British non-participation as strength not weakness, 'the abstention of England from any unnecessary interference in the affairs of Europe is the consequence, not of her decline of power, but of her increased strength. *England is no longer a mere European power; she is the metropolis of a great maritime empire, extending to the boundaries of the farthest ocean...she interferes in Asia, because she is really more an Asiatic power than a European one*'. [3]

Indeed, the Empire provided a convenient domestic distraction, and was, in its size, and prestige, envied around the world. Consequently, Britain was in perpetual dispute with her rival Great Powers: France, Russia, and Germany. As Lord Hamilton wrote to Lord Curzon, 'the main cause of the dislike is... that we are like an octopus with gigantic feelers stretching out over the habitable world, constantly interrupting and preventing foreign nations from doing that which we in the past have done ourselves.' [4] Undoubtedly the single greatest imperial nuisance was the French objection to the British position in Egypt, which had been under 'temporary' occupation since 1882. As well as the *Caisse de la Dette*, which Grey described as 'a noose around Britain's neck which any other country could tighten at will,' [5] Britain was spending vast sums to maintain a strong naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea -£24 million by 1899, on a force which numbered fourteen first-class battleships by 1902 - lest any weakness allow a rival to oust them and cut off the route to India. [6] A break came at Fashoda in 1898, the resulting 1899 Anglo-French agreement established Britain's predominance in the Nile Valley and made possible a supplementary agreement recognising the British position in Egypt, and French ascendancy in Morocco. [7] By signing the entente the two nations were no longer rivals but partners, the entente having removed major foreign policy obstacles on both sides. Its expediency meant an end to the assumption that an Anglo-French war was always likely [8] and thus altered the diplomatic landscape, as third parties, namely Germany, had less opportunity to exploit any differences between the two to use as leverage in their own foreign policy. The entente thus represented a re-alignment in European diplomacy, and acted as a counterbalance to the Russian collapse in the Far East at just the moment German diplomatic dominance seemed inevitable, placing Britain in the pivotal role. [9]

In 1906, Germany was the strongest continental power, economically, industrially, demographically and militarily and was poised to dominate the continent as the great counterpoise to its military power, the Russian army, had been humbled in the Far East and Russia was in the throes of revolution. Germany had come a long way in a short time and its claim to world power was based on its consciousness that it was a 'young, growing and rising nation'. [10] Germany had ambitions to become a 'world power' and alone considered its place among the major powers incommensurate with its potential as the most industrialized country on the continent. [11] Eyre Crowe captured

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contemporary wisdom in his 1907 New Years Day memorandum: The world belongs to the strong. A vigorous nation cannot allow its growth to be hampered by blind adherence to the status quo.[12] Germany could not be expected not to want to expand.

Germany was a nation on the rise, Britain on the other hand was imperially overstretched and perceived to be in relative industrial decline.[13] In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the empire grew by over 4 million square miles of territory and approximately 90 million subjects.[14] Industrially, Britain had been caught by her competitors but the overall economic picture was a lot rosier. Britain's share of world trade was in decline but the value of her exports had increased and with her dominance in the 'invisible' trades and the enormous volume of overseas investment, Britain was extraordinarily wealthy.[15] However this also meant Britain was more dependent than any other Power on international trade which made preserving peace ever more important economically.[16] This had become the British interest. Failing this, it was imperative that there remain a power balance on the continent, and in particular that France remain a Great Power, to prevent German hegemony in Europe, as this would have grave implications for the defence of the British Isles. It is on the success or failure of these goals that one must judge the efficacy of Sir Edward Grey as Foreign Secretary.

Continuity

Grey took office in the midst of the First Moroccan Crisis and his handling of it set the tone for how he would approach European diplomacy throughout his time as Foreign Secretary until the outbreak of war. The entente Grey inherited was being immediately put to the test as Germany endeavoured to nip the new partnership in the bud. Germany stumbled into Morocco ad hoc, in the crude and clumsy manner that epitomized its diplomacy during the decade leading up to the war. In the end, the Germans did not know themselves whether they wanted territorial compensation, or just to humiliate the French and ended up achieving neither.[17] Logically the German objective was to isolate France, demonstrate Russian weakness, and British capriciousness, and so draw France and by extension Russia towards Germany to establish a continental bloc.[18] Regardless, Grey would have to decide whether or not he would stand by the entente.

Grey was a 'Liberal Imperialist' and a firm and genuine believer in the principle of continuity in foreign policy and when in opposition had been reluctant to speak against the government.[19] He had welcomed the Anglo-Japanese alliance, 1902, and wanted Britain 'to have closer relations, if possible, with France & Russia and I believe they are possible'.[20] From the outset he had been a believer in the ententes system as a means to break down the divide between the Triple and Dual Alliances, and praised the contemporaneous partnerships between Italy and France, and Austria and Russia.[21] Prior to giving a speech in late October 1905 he wrote to the *Westminster Gazette*, in order to dispel the impression 'that a Liberal Government would unsettle the understanding with France in order to make it up to Germany...I think we are running a real risk of losing France and not gaining Germany, who won't want us, if she can detach France from us'.[22] Although, it is important to remember that whether or not Grey was inclined to so, Britain was obliged to offer at the least some diplomatic support to France. Integral to the entente was the agreement that British rule in Egypt would be validated, and in exchange France would be supported in its undertakings in Morocco, the French had paid up front, the British with a promissory note.[23] Were Britain to leave France in the lurch, by remaining neutral in a Franco-German war, her honour and international reputation would be compromised.[24] Grey argued that this would have the effect that 'the French will never forgive us... Russia would not think it worthwhile to make a friendly arrangement with us about Asia... we should be left without a friend and without the power of making a friend and Germany would take some pleasure... in exploiting the whole situation to our disadvantage'.[25] Hardinge, the new permanent under-secretary, added that consequently an agreement or alliance between France, Germany and Russia would be a certainty.[26]

