GREAT BRITAIN AND THE WAR OF
1914–1918
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LLEWELLYN WOODWARD
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1914--1918

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Contents

INTRODUCTION  page xi

PART I
The outbreak of war: the BEF: deadlock on the Western Front and disquiet at home

1. The immediate origins of the war  3
2. The British Expeditionary Force: the first four months of the war on the Western Front  25
   Note to Chapter 2: The defence of Great Britain against invasion
3. Trench warfare on the Western Front: failure of the High Command to deal with an unexpected situation  38
4. The higher direction of the war: Asquith and Kitchener  45

PART II
The war outside the Western Front: British attacks on Turkey: formation of the first Coalition Ministry

5. The expedition to Gallipoli: hesitation and delays: the naval attempt to force the Straits: the first landings and the failure to advance  59
6. The political crisis of May, 1915, and the formation of the first Coalition Ministry: unsuccessful attacks at Gallipoli: the evacuation of the peninsula  79
   Notes to Chapter 6. 1. The proposed landing at Alexandretta in 1915
   2. The Salonika Expedition
CONTENTS

7. The expedition to Mesopotamia: mismanagement and disaster: the fall of Kut: recovery: the capture of Baghdad  page 99

Note to Chapter 7. The Mesopotamia Commission

8. Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, 1915–1918  114

PART III
The Western Front in 1915 and 1916: difficulties of the Coalition: death of Lord Kitchener

9. The western offensives of the spring of 1915: the entry of Italy into the war: failure of the autumn offensive: Haig succeeds French as Commander-in-Chief of the BEF  125

10. Allied plans for 1916: Verdun and the battle of the Somme  143

11. Difficulties of the first Coalition: compulsory military service: death of Lord Kitchener: Lloyd George becomes Secretary of State for War  155

PART IV
The war at sea to the autumn of 1916

12. The Grand Fleet in the North Sea: the battles of Coronel and the Falkland Islands: the battle of Jutland  167

13. The blockade of Germany: the first German submarine campaign: attitude of the United States towards British and German action at sea  186

PART V
Great Britain and President Wilson’s proposals for bringing the war to an end, 1914–1917: the entry of the United States into the war

14. Great Britain and the diplomacy of President Wilson to the autumn of 1916: visits of Colonel House to Europe: Grey’s memorandum of February, 1916  207

15. British Ministers and peace terms in the autumn of 1916: British and German war aims: the German ‘Peace Note’ of December 12, 1916: President Wilson’s Note of December 18 and the Allied reply: impossibility of finding the bases
of agreement for a 'peace without victory': the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and the entry of the United States into the war

PART VI

Lloyd George becomes Prime Minister: the Allied offensives of 1917: mutinies in the French army

16. The resignation of Asquith: Lloyd George becomes Prime Minister 245
17. Lloyd George, Haig, and Nivelle 256
18. The German withdrawal to the Hindenburg line: the British offensive at Arras: failure of Nivelle's offensive 267
19. The French mutinies: the British offensive in Flanders 278
20. Cambrai: the new tactics 297

PART VII

The establishment of the Supreme War Council: the Western Allies and Russia after the Bolshevik revolution

21. The establishment of the Supreme War Council: Allied plans for 1918 305
22. The Allies on the defensive: Lloyd George, Haig, and Robertson 318

PART VIII

The last two years of the war at sea

23. The second German submarine campaign and the Allied counter-measures: the effects of the Allied blockade 335

PART IX

The war in the air

24. The RFC in 1914: air warfare on the Western Front: the RNAS 355
25. German bombing attacks on Great Britain: the Zeppelins: aeroplane raids: the bombing of Germany 370
## PART X

*The German western offensives, March–June, 1918: Allied and German war aims: the defeat and surrender of Germany*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>The German western offensives, March–June, 1918</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>The definition of Allied war aims in 1918: President Wilson’s Fourteen Points: German war aims in the West</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>The military defeat and surrender of Germany: the military terms of the armistice</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## PART XI

*The Western Allies and the Bolsheviks*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>The western Allies and the Bolsheviks, 1917–1919</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## PART XII

*The organisation of British resources for total war*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>The transition from peace to war: ‘business as usual’: the beginnings of control: the supply of arms and munitions: the Ministry of Munitions</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Wages: strikes: the reasons for labour unrest</td>
<td>475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Shipping</td>
<td>484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Food production and rationing</td>
<td>498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Paying for the war</td>
<td>514</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## PART XIII

*The Peace Settlement with Germany*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONTENTS</td>
<td>ix</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. The Treaty of Versailles: the Covenant of the League of Nations: the territorial settlement: German reparation: the mandatory system</td>
<td>page 534</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note to Chapter 37. The Peace Treaties with Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. The German observations on the Treaty and the Allied reply</td>
<td>561</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note to Chapter 38. The maintenance of the blockade of Germany after the armistice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. The attitude of British opinion to the Treaty of Versailles</td>
<td>573</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAPS</th>
<th>587</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The North Sea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The German invasion of Belgium and France</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Ypres salient, 1915–1917</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Western Front 1915–1917, Laventie to Arras</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Gallipoli campaign</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The battlefield of the Somme, 1916</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The German and Allied offensives, 1918</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Mesopotamia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Palestine and Syria</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| INDEX | 599 |
Page Intentionally Left Blank
This book is a short account – the essential facts and a running commentary – of the part taken by Great Britain in the First World War. I have written it because, with one exception, the war histories which I have read do not answer the questions I would put to them. The exception is C. R. F. M. Cruttwell’s *History of the Great War*, written over thirty years ago, and covering all the battle-fronts. My purpose is both narrower and wider. Narrower in the sense that, although I must obviously view the war as a whole, I have concentrated upon the British part in it; wider in that I have tried to take account not only of the fighting, but of domestic matters such as the political and economic organisation of Great Britain for war, the extension of state control, the problems set by shortages of shipping and food. I have also carried the story beyond the military defeat of Germany and her Allies to the armistice of November 11, 1918, the Peace Conference, and the Treaty of Versailles. In order to explain why neither of the European belligerent groups would agree to bring the war to an end earlier by a ‘peace without victory’, I have had to say a good deal about British and German war aims, and the discussions with President Wilson.

I have mentioned Cruttwell’s book by name because I think it the most profound study of any war in modern times. I do not mean that there are no other good books. The official histories of British naval, military, and air operations are on the whole very good, though they, and especially those dealing with the Western Front, are too often a defence of the strategy of the British High Command. Anyhow these histories are necessarily so very long and detailed – thirty volumes for military operations alone – that the ordinary reader cannot cope with them. The memoirs and other writings of the senior British commanders shew, often painfully, their limitations. Churchill’s *The World Crisis* is a brilliant but not an objective book. Other experts on military affairs, notably Sir Basil Liddell Hart, have taught me a great deal. It is curious that there should be no comprehensive history,
though there are some excellent monographs, on what has been called, with some exaggeration, the ‘home front’. Lloyd George’s War Memoirs and The Truth about the Peace Treaties are untrustworthy and thus fail to do him justice. Lord Beaverbrook’s revelations about the struggles for power among the leading politicians are valuable at their own level, in spite of their reduction of the government of England to a series of ignoble intrigues. Lord Hankey’s two volumes on The Supreme Command, 1914–1918, are of greater permanent importance.

Like most other writers on the Great War, I have found it hard to resist the temptation to include too much. In order to avoid encumbering and slowing down the tempo of my narrative I have made great use of footnotes. It is possible to read my book – I have tried the experiment – without looking at any of these notes, but they gave me, and I hope may give others, an opportunity to notice interesting and not irrelevant details which I should otherwise have had to leave out.

Inevitably, when I had finished writing the book, I felt that it was not, and could not be the book I would like to have written. The history which I would like to have written would have been distilled from the ‘case-histories’ of many millions of soldiers, records personal and unique, infinite in their variety, but with a basic likeness for the fighting men of every country. Shakespeare in some of his historical plays (John Bates in Henry V), Tolstoy in War and Peace, Thomas Hardy in The Dynasts have come near to such multiple, symbolic representation. I am not foolish enough to imagine myself in this rare company. The only ‘case-history’ with which I could deal would be my own, but I came out of the war very lightly; my greatest burden for most of the time was not exposure to immediate danger but long frustration and accidie. In retrospect I can even regard my four years of military service as a hateful discipline, but none the less a discipline. However, this hypothesis is of interest only to myself. If I mention now shortly some of my personal reactions of fifty years ago I do so only to make clear what my presuppositions and prejudices were and still remain.

I was twenty-four when the war broke out. Hitherto, without knowing it, I had lived too much in and with my books. After leaving Oxford in 1913, I was fortunate enough to win several awards which, together, allowed me to plan four years of travel and research in Europe. I did not look beyond these four years. I arranged to spend the first of them in Paris. For the second year I decided to go to Germany, and for the third year to Russia. I had no plans for the fourth year. It interests me
now to think that I never had any thought of going to the United States. While I was in Paris I was asked to coach the son of a transatlantic family (the mother was English) who spent most of their time in France and Italy. I liked them, and they were very kind to me. They invited me to spend August and part of September with them at Vallombrosa. From Vallombrosa I intended to go to Munich for a term, or perhaps for the academic year 1914-15.

The war thus cut directly across my plans and not merely my plans, but all my interests, hopes, and wishes. It happened (I need not explain why so odd a thing – for me – should have happened) that on the day of the assassination of the Archduke Francis Ferdinando I was staying at a large, cosmopolitan hotel in the Black Forest. My host was an Englishman, partly of German descent, in the diplomatic service. We were having tea on the terrace of the hotel when the head waiter came round telling everyone that the Archduke and his wife had been murdered. I remember that people got up from their tables and talked in little groups. There was one group of Russians. To me the news meant nothing more than another political assassination in the Balkans. My host said at once that there was likely to be a European war and that England would be involved in it. Another of his guests, a very charming and clever Bavarian woman, agreed with him. I was bewildered at all this excitement, and did not like to shew my ignorance by asking too many questions.

About a week later I came back leisurely to England by a cross-country journey, from Freiburg to Mulhouse, and thence by Besançon, Autun, Nevers, and Orleans to Paris. Already there was some activity on the vast empty sidings along the branch line into Alsace from the main Freiburg–Basel railway. I remember the steel rails shining in the afternoon sunlight. When I entered French territory I was surprised to be asked to give some proof of my identity (passports were, of course, not needed for travel in France or Germany in those days). I had sent my luggage, except for one bag, directly from Germany to London, so I had nothing about me to shew who I was. The frontier official asked me where I was going to spend the night; I said truthfully that I had no idea. This satisfied him and I continued on my way.

