

Does Britain share responsibility for the commencement of hostilities in 1914?

Written by Simon Walker

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SIMON WALKER, DEC 7 2011

In August 1914, German Chancellor Theobald van Bethmann Hooweg famously denounced the treaty that assured Belgium's neutrality as "a scrap of Paper"[1], something he could not believe Britain and France would go to war over. This scrap of paper was the Treaty of London, signed in 1839 which amongst many things awarded Belgium with neutrality in light of any conflicts, a treaty that history regards as one of the reasons for Britain and France to declare war on Germany following the crossing of German troops over the Belgium border in 1914. In answering the question "does Britain share some of the responsibility for the commencement of hostilities in 1914?", this essay intends to highlight the effects of the 1839 Treaty and present its signing as evidence of the British agenda to preserve her own self interests both commercial and political, an agenda that encouraged Britain to act in ways which, although not directly contributed to the outbreak of war, did little to prevent it. This essay will highlight aspects of British selfishness and acting in her own interests surrounding and stemming from the treaty of London in 1839 to conclude that although Britain cannot take sole responsibility for the outbreak of war, her actions prior to conflict did not assist to the suspension of arms, even to the point of exacerbating the situation, thus, allowing for the creation of the thesis that British total self focus was a contributing factor to the First World War.

The causes of the First World War have been deliberated for nearly a century and will continue to be at the heart of many debates to come. This essay is not seeking to absolve any nation of blame, from the expansionist plans of German Weltpolitik and crises in Morocco and the Balkans, tied with the misguided actions of the Blackhand Serbian Terrorist organisation, together with the individual motives of all the Nations involved, all contributed to the cause of the Great War. Popular historians such as Andrew Marr highlight that Britain's involvement in war was inevitable, that if Germany had been allowed its plans "...the British Empire would have swiftly died"[2]; by this definition Britain had no choice but to join the war effort. Gordon Martel takes a different slant by arguing that 'nationalism, militarism and imperialism are the most prominent of the "underlying" causes of war...'[3] Martel highlights that it was the ambitions of separate nations that caused the outbreak of war. This is a sentiment echoed in part by Joachim Remak who argued the case of the friction between Britain and Germany regarding imperial power and military strength as a major cause of the war. Remak considers in her book *The Origins of World War 1 1871 – 1914* the Kaiser's dream of ultimate power, Remak quotes Theodore Fontane, a famous nineteenth century writer stating he dreams...of humiliating England. Germany is to be on top, in each and everything'[4], highlighting the argument that Germany moved to war simply to compete on the global stage as a world power, an equal to Great Britain.

When considering Britain's role in the First World War, it is important to consider the actions taken by Britain and her leaders prior to the conflict. Britain in 1914 was a world power, with an empire upon which the *sun never set*. Britain was the envy of many, including Germany. Britain's industrial strength and economy was one to be admired. However this strength was maintained by the substantial empire of territories that Britain possessed across the world, such places as the Dominions including Canada, New Zealand and Australia as well as substantial control in India and Africa, all of which provided industry, trade routes and assistance for the armed forces. Global dominances and resources were of paramount importance in the First World War, as it was the fact that troops from all over the world were pulled into conflict through their allegiances to one European power or another that created the ideal of a total war.

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This essay argues that it was the protection of these international interests that contributed to the outbreak of war. Annika Mombauer highlights in her book, *The Origins of the First World War* that ‘...Britain’s goals of ensuring its own security were clearer than any goals Germany may have had’[5]. This is a powerful statement which highlights the British mentality in 1914 to be based purely on its own protection. Therefore, if this is indeed the case, then the question must be asked, why was a treaty signed over 60 years previously with a breakaway faction of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands so crucial to Britain to cause it to go to war in 1914 and what if anything, did Belgium mean to Britain and therefore to Europe to prompt such an action?

By considering the original text of the Treaty of London in 1839 as a primary source it is possible to analyse the section that was held responsible for escalating the conflict by drawing Britain and France into the First World War, in fact it is a very small paragraph in Article 7 which allowed Belgium to form an independent and neutral state and prompted British intervention,

Belgium, within the limits specified in Articles 1, 2, and 4, shall form an Independent and perpetually Neutral State. It shall be bound to observe such Neutrality towards all other States[6]