Within three months Grey was Foreign Secretary and though certain Britain could not abandon France, was eager to ensure continuity and make sure entente did not become alliance. Writing on 16 January 1906, to Sir Francis Bertie, the British Ambassador at Paris, Grey reiterated his position: Diplomatic support we are pledged to give and are giving. A promise in advance committing this country to take part in a Continental war is another matter and a very serious one: it is very difficult for any British Govt to give an engagement of that kind. It changes the entente into an alliance and alliances, especially continental alliances are not in accordance with our tradition.[27] Grey personally

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believed that should a Franco-German war break out 'we cannot stand aside, but must take part with France.'^[28]

Throughout the crisis and the Algeiras conference Grey dexterously managed to preserve the entente, saving Britain from a return to isolation which would follow were France to succumb to German pressure and make a bilateral deal ignoring British interests. This was achieved by reassuring the French that Britain would not abandon her even though he would not make any guarantees. Grey told Metternich, the German ambassador, on 3 January, that if Germany forced war on France 'public feeling would be so strong it would be impossible to be neutral'.^[29] Similarly he told Cambon, the French ambassador that, in his personal opinion, should Germany attack France as a consequence of a question arising out of the 1904 agreement, 'public opinion in England would be strongly moved in favour of France'.^[30] Grey had constantly to reassure the French so they would not seek a separate deal with Germany, and this rationale can also explain the military talks that he allowed between Sir George Clarke, the secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, and the military *attaché* of the French embassy at London.^[31] The military talks themselves guaranteed nothing though they were undeniably a political act, extending the entente beyond its original remit. Moreover they helped to convince the French that Britain was serious in its commitment to France. Britain having a voice in Europe was dependent on the French connection. Grey appreciated this and revealed in a letter to Bertie the closer relationship he hoped to ensure Britain had with France, 'cordial co-operation with France in all parts of the world, remains a cardinal point of British policy' even noting 'in some respects we have carried it further than the late Government were required to do.'^[32] Lansdowne continued the Salisburian approach of gentle adjustment; he had no intention of embroiling Britain back into the European mire, only to honour its commitment as explicitly stated in the entente. Grey wanted to preserve the entente for its own sake, but also as a means to another end, as a means to constrain Germany.^[33]

German Ambition and the European Balance

Germany held grand ambitions but was constantly unable to achieve them; its greatest weakness as a nation was that it did not know how get its way. In Morocco, German power was at its peak *vis-a-vis* the Dual Alliance yet it was humiliated. Germany was unable to translate military and economic power into material acquisition. It would not compromise with its competitors as it equated moderation with inadequacy incompatible with the world power status which was its aim.^[34] Lord Sanderson, the retired PUS, described Germany as 'a tight and tenacious bargainer, and a most disagreeable antagonist' and 'oversensitive about being consulted on all the questions on which it can claim a voice.'^[35] But for all its bluff and bluster, Germany remained an enigma. Those in the Foreign Office could not decide whether it was bent on Napoleonic domination or simply moving under its own inertia. What was its ultimate aim? Did it even have one? As Zara Steiner puts it: Who knew what the Germans wanted? An African empire? A controlling position in the Balkans and in Turkey? A Central European Customs Union? Control of the sea?^[36] How German diplomacy was interpreted would determine how it should be responded to. In his January 1907 memorandum, Eyre Crowe summed up the two most plausible hypotheses: either Germany was a rising nation who would use the influence its power afforded it to peacefully pursue its interests; or it was consciously striving towards 'a general political hegemony and maritime ascendancy, threatening the independence of her neighbours and ultimately the existence of England'.^[37] That German diplomacy was characterised as being either patience, or impatience. Crowe believed it to be the latter, and so did Grey,^[38] who had the memo circulated to Campbell-Bannerman, Ripon, Asquith, Morley and Haldane. In contrast, a dissenting response written by Lord Sanderson was not circulated.^[39] Yet, in the memo Crowe also conceded the possibility 'that, in fact, Germany does not really know what it is driving at, and that all its excursions and alarums, all its underhand intrigues do not contribute to the steady working out of a well conceived and relentlessly followed system of policy, because, they do not really form part of any such system.' He added that: 'This is an hypothesis not flattering to the German Government, and it must be admitted that much might be urged against its validity. But it remains true that on this hypothesis also most of the facts of the present situation could be explained.'^[40] In reality, what Germany wanted was to divide and rule, to practice *Junkerpolitik*,^[41] to bully its rivals into concessions, in the short term it would try to break the ententes in order to better achieve this, what was needed was resolute resistance.^[42]

For all the crises and machinations, the diplomatic position in Europe from 1906 until the outbreak of war remained static. Having committed to the ententes policy, Grey walked a tightrope. it was essential he sustained his entente

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partners and protect them against German pressure, but also to restrain them, and prevent them provoking the very war he sought to avoid. Grey wished to maintain good relations with all the powers but the entente had to be prioritised above all else, as it was the only thing preventing a quintuple alliance uniting the continental powers against an isolated Britain. German efforts to break the entente, the main obstacle to its dominance, were as relentless as they were unscrupulous. Germany would protest against royal visits to France and Russia and then use similar visits to Germany to try and convince her an Anglo-German entente inconsistent with her own ententes with Britain were being made. Similarly a German bilateral offer concerning the Bagdad Railway was rejected, as to bypass Russian and French interests would have constituted a 'gross breach of faith'.^[43] Grey had to be wary, but knew what the Germans were up to and managed to keep the trivial issues trivial, though he could perhaps be oversensitive, as can be seen in the debacle over the visit of the Band of the Coldstream Guards to Mainz in 1907. As the King observed, the entente really was fragile if it could be ruptured 'on such a trumpery point'.^[44] Though 'cordial', relations with France could prove testing but this was to be expected considering that the entente did not legally guarantee British intervention in a war with Germany and that goodwill would not stop the Germans at the border. Sir Francis Bertie, the British ambassador at Paris, reminded Grey, 'One must take the French as they are and not as one would wish them to be.'^[45] He also warned Grey that there were those in France who thought it would be wiser to come to terms with Germany, but he considered them to be a minority with vested interests and that as long as Alsace-Lorraine remained German there would be no Franco-German political understanding.^[46] Conversely, Britain must not embolden the French too much, lest they be encouraged to 'beard the Germans'.^[47]