After packing up a few things in Paris I took the night boat from Dieppe to Newhaven. There may have been some political excitement in Paris; if so, I did not notice it. I went to Oxford for my first weekend in England. This would have been (I think) the weekend of July 18–20. On Sunday night I was asked to dinner in St John’s senior common
room (the long vacation had begun and the Fellows were not dining in hall). By this time I was a little curious that no one in England in my hearing had even mentioned the event, or any possible consequences of the event which had so much disturbed the groups of Europeans at tea in the Black Forest. I did not venture to ask what my hosts in St John’s thought about it (I suspect that only two of the Fellows present thought about it at all). It would have seemed ridiculous to suggest at dessert on this quiet Sunday evening that a European war might break out in a fortnight. I accepted a friend’s invitation to stay with him for a few days in the Cotswolds. Then I would go to Vallombrosa.

When the war came I did not go to Vallombrosa. Like most of my Oxford contemporaries and school friends I tried to join the army. A doctor who examined me at a recruiting office hesitated about my heart; he told me to take a holiday and to present myself again later. At my father’s advice (my father was a civil servant at the Admiralty. He had no ‘top-level’ information but always expected an Anglo-German war, and was sure, when it came, that it would be a long one) I went back to Oxford in order to apply for a commission through the OTC.

I began my military training in the familiar Oxford University Park. I was, however, now disturbed in my mind. I could not feel sure that Great Britain had been right to come into the war. I disliked my military instruction. It was very elementary, yet I could not evade the fact that I was being taught to kill men. I should never be very efficient at the job, but to kill men would be the intention of my will. Could I be satisfied that, behind the appeals to patriotism and duty, the background of the war was not just another squabble over markets? Was not England enmeshed in the same political selfishness as Germany, less crudely and boastfully, but caught up in the same predatory social system? Anyhow why should we interfere in what was primarily an Austro-Russian dispute over areas of political influence in southeastern Europe? What claim had society upon me to help in getting it out of the political impasse into which it had blundered? Above all, would I be justified in killing Germans? Killing was murder, whatever the recruiting slogans might say about my King and Country needing me.

I was more than once on the point of withdrawing my application for a commission. If I had done so, I would have tried to find some non-combatant work such as stretcher-bearing or mine-sweeping. No one could have been less qualified for either employment, and my
motives for considering them were far from noble. I just did not want to be thought afraid of risking my skin in the army. I had, in fact, no cause to be afraid, because at that time (in spite of my father — and Lord Kitchener) I did not believe that the war would go on long enough for me to take part in it as a trained soldier.

This mood lasted for about six weeks. I had been in Germany several times before July, 1914. My longest visit was only for a month, but one did not have to stay for a month in the country to realize the extraordinary collective arrogance of the German people, and, in particular, of the officers and non-commissioned officers of the German army. The university professors and students at Bonn, where I spent my month, were tiresomely full of talk about the coming war in which the British ‘colonies’ would ‘rebel’, and the German navy sink the British fleet. I found, casually, that one professor of church history bought and studied the current British navy lists. I could not imagine a Canon of Christ Church giving me details of the armament of the latest German ‘Dreadnoughts’. Other foreign students — not only the English — were as astonished as I was over this preoccupation with war and conquest. A later generation is inclined to disbelieve accounts of pre-1914 Germany given by young Englishmen like myself. The well-known earlier comment by the Socialist Bebel — ‘the people are still drunk with victory’ — is also discounted as coming from a German who was ‘up against’ most of his countrymen. One could hardly accuse the Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg of political anti-Germanism. Bethmann-Hollweg in the spring of 1915 admitted to Valentini, the head of the Emperor’s private civil Cabinet, that he could do nothing to damp down the widespread demand for annexationist war aims: ‘The psychology of our people has been so much poisoned by boasting during the last twenty-five years that it would probably become timid if we were to prohibit it.’

Militarism was a very real and very unpleasing phenomenon. The behaviour of the German armies in Belgium did not surprise me. I would have expected as much from the students and from more than one of the professors in Bonn. The decisive argument with me, however, was not the abruptness with which the ordinary ‘decent’ German would fall back into barbarism. My argument was simply that of Socrates; if you have enjoyed the benefit of the laws of your country,

1 It is, however, only fair to say that one of the officers who instructed me in the OUOTC was an Anglican clergyman (and the kindest and least aggressive of men).
you must not refuse obedience to them even when you think they are mistaken and when it is to your personal advantage to evade or disobey them. The fact that I found this argument decisive, and that I did not ask myself what a Christian ought to do shows how deeply the Greek and Latin which I had read at school and the university had entered into my thinking. I found no answer to the argument of Socrates. I thought of it in Flanders when I was first ordered to take action — in fact I took the action on my own initiative in accordance with general instructions — to fire on some German soldiers against whom individually I had no grievance or sense of wrong. I did not regret my decision at any time during the war. Fifty years later, having gone over the argument with myself again and again, I am perhaps less sure that I was right, but, on balance, taking everything into account, I still think that, having accepted the benefit of the laws, and having indeed enjoyed privileges open only to a small minority, I had a duty to do what the state asked of me.

I mention my own case because I think that very many of my friends and contemporaries felt as I did, though they may not have put the matter to themselves in the same words. I have often wondered whether we should have come to the same conclusion if we had known how long-drawn and terrible the war would be, and how many others younger than ourselves would be engulfed in it. I have never been able to answer this question. In this simple form it is indeed unanswerable. There are three different questions: (1) who was responsible for the outbreak of the war? (2) should Great Britain have taken part in it? (3) should the western Powers have made a real attempt to end it in the latter part of 1916 or early in 1917 in terms of a compromise peace?

Anyone who follows closely the course of events leading to the outbreak of the war can hardly avoid concluding that the major responsibility — not the sole responsibility — lay with Germany and Austria-Hungary, and, after these two Powers, more with Russia than with France, and least of all with England. Obviously, if the central Powers could have foreseen their defeat they would not have provoked the war. They expected victory; there is no evidence that they would have drawn back at the last moment even if they had not been caught up in their own mobilisation plans. The German and Austro-Hungarian military leaders had convinced themselves that a European war would come sooner or later; they wanted to use what they thought the best opportunity for it, that is to say, to fight it when Germany was at her greatest military strength in relation to France and Russia. It is not true
to say that the war broke out accidentally, and that given more time and greater skill in negotiation it would have been avoided. The Germans, in particular, if they had been willing to do so, could have called off the war before it was too late.

The answer to the second question – the question of British participation in the war – was stated very clearly by Grey and others and needs no repetition. Self-preservation as well as the defence of international agreements compelled us to take part. If we had stood aside, our position as a great Power, whatever the result of the war, would have been disastrous. Anyhow, leaving aside self-interest, I think still that we were morally justified in resisting the Germans. With a German victory in the war Europe would have been darker even than it is today. Grey, who thought that this war (as Chamberlain thought about the second war) might bring about general ruin, would none the less have spoken as he did about the entry of his country if he could actually have foreseen the extent and ultimate reverberation of the calamities which would follow.

Once the war had begun there was no practical way of ending it on terms short of a complete victory for one or other of the belligerent groups. Neither side could accept President Wilson’s idea of a compromise peace, a ‘peace without victory’. Behind Wilson’s idea lay the fallacy that each Power could return to its previous standing as though nothing had happened. Such a return to the status quo was not possible; the changes brought about by battle in the European and, one might say, the world balance of power could not be ignored after the first few weeks of fighting. German war aims remained annexationist until the very hour of military defeat. Ludendorff and Hindenburg were talking as late as August, 1918, about the transfer of the Briey–Longwy area of France to Germany and of the precise degree of servitude which it would be necessary to impose upon Belgium. At the end of 1917 the Germans had shewn in their treatment of eastern and south-eastern Europe the kind of terms which they would impose upon the west. From their own point of view the German high command had no option. A compromise peace, which did not allow them to display tangible fruits of victory, would not have seemed to the German people worth the sacrifices of the war, and would have shaken the military-autocratic system of government in Germany. A victorious peace, on the other hand, would give this regime enhanced prestige, and fasten its control upon the German people as well as upon the rest of Europe. Wilson himself recognised at last that there was no hope of
general security as long as Germany was controlled by a military oligarchy. As for Germany’s chief ally, there could be for the Habsburgs only complete victory or complete defeat. Either the German-Magyar domination of the Slav nationalities must be re-established or the empire would collapse.

On the side of the western Powers—the German bid for a rapid victory having failed—a ‘compromise’ peace would have given Germany the opportunity to recover from her military mistakes, and, at a suitable moment of her own choosing, to recommence the war. There would be no real peace in Europe, no end to the piling up of armaments, while the character of the German government remained unchanged, and the country was as strongly placed as ever for a resumption of aggressive war.

Thus, however much one detested the slaughter and suffering, there was nothing for it but to go on, and to go on until victory. One might not share the popular belief in a much better world after the war, but at least the world would not be under the stifling domination of German force.

If I did not think it possible to end the war by any means short of inflicting heavy defeat on the enemy, I never lost confidence that, even with the generals we had to accept because we had no better ones, we should not lose the war. We were, however, trying to win it in the crudest way at least as far as our land forces were concerned. Looking back at my own angry reflexions on our commanders, I can see that I was a considerable prig, intellectually intolerant, and affected by a half-realised class jealousy; I disliked the social code of many regular officers (not all—my own colonel in France was an admirable exception), their assumptions of superiority, their standards of value, but the reasons for my dismay, on finding myself inside the army, went beyond a criticism of military arrogance—after all, I had seen a much more unpleasant state of things in Germany. What alarmed me was the lowness of professional competence among the higher ranks. From Kitchener downwards these commanders just did not know how to set about their task of winning the war. No one doubted their personal courage, their discipline, their coolness in difficult moments, their power of endurance. Their trouble was lack of imagination and ‘free intelligence’. After the first few months of the war the problem before them, in its simplest form, had been to find a means of protecting their men against machine gun and rifle fire while they were crossing the area between their own and the enemy trenches. The experience of
recent warfare, in Manchuria and the Balkans, ought to have made the high command aware earlier of this problem and of the impossibility of solving it without some new form of mechanical aid. The War Office, to use a loose but convenient designation of the whole senior directing body, had at its disposal in Great Britain some of the best engineering talent in the world. The senior officers never took the initiative in consulting this talent or in providing the engineers with the means for experiment on a large scale in order to solve this new military problem. If the cavalrymen who cluttered up the high places in the military command had been as eager and co-operative in experiment as the pilots and designers of aeroplanes, the waste of life in futile attacks on the Western Front might have been avoided, just as, conversely, if the small number of enthusiasts responsible for the development of military aircraft had been as slow, unimaginative, and unhelpful as the General Staff shewed themselves towards the development of the tanks, we should have been continuously outmatched in the air.

