Why did Britain go to war in 1914?

A handful of belligerent political leaders, primarily in Berlin, but also in Vienna, exploited the murder of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne Archduke Franz Ferdinand to pursue their long-held belief in Germany’s need for a world policy ‘Welpolitik’, even the right to world power ‘Weltmachtstellung’[[1]](#footnote-1). Their machinations, deviousness[[2]](#footnote-2), obfuscations and at times ineptitude and delusions[[3]](#footnote-3), led Britain’s leaders, reluctantly, in August 1914, once all efforts at mediation had failed, and enough of Britain’s divided cabinet could unite after Germany’s invasion of Belgium, to go to war when Germany failed to respond to Britain’s 4 August 1914 ultimatum.

Original documents identified and collated for the purposes of explaining the actions, decisions and feelings of the participants in the lead up to what became a world war (1914-18) by the likes of Immanuel Geiss (1967)[[4]](#footnote-4), John Röhl (1973)[[5]](#footnote-5) and Annika Mombauer (2013)[[6]](#footnote-6) show that Germany was inclined to risk trying to achieve world power status through conquest: a gamble that Germany’s Reich Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg described, when it went awry, as a ‘House of Cards’[[7]](#footnote-7). A handful of German leaders: the German Emperor and Prussian King, ‘Kaiser’ Wilhelm II (Wilhelm II), Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, the Imperial German Chancellor and Prussian Prime Minister, 1909-1917 (Bethmann Hollweg), Gottlieb von Jagow, the Secretary of State in the Auswärtiges Amt, 1913-1916 (Jagow) and Helmuth von Moltke (Moltke), the Chief of the German General Staff 1904-1914, in particular, were inspired by, reading about, dreaming of, and planning ways to achieve their ambitions that ‘challenged the status quo in three ways: colonial, naval and economic’[[8]](#footnote-8). These leaders in Germany used the excuse of Franz Ferdinand's murder in Sarajevo in June 1914, Moltke’s ‘slogan for a great war’[[9]](#footnote-9), to risk a belligerent and acquisitive policy, firstly by bolstering Austria-Hungary against Serbia with a ‘blank cheque.’ This was misguided; Jagow’s excuse to Karl Max Prince von Lichnowsky, German Ambassador in London 1912-14 (Lichnowsky) was that this somehow kept the balance of power. Wars are instigated by people, not countries. When we personify Germany, Britain, France or Russia we mean a few leaders with executive power[[10]](#footnote-10). In Germany, this meant kaiser Wilhelm II, the Reich’s Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, Jagow and Moltke; they are the reason Britain went to war in 1914.

Wilhelm II held too much power in the burgeoning German Empire and had influence that tipped then slid others towards conflict with Germany’s neighbours. Wilhelm II held the view that Germany deserved and required the status of a Great Power like that of the British Empire. Used to viewing with envy, for example, the scale and grandeur of the British Fleet in his youth[[11]](#footnote-11), Wilhelm II, a grandson of Queen Victoria, whatever the consequences and however it could be achieved, desired that Germany too should have such a fleet, something he was able to progress through Grand-Admiral von Tirpitz, State Secretary of the Reich Navy Office (Tirpitz), and by finding a way to get around budget restrictions imposed by the Reichstag; something that the then Reich Chancellor Bülow assisted with by removing Wilhelm II’s sentimental references to his youth spent in Plymouth in a proposal document, thus indicating how those around Wilhelm II would compensate for his failings as a politician and diplomat where there was, according to Lichnowsky, a preponderance of, ‘the politics of sentiment, not Realpolitik’.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Although a constitutional monarchy, Wilhelm II wielded power with few checks. In the case of the kaiser this was unfortunate as he wished upon himself either the role of a great Prince of Peace ‘Friedenskaiser’ or of a great warlord ‘Obersterkriegsher’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Wilhelm II would oscillate between the two perspectives, tipping him swiftly, depending on the circumstances or his company, from being in favour either of war or of peace and thus leading to a foreign policy that Lichnowsky later described as ‘either, or’. Wilhelm II’s passions could not help but influence others, according to Röhl,[[14]](#footnote-14) for example, after 5 July 1914 ‘the tub-thumping voice of Wilhelm II became one of the most effective weapons in the hands of those statesmen in Vienna who were recklessly playing with war’. While according to Sean McMeekin Wilhelm II’s ‘incandescent rage over Sarajevo gave way to recklessness’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Two weeks later on 28 July 1914 Wilhelm II, feeling certain that Austria-Hungary could be satisfied by Serbia’s overall compliance to the ultimatum presented as a result of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand believed that ‘every reason for war drops away’.[[16]](#footnote-16)

