Naval War College Review

Volume 32
Number 6 *September-October*

Article 24

1979

Britain and the Origins of the First World War

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Recommended Citation

Megargee, Richard and Steiner, Zara S. (1979) "Britain and the Origins of the First World War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 32 : No. 6 , Article 24.
Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol32/iss6/24

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"pointless and futile gesture," outnumbered and with no air force. The author concludes by asking "if the British or Japanese, for that matter, did much good by remaining locked in such a lengthy struggle?"

But before he reaches this Peterkin conclusion, Brigadier Smith tells a good story of the 1942-45 battles, from the initial disheartening defeats (the Japanese conquered Burma with two divisions) to the bittersweet capture of an abandoned Rangoon in May 1945. The British and the Americans had to learn modern jungle warfare practically from scratch. Brigadier Smith thinks that the British learned then the lessons that were so successful later in Malaya and Borneo against the Communists and the Indonesians. There were never very many men actually fighting in the Burma campaign, but because of terrain, weather and logistic problems it became very much a soldier's war. More Victoria Crosses were won in Burma than in Italy or Normandy.

The author is always fair in his judgments (even to Stilwell), but one wonders if his greatest admiration isn't reserved for the Japanese fighting man, just as his strongest strictures are saved for the Japanese high command whose "inflexible tactics, ill-conceived arrangements for administration, and unquestioning optimism became a dangerous mixture."

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Steiner, Zara S. *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977. 305pp.

Zara Steiner has written a worthy addition to the fine British series, *Making of the 20th Century*, edited by Christopher Thorne. The book fulfills the series' promise to examine the major events of this century through readable, general studies benefiting from the latest scholarly interpretation, sources and bilbiography. In this work, the critical event is British involvement in the international politics leading to World War I.

The reader will find here no sharply revisionist interpretation of the British prewar role. Steiner contends that British foreign policy was relatively consistent and uncomplicated–the product of enduring and generally accepted objectives, the almost unchallenged personal direction of the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, and the escalating external threat posed by the German Empire. That policy is implicitly contrasted with the aggressive and erratic conduct of concurrent German foreign affairs–generated by internal social, political and economic turbulence, and disruptive personal rivalries and ambitions. (German policy is well analyzed in the companion volume of this series, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* by Otto Berghahn.)

The text clearly identifies the paramount trends in 20th-century British foreign policy. The objectives are described as essentially defensive: retreat from overextended diplomatic commitments, consolidation of vital imperial holdings, and protection and preservation of an enviable trade preeminence. Such goals were well established and in large part implemented by Conservative Governments at the turn of the century; they prompted attempts at either rapprochement, entente or alliance with Japan, the United States, Germany, France, and Russia. These policies were continued with considerable fidelity by the prewar Liberal Ministries in which Grey directed diplomacy.

Grey's preeminence in the control of British foreign affairs, 1905-1914, is also thoroughly described. He is shown as master of his own elitist ministry, autonomous in thought and action despite the growing Germaniphobia of his subordinates. Nor did representatives of the military succeed in altering the course of policy charted by the Foreign

Secretary; in fact they were almost criminally ignored by the foreign policy establishment. Grey was also relatively immune from challenges within a Liberal Cabinet largely ignorant of the specifics of his policy and reluctant to jeopardize precarious party unity with disputes over foreign affairs. Parliament itself was seldom afforded clear explanations of the implications of Grey's diplomacy and had little institutional capacity to influence negotiations directly even had such information been forthcoming. Beyond this, the public was even further removed from the intricacies of policy formulation and proportionately less able to affect its course.