Kitchener said of the military position after the introduction of trench warfare, 'this is not war', yet it was the war he was fighting, and his first duty ought to have been to look for a way of meeting the new conditions. Owing to the lack of an intelligent professional approach, therefore, the soldiers fell back after the summer of 1916, upon the doctrine of 'attrition', wearing the enemy down by attacks, general or local, which in fact weakened the attackers as much as the defenders. This plan, if one can call it a plan, did result in victory, but the victorious generals nearly destroyed European civilisation by the methods which they employed to save it. Fortunately for the Allies the enemy generals were equally obtuse. I can see now that the routine-mindedness of military men had deeper causes than I thought at the time and that it was not fair to put the whole blame upon the army commanders, individually or collectively, for their mental illiteracy. English society had taken no trouble to ensure that its armed defence would be directed by men as able as those who managed its civil affairs. The intellectual requirements for entrance into the army were far below those laid down for entrance into the higher branches of the civil service. One of my Oxford colleagues said to me in 1919, when I was complaining of the low mental level of our military leadership, that the army was 'run by pass men'. The English people had been willing to allow this dangerous state of things. They could not complain of the consequences when they had left the fate of a generation in the hands of a custom-bound clique which would never have been permitted to take over the
management of any other important department of state or of a great business. Even so, the last word remained, in war as in peace, with civilian Ministers. Asquith described Kitchener as 'the only soldier with brains since Wolseley', yet he did nothing to encourage Kitchener to apply new ideas to a new situation. Churchill and Lloyd George indeed realised the facts: Churchill was discredited, somewhat unfairly, by the failure at Gallipoli; Lloyd George had neither the moral strength nor the mastery of detail which would have enabled him to dominate the military chiefs. He realised their helplessness before the problem set to them; he could not get rid of them, since he had no better candidates to put in their places, and, after the missed opportunities of 1915, he did not suggest a feasible alternative to their concentration upon a disastrous strategy.

I remembered gloomily that this kind of thing had happened before, not of course exactly, but after the manner in which historical situations recur. The western Roman Empire had disintegrated because the cultivated classes in society left the profession of arms and the duties of defence to hired barbarians, and gave them little help from mechanical devices. Barbarians fought barbarians with similar weapons and similar tactics, and the western Empire came to a squalid end. We took our barbarians from within our own society, but the result could well be the same.

From the autumn of 1916 I was in a state of angry depression. I was a totally insignificant part of a vast, ill-directed machine. As the months passed my feelings of inner insubordination became more intense, but there was nothing I could do about them. The odds were that, before the war ended, I should be killed uselessly, as thousands of better people than myself had already been killed. This was not what I had meant by my Socratic ideas of obedience to the laws because I had benefited from them. At least about one thing I had no illusion. The war had to be won, and as it would have to be won by those who were directing it or by other professionals of the same plodding type, the end would be one of mutual exhaustion in which the moral standards of the victors as well as the defeated would be dangerously lowered. Our own much-praised propaganda organisation seemed to be doing a good deal to lower these standards. In the autumn of 1916 I was sent to Salonika. One of my 'bottle-washing' jobs there was to hand out material from London to the local Greek newspapers. I remember a disgusting sentence, transmitted by wireless from the propaganda office: ‘Our men are enjoying killing Germans in the spring sunshine.’
The instruments which we were using, the methods by which we were trying to uphold the freedom and high culture of Europe were all the time dragging us down. When would this dégringolade end? What were the prospects for western civilisation? There was much talk at this time of 'a war to end war', about the spirit of comradeship in the trenches, the debt owed to the fallen. I did not regard such talk as insincere, but I could not imagine how a change for the better, a great regeneration could come out of this mass slaughter. We should have avoided a greater calamity; that would be all. I did not even expect so grim a conflict for power to be the last of its kind. War was not the way to end war. The Allies would win; after their victory there would be much fiercer hatred between nations, not merely the superficial xenophobia of every large group for every other large group, or the nouveau riche type of nationalist arrogance which had taken hold of the Germans, but a hatred based in the Allied countries on the havoc Germany had caused and the savagery with which she had fought the war, and based in Germany on the bitter consequences of defeat, thwarted ambition, and loss of status. The Great Powers had managed their affairs unwisely before 1914; were they likely to shew more wisdom after the strain of a war in which their best citizens had been killed and their accumulated resources gone to waste? There would be far less mutual trust, less, not more co-operation, and less chance of a lasting peace because the Germans would never acknowledge what they had done and never accept the loss of their dominant position in Europe.

Alas I could find little reason to hope for better relations between Englishmen and Englishmen. The most unselfish would have given their lives. Those who had known and loved them would never forget them. For a time there would be a general sense of sorrow, but it could not be lasting. It meant little to say that the dead would be held in everlasting remembrance. How could they be remembered by those to whom they would be only names on countless memorial stones? Few people in 1914 had thought about the young soldiers killed in the Crimean war. Even the South African war memorials had no personal significance to the generation twenty years younger than myself. If I lived to be an old man, I should find that only the contemporaries of my youth were really moved by the thought of the losses in the battle of the Somme. As for the 'comradeship of the trenches' which was positive and remarkable during the war, I did not see how such a relationship could be preserved in the scramble and competition of the modern industrial system to which the soldiers would return.
During these dismal years, if I had been consistent with my own past, I should have turned for consolation to religion and poetry. Before 1914 I had thought of taking Orders; I had observed even then that I was continually postponing the date of doing so, and I think it certain that, war or no war, I should not have felt able to commit myself to the beliefs which, however lightly they seemed to fall upon some clergy-men, an ordained minister of the Church of England bound himself publicly to hold and to teach. Nevertheless in 1914 I was a practising Anglican; four years later I still had not broken altogether with the practice of religion, but I had drifted away from it. The sacraments had lost meaning for me; the creeds had become antique formulae. I did not suppose that the problem of reconciling the goodness of God with the existence of evil, pain, and unmerited suffering had been set for the first time by the war, or that defensive war - the bellum justum of the lawyers - was necessarily incompatible with Christian teaching. I agreed with William Temple that, although Great Britain was morally bound to declare war on Germany in 1914 and to fight on until victory, the war itself shewed 'the un-Christian principles which had dominated the life of western Christendom, and of which the Church and the Nations had need to repent'. I could subscribe also to Temple's other comment that, for the first time since the Emperor Constantine, war was regarded by large numbers of Christian Europeans as marking the collapse of Christianity, and that responsibility for the outbreak of a particular war was being assessed in terms of moral guilt. This change of attitude was largely the result of the slow permeation of western thought by Christian ideas. On the other hand it was not difficult to put aside the crude conclusions of a number of clergy that the suffering brought by the war was a divine judgment on national sins, general or particular. (Drunkenness, sabbath-breaking, even the disestablishment of the Welsh church were put forward as sins calling for Divine chastisement upon the whole nation.) Temple rightly described this view as 'sheer superstition'. I could not, however, accept his own interpretation of the value of suffering as a form of purgation. Now that I am old, I should not reject this idea; indeed I find consolation in it. I would not, however, apply it in the case of suffering inflicted haphazard upon innocent and guilty by other human beings. I have mentioned the first time I directed the firing of guns with the purpose of killing Germans. I could not regard myself as having acted in order to give these Germans a chance of purgation through suffering.

It might be true, as Scott Holland wrote, that 'if only the world had
been Christian, it would not be at war', but this fact did not reconcile the coexistence of an omnipotent and merciful Providence with the misery of the innocent. It was no argument to say that the frightful tale of injustice would be set right in another state of being outside time. Why permit the evil things to happen at all? No doctrine of free will, no theory of Christian redemption provided a solution.

I was only one among many thousands who put these questions, in one form or another, without finding an answer. With few exceptions the clergy of the Established Church did not help us to find an answer. The Church of England, as would-be reformers put it, was 'not organised for a crisis'. Since the Tractarians the Anglican clergy had imitated the example of other callings in a movement to raise their own professional standards and status. They had done so with unfortunate consequences. They had indeed professionalised themselves, but in so doing they had lost touch with an increasing number of the laity. They had reintroduced sacerdotal procedures and practices which had ceased to be part of the tradition of the English people. They had dressed themselves up in forgotten uniforms, copes, mitres, chasubles, and what not without realising how little meaning these marks of status had for the ordinary church-goer. Tennyson had summed up the movement long ago, before the revival of ritual and ceremonial had reached its present pitch, when he wrote (in Maud) about hearing 'the snowy-banded, dilettante, delicate-handed priest intone'. What did it matter how many candles were lit on an altar, whether this altar were of wood or stone, if the foundation and fabric of Christian doctrine were crumbling under the pressure of modern linguistic, historical, and anthropological research? What had these hieratic figures, cocooned in their finely-stitched embroideries, to do with good and evil as the common man saw good and evil in a real world?

If I broke or drifted away from the Church of England, I could not join any other religious body. The Roman Catholic Church, since the Council of Trent, and earlier, had worked out dogmatic and devotional fantasies which seemed to me absurd. The Protestant non-conformists were a historical survival. The only one of these bodies likely to appeal to me was the Society of Friends, but I never could make out what they did or did not believe. In any case, in the immediate context of the war, their attitude towards military service was irritatingly confused, and I was too much of a prig myself not to be aware very quickly of any element of priggishness in others.

During this time I read, as far as I could get hold of it, the literature
of imagination written during the war. Before 1914 the poetry which moved me most had been of a traditional kind. I did not dislike the mildly contemplative verse which Edward Marsh published in his anthologies of ‘Georgian’ writers. Most of the writers had been brought up, as I was, in the long-established discipline of Greek and Latin. Most of them lived, as I had lived, in the less industrialised half of England, where the countryside had only begun to change from the Victorian pattern; the garden of Somersby Rectory, described in In Memoriam, the ‘full-foliaged elms’ and ‘large leaves of the sycamore’, were familiar to me. Hardy, Yeats – the Yeats of 1900 and the dedication to ‘The Shadowy Waters’ – Francis Thompson, Bridges, and Masefield were the ruling contemporary poets. Walter de la Mare, Rupert Brooke, and half a dozen others seemed likely to dominate the next twenty years without any startling change. I had come across – no one who read the literary journals could fail to do so – certain new and noisy figures; Ezra Pound, the Vorticists, et hoc genus omne. When I was living in Paris I learned a great deal about Marinetti and his friends. I had agreed with the judgment of the new weekly paper, the New Statesman, about the so-called Vorticist movement. A reviewer in this paper described Pound as unconvincing: ‘when he is comprehensible, he is usually silly; when he is incomprehensible, he would not, I suppose be found less silly by anyone who had the key to his cypher’.¹ As for Marinetti, the New Statesman in July, 1914, seemed to me to put the matter simply: ‘Signor Marinetti’s glorification of war, violence, and cruelty is like Kipling at fourteen writing in a school magazine, if you could imagine Kipling emancipated from religion and belief in British law and order . . . The whole thing is a display of penny fireworks . . . Art is not a diffusion of life into wavy lines and dots and dashes but the opposite.’ Again, in this ill-fated July of 1914, I had thought a reviewer in the New Statesman right in saying that Pound’s Provençal poems reminded him of an American tourist sending home picture postcards of the places he had seen on his travels.