It was in response to such extreme oscillations that Grey (aka Britain) tried to find a response that would maintain peace. The undercurrent, in Germany, was for belligerence, bullying if not conflict, planning for war, not for peace, as was apparent in the conference Wilhelm II called for on 8 December 1912 that Bethmann Hollweg described as a ‘War Council’[[17]](#footnote-17). At this conference Wilhelm II reported on what Viscount Richard Burdon Haldane, British Minister or War, 1905-1912 (Haldane) had told Lichnowsky about Britain’s view of Germany. Wilhelm II in his opening address talked of the state of preparedness of the German army and navy.[[18]](#footnote-18) According to Röhl, Germany had wanted, or at least had expected, a war for some years.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Another example of the Wilhelm II’s state of mind and intent are his marginal notes. These ‘marginalia’ were so influential, that differences of opinion in the Auswärtiges Amt could, according to Geiss[[20]](#footnote-20) ‘swing round wholly and unreservedly to the harsh course ordered by the kaiser’. In a telegram between Heinrich Leopold von Tschirschky und Bögendorff, the German Ambassador in Vienna, 1907-1916 to Jagow, for example, from Vienna, 24 July 1914, Wilhelm II wrote that ‘Austria must become preponderant in the Balkans … otherwise there will be no peace’[[21]](#footnote-21). While on the 29th July, Lichnowsky, reporting on a visit to the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey (Grey) regarding Britain’s desire for mediation and the suggestion that Austria confine herself to occupying Belgrade Wilhelm II’s marginal note handwritten alongside Grey’s proposal, would, according to the kaiser result in Germany leaving ‘Austria in the lurch as if we were common as dirt and Mephistophelian!’[[22]](#footnote-22) And then, throughout the telegram from Lichnowsky to Jagow, on the 1st August you are left with the impression that Wilhelm II’s excitable ‘marginalia’ must have been fuel to hawks.[[23]](#footnote-23)