Although determined to resist German pressure, Grey endeavoured to show that the entente was not aimed against Germany, and that Britain hoped to enjoy good relations with Germany, provided they did not jeopardise relations with France. In August 1907 the Anglo-Russian convention was signed, an aim Britain had been actively pursuing since 1903. It was, like the French entente, an extra-European agreement but one made all the more pertinent with its potential European implications. Grey did not believe Russian priorities lay in Asia and described its potential threat to India as a design, 'which I do not believe Russia has seriously entertained'.^[48] Rather, the Russian agreement was intended 'to begin an understanding with Russia which may gradually lead to good relations in European questions also'.^[49] Grey saw Russia as a vital element in balancing German power in Europe and saw an entente with Russia as 'necessary to check Germany'.^[50] Germany's military capacity combined with its capricious and erratic nature – Grey described the Kaiser as being like 'a cat in a cupboard'^[51] – meant that whether it was currently seeking deliberate conquest or not it would have to be prepared against just the same. On the other hand Grey also had to be sensitive to the German fear of encirclement after it had been shown to be isolated at Algeciras. In 1909, France suggested that efforts should be made to detach Italy from the Triple Alliance, a move which Grey rejected at once, as the 'real isolation of Germany would mean war'.^[52] Grey was even averse to the term *triple entente* lest it sound too much like an alliance, and instructed ambassadors to avoid using it in their official correspondence.^[53] Instead, with regard to Germany, Grey intended to combine conciliation on inessentials with firmness on essentials.^[54] He welcomed the Franco-German agreement on Morocco, and was eager to make Germany a signatory to the Baltic and North Sea agreements, which 'served to associate Germany in an innocuous arrangement with the three entente powers which, it was hoped, would lessen international tension and ease its suspicions'.^[55] His ententes policy was meant to encircle Germany and prevent it bidding for the hegemony of Europe. But it was imperative not to arouse German suspicion as it would confirm German fears and lead to war, precipitated by Germany in order to destroy the ring.^[56]

The greatest test to the ententes came in Bosnia and at Agadir. In October 1907 the Eastern Question was reopened when Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Bulgaria declared its independence. This led to an Austrian showdown with Russia which saw a Russian retreat, though crucially this was due to its military weakness rather than its isolation, as will be discussed later. The Agadir crisis arose when, in April 1911, France despatched troops to Fez to put down a revolt, contravening the Algeciras Act. Germany gave approval to the French occupation on 21 May but demanded compensation. The tension was ratcheted up a notch when, on 1 July, Germany sent the gunboat 'Panther' to Agadir.^[57] Again, as in the First Moroccan Crisis, German aims were broad. Germany ostensibly desired either a greater role in Morocco or territorial compensation in the French Congo, but as ever its real ambition was to split the entente. Grey and the Cabinet believed that as France had altered the *status quo* Germany was entitled to compensation, but were keen to insist that British interests be protected and the entente preserved.^[58] Unexpectedly on 15 July, Kiderlen, the German Foreign Minister, revealed that Germany would expect the whole of

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the French Congo in return for German *desinteressement* in Morocco.[59] Such a demand turned a colonial negotiation into a diplomatic showdown. Germany wanted to humiliate France, Eyre Crowe minuted that 'the conditions demanded are not such as a country having an independent foreign policy can possibly accept'.[60] Asquith described the demand as a 'choice specimen of what the Germans call "diplomacy"'.[61] Grey had to intervene. The entire ententes policy was at stake were France to give in to Germany, unravelling all Grey had done as Foreign Secretary. By extending the entente cordiale Britain had at a stroke supplanted Germany as the decisive power in European politics, moving Germany into the isolation which she had previously occupied. Britain held the balance in Europe and was able to use this diplomatic power to constrain Germany, as well as France and Russia, in order to preserve the European equilibrium and peace in Europe.[62] Nicolson, the new PUS, wrote to Goschen, 'it is more than ever essential that France and ourselves should show a united front... for were [Germany] to detect the slightest wavering or indifference on our side, she would no doubt press France with extreme rigour and the latter would either have to fight or surrender'.[63] On 21 July Grey told Metternich, the German Ambassador, that Britain would not recognise a settlement to which she had not had a voice.[64] On that same evening Lloyd George delivered the Mansion House Speech. In his speech, which Grey approved,[65] Lloyd George vigorously announced that were Britain "to be treated where her interests were vitally affected as if she were of no account in the Cabinet of nations, then I say emphatically that peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable for a great country like ours to endure".[66] The speech has been interpreted as being directed at France as well as Germany but more importantly it was a reminder to all that Britain would not be ignored. It provided the punch in its language that Grey's diplomacy sometimes lacked, galvanizing French resistance and re-affirming Britain's commitment to stand by France. Britain was tied to France by her own interests, France had to be maintained as a Great Power as without her Britain would be isolated against a German dominated continent, accordingly her position must be in any war scare to make it clear that were France made to go to war Britain would go with her.

The Naval Question

Grey had managed to sustain the ententes with France and Russia, the only outstanding concern was the growing German Navy. Britain, and Grey were unequivocal; Britain must have naval superiority. Grey reiterated this in February 1908 memorandum 'the supreme interest of the security of the British Empire requires that the standard and proportion of the British Navy to those of European countries, which has been upheld by successive British Governments must be maintained'.[67] The main obstacle to this was his own party. The Liberal government endeavoured to make efficiency savings in order to finance domestic reforms without resorting to increasing taxation. There were two solutions to this problem; a naval agreement with Germany, or to demonstrate to Germany the hopelessness of its naval ambition by demonstrating that for every German ship England will inevitably lay down two, so maintaining the present, relative British preponderance.[68] Based on the logic that the entente cordiale paid for old age pensions, an understanding with Germany which would reduce naval expenditure was hoped for, but this was a bridge too far as Britain and Germany had mutually incompatible aims.