Noting that traditional policy and autonomous leadership operated to ensure consistency in British foreign affairs, the author also contends that circumstances afforded the Foreign Secretary very little freedom of action. At home, the Government faced a sluggish economy, escalating demands for expensive social welfare programs, and sharply rising costs of military hardware; abroad, new challengers arose to dispute British claims along the frontiers of empire in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, while the Boer war and other adventures demonstrated British military inefficiency and impotence. These factors made it indispensable that Grey conciliate the most dangerous of Britain's rivals, notably France and Russia; yet the very policies that did so placed England in the camp of those powers most vulnerable and resistant to the growing Continental power of Germany. Despite the initial lack of fundamental conflicts in Anglo-German interests, there were few areas of potential cooperation. Those there were soon fell victim to irresponsible and inflammatory German challenges to both the European and world status quo, and even worse, to the naval superiority Britain considered vital to imperial security. Thus Grey was left no choice but to reinforce an anti-German Continental balance and Britain's own global naval supremacy.

The author concludes that when war came it was the culmination of German actions which, while not primarily directed against England, seriously threatened long-term British interests and recent obligations. These actions ultimately required the Foreign Secretary to lead the British people to war on behalf of an acceptable European balance, outstanding diplomatic commitments, and imperial security. Sir Edward Grey is thus depicted as the custodian of historic interests and policies that he skillfully defended until the final crises of 1914.

The reader need not challenge Professor Steiner's excellent account to arrive at a far less complimentary interpretation of British foreign policy as articulated by Sir Edward Grey. Other scholars have with the same evidence criticized the Foreign Secretary's determination to maintain the imperial status quo, in conjunction with France and Russia, at the expense of a more objective attitude toward the European balance. They have also marveled that Britain, who historically had refereed the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in order to prevent the outbreak of any general European conflagration, was so insensitive to the equally apparent and even more dangerous threat of Austro-Hungarian dissolution. And from the evidence in these pages alone, anyone can question a policy that on the eve of crisis left British response unclear to friends and enemies, cabinet members and service chiefs, Parliament and public; that placed Britain's fate at the mercy of accidents such as the invasion of Belgium and imprudent Germanic declarations; that responded so clumsily and tardily to a situation that had been the focal point of British diplomatic maneuvering since the formation of the entente system. This reader concedes Steiner's claims for the

essential legitimacy and benignity of Grey's foreign policy efforts, but he finds little cause for praise in a policy so lacking in precision and initiative, and so devoid of strategic considerations.

In addition to its contribution to our understanding of and debate on the responsibility for the First World War, this work will inevitably be analyzed in the context of current U.S.-Soviet relations. The obvious analogies will be drawn between Great Britain and the United States. The latter will be seen as a similarly satisfied power facing domestic problems and costs, eroding military credibility, and an aggressive challenge to its international, and especially its naval, primacy; and this threatened power will also have the options of détente, preemptive strikes (as the British considered "Copenhagening" the German Fleet in 1904), defensive alliances, or an arms race, to assure its continued supremacy. One hopes that any such analogies will note major differences in the contemporary international environment, the nature of military conflict, and the policy control mechanisms of the states involved in ostensibly parallel situations. But analysts may legitimately ponder certain grim reminders of the consequences of error in assessing enemy intentions and passivity in the face of challenge.

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Annotated by

Ann Hardy, with Kathleen Ashook
Doris Baginski and Mary Ann Varoutsos

Boston Study Group. *The Price of Defense; a New Strategy for Military Spending.* New York: Times Books, 1979. 359pp. $15.00

The Boston Study Group favors a reduction in defense spending affecting both conventional and nuclear forces. Employing graphic comparisons between existing and projected U.S. and foreign military forces, they maintain that American military policy should be reassessed: it should eliminate half the present Military Establishment, reducing "interventionist" conventional forces; it should avoid the appearance of having a preemptive strike capability; it should depend on submarine-launched missiles and a very limited number of ICBMs; and it should discourage advanced technology for developing new weapons systems, and discontinue extensive arms sales abroad.

Buzan, Barry. *A Sea of Trouble? Sources of Dispute in the New Ocean Regime.* Adelphi Papers, no. 143. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1978. 50pp. $1.50

Long regarded as inexhaustible and inaccessible, ocean resources have recently become an important source of international conflicts and disputes because of their realizable economic value and the growth in the number of sovereign states. After first categorizing disputes related to law-of-the-sea issues, this incisive analysis surveys past, present, and potential conflicts