After the presentation of Austria-Hungary’s ultimatum by Leopold count Bertchold von und zu Ungarshitz, the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister (Berchtold) to Serbia, and its aftermath, Wilhelm II made his views of the proposed conferences emanating from Grey clear and Wilhelm II was not the only German leader whose right-wing conservatism inclined the country towards conflict. Bethmann Hollweg’s will and actions, in his own words ‘like a house of cards'[[24]](#footnote-24) were to build a position against which Britain had to act. Britain, in this respect went to war because Germany dared to try aggression to achieve its aims once unrealistic and bungled efforts to secure Britain's neutrality in 1914 had failed. Such diplomatic ineptitude was no clearer than when Bethmann Hollweg called in Britain’s ambassador, Sir Edward Goschen on the evening of Wednesday 29 July 1914 and made remarks respecting the integrity of Belgium after the war, ‘a diplomatic blunder of the first order’.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Bethmann Hollweg and Wilhelm II did not act alone, there were others in the German leadership and administration, as well as in Austria-Hungary, whose collective machinations led Britain to go to war in 1914: Jagow and Moltke drove Germany's aims while in Austria-Hungary Franz Freiherr Conrad von Hötezendorf, Chief of the General Staff, 1906-1911 and 1912-19176 (Conrad) was equally belligerent, demonstrated by a career of warmongering against Serbia. Jagow, as early as December 1912 had said that he wasn’t against war; to Lichnowsky he took the view, like that of Wilhelm II, that Austria was weak and falling behind as a power in the Triple Alliance.[[26]](#footnote-26) Then, by way of example of his continued belligerence, after the devious way in which the Ultimatum was presented to Serbia Jagow then urged Austria to begin the war as soon as possible in order to ‘knock the bottom out of the attempts at reconciliation’.[[27]](#footnote-27) He wouldn’t stand for one of Grey’s conferences which according to Jagow, would be a ‘court of arbitration’, where the ‘timid would win through’ and in any case it was ‘Austria-Hungary’s not Britain’s nor Russia’s business.[[28]](#footnote-28) Jagow then failed to treat Grey's initiative for mediation with any degree of urgency waiting until two hours after the time limit on the Ultimatum had expired whilst making it clear to Austria-Hungary of his tacit refusal to consider Grey's offer.[[29]](#footnote-29) On the other hand Jagow tried to impress upon Britain that he had given the Austrian's immediate and positive indication that he supported the British initiative. On the 25 July 1914, during a series of exchanges with Lichnowsky, Jagow insisted, hypocritically given Germany’s involvement through giving Austria-Hungary a ‘Blank Cheque’ to tackle Serbia firmly, that the 'matter must be localised by the non-interference of all Powers'.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Moltke, was another of the German belligerents. There’s evidence of this in the Moltke-Conrad Agreement of 1909 which indicates how clear Moltke had been on how a war might play out.[[31]](#footnote-31) While in the War Council of 8 December 1912 Moltke took the view that ‘war is unavoidable sooner or later’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Then, to avert potential mediation through conference rather than sticking to Conrad’s plans for Austro-Hungarian action by the 12 August 1914, Moltke informed Lt. Colonel Biernerth the Austrian-Hungary Military Attaché in Berlin to mobilise.[[33]](#footnote-33) Moltke pushed for war throughout July 1914 because he believed that victory for Germany was possible and desirable.[[34]](#footnote-34)

According to Geiss[[35]](#footnote-35) other belligerents in Germany included leading officials in the Foreign Ministry, Count Hoyos, Forgach and Macchio in particular, and on the military side Baron Conrad von Hötzendorf Chief of the General Staff, Kribatin, General Potiorek the Governor of Bosnia-Herzegovina. It was German Imperialism and ‘Wilhelmine Welpolitik’, that according to Giess[[36]](#footnote-36) provided the latent tensions. Germany, in contrast to its agrarian neighbours Austria-Hungary and France, was an industrial force with a rapidly expanding population. Unified under the Prussian Bismark only 40 years earlier, by the turn of the century, as Hans Deltbruck put it in November 1899, 'we want to be a world power' achieved 'with England means peace; against England means - through war'[[37]](#footnote-37). Whilst Britain could tolerate a degree of Austro-Hungarian hegemony in the Balkans, it could not tolerate Germany’s potential hegemony of continental Europe. As Haldane had said to Lichnowsky ‘England could not tolerate Germany’s becoming the dominant power on the Continent and uniting it under her leadership’. [[38]](#footnote-38) Geiss believes that as one of the most powerful conservative forces in the world the German Empire would ‘uphold conservative and monastic principles by any means against the rising flood of democracy, plus its Weltpolitik, made war inevitable’[[39]](#footnote-39) . It was born out of Germany's fear of encirclement and of Russia's burgeoning might, that Russia’s army was on track to become huge and that along with improved communications could by 1917 be an overwhelming threat.