I could document my own perplexities and anger from the changes in the poetry of the war years between 1914 and the latter part of 1916. There were some good poems written in the early part of the war. They were not, or most of them were not, written out of personal experience of the fighting. The theme of Thomas Hardy’s ‘In Time of

¹ Rupert Brooke, in the Cambridge Review, had reviewed Pound more favourably: ‘when he has passed through stammering to speech and when he has more clearly recognised the nature of poetry, he may be a great poet’.
the Breaking of Nations’ is the order and continuity of life, not the disorder and catastrophe of battle; the poem was written in 1915, but Hardy, in his august manner, was remembering something he had seen in Cornwall over forty years earlier during the Franco-Prussian war, when he had heard the news of the battle of Gravelotte. A. E. Housman’s ‘Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries’ had as its background the war of movement, the line of battle of the old regular army, not the slaughter in the trenches. Rupert Brooke’s war poems belong to the period before the Gallipoli landings; Brooke died while war was still an adventure to him and his friends. Wilfred Grenfell was killed in action in 1915; his strangely noble poem ‘Into Battle’ also belongs to the time before mass killing had become a dreadful routine. The change came after the battle of Loos, the failure at Gallipoli, and, above all, after the holocaust on the Somme.

The horrors of the ‘war of attrition’, repeated again and again by the commanders to whom all the Great Powers had handed over the destiny of youth, stunned and deafened the imagination. The personal anguish was beyond description. Writers as different as Yeats and Kipling have remarked that such emotional distress stifled the writing of poetry and turned men’s minds away from it. In Kipling’s words:1

What man hears aught except the groaning guns?
What man heeds aught save what each instant brings?
When each man’s life all imaged life outruns
What man shall pleasure in imaginings?
So it has fallen, as it was bound to fall.
We are not, nor we were not heard at all.

The background of 1914 and the first nine months of 1915 were so very different from that of the later war years that there is no unity between the two periods. Furthermore there was now a dividing line between contemporaries; those who had fought in the war and those who had not done so. The poems of those who had seen war for themselves became short, violent protests against the monstrous situation into which the soldiers of all the belligerent nations had been thrust. Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves could not use the poetic conventions of the so-called ‘Georgians’ to describe the appalling

1 I have seen these words quoted recently, in regard to the failure of the poetic imagination to compass the dreadful experience of modern war. I cannot remember who quoted them, and in what context; they seem to me to apply to both wars.
facts of battle. One can notice the transition in Sassoon’s writing from

Ring your sweet bells; but let them be farewells
To the green-vista’d gladness of the past
That changed us into soldiers

to

O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

Wilfred Owen’s ‘Futility’ is perhaps even closer to the Georgian language, and is yet an age away in substance.

. . . Was it for this the clay grew tall?
O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth’s sleep at all?

So to me, in the last years of the war, the futility, inevitable, outrageous in its necessity, overshadowed everything. I use the words ‘inevitable’ and ‘necessary’ because I still thought that a German victory would fasten on Europe chains from which there would be no hope of release except after even greater misery. If I did not expect a much better world to come out of it, at least, though at far too heavy a cost, our victory would have removed the threat of a mindless European tyranny.

Then, almost as an anti-climax, the war ended. After being let out of hospital and pronounced fit for ‘light work’, I assisted a temporary section of the Foreign Office in preparing for publication a number of handbooks for the use of the British Delegation to the Paris Conference. These books were in general very good. I wrote only one of them. I have reason to think that Balfour read the handbooks - I know that he read my small contribution. I doubt whether Lloyd George even looked at the title-pages. I respected my colleagues in this work. I liked their hopefulness, though, as the weeks and months passed, we began to realise the difference between putting forward the most admirable proposals and getting agreement on them. I found it an extraordinary thing to be listening again to the talk of people of first-class ability; I still felt a strange and immeasurable difference between the majority who had not seen war at first hand and those who, like Wilfred Owen, had watched the light fall at dawn on the body of a dead soldier.

As I have said, I never expected a satisfactory peace settlement. Europe had been torn apart with such savagery that reconciliation must
be far distant, I did not think the treaty of Versailles too severe. Germany had survived the war as a united Reich. I had assumed, rightly, as it turned out, that the Germans would forget the terms which they had intended to fasten on their enemies, and that they would cry out against everything likely to lessen their own chances of regaining the military status which they had lost by defeat. I could see no advantages—only great risks—in a generosity which from the British point of view would have been at others’ expense, and which would have met with no response from Germany. I never shared the Russian Bolshevist dream of a world revolution in the supposed interest of the proletariat. Such a revolution was most improbable, but, if it had spread over Europe, the result might have been chaos; there was a limit to the capacity of western society to hold together. The Bolshevist revolution was based upon implacable hatred; the only revolution which would have had a chance of success (and, remembering the history of the Crucifixion, one could not put this chance very high) must have been based upon compassion and forgiveness, notions which Marx and Lenin in their intellectual pride never envisaged.

Throughout this time I was tired and unwell. I had been in military hospitals for nearly eight months in 1918, and was very ill again for a short time during the influenza epidemic. After July, 1918, when I came back to England in a hospital ship from Malta, I was not personally unhappy—the very reverse, in fact, because I was with my wife whom I had married while in England on short leave in 1917. We had parted at the gate of Southampton Docks on a September evening uncertain whether we should ever meet again. When she came to me after my disembarkation at Avonmouth, I could hardly believe my immense good fortune. We were together. I was sure that I should slowly get well again. I expected the war to end before the winter. I could think of plans for the future. I was still young and could look forward to a reasonably good job, though I did not know what this job would be.

My good fortune continued when, after a pleasant but extremely fatiguing three months in the summer of 1919 as a schoolmaster, I was elected to a fellowship at All Souls. This fellowship left me to choose my profession. I think that, if I had been offered some literary or publishing work, I should have taken it, but I did not know any literary men in London or elsewhere, or how to set about trying to establish myself as a writer. I also doubted whether I could earn a living from the kind of books which I hoped to write. A College
tutorship would give me a quiet sufficiency, and time outside my teaching. So I stayed on in Oxford. I have never regretted my choice. I enjoyed the tutorial hours with my pupils. I wrote a good deal, and always in the way I wanted to write and on the subjects I wanted to write about. Within a year or so I realised how wise I had been not to have given up my independence for a more competitive existence, and especially so because I began to find myself out of sympathy with nearly all post-war writing. My failure to see more than newfangledness where others acclaimed originality at first bewildered me, until I discovered that the study of history, though in some respects a danger to the imagination, at least freed one from the tyranny of contemporary fashion. I could remember the French saying about a majority which was built up in time – qui se compte par générations. I should say now that, fundamentally, the reason for my distaste for contemporary moods and styles was that, although I had ceased to be a believing Christian (I still attended my college chapel as an act of ancestral piety) I went on reasoning in Christian terms and my judgments were according to Christian standards of value. At all events, I was sure that the only hope for the future of the world lay in accepting the Christian virtues of compassion and humility. I kept in mind two sentences of a non-Christian writer, Anatole France: il faut mépriser les hommes avec allégresse, and les grands écrivains n'ont pas l'âme basse. I did not find many signs of gentleness or nobility in English post-war writing. The favourable reception given to Lytton Strachey's Eminent Victorians shocked me because Strachey distorted and even suppressed facts in his attempt to 'debunk' heroic action. Keynes' reckless condemnation of Wilson, Lloyd George, and Clemenceau seemed equally overdrawn for literary effect. Aldous Huxley made living people into puppets, and seemed to enjoy his own cruelty to them. James Joyce's almost incredible detachment from personal emotion – Ulysses seemed to me to shew neither pity nor any sense of distress – left him, for all his virtuosity, without more healing power for his contemporaries than one would expect from a diagnosis of humanity undertaken by a scientist on a distant planet. D. H. Lawrence was, for me, the most remarkable of the younger writers who did not go to the war. He was physically as well as mentally unfit for military service, and, as his letters shew, unable to give a coherent explanation why the war affected him as it did. Sometimes he treated it merely as an interference with his freedom of action and choice. He wrote in December, 1914, that he was 'glad of this war'... 'it kicks the pasteboard bottom in of the usual “good” popular
novel’. At the end of January, 1915, he felt ‘hopeful now about the war’. We should ‘all rise again from this grave – though the killed soldiers will have to wait until the last trump’. Lawrence looked forward to a new community ‘wherein the struggle shall not be for money or for power’, though he did not suggest reasons why a most deadly contest for power should have this happy conclusion. Then the mass slaughter, and his own private anxieties – financial troubles aggravated by the suppression of his novel *The Rainbow* – played on his nerves and made him think that he would find ‘freedom’ in America. As the months passed, this nervous anger against a hostile world became almost hysterical; he talked about a society based on honesty and love, and yet railed against the folly and mediocrity of the nations who would compose it. Finally, exasperated, depressed, and ill, he lost hope in everyone and everything. In November, 1918, he began to ‘despair altogether about human relationships . . . one may just as well turn into a sort of lone wolf and have done with it’. Under the nagging pressure of his own poverty the ideal of a new community disappeared. He cadged for money, looked for a legacy to his wife which would enable him ‘to *get out*, out of England, – really, out of Europe . . . I feel caged, somehow, and I *cannot* find out how to earn enough to keep us, and it maddens me.’ In November, 1919, Lawrence managed to go, not ‘out of Europe’ but to Italy. His health improved; he was rather less harassed for money, yet of the hopes of a new society regenerated by the experience of war, nothing remained. For me, and others who had admired his insight, there was in his later work no coherent philosophy, and, alas, less artistic power.

