Why did Britain join the war against Germany?

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The First World War is perhaps best summed up, in British popular memory by a statement made in the television show *Blackadder* when Captain Edmund Blackadder makes the assertion that 'Field Marshal Haig is about to make yet another gargantuan effort to move his drinks cabinet six inches closer to Berlin.'[1] The comment may have been made for comic effect, but it strikes a chord with the idea that is held by many of the British public that the First World War was fought over nothing but trivial issues amongst a tiny elite. Indeed, as Sheffield has stated, '*Blackadder* simply would not work in the absence of a British national perception of the First World War.'[2] However, as this essay will attempt to justify, the idea that Britain went to war for no reason is without charge; Britain went to war to preserve its national interests that were threatened to such an extent that it faced no other realistic opportunity but to engage in war.

The issue, brought up by Fischer and reconsidered by Joll that German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg may have 'over-estimated Germany's strength and, above all, maintained up to the final crisis an unfounded belief in the probability of Britain's neutrality' is something that requires further consideration.[3] British indecisiveness is demonstrated by a letter dated 31 July 1914 from British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey to British Ambassador to France, Grey states:

'Up to the present moment, we did not feel, and public opinion did not feel, that any treaties or obligations of this country were involved. Further developments might alter this situation and cause the Government and Parliament to take the view that intervention was justified. The preservation of the neutrality of Belgium might be, I would not say a decisive, but an important factor, in determining our attitude.'[4]

Such apparent indecisiveness may have given Germany the idea that Britain did intend to remain neutral in a continental conflict and thus encouraged Germany to pursue with its war aims. Whilst Grey's stance does not rule out military intervention, the wavering posture of Britain documented in this letter, just four days prior to the invasion of Belgium may have been interpreted by Germany as confirmation of the assumption made by Bethmann-Hollweg that Britain intended to stay neutral in the conflict. The invasion of Belgium would, as we know, be provided as the context for Britain joining the conflict against Germany, so it remains questionable as to why Grey would not provide a more assertive statement as to British intentions if Belgium were to be invaded. Lynn-Jones has established an interesting argument that British ambiguity during the July crisis was fuelled by a détente between Britain and Germany that had existed since 1911 and a belief that the:

'crisis could be managed not by threatening Germany, but by attempting to cooperate with Berlin. In Germany, the détente contributed to the ultimately false expectations that Britain would remain neutral.'[5]

An alternative view of the German willingness to invade Belgium rests in the idea that Germany had already accepted that Britain was to be a part of the war. Sheffield has gone further to suggest that German war planners had contemplated this, but had: 'underestimated its importance.

'If the Schlieffen Plan had worked and France and Russia had been defeated in short order, the ability of Britain to tip the balance in a protracted war of attrition would have been immaterial.'[6]

This essay however, is not out to consider German thinking in the build up to the First World War, but to consider why Britain was to join the war. Regardless of German considerations when the Schlieffen Plan was initiated, a conclusion that may be drawn from all of this is that, as Sir Edward Grey stated himself, (see above) the neutrality of Belgium was not decisive in the British decision to go to war in 1914. This was because it was always the intention of Britain to go to war if Germany were to create one.

Since the neutrality of Belgium was used by Britain as the official justification for war, it seems sensible to first consider the importance of Belgian neutrality in British foreign policy. Sheffield has orchestrated a large part of his assessment around the idea that '[t]he German invasion of Belgium made British entry into the war virtually inevitable.'[7] Howard too, has suggested that the invasion of Belgium was most important in the decision-making in Britain as to whether to enter the war.

'In Britain the invasion of Belgium united what had until then been a deeply divided public opinion. Ever since the sixteenth century it has been an article of faith in British naval policy that the Low Countries should not be allowed to fall into hostile hands and this belief has become almost visceral, irrespective of party politics.'[8]

Belgium was important to Britain; this is not what is at question. The neutrality of Belgium and the other Low Countries was extremely useful for the defence of the island of Britain (an invasion of Britain could potentially be a launched from there) and it provided ports for access to European markets. However, the idea of Belgian importance to British interests does not, when considered solely on its merits hold up to logical thinking as a reason to initiate war with Germany. According to a report made by Sir Edward Goschen, the British Ambassador in Berlin, the German Chancellor was very 'agitated' by the British decision to position herself closer to France. The report claims von Bethmann-Hollweg believed that it was terrible that 'just for a scrap of paper Great Britain was going to make war on a kindred nation who desired nothing better than to be friends with her.'[9] This report seen without any further information on the context of the outbreak of the war would make it appear that the occupation of Belgium was not intended to be a hostile manoeuvre against Britain. A more enlightening argument is that the German invasion of Belgium served as a convenient excuse to initiate a war, and one that made more sense to the British people than an obscure disagreement in Eastern Europe over the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. A speech made by Sir Edward Grey to Parliament serves as evidence to show that he was keen for people to rethink the issues in terms they would understand.