The murder of Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 by Serbian fanatics should have no more brought Britain into armed conflict in continental Europe than the First and Second Balkan Wars (1912/1913). Before 1914 the principle of national self-determination directly threatened the Ottoman Empire and caused the First Balkan War against Turkey.[[40]](#footnote-40) Here, at the edge of Europe, with the desire for national self-determination being achieved at a cost to the Ottoman Empire the very same movement threatened Austria-Hungary, itself ruled by a monarchy that clung to its dynasty with its threadbare grasp on its multivarious peoples. In July 1914 Jagow told Lichnowsky that as a result of her lack of energy Austria was ceasing to count as a Great Power and weakening their Triple Alliance.[[41]](#footnote-41) And so it is that Germany turned a defensive alliance into an offensive one with its aim to achieve ‘Weltmachstellung’ (world power). Britain went to war in 1914, sooner and then again later in 1939, against this enactment of a desire in the German leadership for Germany and Germans to be part of a world power.

Understanding why Britain went to war in 1914 necessitates understanding why Germany left Britain with little choice - this cuckoo in the European nest wanted to dictate to all on the continent with Britain a tame ally or at least neutral. Britain had historically always acted against a single power dominating continental Europe. Lichnowsky’s insightful thoughts on the nature of foreign diplomacy compares Britain to a step by step approach of ‘partly, partly’ while in Germany their policy had been ‘either, or’. [[42]](#footnote-42) This is how Britain went to war in 1914 with Grey’s cautious and negotiated steps as Lichnowsky described in 1928.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Britain was reluctant, as were France and Russia, even Serbia to take part in an armed conflict. Britain, through Grey, governed by the cabinet of its coalition government of Liberal and Conservative politicians, guided and advised by experienced and informed career civil servants, ambassadors and military leaders such as Sir Eyre Crowe, Assistant Under-secretary of State in the British Foreign Office (Crowe), Sir George Buchanan, Sir Horace Rumbold and Sir William Nicholson. Lichnowsky felt that ‘Britain’ did everything to avoid war. ‘It would have been absolutely insane to precipitate it’.[[44]](#footnote-44)Such efforts at mediation were delayed, ignored, obfuscated, discombobulated and stonewalled by the likes of Bethmann Hollweg, and spurred on by the albeit oscillating and sentimental politically inept Wilhelm II.

Britain, with Grey pivotal, could not have known or believed how duplicitous Germany could be, though expert insight and analysis had been and would be provided by Crowe: Germany had ambitions and the means for aggrandisement both in Europe and Africa. 'Either Germany is definitely aiming at a general political hegemony and maritime ascendancy', Crowe advised in his memorandum of 1 January 1907 ‘Germany distinctly aims at playing on the world's political stage a much larger and much more dominant part than she finds allotted to herself under the current distribution of material power.[[45]](#footnote-45) Here Crowe elucidates the dichotomy that was this fledgling cuckoo at the beginning of the 20th century: on the one hand a 20th century commercial and cultural powerhouse, on the other a 19th even an 18th political entity where the likes of Bethmann Hollweg, according to Erdmann could dream up an 'eighteenth century cabinet war'.[[46]](#footnote-46)

According to Lichnowsky, writing in 1928, from his earliest dealings with Grey, and having spoken to Haldane he ‘repeatedly received hints to the effect that England could not remain an idle onlooker in a European war’.[[47]](#footnote-47) For the German leadership to believe that Britain would remain neutral flies in the face of the diplomatic reports they received from Lichnowsky who suggested that ‘We required [Grey] to make the Austrian standpoint as much his own as we did’.[[48]](#footnote-48) Repeatedly Grey took the initiative to see if the issues could be resolved. For example Lichnowsky to Jagow 25 july 1914,[[49]](#footnote-49) Grey’s and therefore Britain’s problem was that he ultimately came up against Germany’s *fait accompli.* The final days of July 1914 and the first days of August show what Grey did to try to avoid Britain having to take part in a continental war. Röhl describes the end of July 1914 as,

‘A race between the Powers in their moves to mediate and Germany in her endeavour to bring Austria-Hungary into the war at the earliest possible moment and so give still great force to the *fait accompli* with which the world was to be confronted’[[50]](#footnote-50).