This lack of coherence in the work of my contemporaries alarmed and depressed me almost as much as the lack of compassion. I could recognise little in the new experiments, especially in painting and sculpture, which did not signify a deep and general disorder concealed under much pretentious talk. I remember some sentences written in the *New Statesman* by J. C. Squire in January, 1920 – I have a copy of them now – which expressed very clearly my own dismay:

*Posterity may detect (in the changed mode of imaginative response) something more important than we can clearly see. It is not for nothing that, to an extent not foreseen in the early days of Marinetti, a section of artists, in all countries from France to Nicaragua, are running amok, inuring us to every kind of lunacy and incomprehensibility, and threatening an atmosphere which may powerfully affect those who grow up into it. However foolish*
we may think it, the disease is too general to be ignored, and it has subcutaneous connexions with the general state of the European soul and mind. Underlying literature, as all other human activities, is philosophy, systematised or vaguely assumed, and it may be that we are here and now in the middle of a critical battlefield, of a conflict between beliefs and working assumptions which to some of us mean security, vigour, and health, and beliefs or disbeliefs, passions and manias which might, were they to spread, mean the death of ordered civilisation and of literature with it.

At this time the forces of anarchy, or so I thought them, in western civilisation were strengthened at least temporarily by the hypotheses reached in the new science of psychology and the practical study of psychoanalysis. These hypotheses, or firm conclusions as they were popularly taken to be, seemed to deny the humanist assumption of man as a rational creature, capable, in a favourable environment, of almost endless improvement, self-improvement as well as mastery of his surroundings. The exploration of the depths of personality began largely with the observation of abnormal cases, but Freud and his fellow-workers found to their surprise that explanations which fitted the behaviour of disordered minds and personalities applied also to the behaviour of so-called normal people. The conscious attitudes and values of human adults appeared to be determined to a large extent by experiences which dated back to early childhood and could be analysed in terms of suppressed infantile sexuality.

These views had reached England before 1914. They had been received at first with bewilderment. An English translation of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published in 1913. The publishers stated that the sale of the book was ‘limited to members of the medical, scholastic, legal and clerical professions’. One reviewer, after describing Freud’s views very fairly, called the book ‘a remarkable collection of data, however rickety the theory based on them seems to be’. Other critics were harsher; a French professor of psychology, after hearing Freud lecture in Paris, described the lecture as ‘une mauvaise plaisanterie’.

Once these theories had come into wide circulation, they were bound to have a disintegrating effect. They were a fountain of compassion for those who used them in their art of healing. At the same time they might well appear, especially to readers untrained in the critical examination of concepts, to destroy the moral and intellectual bases of western civilisation. They offered, at least on a superficial reading,
neither hope nor any ground for stability to a society almost strained to breaking-point by the external havoc and emotional devastation of the war. They could be used to justify, if such a term applied, the wilder experiments already being made in art and letters.

Such a situation in which traditional values were overturned was not new in western society. I remembered once again the end of the western Roman Empire. In the fifth century a Roman poet, sailing past the island of Capraria after it had been given over to a monastery, wrote of the place 'Squalet lucifugis insula plena viris', but he did not mean by this invasion of what seemed to him a degrading superstition that the citadel of human personality had been undermined and brought to ruin. In any case a new stability was regained, after a time of sordid confusion, largely by the efforts, in modern jargon, of a dedicated élite within the Christian church. There was now no likelihood of such a Christian revival. Outside the church there was not merely no intellectual or moral élite, no single, dominant body with the artistic skill and imaginative strength to rebuild the ruins into which the ideas of human progress and of the nobility of human beings had fallen. The writers of imagination who had fought in the war and survived had to meet this crisis; the hackneyed term is unsuitable to describe the general desiccation of the streams of poetry. They had to meet it as individuals because their older contemporaries were of little help and their juniors, who had not shared in the experience of the war, were inclined to retire into private and often savagely ironic commentaries of their own. H. G. Wells continued to write a great deal; already in an essay of 1911 he had argued for the use of the novel as a general medium of discussion in an age of vanishing certainty, but his own work took on more and more the character of bare statements of social and political facts; his analysis was too rapid, and often too superficial (as in his Outline of History) to give satisfactory answers. Bernard Shaw, at the height of his reputation, might have used the

1 'The island is squalid with men who run away from the light.'
2 Francis Thompson, whose poetry, apart from The Hound of Heaven, fell into eclipse between 1914 and 1919, had come near to expressing the new ideas in An Anthem of Earth

Thou dost this body, this enhavocked realm,
Subject to ancient and ancestral shadows;
Descended passions sway it; it is distraught
With ghostly usurpation, dinned and fretted
With the still-tyrannous dead; a haunted tenement,
Peopled from barrows and outworn ossuaries.
theatre as the great Athenian tragic poets and Aristophanes had used it over two thousand years earlier, but Shaw was not Aristophanes, and the English stage was not the Greek theatre. Shaw himself, in his preface to *Heartbreak House*, written during the war, pointed out that economic and social conditions in war-time made the playing of serious drama almost impossible. The theatres were filled with audiences who wanted nothing but light entertainment.

I am writing of things which happened nearly fifty years ago, though, as so often with the old, they are very clear to me, clearer than many events of the late 1940s. I can remember how odd it seemed to me that, suddenly, I neither understood nor sympathised with the new fashions in imaginative writing. I continued to think of the barbarians infiltrating into and finally overthrowing the high civilisation of the western Roman Empire. When I read the bits and pieces of recondite learning, the quotations and echoes from earlier poets in *The Waste Land*—Desmond MacCarthy likened them to collector’s pieces carefully arranged in the window of an expensive shop—I was reminded of a cameo of Augustus in the treasury of Aachen cathedral, preserved for its rich associations and framed in a barbarian setting. When I looked at the latest modes in painting I thought of the curious forecast made by the Abbé Lamennais over a century ago about an atheist society falling into ruin in spite of its immense material achievements: ‘Reason will decay before men’s eyes. The simplest truths will appear strange and remarkable, and will scarcely be endured.’

I am not so absurd as to claim that my judgment in these matters was right. Indeed I know that most people with a better claim to judge works of imagination think me altogether wrong. I am merely recording that the experience of the first war left me with a conflict of views about the nature of things which I have not been able to decide because the evidence for each of the two views has seemed, paradoxically, to be valid in its own field and yet finally incomplete. On the one hand I have observed the bleak indifference of time and chance, the negation of values in a universe without justice or compassion or hope or the possibility of lasting good. The only judgment to be passed on such a spectacle is in Housman’s words:

For men at whiles are sober,
And think by fits and starts,
And if they think, they fasten
Their hands upon their hearts.
On the other hand there has remained with me an inexplicable (that is to say, I find no way of explaining it) sense of the unity and goodness of life. This deep confidence has not been a fugitive mood, a piece of wishful thinking or defence mechanism, a death wish or the like. It has had nothing to do with my physical health. It is not an inference from my own observation or that of others on the processes of living. The visible, countable evidence, as I have said, is mainly the other way.

It may be said 'What has all this personal record to do with writing a history of the war of 1914-18? Why trouble others with my perplexities?' Again I may be mistaken, but I think it essential that anyone attempting to write the kind of history, or, as I have called it, running commentary, which cannot be compiled equally well by computing machines ought to set out his philosophy. I think this to be especially necessary for a historian of war. No one has put the case more directly, in the case of war, than John Ruskin, though I could quote a curiously similar statement by Bismarck during the Franco-Prussian war. In 1865 Ruskin gave a lecture on 'War' to the cadets of the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich. He published the lecture, with an introduction, in his book *The Crown of Wild Olive*. In this introduction he wrote of the difficulty of knowing whether to address one's audience as believing, or not believing, in any other world than this. . . . And the more I thought over what I had got to say, the less I found I could say it, without reference to this intangible or intractable question. It made all the difference in asserting any principle of war, whether one assumed that a discharge of artillery would merely knead down a certain quantity of once living clay into a level line, as in a brickfield; or whether, out of every separately Christian-named portion of the ruinous heap, there went out, into the smoke and dead-fallen air of battle, some astonished condition of soul,¹ unwillingly released.

In this year 1967 I would put the question in a less simple form, but it would be the same question.

¹ Ruskin's words 'some astonished condition of soul' have a parallel in the prayer of a French nun of the later seventeenth century; 'Et, à l'heure de ma mort, soyez le refuge de mon âme étonnée.'
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PART I

The outbreak of war: the BEF: deadlock on the Western Front and disquiet at home
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CHAPTER I

The immediate origins of the war

The Great War of 1914–18 arose out of a political situation in which the Powers of Europe were divided into two groups, roughly equal in military strength. Germany and Austria-Hungary were in one group, with Italy as a somewhat doubtful ally; France, Russia, and Great Britain were in the other group. France and Russia, like Germany and Austria-Hungary, were linked by a treaty of alliance; Great Britain, though aligned with France and Russia, was not bound by any military convention with them, and retained full freedom of decision in the event of a war. Military conversations, however, had taken place between the British and French to arrange common action if the two Powers were together involved in war with Germany. In 1912 the French moved most of their fleet from the Channel and the North Sea to the Mediterranean; the move implied collaboration with Great Britain at sea, but again an exchange of letters with the British Government disclaimed any mutual commitment. Naval conversations were also held with Russia; for geographical reasons these conversations were less important than those with France. Nevertheless, as time passed, and the Germans tried to break the Anglo-French and Anglo-Russian ententes, a feeling grew up, especially in France, that Great Britain was committed, morally as well as by self-interest, to come to the assistance of France if she were attacked by Germany.

The aim of Grey's foreign policy had been to lessen the tension between the two Continental military alliances. These efforts seemed to have succeeded in the crisis brought about by war in the Balkans in 1912–13. Servia, Greece and Bulgaria had combined to get rid of what remained of Turkish sovereignty in Europe. They defeated Turkey, but quarrelled over the spoils of victory. Servia\(^1\) gained in territory, and would have gained more if Austria-Hungary had not refused to allow

\(^1\) Until the outbreak of war in 1914 the Cyrillic characters in the name 'Servia' were translated in this manner in Great Britain. After the outbreak of war the transliteration 'Serbia' came into general use in England.
her to establish herself on the Adriatic coast. Austria-Hungary objected to the aggrandisement of Servia because this southern Slav state favoured the predominance of Russian influence in the Balkans; an enlarged Servia would therefore block the way to Austro-Hungarian and German control of the Balkan peninsula and the routes through it to the Near and Middle East. For Austria-Hungary Servian expansion would have even more serious domestic consequences. Austria-Hungary had already assumed full sovereignty over the former Turkish provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, most of whose inhabitants were Slav. Servian nationalist ambitions envisaged a greater Servian kingdom including Bosnia-Herzegovina and possibly other Slav areas under Austro-Hungarian rule. Such a kingdom would have meant the disruption of the multi-national Habsburg Empire whose collapse seemed anyhow probable after the death of the Emperor Francis Joseph.1

If Austria-Hungary could not allow the Servian threat to her political cohesion, Germany could not allow the break-up of Austria-Hungary. In the years before 1914 Germany had made the blunder, and worse, of arousing the fears of the three Powers, France, Russia, and Great Britain by an aggressive policy. France had never been reconciled to the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871; Russia was alienated by the eastward expansion of German influence through the Balkans and along the line of the German-controlled Baghdad railway—an expansion which cut across the age-long efforts of Russia to reach Constantinople and these same Middle Eastern regions. Great Britain had been disquieted by German competition in shipbuilding openly directed against the naval predominance which was vital to an island state without a large army and dependent for her existence upon seaborne trade.