By analysing the above, the independence of Belgium was clearly intended and eventually supported by all the nations that signed the treaty, including France, Germany, Austria, Russia and the United Kingdom. It is important also to note that this independence was as vital to the European Powers as it was to the Belgians who had fought for 9 years to achieve it. By separating Belgium from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, competition in European Trade decreased; as the supremacy of Belgian cotton in the city of Ghent plummeted, creating unemployment and economic decline, trading with the colonies froze also, allowing other nations such as Britain to increase their stronghold. Furthermore strategically, the isolation of Belgium created a buffer zone between France and the rest of Northern Europe, and by default therefore a buffer zone for Britain, as aside from France, Belgium presented the nearest coastal threat to mainland Britain. Michael Brock in his essay *Britain Enters the War* in 2001 highlighted that the strategic factor of Belgium’s proximity as a significant cause of Britain joining the conflict in 1914, Brock explains ‘the need for preventing the Belgian coast and the mouth of the Schelde from falling into the hands of a hostile power had been recognised for centuries’[7]. This view is echoed by Ruth Heing in her book *The Origins of the First World War 3rd edition*, Heing states ‘...[the] unprovoked German invasion... was bound to draw the British government into the conflict because of the strategic threat posed as much as the violation of international law’[8]. On the basis of this evidence this essay argues that Britain’s involvement in the neutrality of Belgium was not because she truly supported revolutionaries who had been fighting for nearly a decade for their independence from the Kingdom of Luxemburg but because it was very advantageous for Britain, economically and strategically. Therefore it can be argued that Britain’s aid to defend the ‘rape of Belgium’[9] was a defensive measure for Britain’s security over a humanitarian manoeuvre or simply an act to maintain international law.

Margot Lyon highlights in her book *Belgium* that although Belgium enjoyed independence, the implications of the articles of the 1839 Treaty limited trade and stunted the economy, Lyon quotes the newly appointed King Leopold of Belgium who in 1839 said ‘This country feels humbled and disenchanted with its so-called political independence.’[10] Lyon also highlights that ‘Belgian anger was principally directed against England’[11]. This statement is important as it highlights that the Treaty signed by Belgium, although clarifying her independence, was recognised by her King as being detrimental for Belgian progression, a detriment that he felt the British had had input in orchestration. By considering the birth of Empire from 1700 onwards it is clear that Britain pulled away from Europe and established itself as the first and one of the most dominant industry nations which rapidly spread into an empire. This essay argues that Britain’s first steps were not without casualties, it was important to gain a strong hold first before other nations in Europe did. By pursuing such policies as the Treaty of London in 1839 Britain was able to distance herself from Europe and focus overseas and domestically on growth. Porter highlights in *The Lions Share, a short history of British Imperialism 1850 – 2004* that in light of European revolution in the mid 19th century ‘Britain... was spared the full effects of Europe’s revolutionary movement... and consequently had been able to take advantage of the disorder... to do more or less what she liked outside’[12]. Through examining Porter’s point it can be seen that Britain acted primarily in her own interests, building empire, a strong economy and stayed away from the revolutions and changes on the continent not only as protection for the British way of life but as an opportunity to take the upper hand as a global world power with extensive trade and economic domination.

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Britain's isolation and self focus continued for nearly a century, indeed it was the conclusion and after effects of World War One that brought Britain to be more actively involved in foreign affairs. However, this doesn't mean that Britain was completely oblivious to the turmoil in Europe at the turn of the 20th century. In 1879 Germany and Austria had formed the Dual Alliance, in retrospect this was a significant turning point as this began an array of allegiances that contributed to the drawing of so many nations into conflict in 1914. Martel highlights that Britain '...departed from her long-standing policy of splendid isolation, during which she [had] remained aloof from the continental alliances'[13] to embark on a process of forming allegiances in what Martel refers to as the '...diplomatic revolution'[14] of 1902 to 1907. These alliances with such nations as Japan, Russia and France, however, all held a particular benefit to Britain with for example in the case of Japan, the treaty offered protection in relation to Russian ambitions in the east: a treaty that historians such as Martel highlight as a cause of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904[15]. Mombauer highlights the motivation behind the treaties with France in 1904, the Entente Cordial and the Anglo-Russian Entente with Russia in 1907 which led to the creation of the Triple Entente the same year. Mombauer argues 'it was believed that it would be far more disadvantageous to have an unfriendly France and Russia than an unfriendly Germany'[16]. This was due to many factors but mostly through concerns over Empire and Russia's coveting of India, the British crown jewel of Asia. Therefore It can be seen that through relatively simple steps Britain had been able to maintain its strength and security in India, again without having to take up arms but through manipulation and policy that had delivered British goals without conceding much in return, similar to the situation Britain had experienced with the neutrality of Belgium 60 years previously.