On the 26 July 1914 Grey’s proposals for a four power conference would involve those countries which were not, he believed, directly involved in the pending conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia: Britain, France, Italy and Germany.[[51]](#footnote-51) To this end Grey instructed Sir Edward Goschen, British Ambassador in Berlin (1908-1914), to promote ‘the direct exchange of views between Austria and Russia’ not realising that Austria was already at war with Serbia and that Russia had begun premobilisation. Although the Great Powers desperately tried to prevent the local war against Serbia as the best means of averting a major one (for example, Telegram 199. 27 July, Jules Cambon, French Ambassador in Berlin to Jean-Baptiste Bienvenue-Martin, the acting French Premier/Foreign Minister from 15th to 29 July 1914),[[52]](#footnote-52) on the proposal by England for Germany to join the cabinets of London, Paris and Rome, ‘to prevent hostilities between St. Petersburg and Vienna’. Although we know that the duplicitous Jagow while saying that ‘he was disposed to join the Powers and do all he could to preserve peace’, had only a few hours earlier expressed his regret to Berchtold that military operations against Serbia were ‘too long drawn’ and that ‘proceeding without delay to place the world before a fait accompli’ was vital.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The German Government again on the 28 July 1914 steadfastly rebutted all attempts at mediation[[54]](#footnote-54) - to have participated in mediation would have soon revealed the extent of Germany’s duplicity.

On the 29 July 1914 the British Cabinet met after which Grey sent for Lichnowsky[[55]](#footnote-55) repeated his suggestion that Germany take part in mediation *… ‘à quatre’* On the doctored version of the original telegram that Jagow put before Wilhelm II, one of the kaiser’s marginal notes states a preference for England making it clear to Russia and France that she will not side with them, which that night, early on the morning of 30 July 1914[[56]](#footnote-56) turns into Bethmann Hollweg’s bid to secure British neutrality. Grey in turn explains in a conversation with Cambon,[[57]](#footnote-57) French Ambassador in London, 1898-1920, that in a general conflict Britain would not be able to remain neutral, though he explained also that there could be no guarantee of intervention by Britain until the position of Belgian neutrality was understood. Paul Cambon now asked Grey to reconsider their correspondence in 1912[[58]](#footnote-58) and Raymond Poincare, the French Premier, attempted to make it clear to Sir Francis Bertie, Ambassador to Paris, that only an unequivocal of England’s support could save the peace.

Come 31 July 1914, [[59]](#footnote-59) Grey continues to talk peace and mediation.[[60]](#footnote-60) Nor could Grey undertake any definite agreement learning that Russia had ordered a complete mobilization of her fleet and army,[[61]](#footnote-61) ‘I still trust that situation is not irretrievable’ he said while Germany, according to Grey,[[62]](#footnote-62) Germany did not expect Britain’s neutrality. Whereas in fact, due to the mistaken weight Wilhelm II gave to a letter of 28th July 1914 from his brother Prince Heinrich, Prince of Prussia.[[63]](#footnote-63) It was Grey, by refusing to take the neutral route that caused Bethmann Hollweg’s ‘House of Cards’ to collapse. Britain went to war in 1914 because Germany had staked too much on Britain’s neutrality; under the circumstances, as the conflict escalated, Britain, the erstwhile super power and empire, was quite unwilling and unable to remain neutral.

On 1 August 1914, in a last-ditched effort to conjure up the impossible Grey had a telephone conversation with Lichnowsky that the Prince interpreted as an assurance of Britain’s neutrality in the event that France remained neutral too, though what Grey had intended to mean, some authors contend, was that he had meant to imply that Germany too would remain neutral.