Early British approaches to Germany were met with indifference which soon became open hostility, because it was assumed, correctly, that they were merely a cover behind which Britain could maintain her naval superiority without effort.[69] Captain Dumas, the British Naval *attaché* at Berlin reported that 'in the proposal of England of all countries, to disarm they discerned the most Machiavellian duplicity: first in asking Germany to halt her progress as a world power and secondly, in forcing on her... a role as the one determined disturber of the peace of the world'.[70] Britain had nothing to offer Germany that it was willing to give and *vice-versa*, and consequently negotiations reached an impasse. Germany argued that its naval programme was law and that nothing could be done to override it and would only offer a reduction in the tempo of its naval construction and in return demanded British neutrality in a European war. Any understanding with Germany would have to be compatible with the ententes, making a deal on these or any terms involving neutrality impossible. Grey wrote to Goschen, the British Ambassador at Berlin, that not only would a political understanding estrange France and Russia leaving Britain isolated, but that such an understanding was 'an invitation to help Germany to make a European combination which could be directed against us when it suited it so to use it'.[71] Moreover, 'no understanding here would be appreciated here unless it meant an arrest of the increase of naval expenditure'.[72] The only policy that could succeed was to match the German construction programme without complaint or grimace. This was seconded by the PUS, Sir Charles Hardinge,[73] and also Sir Edward Goschen, the British Ambassador at Berlin, who advised Grey:

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I think that as soon as the Germans are absolutely convinced, and they are nearly at that point, that we have made up our minds to maintain our naval superiority at sea and will shrink from no sacrifice in order to do so, they will calm down and, realizing the hopelessness of competition, perhaps be glad at a given moment to ease the strain on their finances by dropping a ship or two... As long as they are anywhere near us in numbers they will strain every nerve, but they are too practical a nation to persevere much in a task which they see is hopeless.[74]

A naval agreement with Germany was a red herring, but one that would persist leading to inevitable disappointment and straining relations with Germany.

In the wake of Agadir and the prospect of war there was pressure on Grey to improve Anglo-German relations, especially from the radical and pacifist wing of the Liberal party whose pressure on Grey to come to a *detente* with Germany, culminated in the 1912 Haldane Mission.[75] The Haldane Mission was doomed to failure from the start, neither side had altered its position since 1909 and to expect different results was insanity. But more importantly, the Haldane Mission saw Grey falter from his policy of resisting German pressure, adopting a more conciliatory stance fatally undermining his European strategy.

Haldane was sent to Germany not to conclude a deal but to see whether it was possible one could be reached, though he carried with him an earnest desire to ease the international tension between the two nations.[76] However, this translated into over eagerness, and his naive negotiating misrepresented the British position, portraying weakness and the notion that Britain wished to placate Germany. The same impasse reached in 1909 was promptly reached again in his meeting with the Kaiser and Admiral von Tirpitz. Not only would Tirpitz not contemplate repealing the new Fleet Law to increase the German Navy, he reacted violently against the suggestion to drop just one ship.[77] In a report to Grey, Goschen remarked 'it is my firm opinion that if Lord Haldane had talked to him until Doomsday he could not have persuaded him to diminish the number of ships for which he has applied and which there is but little doubt the Reichstag will sanction'.[78] Even Haldane conceded 'that agreement would be bones without flesh if Germany began new ship building immediately... the world would laugh... and our people would think that we had been befooled'. Yet he carried on the negotiations because personally he believed the opposite, 'that the mere fact of an agreement was valuable'.[79]

Continuing negotiations when there was evidently nothing remaining to discuss was the great folly of the Haldane Mission. Forcing an agreement where there was not one to be made, one that did represent a reasonable *quid pro quo*, would only be detrimental to British interests and place an unnecessary strain on the ententes. More importantly, one sided conciliation showed weakness and meant surrendering to German blackmail which had hitherto paid no dividend, only encouraging Germany to become as disagreeable as possible.[80] In his discussion with the Kaiser and Tirpitz, eager to make progress and not understanding the implications, Haldane abandoned the British position by suggesting not only that relaxing the tempo of construction rather than making actual reductions would suffice and that this was a mere technicality to be *preceded by* a political understanding, offering the Germans what they wanted and getting next to nothing in return.[81] From there colonial and territorial exchanges were proposed but these were minor matters; Britain would obtain a controlling interest in the southern section of the Baghdad Railway in return for Zanzibar and Pemba and a piece of Angola.[82] Haldane hoped that a colonial agreement would mirror the French and Russian ententes but compared with Egypt and Persia, Angola, Zanzibar and Pemba were inconsequential. Goschen wrote to Nicolson to oppose a political understanding without a naval agreement, echoing what the latter had been minuting:

In my opinion they were getting more or less their hearts desire at a cheaper price than we had fixed before. And I think it is a pity as recent events have shewn that our position, unhampered by a political understanding, is a strong one, and our price should therefore have been raised not lowered.[83]

A 'Sketch of a Conceivable Formula' was proposed but again demanded British neutrality in a European war. Grey was just as culpable as rather than reject this out of hand as his officials recommended he haggled over terms of neutrality, eventually offering "England shall neither make nor join in any unprovoked attack upon Germany". But the terms were meaningless, what constituted unprovoked? A promise not to make an unprovoked attack is worthless, surely that is assumed anyway. Moreover by emphasising *unprovoked*, Grey depicts the British position as arbiter or

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referee, rather than actively interested Power, that British involvement floats purely on the breeze of what is just rather than what is in its interest. But this is to digress; Grey accepted the premise of the proposal. This showed weakness and led Germany to infer that Britain may not be as committed to the entente as she seemed and that in the face of war with Germany Britain would want to deal rather than fight, its current reluctance merely hard bargaining. Palmerston would say that every country would give up three questions out of four rather than go to war but one must never let one's opponent guess which, to abide by the axiom, *si vis pacem para bellum*.^[84] In the Haldane Mission Grey dropped the mask and let slip the fact that Britain was less determined to preserve its interests by force than it had previously seemed. Grey loathed the idea of war just as much as radical colleagues but hitherto he had managed to conduct diplomatic relations from a position of strength. He had managed to walk the tightrope, to frustrate Germany without it feeling victimised while Russia recovered and France re-organized. But the Haldane Mission saw strength turn to weakness and resistance replaced by concession and the hope that peace could be maintained through nebulous 'goodwill'. To preserve peace in Europe it had to be made abundantly clear to Germany that Britain would under no circumstance tolerate France being crushed, to maximise the deterrent against it doing so. The effect of the Haldane Mission was that it was not.