Further criticism of Britain and her actions prior to war was in fact her lack of action, or at the very least the refusal to take a firm stand with any particular nation. When Theobald referred to the Treaty of London as a scrap of paper, he could have very well referred to many British treaties that several European nations were reliant on prior to 1914. Historians looking back towards the causes of the war, such as Mombauer have highlighted that Britain's refusal to publicly pick a side prior to the conflict is important, as this may have averted the war and lifted the veil of suspicion surrounding the secret treaties of the first decade of the 20th century. Mombauer highlights that this belief existed at the time and was put forward by Germany as a fundamental cause of conflict in 1914,

... German politicians had maintained... that British policy had... been responsible for the outbreak of war, because Britain's leaders had not made their intentions of supporting France and Belgium clear...[17]

Michael Brock reiterates this point by highlighting that whilst the Entente Cordial meant that France and Britain would consult each other in a climate of aggression, the treaty was 'not based upon an engagement to co-operate in war'[18], therefore it is possible to conclude that Britain was able to reap defensive benefits without actually making a solid commitment to action. Heing argues the viewpoint of historian L.C.F. Turner that a firm announcement by the British to '...intervene on the side of France might have deterred Bethmann Hollweg...'[19].

However Grey failed to act prior to the crisis in Serbia and this lack of action by Britain, a policy that can be perceived as dithering on the behalf of Grey allowed the conflict to escalate when plausibly it could have been halted and potentially averted the war.

The foreign policies pursued by Prime Minister Asquith and Foreign Secretary Edward Grey prior to 1914 have been criticised for their weakness and held to account as part of Britain's responsibility for the outbreak of war. The Naval race between Germany and Britain is a key example of mishandled policy. Returning to the notion of imperialism Heing argues that Germany wanted to be 'a world power the same as Britain' [20] and that to achieve such a goal Germany believed that '...British naval mastery would first have to be challenged'[21], this prompted Germany to build a vast navy very quickly. Britain's response was characteristically defensive, involving the building of new ships, to maintain a policy of a *two to one factor* navy supremacy ratio that ensured her safety and domination of the oceans of the world. Grey has also been lambasted for his influence on Britain's actions just prior to the outbreak of conflict. Martel highlights that as tension in Europe grew, Grey, on behalf of Britain still 'refused to be drawn into the war as if their participation had been predetermined'[22]. Grey wanted to keep Britain out of conflict as much as possible, even to the point of his cabinet, in the July of 1914 refusing to support action to defend France or even Belgium should the tensions in Europe escalate into conflict. Although this refusal was overturned, it is clear to see that the parliamentary mentality was keen to keep Britain safe and powerful, regardless of the cost across Europe.

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In conclusion, this essay highlighted many held causes of conflict in 1914, but in terms of Britain's involvement this essay maintains that through a policy of pure self interest regarding the maintenance of economic, political and imperial dominance, Britain can indeed be held accountable for her role in the war of 1914. These policies, designed to keep Britain separate and safe, can be evidenced in the Treaty of London in 1839 as well as in the forming of alliances which indicated that Britain held no specific commitment to action, policies that allowed a sense of suspicion in Europe to develop. Furthermore this essay argues that it was the dithering of Asquith and Grey that added to the tension as they determinedly kept Britain aside from being drawn into what they perceived as a European conflict. Finally, this essay would reiterate the importance of Belgium's neutrality which held such strategic concern for Britain. As Asquith himself noted in August 1914, 'we got the news that Germany had entered Belgium... this simplifies matters.' [23] Asquith's dithering was over; Belgium's jeopardy held the potential to become Britain's jeopardy, the time to act had arrived as finally Britain herself was realistically in peril.

In response to the question, does Britain share some of the responsibility for the commencement of hostilities in 1914? This essay maintains that there was plenty of responsibility to go around. However, Britain was certainly not innocent and although she was not an overt aggressor in the run up to conflict, her policy of manipulation and inaction was very damaging. Britain may have not started the war but at the very least did it little to avoid it. Furthermore this essay would argue that Britain's actions and policies undertaken prior to 1914 actually exacerbated the situation beyond the point of resolution, to a climax where conflict was inevitable.

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[8] R.Heing, *Origins of the First World War 3^d edition* (New York, Routledge, 2002), p.31.

[9] Mombauer, p.197.

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[11] Ibid.

[12] B. Porter, *The Lions Share, a short history of British Imperialism 1850 – 2004* (Harlow: Pearson Education limited, 2004), p.82.

[13] Martel, p.12.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Mombauer, p.197.

[17] Ibid, p.191.

[18] Brock, P.147.

[19] Heing, p.31.

[20] Ibid, p.11.

Does Britain share responsibility for the commencement of hostilities in 1914?

Written by Simon Walker

[21] Ibid.

[22] Martel, p.77.

[23] Brock, p. 166.

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