'I believe the country, so quickly has the situation been forced upon it, has not had time to realise the issue. It perhaps is still thinking of the quarrel between Austria and Servia, and not the complications of this matter which have grown out of the quarrel between Austria and Servia.'[10]

The 'complications' Grey referred to in this speech was the issue of Belgian neutrality, to which he also suggests that there was an 'obligation on this country' to protect.[11] There is a stark contrast between Grey's position in this speech made before Parliament and the ambiguous statement made by Grey in a letter to the French ambassador presented earlier in this essay. This further illustrates the idea that the invasion of Belgium was just a pretext to more complicated motives. The importance of maintaining Belgian neutrality therefore, should not be seen as the solitary reason for Britain joining the war against Germany. If the neutrality of Belgium were of primary importance to Britain then the Foreign Secretary would have made this clear to Germany without any ambiguities.

To understand why Britain would enter into a continental war against Germany we must first understand contemporary thinking in regards to what British interests were. For much of the British public, the Empire was what made Britain great. At the time, few would have disagreed with a statement made by Joseph Chamberlain that 'the British race is the greatest of governing races that the world has ever seen'.[12] While many historians, with the benefit of hindsight, have criticised the Empire as a financial drain on the British economy, this must not be confused with how the Empire was perceived at the time. Perhaps the most concise and accurate description of the popular perception of the British Empire is provided by Joll:

'The commercial links with the Empire were undoubtedly important – in 1902 they reached their highest point with about 38 per cent of British exports going to British possessions; but these imperial links were only part of the overall

pattern of British trade, while many of the colonies, the necessity of retaining which was taken for granted, were in fact economic liabilities rather than economic assets. The idea of economic advantages of empire was more important than the reality in convincing the British in 1914 that the maintenance of their imperial position was worth the risk of war.'[13]

British foreign policy was entrenched by the idea of using the empire as a means to provide wealth to the nation's capitalists. The government was largely influenced by what Cain and Hopkins have described as 'Gentlemanly Capitalism' whereby:

'political imperatives at home rapidly became linked to economic and military success abroad as the creation of wealth from the burgeoning transactions sector promoted private gain, the fiscal needs of the state, and the defence of the realm.'[14]

However, by the 20th century it was apparent to many that continued expansion of the Empire was out of the question. As French states, Sir Edward Grey 'was opposed to further imperial expansion because he recognised that British resources were already dangerously overextended in defending what it already had.'[15] It is therefore imperative when considering the nature of British thinking in the build up to the First World War to remember what policy makers considered to be in the British interest; namely the strong desire to maintain the strength of the Empire, as it already existed. This was seen as the most effective way of preventing the decline of British influence. This also ensured a central role of the Royal Navy in British thought. As Howard has explained:

'The Royal Navy's 'command of the seas' both held the Empire together and ensured the British people were fed. Loss of naval supremacy was a nightmare that dogged successive British governments and dominated their relations with other powers.'[16]

When assessed in these terms, it does not seem inevitable that Britain would end up on the side of Russia and France in a continental war. Indeed, France and Russia were traditional rivals to the British in Africa and the Middle East respectively. The unification of Germany was seen as beneficial to the British interest since '[t]he annexation of Alsace-Lorraine . . . traumatised the French political elite and imposed a lasting burden on Franco-German relations.'[17] From this point on British diplomacy relied heavily on a balance of power theory combining the new strength of Germany with Austria-Hungary and Italy. As Martel has explained, '[a]s long as France and Russia faced the combined strength of the Triple Alliance in Europe . . . they were not likely to risk a conflict with Britain.'[18]

One of the most often stated reasons for Britain going to war with Germany is that it was a consequence of longstanding tensions because of a naval arms race. A large number of scholars have devoted much time to considering the motives of the Kaiser in raising a large navy. Sheffield has suggested that '[a] powerful navy would give Germany leverage to get Britain to abandon its non-aligned stance'.[19] The argument holds that a powerful German navy would discourage any attack by Britain since:

'even a victory over [Admiral Alfred von] Tirpitz's newly powerful navy would be a Pyrrhic one, and a loss of ships could weaken it sufficiently to leave Britain in a poor position to face a challenge from French and Russian naval power.'[20]