Anglo-Russian Relations and The Eastern Question

The Anglo-Russian relationship differed from the Anglo-French one as it was slower to grow beyond the sum of its parts, and the balance between its utility in Europe as well as in Central Asia made it a more difficult partnership. Moreover, the radical loathing of autocracy made it harder to develop the same emotional connection that Britain was able to make with France. Nevertheless the Anglo-Russian Convention brought 'the Great Game' to an end, and though it would not remove all grounds for misunderstanding between the two nations, it did restrain mutual suspicion to an extent sufficient to allow collaboration in Europe.^[85] In Europe, Grey would welcome diplomatic cooperation with Russia in matters of common interest and would seek to promote Russian loyalty to France, but he was not prepared to give Russian wishes precedence over other considerations, nor to regard the Russian position in eastern Europe as an issue over which Britain would in any circumstances go to war.^[86] From the Russian perspective the entente cordiale meant that a Russian government wishing to maintain the French alliance would have to improve relations with London.^[87] An entente with Britain afforded Russia better relations with Japan, and though engaged on opposite sides of the Persian constitutional struggle, both shared a mutual interest in postponing its partition and preventing German penetration.^[88] Furthermore, commitment to the Franco-Russian also meant commitment to the European balance of power, which was threatened by German strength and her own weakness. It was on these grounds that the proposed Russo-German alliance signed at Bjorkoe by the Kaiser and the Czar was rescinded when the latter returned to St. Petersburg. An alliance with Germany would mean subjugation. The Russian Foreign Minister Lambsdorff wrote that 'from many years experience I have drawn the conviction that to be on genuinely good terms with Germany the alliance with France is necessary. Otherwise we will lose our independence, and I know nothing more burdensome than the German yoke'.^[89] Britain and Russia were thus in the same boat, both wanted to remove problems in Central Asia so they could pay closer attention to Europe and counteract German power.

As mentioned earlier, the greatest test to the Anglo-Russian entente came in Bosnia, in late 1908, when the Russian Foreign Minister Isvolskii was outmanoeuvred by his Austrian counterpart Aehrenthal as both men attempted to pull off a diplomatic coup. It was not simply a matter between Austria and Russia but one complicated by the change in the Ottoman government brought about by the Young Turk revolution earlier that year. This presented an opportunity for Britain to reverse its declining position vis-a-vis Germany at the Porte, one which Grey intended to take.^[90] Grey tried to coordinate his Russian and Turkish policies, 'to be pro-Turkish without giving rise to any suspicion that we are anti-Russian',^[91] in order to sustain the new entente with Russia and the recent pro-British orientation at Constantinople. In the long term this would prove this to be an impossible task, as at the Straits Russian gain was Ottoman loss and vice versa, but in the short term the two did not collide.

The crisis came about in early October 1908 when Bulgaria declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire and Austria annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the summer Isvolskii, 'with a lack of caution, derived both from a hunger for a diplomatic victory and overconfidence in his own skill' had proposed, in writing, a Russo-Austrian agreement in which Austria would annex Bosnia, Herzegovina, and the Sandjak and would in turn support Russian interests at the

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Straits.[92] He had hoped the moves would be made simultaneously, but Aehrenthal moved quickly to annex the provinces leaving him high and dry.[93] Grey did not know about Isvolskii's duplicity but when the latter met with Bertie in Paris to plead his innocence, Bertie remained suspicious feeling that he 'did not quite tell me the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth'.[94] Stolypin, the Russian Prime Minister was outraged since Russia was unprepared for and could not afford in support of such a risky policy.[95] Both he and Russian public opinion did not care about the Straits and were much more interested in Russia protecting Slav interests in the Balkans. Isvolskii went to London in a vain attempt to garner British support at the Straits but was rebuffed. He was told that though Britain did not oppose the idea *per se* the moment was inopportune as it would deal yet another blow to the Young Turks, but the idea could be revisited at a later date provided Russia cooperate with Britain 'to pull Turkey through the present crisis'.[96] Isvolskii also promised he would adopt a 'stiff' attitude towards Bulgaria and make her pay financial compensation to Turkey for the loss of the Eastern Roumelian tribute and the Oriental railway.[97] The three entente Powers mediated a settlement between Bulgaria and Turkey in which Turkey was to awarded £6, 500,000, the Bulgarians paying £4,000,000 and the rest coming from Russia who renounced part of its war indemnity of 1878.[98] Grey and Isvolskii had resolved the Turco-Bulgarian crisis in a manner favourable to Turkey and to the mutual advantage of Britain and Russia. Isvolskii on his part had improved his reputation as a Pan Slav by attaching Bulgaria to Russia and had also improved Russo-Turkish relations preparing a way for a future revision of the Straits rule.[99] Grey had managed to subordinate Russian aspirations at the Straits, obtain their assistance in supporting the Young Turks, while keeping the Straits issue as a carrot which not only could be used as leverage when a more apposite moment arose, but showed British value as a partner .