There were other internal reasons why Britain had not been early to make a firm stand against Germany, not least division in the British cabinet that risked a collapse of the British Government or taking a noninterventionist route, therefore having by the time the cabinet met, the support of the Unionist Part was crucial to the policy of Grey and Herbert Asquith, British Prime Minister 1908-1916. Even more importantly, Henry Wilson, British General, Director of Military Operations 1910-1914 had been successful in securing interventionist Tory pressure on the Liberals. Grey said he would resign if Viscount John Lord Morley of Blackburn, Lord President and the Council and Cabinet Minister 1910-14 and the ‘Little Englander’ faction desired ‘an uncompromising policy of non-intervention’. At this stage on 1st August the cabinet still said no to Churchill, but by 3 August 1914, with the most vociferous noninterventionists gone, the cabinet approved Churchill’s previous mobilization of the Fleet. And now, according to Cambon, if Britain would fight at sea, they would fight on land as well. Speaking in the House of Commons that day Grey declared that ‘if Britain stands aside, forfeiting her Belgian Treaty Obligations’, then we would ‘sacrifice our respect and good name and reputation’.

Although Grey had, according to Lichnowsky[[64]](#footnote-64) been, ‘a force for peace’ with Germany’s invasion of neutral Belgium removing all doubts and barriers from Britain’s apparent and from Germany’s point of view plausible and desirable neutrality, Britain went to war with Germany.

The usually misquoted H.G. Wells' phrase, 'the war that will end all war' - the title to a pamphlet he wrote in November 1914,[[65]](#footnote-65) expresses what all the leaders of the combatants understood - that this would be a war on a scale like none that had gone before, a risk the German leadership wanted to take, opening a Pandora's Box.[[66]](#footnote-66) Grey, and others, such as Viviani understood this[[67]](#footnote-67) which explains their kind of diplomacy that to some appeared then and since as evasion or indecision, whereas the evidence in the original documents shows that actions were designed to achieve peace against the odds.

Although it was the invasion of aliens that H.G. Wells wrote about in his fiction, several other authors had written about a fictional invasion of Britain by Germany, something that initially the cabinet and British Military leadership planned for and what was seen as an eventuality should Germany have been successful in conquering France and Russia. In its position as the dominant and established World Power, it was the British Empire that felt it had to meet the obligation to support France, not least because consideration had been given to alternative outcomes: France and Russia defeating Germany leaving the defensive alliance in tatters and other parts of the British Empire vulnerable. Ultimately Britain alone did not 'go to war', but rather the British Empire, with Kitchener as its military leader, a stalwart of successful colonial rule in India and of battles in Sudan and Southern Africa, with dominion and colonial forces to call upon, blocked Germany's way to Paris. Having paved the way for seeking common ground on foreign policy in 1904.[[68]](#footnote-68) With Britain's own issue of internal national self-determination to manage, the question of Irish Home Rule and the Protestant countries of the north, postponed and with parliament's and the cabinet's support to do so, Britain presented Germany with its ultimatum.

Britain had not declared her position too late, rather she left the door open for as long as possible for mediation. The extent to which German leaders, Bethmann Hollweg and Jagow lied about Germany's role and actions in relation to pushing Austro-Hungary into war with Serbia and deliberately stymied British efforts to bring the Powers to conference has only subsequently been fully realised. Though the evidence was lacking, advice and insights from the likes of Buchanan, Rumbold, Nicholson and Crowe from Britain, as well as from Poincare and Sazanov from France and Russia respectively, must have come close to confirming Grey's fears regarding Germany's desire to be and to prove that it was a World Power.

Where Germany was belligerent, Britain sort peace; where Germany was devious, Britain was politically correct; where Germany was inept, Britain was a paragon of considered diplomacy; where Britain was coy, Germany was blunt and where Britain’s leaders worked as part of a cabinet and reported to Parliament, Germany’s leaders worked in the cabal of monarchic rule. Ultimately, Britain could not remain indifferent ‘when all Europe was in flames’[[69]](#footnote-69) Whilst compared to other neutral states, be it the Netherlands, Sweden or Spain, Britain and its Empire could and had to act according to its status, having the means to do so with the Fleet and the British Expeditionary Force and having, with German's breach of Belgian neutrality, and cabinet support, not without resignations and abstentions, the legal means to do so.

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64. Röhl, *1914: Delusion or Design?* (1971) p. 89 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
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