Since Austria-Hungary could not permit further expansion by Servia, and since Russia could not permit Servia to be weakened, since Germany had to uphold the existence of Austria-Hungary as a Great Power, and since France was pledged to support Russia against Germany and Austria-Hungary, and Great Britain could not allow the defeat of France and Russia without grave danger to herself, the peace of Europe depended upon the degree of restraint shewn by the Servian nationalists and by the political and military leaders of Austria-Hungary. In the latter part of the Balkan war Austria-Hungary would have attacked Servia if Germany had promised support. Until the summer

1 Francis Joseph was 84 in 1914.
of 1914 Germany continued on the whole to restrain rather than encourage her ally.

A change in German policy then brought about the calamity of general war. What was the reason for this change? It has been alleged that, apart from the need to assist her only sure ally in Europe, Germany had planned war for the autumn of 1914 as a means of establishing world hegemony, and that she used the Austro-Serbian crisis as a convenient pretext for her attack. There was an important body of opinion in the Reich utterly confident of German military superiority and hoping to impose a German pattern upon the rest of Europe. The Emperor William II, unstable, boastful, and yet fundamentally unsure of himself, seemed at times to share these pan-German ambitions while publicly disclaiming them. They found support among the armed forces and in many financial and business circles. The mood of the German people was arrogant, sharp, and given to applaud methods of bullying and blackmail. There is, however, less reason to suppose a deliberate plan to wage aggressive war for political ends (as the elder Moltke had described the Prussian war of 1866 against Austria) than to regard Germany, for all her outward show of confidence, as nervous of encirclement and attack by other Powers. The German people were unlikely to see in the policy of their rulers a reason for the distrust in which their country was held. If, then, the Germans thought war inevitable, they had better choose their own time for it, and fight while they were still in a position to overwhelm their enemies.

In the autumn of 1914 Germany was at her maximum strength against France and Russia. On the naval side she had completed the widening of the Kiel canal which enabled her to move in safety the largest capital ships between the Baltic and the North Sea. On land Russia and to a certain extent France were in the middle of plans of military organisation which in a short time would add greatly to their military strength. Germany had taken in 1913 an exceptional financial measure for military purposes; she had raised a special levy of 1000 million marks. She could not easily repeat this measure in peace-time.

1 'A war not fought out of necessity to meet a threat to our existence, not called into being by public opinion. It was a war recognised by the government as necessary, a war long planned, quietly prepared for, and fought not for acquisition of land or increase of territory, but for an ideal end – for predominance and power (für ein ideales Gut, für Machtstellung), Moltke, Gesammelte Schriften, iii. 426.

2 A contemporary equivalent would be about £300,000,000. It has been alleged that the German Government took steps, with a view to the outbreak of war, in
Moltke,¹ the Chief of Staff, had cause to say, in June, 1914: ‘The sooner things boil over, the better for us.’ Four months earlier Conrad von Hoetzendorf, Austro-Hungarian Chief of Staff, had written to Moltke: ‘What are we waiting for?’

There is another factor of which account must be taken. The nation states of Europe in 1914 have been described retrospectively as existing in an ‘international anarchy’. Such was not the view of contemporaries. There was no super-national authority in Europe, dictating, in Hobbes’ words, ‘articles of peace’, but the relations between the Great Powers had become more orderly, and, at least apparently, subject to an agreed law during the course of the nineteenth century. International law might still be described as ‘the measure of conscience of the stronger’, yet there seemed to be a greater awareness of the danger which a general war would cause to the interlocked interests of civilised states and also a growing sense of revulsion against the moral evil of war as such, and a movement of public opinion away from the older view that aggressive war was a legitimate instrument of policy. This saner attitude, however, had not developed evenly among the Great Powers. The relevant consideration here is not that the more backward states were backward owing to some innate ‘wickedness’ or that the more advanced states had among their citizens a larger share of moral virtue. Different attitudes to war persisted and were of sinister importance; they were due much more to the fact that the nations of Europe, and different classes within nations, were at different stages of political maturity. For historical reasons the two western Great Powers, Great Britain and France, had responded more quickly to the conditions and possibilities of the Industrial Revolution. They were genuine parliamentary democracies. They had learned, neither completely nor uniformly, but on an average throughout all classes, that, owing to technological progress, the centuries of poverty and scarcity might be brought to an end, and that war was no longer necessary to secure the minimum requirements of good living. Germany might also have learned these lessons, but her political development had been retarded by the failure of the liberal elements in the country to bring about national unity

¹ Nephew of the elder Moltke.
in the critical years 1848–9. National unity had been achieved by Bismarck who held to the ideas of the most backward governing class in Europe outside Russia – the class of Prussian landowners. Bismarck fashioned the political institutions of the German Reich in a form which ensured political control to this backward minority. They in turn imposed their standards, judgments, and values upon a docile and prosperous middle class, and to a large extent, upon the German people as a whole. Germany was the only Great Power in which effective public opinion was less liberal in 1914 than it had been two generations earlier. The wealth created by the German population, and its vast productive potential were therefore at the disposition of a governing class out of touch with the best thought and most intelligent hopes of the age. In this submission of the German people to ‘the traditional mentality of poverty-haunted border robbers’ lay the deeper reasons for the ill-starred willingness of Germany to accept the risks of provoking a European war in 1914. The attitude of the German military party in the early summer of that year can be seen clearly in the report of Colonel House whom President Wilson had sent to Europe at the end of May, 1914, to discuss with European Governments the possibility of a peace pact. House found in control of German policy a ‘military oligarchy’, determined upon war, and even ready to depose the Emperor in favour of the Crown Prince if he resisted their designs.

At this dangerous moment in international politics, on June 28, 1914, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Emperor Francis Joseph, was assassinated at Sarajevo in Bosnia. The murderer and his associates were members of a Servian secret society which aimed at detaching Bosnia-Herzegovina from Austria-Hungary. The Archduke, violent and unpopular with the ruling authorities, was believed to favour the so-called trialist solution of the nationalist problem of the Habsburg Empire, that is to say, the grant of self-governing institutions to the southern Slavs as co-partners with the ruling German and Magyar nationalities. There is no evidence that the Servian Government had anything to do with the assassination, but they had allowed an open campaign of propaganda on Servian territory against Austria-Hungary, and had not prevented their own officials from taking part in it.

1 See below, pp. 210–11.
2 This trialist solution was disliked by the Austro-Hungarian authorities, who feared its effects on the rest of the Empire, and by the Serbian nationalists, who thought that it might weaken the force of the nationalist movement.
The Austro-Hungarian Government seized the occasion to deal ‘once and for all’ with Servian incitements to disruption. They knew the risk that Russia would strongly oppose their action, and that, before they started measures which might lead to war they must be sure of German support. On July 5 therefore the Emperor Francis Joseph sent a letter to William II by special envoy saying that Austria intended to deal severely with Servia and might go as far as partitioning the country. Similar information was given to the German Foreign Office. William II at first answered cautiously; later, without waiting to consult Bethmann-Hollweg, the German Chancellor, he agreed that Austria should ‘march into Servia at the present time, which is all in our favour’. William asked the Minister of War whether the German army was ‘ready for all contingencies’. The Minister answered (not unexpectedly) ‘yes’, and the Chancellor, on his return to Berlin later in the day, agreed with the Emperor that Austria must decide for herself what to do, and that Germany must not desert her.

William II seems to have thought that neither Russia nor France would intervene. He did not mention England, and indeed had no reason to do so. If Russia and France did not resort to war, there could be no question of English intervention. On the other hand William took account of the possibility of war. He did not, as is sometimes said, merely give Austria a free hand to do what she thought fit; he knew that she intended military action, and might go as far as a partition of Servia. In promising German support he had no need to order special military preparations. German plans of mobilisation were ready to the last detail. Moreover for Germany mobilisation meant war. The mobilised German armies would not stand passively on the frontiers awaiting events. The German strategic plan for victory against France and Russia envisaged a rapid invasion of Belgium, the overthrow of France in a lightning campaign before the Russians had completed their slow process of mobilising and begun to advance westwards. While the mass of the German armies was moving towards the French frontier, a special force would secure a road into Belgium and France through Liège, and other troops would occupy Luxembourg. This plan could not be changed at short notice. Once it was set in motion by a mobilisation order, war would follow.¹ William II therefore merely assured himself that the military chiefs were ready to put the order into effect. He also consulted the head of Krupps. Baron Krupp von Bohlen told him that his firm had sufficient material ‘for a long

¹ For this so-called Schlieffen plan, see also below, p. 32.
The Austro-Hungarian governmental machinery moved with its usual slowness—too slowly for the Germans who wanted a *fait accompli* which would anticipate Russian attempts to prevent the disruption of Servia. Austria did not send an ultimatum to Servia until July 23. Meanwhile, on the plan to localise the war, they (and the Germans) tried to influence European opinion. The Austro-Hungarian Embassy in London was instructed to write to important people who might support the case against Servia. After an article of July 16 in *The Times* warning Austria, the Ambassador asked Wickham Steed, the foreign editor, to lunch, and suggested that he should ‘use his influence’ in the British press to make the position of Austria understood. Steed warned the Ambassador that an attack on Servia would at once bring in Russia and that, if the war then became general, Great Britain would certainly intervene.