However, the more problematic issue and greater threat to European peace was the Austro-Serbian dispute. Serbia was not directly affected by the annexation but worried by the implications of Austrian encroachment and afraid it was a precursor of a drive to cut her off from the Adriatic and to commercially subject her to Austria.[100] Pan Slav sentiment in Russia inclined her to back Serbian demands but the whole affair was a charade. The annexation had presented Europe with a *fait accompli*, no one was going to challenge the Austrian action and Aehrenthal knew it. He had banked on German support and though the Germans were unimpressed they had not been consulted, the greater European situation meant they had little choice but to back their only reliable ally.[101] On 30 October Bulow gave Aehrenthal his full support, 'I shall regard whatever decision you come to in the Balkans as the appropriate one'.[102] In January 1909 Moltke, the chief of the German general staff, wrote to his Austrian counterpart Conrad guaranteeing German participation in an Austro-Russian war.[103] Germany was going to be 'more Austrian than the Austrians',[104] in order to reassert its position as the leading power in the Austro-German alliance, and to humiliate Russia and potentially disrupt its alliance and entente. In response, mirroring the Moroccan crisis, to preserve the entente, Grey was willing to be at least as Russian as the Russians. He had not realised that Russian policy was essentially an effort at damage control.[105]

Britain and Germany were in locked in another diplomatic battle but this one Grey could not win. Germany held all the cards, Austria had no intention of encouraging Serbia's southern Slav ambitions by agreeing to compensation territorial or otherwise and unlike Britain and Russia was willing to fight in what to it was an essential interest.[106] French support to Russia was nominal. On 9 February 1909 France came to an agreement with Germany over Morocco, and on the 26th she told the Russians that the affair 'was a question in which the vital interests of Russia are not involved' and that 'French public opinion would be unable to comprehend that such a question could lead to a war in which the French and Russian armies would have to take part'.[107] The Russians themselves, still recovering from their Japanese misadventure, were in no position to go to war and as early as November 1908 were advising Serbia so.[108] Not only was Russia not willing nor in a position to be able to wage war, the issue at hand did not warrant it. Austria had administered the provinces anyway making the Austrian gain only one on paper, and Serbia, aside from its *amour propre*, was not directly injured by the annexation. Russian resistance eventually subsided as her position was hopeless. On 22 March Germany presented its *demarche* in St. Petersburg, which amounted to an ultimatum, which Russia accepted. Although Grey was angered that the ground was cut from beneath him, Britain was freed from an increasingly difficult and embarrassing situation and had managed to avoid speaking too sternly to the Russians. Though undoubtedly a diplomatic defeat the fact that pro-entente Stolypin and Isvolskii remained in office meant that the entente had endured which constituted at least a partial success.[109]

Bosnia had polarized Europe firmly into two camps but in the face of the Balkan Wars European relations enjoyed a

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renaissance and the Concert of Europe was temporarily resurrected. The reason for such relative unity was that the Balkan League, an alliance of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro, and hostile to Turkey, displayed surprising potency and threatened to precipitate the end of Turkish rule in Europe, an eventuality all the Powers wished to avoid. During this episode, Anglo-German relations improved considerably, centred around the joint determination to keep Austria and Russia together. Seeing as both Austria and Russia wanted to avoid war and the French also desired peace, cooperation was not difficult.[110] Grey endeavoured to be the honest broker and by working with the Concert minimised the risk that the war would spread. He maintained the strictest disinterest and insisted the other Powers did likewise, as 'the terms of peace must not contain any condition that would be specifically injurious to the interests of any one of the Powers: otherwise the unity of the Powers could not be preserved'.[111] Yet, his impartiality gave way under pressure when the Montenegrins defied the Concert and refused to leave Scutari, and with Austria poised to intervene, Grey was anxious not to sanction any Concert action which might compromise relations with Russia. He warned Cartwright, the British Ambassador at Vienna 'we...should have to consider, not the merits of the question of Scutari, but what our own interests required us to do in a European crisis'.[112] Grey had become increasingly wary of the danger of acting 'against the wishes of Russia and of separating ourselves from France at a moment when it seems most necessary that we should keep in close touch with her and Russia'.[113] In the end, the prospect of a restored Concert of Europe had been a false dawn. Though the powers had acted in concert it was only in reaction to a unique circumstance, when a combination of competing smaller nations had united to rupture the *status quo* in a manner which, conveniently, was undesirable to all.

The most important outcome was the contrasting relations Britain experienced with Russia and Germany. Despite Grey's willingness to protect Russian interests Anglo-Russian relations did cool; the Russians were upset that they had had to compromise in Albania and had been blocked by Britain in their desire to exploit the Second Balkan War to make gains in Turkey. In Persia too, the Convention was unravelling. Following the humiliating back down in the Bosnian crisis the Russians looked to northern Persia to secure compensation confident that Britain would not dare oppose them there because of their preoccupation with the balance of power in Europe.[114] Since then events such as the Shuster affair had further strained already tense relations there.[115] At the Foreign Office opinion had been divided over what line should be taken with Russia with men like Nicolson and Buchanan advocating closer ties, ideally even an alliance, though they knew domestic politics made this impossible, whereas Tyrell and Crowe, who had taken over the Eastern Department in September 1913, wanted to take a firmer line with Russia particularly over Persia.[116] Only one was consistent with the ententes policy Grey had followed since he took office.

Nicolson believed that as Russia grew stronger she would be more disposed to deal with Germany and that in any case Britain could not afford to lose her, as their understanding was more vital to Britain than it was to Russia as firstly, without the restraint and security provided by the Convention, Russia could do what she liked in Central Asia and the Far East at British expense, and secondly the policy to support France against Germany would not be possible without Russia.[117] In the latter he was correct. His mistake was overestimating Russian strength and underestimating the entente's importance to Russia. There was no danger Russia would abandon Britain, and also France, by falling into the arms of the Germans, as the two were engaged in a 'ferocious' propaganda war against each other.[118] Crowe and Tyrell both wanted to maintain the entente but wished to be speak to Russia more firmly and frankly and did not want as Tyrell believed Nicolson did 'to leave the Russians to pipe the tune and us to dance to it'.[119] What Hardinge had written in his April 1909 memorandum remained true, if the price of Russian loyalty was a British commitment to her defence, then that price was too high.[120] If Britain could not pursue her interests wholeheartedly for fear of offending the Russians yet remained committed to supporting Russia in the Balkans then the entente represented responsibility without power.[121] As with France the value of the entente in the wider European context was that it restrained Russia as well as Germany. By formally pledging support to Russia, Britain would merely be accepting subservience to Russia to avoid potential subjugation by Germany. The ententes policy was designed to achieve deadlock rather than mere balance and an alliance would involve Britain surrendering her role as the decisive makeweight power; the means would supplant the ends.