The aggressive nature of the German motives in Sheffield's description is in contrast to Corrigan's explanation in more economic terms, which suggests:

'[Kaiser] Wilhelm [II], egged on by the military-industrial complex, wanted what he considered to be Germany's rightful place in the sun. . . [Furthermore, as] Germany's economy grew she found it necessary to have a merchant marine, which provided another excuse for developing a navy to protect it.' [21]

This essay does not intend to go to great length to assess German motivations for building its navy, but only to illustrate the controversy surrounding the topic, to explain how British thinking towards Germany changed because of this. As has already been addressed, the Royal Navy was paramount in British considerations towards other powers,

so the idea of German rivalry at sea was not welcomed by the British at all. Howard has provided a good summary of British anxieties.

'Given that she already had the most powerful army in the world, it was not immediately evident – at least not to the British – why Germany needed an ocean-going navy at all.'[22]

Regardless of German ambition, the expansion to its navy and its sudden imperial agenda was seen as a direct threat to the British Empire. This was not simply a case of the British reacting in a hostile fashion to any naval power, for instance as Sheffield points out 'Britain made a conscious decision not to enter a naval arms race with the USA' which also maintained a large naval force.[23] This shows that Britain was willing to accept that it was no longer the only naval power. However, despite the Kaiser's plea in the Daily Telegraph, that he was 'a friend of England',[24] bad diplomacy in Morocco during the Agadir crisis and in South Africa during the Boer War convinced many of the British people otherwise and indeed, that Germany had hostile intentions towards them.[25] This was made all the more serious as the nature of the threat was directed at what Britain held most dear, the Empire and the Royal Navy. This new threat at the heart of British anxieties is key to understanding the British motivations in the July crisis of 1914.

When Britain made the decision to go to war, unlike any of the other European powers it was not faced by an imminent danger of invasion. There were not troops marching towards it borders and it was not presented with an unacceptable ultimatum. The nature of the threat to Britain was more subtle than this, but when considered in relation to the perceptions held by the British it was just as sinister. The prospect of a war involving France and Russia against the growing power of Germany, that did not involve Britain could end with two consequences depending on which side was victorious. The first was that Germany, a power that as has been discussed was seen to by the British to be hostile to its interests, would be victorious and would conquer most of Europe. Sheffield has explained the predicament the British faced with this consequence.

'[I]f a hostile power did succeed in achieving a dominating position in Europe, with no powerful continental allies Britain would be very vulnerable to attack – particularly with major ports in enemy hands.'[26]

With France and Russia defeated the balance of power that Britain relied upon to insure her own security was void. Furthermore, the reference to major ports, namely those of the Low Countries would suggest British interest in the protection of Belgium. However, this is only important in the event of a hostile power dominating the continent. German invasion of Belgium in 1914 did not necessitate a war between the two powers but was adequate in qualifying in the minds of the British the nature of the threat that lay ahead should victory be found by the Germans.

The second consequence of a continental war that did not involve Britain was that France and Russia could defeat Germany alone. This would not mean that Britain was no longer threatened, far from it. Despite agreements to settle imperial rivalries with both France and Russia in years prior to 1914, which allowed them to focus on the emerging power of Germany, 'the outbreak of war in August 1914 did not cause the Entente partners to forget their prewar differences.'[27] If Britain failed to come to the aid of the French and the Russians, it was highly likely that in the event of their victory, traditional imperial tensions would re-emerge and they would want to punish Britain for ignoring the appeals for help from friends. Therefore, in the words of French it is realistic to make the assessment that 'British desiderata were chosen not only with an eye towards securing Britain's postwar position against Germany but also against France and Russia.'[28]

It may therefore, be conclusively stated that under no circumstances, was Britain faced with a favourable outcome to war between the continental powers. When war became imminent, the British government came to the same conclusions. With no power to negotiate any further, Britain was forced to enter the war to make sure that it did end in a favourable manner. As Sheffield states:

'[t]aking the long view then, the First World War appears not as an aberration in British history but simply as one round in a long struggle to prevent one continental state from dominating the rest.'[29]

Compliant with this statement, British policy also continued in its long struggle to maintain the greatness of Britain, by securing an advantageous platform from which it could maintain the strength of the Empire. In 1914, Britain faced the catastrophic choice between war and its own demise as a world power. The neutrality of Belgium whilst important to Britain was in no way the reason Britain went to war, but served as a focus for the British public to realise the danger, in a way that they could understand, that threatened them if they failed to act decisively.

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