For the first few days after the assassination Grey and the Foreign Office do not seem to have been seriously alarmed about possible consequences. Prince Lichnowsky, the German Ambassador, came back from leave on July 6. He told Grey that he had found ‘anxiety and pessimism’ in Berlin; that Austria intended ‘to do something’ and might take military action against Servia. There was some feeling that ‘trouble was bound to come’, and that it would be better not to hold Austria back but to ‘let the trouble come now rather than later’. Lichnowsky hoped that, if ‘trouble’ came, Great Britain would use her influence to mitigate feeling in St Petersburg. Grey answered that he was disturbed by what the Ambassador had said, and that he would like to talk over matters later with him. Grey then spoke to the Cabinet, whose members were dismayed by the prospect of another acute crisis in European affairs at a time when Great Britain was occupied with a grave situation in Ireland. On July 9 Grey mentioned to Lichnowsky the Anglo-French and Anglo-Russian naval and military conversations. He explained that these conversations had not resulted in any binding agreements. He added that, ‘if Austrian action with regard to Servia kept within certain bounds, it would ... be comparatively easy to

1 *British Documents on the Origins of the War* (henceforward referred to as B.D.), Vol. XI, No. 32.
encourage patience at St Petersburg; but there were some things that Austria might do that would make the Russian Government say that the Slav feeling in Russia was so strong that they must send an ultimatum or something of that sort.1 On July 20 Grey again warned Lichnowsky that Austria should keep her demands within reasonable limits. Grey said that he ‘hated the idea of a war between any of the Great Powers, and that any of them should be dragged into a war by Servia was detestable’.2

The Austrian Note to Servia of July 23 demanded an answer within forty-eight hours. The Servian Government was required to disavow all propaganda against Austria-Hungary, to suppress the Servian nationalist societies, hold a judicial enquiry into the events of the assassination, and allow ‘organs of the Austro-Hungarian Government’ to assist on Servian territory in searching out the guilty parties and putting an end to the subversive movement. The German Government, although the Foreign Minister, von Jagow, pretended otherwise,3 knew the general nature of the Austrian demands before the Note was sent and approved of the ultimatum. Grey described the Note to the Austrian Ambassador on July 24 as ‘the most formidable document’ which he had ever seen ‘addressed by one State to another that was independent’.4 The Austrian Government did not want Servia to accept the terms. They intended war, and hoped only that Russia would not intervene, though the Russian Government had already said that they would not allow an attack upon Servia. Grey did not think that a war between Austria and Servia could be localised. He said to the Austrian Ambassador on July 24 that he felt ‘great apprehension’ for the peace of Europe and that he must consult with other Powers to see what might be done. He had pointed out at his previous interview that the possible consequences of the situation were ‘terrible’. If as many as four Great Powers . . . were engaged in war, the expenditure in money and the interference with trade would bring about ‘a complete collapse of European credit and industry. In these days, in great industrial States, this would mean a state of things worse than that of 1848, and irrespective of who were victors in the war, many things might be com-

1 B.D., No. 41.
2 B.D., No. 68.
3 Jagow was given the actual text of the Note nearly twenty-four hours before the time of delivery. If the German Government had regarded any change in the text as desirable they could easily have notified Vienna, but they sent no comment before the Note was delivered.
4 B.D., No. 91.
Grey asked Germany to restrain Austria. Grey advised the Austro-Hungarian Government to enter on a direct exchange of views with Russia.1

In accordance with the procedure agreed between the German and Austro-Hungarian Governments the German Ambassador on July 24 asked Grey to assist in localising the Austro-Servian dispute. Grey was certain that it could not be localised. He told Lichnowsky that, in view of the character of the Austrian Note and of the short time-limit, he could do nothing to influence Russia. He suggested that Austria should be asked to prolong her time-limit. Instead of accepting the German-Austrian proposal that Great Britain should invite Russia to stand aside while Austria crushed Servia, Grey thus wanted Germany to restrain Austria from making her attack. He said that Germany, France, Italy, and Great Britain should work together at Vienna and St Petersburg in favour of moderation, but that Germany alone could influence Austria to postpone military action.2

The Servian reply to the Austrian Note accepted nearly all the Austrian demands. The Servian Government was unwilling to allow Austrian representatives to take part in an enquiry into Servian complicity in the murder of Francis Ferdinand or to assist in the suppression of the Servian nationalist movement. They offered, however, to submit the whole of the dispute to the Hague Court. The Austrian Government, not having received a full acceptance of the terms, ordered their Minister to leave Belgrade at once.

On hearing from the Austrian Ambassador on July 25 that the Austrian action at Belgrade was ‘not an ultimatum, but a démarche with a time-limit’, and that if Servia did not comply with the Austrian demands, a breach of diplomatic relations, and military preparations, but not actual operations would follow, Grey said to Lichnowsky that the situation would soon be that both Austria and Russia would have mobilised. The only chance of peace would be for the four Powers to join in asking both Austria and Russia not to cross their frontiers until

1 B.D., No. 86. Grey’s forecast of European revolution following economic collapse was especially relevant to conditions in Austria-Hungary, but the fear of a general collapse was continually present in Grey’s mind. See below, p. 20. One may contrast Grey’s own statements of his anxieties with William’s II view that Grey deliberately brought on the war in order to destroy German trade.

2 B.D., No. 99. The German reply to Grey’s proposal was that they had ‘passed it on’ to Vienna, but that Count Berchtold appeared to be away, and that as the Austrian ultimatum expired ‘today’ (25th) there no longer seemed any chance of postponement. Lichnowsky sent two telegrams urgently asking that Grey’s proposal should not be rejected.
there had been time for them (the four Powers) to suggest a settlement. Grey repeated his fear that an Austro-Russian conflict might mean a general war; Great Britain had no binding commitments, but could not remain indifferent to developments in Europe.\(^1\) Lichnowsky told the German Foreign Office that, if Germany refused the British proposal for mediation, she would probably force Great Britain to the side of France and Russia.

On July 26 Grey, remembering the success of the Ambassadors' Conference in London during the Balkan crisis of 1912–13, proposed\(^2\) a conference of Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy; the four Powers would invite Austria-Hungary, Servia, and Russia to suspend all military operations pending the result of the conference. Sazonov, the Russian Foreign Minister, said that he would prefer direct Austro-Russian negotiations, but that, if this plan failed, he would agree to Grey's proposal. France and Italy accepted the proposal. Germany rejected it on the ground that she could not agree to bring Austria before a European tribunal in regard to her policy towards Servia.\(^3\) The German Chancellor knew that the other three Powers would not agree to his own proposal to allow Austria a free hand. The Russian suggestion of direct negotiations also came to nothing because Count Berchtold, the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister, avoided seeing the Russian Ambassador in Vienna until July 28 and then told him that the proposal for discussing Austro-Servian relations was unacceptable and in any case came too late because Austria had already decided to declare war on Servia on July 28.

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\(^1\) B.D., No. 116 and *Die Deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch* (henceforward referred to as *D.D.*), Nos. 180 and 179.

\(^2\) B.D., 139–40. The proposal was actually sent out by Nicolson, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, with the approval of Grey, who was away from the office on July 26. Nicolson, and Tyrrell, Grey's private secretary, in transmitting the proposal to Lichnowsky, warned him that there was no chance of localising the dispute. If Great Britain and Germany succeeded in saving the peace of Europe, Anglo-German relations would be 'placed on a secure footing for all time. If we do not (succeed), then everything is uncertain.' On the other hand the Emperor and his Chancellor seem to have felt reassured on July 26 by a telegram from Prince Henry of Prussia claiming that he had been told by King George V that 'we (Great Britain) shall try all we can to keep out of this and to remain neutral'. In fact, King George had said: 'I don't know what we shall do. We have no quarrel with anyone, and I hope we shall remain neutral. But if Germany declares war on Russia, and France joins Russia, then I am afraid we shall be dragged into it'.

\(^3\) B.D., Nos. 185 and 249. *D.D.*, No 248.
Austria had declared war sooner than she had at first intended; she would not be ready to invade Servia until August 12, but she wanted by her \textit{fait accompli} to put a stop to efforts at mediation between herself and Servia. The crisis had now reached the acute stage which Grey had foreseen. The declaration of war on Servia would not bring a withdrawal of Russian opposition. The Russians were not bluffing. They would not tolerate what they (and, for that matter, Austria) regarded as a decisive blow to Russian influence in the Balkans. Since Austria had taken the initiative in military measures, the chances of avoiding a European war had diminished because the General Staffs of the Continental armies were tied to their time-tables of mobilisation; Germany, in particular, with her plans for a rapid campaign against France, could not afford to lose a day. Grey was also right in saying that Germany alone could stop Austria. So far from attempting to do so, Germany had been urging Austria not to delay, and was dismayed to hear that military operations would not begin for another fortnight. The German refusal to agree to Grey’s proposal for a conference, that is to say, the refusal to recognise that the Austro-Servian dispute was almost certain to lead to a European war if Austria were not held back, therefore left Germany as well as Austria-Hungary with a heavy share of responsibility for the outbreak of the war. On July 27 Grey had told Lichnowsky that the Servian reply to the Austrian Note shewed that Russia was exercising a moderating influence on Servia, and that Germany should do the same with Austria. Grey also said that, if Austria persisted in her present course and Germany supported her, ‘without any reference to the merits of the dispute’, but merely because ‘she could not afford to see Austria crushed, just so other issues might be raised that would supersede the dispute between Austria and Servia, and would bring other Powers in and the war would be the biggest ever known’.\footnote{B.D., No. 176.} Lichnowsky had no doubt about Grey’s meaning. He telegraphed to Berlin that, if Austria tried to ‘crush’ Servia, England would ‘place herself unconditionally on the side of France and Russia’.\footnote{D.D., No. 265. Grey said in the House of Commons on July 27 that, if the dispute ceased to be between Austria-Hungary and Servia, and became one in which another Great Power was involved, ‘it can but end in the greatest catastrophe that has ever befallen Europe at one blow: no one can say what would be the limit of the issues that might be raised by such a conflict’.
fleet, which was about to disperse after manœuvres, would remain concentrated.

For a short time now there was a chance that Germany might not follow Austria on her reckless course. The Emperor William, who had approved of Austrian action when he expected it to be rapid, and thought that it could be localised, now began to realise the risks which he was allowing Germany to run. On reading the text of the Servian reply to the Austrian Note, he suddenly concluded that this reply was 'a great moral victory for Austria', and that 'every reason for war disappears'. He proposed on the morning of July 28 that Austria should be content with the occupation of Belgrade as a guarantee that Servia carried out her promises.

Bethmann-Hollweg waited until the late evening before transmitting this suggestion to Vienna (thus ensuring that it did not arrive before the Austrian declaration of war on Servia). He pointed out that, if Austria refused every suggestion for mediation, she would have the responsibility put on her for the outbreak of a European war. He recommended that she should consider repeating that she did not intend to annex Servian territory, and that she would be satisfied with the occupation of Belgrade and other places as a guarantee of the 'complete fulfilment' of her demands (not, as William II had suggested, the fulfilment of the promises in the Servian reply). Bethmann-Hollweg knew before he sent his telegram that Austria intended to hand over parts of Servia to Bulgaria and probably other parts to Albania. He told the German Ambassador in Vienna to avoid giving the impression of holding Austria back; Germany merely wanted to ensure that, if a war broke out, it would be fought under the best possible conditions for the two Central Powers.¹

The final stage on the road to catastrophe now began with the inevitable Russian answer to the refusal of Austria to discuss with Russia her action against Servia and her declaration of war on July 28. The Russians, on hearing of the declaration of war, decided to order on the following day a mobilisation against Austria, but not against Germany. The political advantages of this partial mobilisation were obvious, but the Russian military authorities disliked it because it would interfere seriously with the general mobilisation which they now thought unavoidable. The Tsar was persuaded with great difficulty on the night of July 29 to order general mobilisation. He countermanded the order before it was sent out because he believed that he had more hopeful

¹ D.D., No. 323.
news in a personal message from William II. He replied to this message with a suggestion that the dispute should be referred to the Hague Court—a proposal which the Germans thought merely absurd.