The July Crisis and the Myth of the Free Hand

As 1914 began British relations with Germany were the best they had been since Grey had been in office yet within nine months they would be at war. During the Balkan Wars Britain had been able to enjoy good relations with

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Germany because they both desired the same outcome. A year later this was not the case; far from trying to prevent war Germany was actively seeking it. In the elite German circles the zeitgeist was that sooner or later war was inevitable, even preordained as a literally Darwinian struggle between Teuton and Slav.[122] Germany had not been fully prepared for war in 1912-13 and so had acted as peacemaker with Britain -and hoped to detach her from the entente by showing good faith as a bonus- but by October 1913 the Kaiser was able to assure Berchtold, the Austrian Foreign minister, that should he wish to strike against Serbia, 'I shall stand behind you, and am prepared to draw the sword whenever your moves make it necessary'.[123] But this was just the start. By July 1914 Germany was pressuring Austria to precipitate the 'inevitable' war, making thinly veiled threats about the future of Austro-German relations if they were to let the July Crisis end with a 'so-called diplomatic success'.[124] Germany had become conscious that its military predominance was in decline, especially as Russia had increased its peacetime army from 1.3 to 1.75 million men.[125] Lichnowsky, the German Ambassador, warned Grey most Germans believed it would be better to let trouble come now rather than later.[126] Bethmann-Hollweg, the German Prime Minister, seeking to prepare the way was, as he had been during the Haldane Mission, desperate to ensure British neutrality in a European war, and which his recent experiences; cooperation in the Balkans and over the future of the Portuguese African colonies, the Haldane Mission and cooling Anglo-Russian relations, led him to believe was attainable.[127] Despite the vague warning from Lichnowsky, Grey was not to know the German position had changed, so when the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo sparking the July Crisis, Grey assumed a resolution similar to the one made a year earlier could be arranged. Perhaps emboldened by his success in brokering that peace that brought a conclusion to the First Balkan War, and considerably raised his stock, he largely ignored his Foreign Office officials who counselled closer cooperation with Russia and France.[128] The Austrian ultimatum to Serbia shattered the illusion that peace could be preserved by conciliation and compromise whilst still maintaining the ententes. Grey was too slow in reaching this conclusion, and his hesitation and indecisiveness prevented him from the issuing the appropriate response when it could still have made a difference.

On 24th July the Foreign Office received the text of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia which changed the complexion of the case.[129] Grey described it as 'the most formidable document I have ever seen addressed by one State to another that was independent'.[130] Yet he was unable to appreciate its implications. Crowe understood immediately,

The moment has passed when it may have been possible to enlist French support in an effort to hold back Russia...France and Russia consider that these are the pretexts and that the bigger cause of the Triple Alliance versus Triple Entente is definitely engaged...Our interests are tied up with France and Russia in this struggle, which is not for the possession of Servia, but one between Germany aiming at the political dictatorship in Europe and the Powers who desire to retain individual freedom.[131]

Humiliating Serbia meant humiliating Russia *again*. A war involving Russia would involve France, and British interests were tied to ensuring that France remained an independent Power. Under these circumstances conciliation would cut no ice; the Triple Alliance had to be resisted; the parallel was not the Balkans but Agadir. Grey, however, chose caution over determined resistance and entente solidarity. He hoped to be able to persuade Germany to restrain Austria and abandoned the maxim *si vis pacem para bellum* that had hitherto served him so well. A blunt statement made in response to the Austrian ultimatum to the effect that under these circumstances Britain would be certain to side with the entente powers against Germany may have made Bethmann-Hollweg reconsider his march to war. Grey had already told the Germans it would be unlikely Britain would remain neutral in a continental war but had done so too passively and equivocally. In June, Grey had warned Lichnowsky not to underestimate entente solidarity, warning him 'though we are not bound by engagement as allies, we do from time to time talk as intimately as allies'.[132] And on 27 July Grey repeated the warning in private to Lichnowsky, saying that were war to come 'Britain could not stand aside and wait'.[133] But his failure was that this point was not put across strongly enough. By July 1914 the 'Triple Entente' was at its strongest, the Russian army had recovered and grown to an unprecedented size, the time had come to confirm what Germany had feared most of all; that it had missed its time to act. Now was not the time to be civil but to deter German action by explicitly stating that any attempt to break the entente by force would be met with unflinching resistance. In theory this was the position but the Germans did not believe it and were willing to gamble on British neutrality, had Grey been more bellicose from the off, war could perhaps have been avoided.

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Once Austria declared war on Serbia on 28th July, a greater European war became unavoidable. From then on the question was whether Britain would be involved. In his memoirs Grey wrote that had Britain not supported France he would have had to resign.[134] Had Grey gone then Asquith was determined to do so to, 'if Grey went I should go, & the whole thing would break up'.[135] Yet, even were the government to break up the Conservatives had made it clear that they intended to support France offering their unconditional support in a letter on the 2nd August. Thus, with the opposition providing no alternative, Britain was bound to go to war. The only remaining question was whether she would do so under a Liberal or Conservative or Coalition government. All Grey could do was to try and ensure the Liberal government could enter the war united.

Looking back at the First Moroccan Crisis, Grey wrote that had Germany forced war on France, Britain should have gone to her aid. Were Britain not to 'we should be isolated and discredited...hated by those whom we had refused to help, and despised by others'.[136] That the same was true eight years later only serves to show how static the diplomatic situation was. Far from having a free hand Britain was committed to go to war from the moment the first military talks began with France. In his 3 August speech to the Commons Grey claimed to have acted to ensure

If any crisis such as this arose, we should be able to come before the House of Commons and be able to say to the House that it was free to decide what the British attitude should be, that we should have no secret engagement which we should spring upon the House, and tell the House that, because we had entered into that engagement, there was an obligation of honour upon the country.[137]

He presented a compelling case explaining that though Britain had no legal obligation there remained a moral obligation to stand by France.[138] But whatever the distinction an obligation remained an obligation, and as Grey said that day "to say we would stand aside, we should, I believe sacrifice our respect and good name and reputation before the world".[139] Throughout his time in office Grey had given what British support he could to France and Russia to try and thwart every German attempt to divide and rule. Abandoning them would not only tarnish Britain's reputation but make her an international pariah.

Conclusion

Grey came to the Foreign Office determined to use the opportunities the international situation presented him to make Britain the dominant voice in European diplomacy. In this sense his ententes policy was more ambitious than Lansdowne had ever intended when he made the entente with France. What had started as a move to reduce the burden of imperial defence, Grey turned into a plan to supplant Germany as the predominant European power. *Russian weakness and consequently increased French insecurity made this possible as in the face of German aggression British support was invaluable in giving France the strength to resist Germany.* That the support was not unconditional restrained French excess. The same was true with Russia. Though the Anglo-Russian relationship was more businesslike than that with the French its expedience ensured its survival. Grey did exceedingly well to maintain both ententes against relentless German pressure and unscrupulous conniving. During the Bosnian annexation crisis and the Agadir crisis his unwavering support to his partners kept the ententes alive. However, faced with the prospect of war at Agadir, Grey lost his nerve and made a subtle but fatal correction to the course he had already laid out.

Following Agadir, Grey, desperate to improve relations with Germany, laboured under the erroneous belief that good relations with all the powers was both possible and consistent with the ententes policy he had pursued up until that point. Though sanctioned in part to appease his radical critics the Haldane Mission dealt a terrible blow to the ententes policy by showing cracks in what had previously been impenetrable resistance. During the negotiations Haldane willingly handed over the initiative to the Germans making Britain appear weak and over eager to deal. In this respect the criticism that Grey did not appreciate all the consequences of his actions is valid.[140] This mistake was compounded by the unfortunate timing of the Balkan Wars as Germany was able to prey on his profound desire for peace. Grey revelled in playing the honest broker and again showed great skill in managing to avert a European war. However, German support, which was indispensable in finding a peaceful solution, was given to buy time and did not represent a change in attitude. Nevertheless its support during the episode helped to convince Grey that deep down there was an inherent reasonableness in Germany that could be appealed to and despite its occasional

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recourse to *realpolitik* international relations did not take place in a moral vacuum, something he had always hoped was the case. He was thus lulled into naive tranquillity and fatally hesitated in the July crisis, giving Germany the benefit of the doubt to the incredibly provocative and unreasonable Austrian ultimatum. In theory such a demand should have been met with an equally assertive response warning Germany that to stand by such a demand would in all likelihood result in war with Britain, as it had during the Moroccan crises. The officials at the foreign office were unanimous that to make such a demand and so recklessly risk the peace made only a year earlier was not the action of a reasonable power interested in peace but yet another attempt to break the 'triple entente' and achieve the dominance of Europe. Crowe in particular seems to have known his adversary. Grey chose to ignore these warnings believing he knew Germany better. His greatest mistake was that he failed to follow his own plan. He would write in his memoirs that he was certain 'a great European war under modern conditions would be a catastrophe for which previous wars afforded no precedent' and that 'once it became apparent we were on the edge, all the Great Powers would call a halt and recoil from the abyss'.^[141] He did not realise until it was too late that Germany did not want peace. A contemporary critic wrote of him in 1908 'his unquestioning faith in the honesty of those on whom he has to rely render it easy for him to drift into courses which a more imaginative sense and a swifter instinct would lead him to question and repudiate.'^[142] Grey faced numerous tests during his tenure in Whitehall and for the most part he handled them with distinction. He surreptitiously directed the ententes against Germany to restrain any Napoleonic ambitions it may have harboured but ultimately he did not have the mentality to risk war in order to win peace. In the end he simply played with too straight a bat. Britain may well have been better served by blunter, less judicious and perhaps a less 'able' man.

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[100] *Ibid.*, p.186

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- [103] Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, p.453
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- [108] Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *The Annexation of Bosnia*, (Cambridge, 1937) pp.72-3
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- [110] R.J. Crampton, *The Hollow Detente*, (Prior, 1980) pp.60-9
- [111] Grey to Goschen quoted in R..J. Crampton, 'The Balkans, 1909-1914', in Hinsley, *British Foreign Policy Under Sir Edward Grey*, p.262
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- [114] Sweet and Langhorne, 'Great Britain and Russia 1907-14', p.250
- [115] Ibid., pp.250-1
- [116] Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p.334
- [117] Ibid., pp.328-331
- [118] Sweet and Langhorne, 'Great Britain and Russia 1907-14', p.253
- [119] Chirol to Hardinge, 23 May 1913 quoted in Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p331
- [120] Sweet and Langhorne interpretation of Hardinge memo. April 1909, *BD V* pp.823-6
- [121] Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*, pp.363-377
- [122] Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, pp.32-3

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[123] Berchtold conversation with Wilhelm II, Oct 1913 quoted in Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, p.44

[124] Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, pp.57-61

[125] Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p.336

[126] Sir E. Grey to Sir H. Rumbold, 6 July 1914, *BD XI* pp.24-5

[127] Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, pp.29-31

[128] Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, p.234

[129] *Ibid.*, p.236

[130] Grey quoted in Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, p.236

[131] Crowe minute quoted in Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, pp.122-3

[132] Sir E. Grey to Sir E. Goschen, 24 June 1914, *BD XI* pp.4-5

[133] Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, p.239

[134] Sir Edward Grey, *Twenty Five Years*, (Hodder&Stoughton,1925) pp.312-313

[135] H.H. Asquith, *Letters to Venetia Stanley*, ed. Michael and Eleanor Flock, (Oxford, 1982) p.140

[136] Grey, *Twenty Five Years*, p.77

[137] Grey, *Speeches on Foreign Affairs*, (George Allen&Unwin Ltd, 1931) p.298

[138] Grey also argued that the British were obliged to protect the undefended French north-western coast as per the 1912 naval agreement, but Germany was willing to pledge not to attack the French coast if Britain were to remain neutral.

[139] *Ibid.*,p.313

[140] Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*, p.336

[141] Grey, *Twenty Five Years*, p.312

[142] A.C. Gardiner on Sir Edward Grey quoted in Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, (Penguin, 1998) p.57

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