On hearing (July 29) of the Russian order for partial mobilisation Grey told Lichnowsky that he thought mediation between Austria and Russia not impossible although it was too late to prevent all Austrian military operations against Servia. Grey proposed, on lines similar to William II's plan (of which Grey knew nothing), that Austria, after occupying 'Belgrade and other places' should agree not to advance further, 'pending an effort of the Powers to mediate between her and Russia'. Grey also warned Lichnowsky even more definitely that, if Germany and France came into the war, 'the issue might be so great that it would involve all European interests'. Great Britain might then have to decide very rapidly whether British interests required her intervention. Grey said that he was putting the facts in the form of a private statement because he did not want to leave himself open to the charge that the friendly tone of his conversations had misled Lichnowsky or the German Government into believing that 'we should not take action, and to the reproach that, if they had not been so misled, the course of things might have been different'.1 William II now had no doubt about British intervention. After his fashion he regarded Grey's words as evidence of secret plotting. 'England reveals herself in her true colours at the moment when she thinks we are caught in the toils. This means that we are to leave Austria in the lurch.'2

Bethmann-Hollweg also could have no doubts. Moreover, in addition to Lichnowsky's report, the Chancellor now had information that neither Italy nor Roumania was likely to take the Austro-German side. At this late hour Bethmann-Hollweg made a more genuine attempt to get direct talks between Austria and Russia, but he never went as far as insisting on them, and his messages to Vienna give the impression that he was still concerned mainly with trying to fix on Russia the responsibility for the war which he now thought certain. Finally, Bethmann-Hollweg surrendered to the German military pressure and

1 B.D., Nos. 263, 284, 285, 286.
2 D.D., No. 368. William II's attitude of mind had little significance at this time except to shew his unfitness for the responsible office which he held. He now convinced himself that 'the whole war is plainly arranged between England, France, and Russia for the annihilation of Germany'. He was particularly violent against England, and thought that he could trace the machinations of Edward VII in the 'plot' against Germany. 'Edward VII after his death is none the less stronger than I am.' D.D., No. 401.
let matters take their course. He telegraphed during the night of July 29–30 to the German Ambassador repeating the proposal for a halt in Belgrade and for opening conversations with Russia on this basis. He told the Ambassador of Lichnowsky’s report, and pointed out that a refusal of Austria ‘to enter into an exchange of views with St Petersburg would be . . . a serious mistake, for that is just what would provoke the armed intervention of Russia . . . We are ready to fulfil the obligations of our alliance, but must refuse to be drawn into a world conflagration lightheartedly by Austria and without regard to our advice.¹ Even so the Chancellor did not advise Austria to give up her plan of invading Servia, though he knew that this step alone would be likely to prevent full Russian mobilisation. In any case Berchtold had already asked Germany to warn Russia that further measures of mobilisation on her part would lead to German mobilisation. Bethmann-Hollweg had sent a message in this sense in the early afternoon of July 29.² Berchtold could therefore feel sure of his ally and need make no concessions. He agreed to allow the Austrian Ambassador at St Petersburg to begin conversations with the Russian Foreign Minister, but the Ambassador was merely to explain that Austria intended only a temporary occupation of Servian territory; there was to be no real discussion of the Austrian demands. As for the proposal for a ‘halt in Belgrade’ Berchtold had not sent an answer; he explained that, owing to the absence of Count Tisza, the Hungarian Minister President, no answer could be expected until July 31.³

In the evening of July 30 Bethmann-Hollweg instructed the German Ambassador at Vienna to urge the Austrians once again to accept the ‘halt in Belgrade’ proposal. The Chancellor cancelled this telegram before midnight.⁴ He had given way to the demands of the General Staff. The General Staff could not allow the situation to drag on while the Russians and French took steps which would make their mobilisation easier. In the afternoon of July 30 Moltke had recommended

¹ D.D., Nos. 396 and 397. ² D.D., Nos. 342 and 378. ³ It would have been possible to have communicated with Tisza by telephone. In fact, Conrad and Berchtold, with the Emperor’s approval, had decided in the afternoon to reject a formula put forward by Sasonow and revised by Grey to the effect that ‘if Austria, having occupied Belgrade and neighbouring Servian territory, declares herself ready in the interest of European peace to cease her advance and to discuss how a complete settlement could be arrived at’, he (Grey) hoped that ‘Russia would also consent to discussion and suspension of further military preparations, provided that the other Powers did the same’, B.D., No. 309: Conrad von Hoetzendorf, F., *Aus meiner Dienstzeit*, iv, 149–52. ⁴ D.D., Nos. 441 and 450.
Conrad to decline Grey's proposals and to mobilise at once against Russia. The *casus fæderis* with Germany would then have arisen, and Germany herself could order full mobilisation. In Moltke's words, 'A European war offers the last chance of preserving Austria-Hungary.'

Russia decided upon general mobilisation during the evening of July 30; Austria took a similar decision, subject to formal German agreement. The Russian mobilisation notices were published on the morning of July 31, and the Austrian just after midday. German mobilisation, as Moltke had said, was bound to follow. Austrian and Russian mobilisation would not automatically mean war. German mobilisation would bring with it the invasion of Belgium; Moltke had drawn up and given to the German Foreign Office on July 26 an ultimatum to be presented, when the time came, to the Belgian Government.

Grey indeed had little hope that war could be prevented. On the night of July 29–30 he had received a message from Bethmann-Hollweg which he (Grey) described as shewing that 'we were henceforth to converse upon how we should conduct ourselves in war, no longer how war could be avoided'. The German Chancellor was merely attempting once again (though he could hardly have hoped to succeed) to get English neutrality. He promised, on condition of such neutrality, that Germany would make no territorial demands on France, though he would give no assurance about the French colonies. Germany would also promise the territorial integrity of Belgium after the war, provided that Belgium had taken no hostile action against her. Grey had been astonished at the combination of naïveté and cynicism in this proposal. He answered that the proposal could not 'for a moment be entertained', but added that, if Great Britain and Germany worked together to preserve the peace of Europe in the present crisis, he would try to bring about some arrangement by which 'Germany could be assured that no hostile or aggressive policy would be pursued against her or her allies by France, Russia, or Great Britain, jointly or separately'. On the morning of July 31 Grey made another direct appeal to Germany. He said to Lichnowsky that 'if Germany could get any reasonable proposal put forward which made it clear that Germany and Austria were

1 Conrad, iv, 152. Moltke had told Conrad that he did not expect English neutrality. Bethmann-Hollweg telegraphed to the German Minister at Stockholm on July 30 that England was expected to enter the war on the Franco-Russian side, *D.D.*, No. 406.

2 Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, i, 326.

3 *B.D.*, No. 293.

4 *B.D.*, No. 303.
striving to preserve European peace, and that Russia and France would be unreasonable if they rejected it, he would 'support it at St Petersburg and Paris and go to the length of saying that, if Russia and France would not accept it, His Majesty's Government would have nothing more to do with the consequences; but, otherwise, . . . if France became involved . . . we should be drawn in'. Grey's idea of a reasonable proposal was that the four Powers should 'offer to Austria that they would undertake to see that she received full satisfaction of her demands on Servia, provided that they did not impair Servian sovereignty and the integrity of Servian territory'. The four Powers would guarantee to Russia that the Austrian demands would be kept within these limits. All Powers would suspend military operations or preparations.¹

The Germans answered Grey's last appeal by saying that they had sent a communication to Russia and must await the Russian reply. This communication was an ultimatum. On getting news of the Russian mobilisation order – the Germans already knew that the Austrians were issuing a similar order – the German Foreign Office telegraphed to Russia an announcement proclaiming a state of 'immediate danger of war'² and warning Russia that, if she did not suspend every military move against Germany and Austria-Hungary within twelve hours, Germany would mobilise. A note of a similar kind was sent to the French Government, with an additional sentence that for Germany mobilisation meant war. The French Government was asked to declare within eighteen hours whether they would remain neutral in a German-Russian war. The German Ambassador in Paris was instructed to demand that, if the French gave a promise of neutrality, they should hand over the fortresses of Toul and Verdun to Germany as pledges for the period of the war.³

The Germans did not wait for an answer from France or Russia before beginning their mobilisation. The German order was issued in the afternoon of August 1. French mobilisation was ordered on this

¹ B.D., No. 340.
² 'Kriegsgefahrzustand', a state of imminent danger of war, was a technical term denoting the taking of all measures preparatory to war short of mobilisation.
³ Since the French Government made no offer of neutrality (their reply was that France would act in accordance with her interests), the Ambassador did not have to carry out this instruction to ask for pledges of neutrality. The fact that the Germans intended to put forward such a demand was not generally known until 1918. The reason for such an impossible request was that the Germans wanted to be sure of a French refusal. French neutrality, even for a few weeks, would have upset the German military plans for a rapid campaign in the west before turning eastwards against Russia.
same afternoon. The French General Staff had been pressing for it earlier. Joffre, the French Commander-in-Chief, warned his Government on July 31 that every day's delay would mean losing territory to the depth of fifteen to twenty kilometres. The French Government gave instructions that their troops should be kept ten kilometres back from the frontier; Germany, who could not wait, would thus have to declare war on France.

The purpose of the French withdrawal was to convince British opinion that France was not the aggressor. Grey needed no convincing. He thought of a European war, not as William II imagined him to be thinking, in terms of a long-planned opportunity to achieve the destruction of Germany, but as a terrible evil which might cause the destruction of Europe. His whole policy had been directed towards bringing about general appeasement. Nevertheless he regarded British intervention as necessary in British interests if France were drawn into the war. The war had arisen out of a question of little concern to Great Britain, but once the four Great Continental Powers were engaged in it, the issue would become one of European predominance, and, if Germany and Austria were victorious, British interests would be in extreme danger. If, on the other hand, France and Russia won without British aid, they would be unlikely to shew much consideration for a nation which, in their view, would have repudiated its obligations. It was true, again, that Great Britain had no binding commitments with France, but, as Eyre Crowe¹ wrote in a memorandum of July 31 to Grey:

The Entente has been made, strengthened, put to the test and celebrated in a manner justifying the belief that a moral bond was being forged. The whole policy of the Entente can have no meaning if it does not signify that in a just quarrel England would stand by her friends. This honourable expectation has been raised. We cannot repudiate it without exposing our good name to grave criticism.²

Grey himself felt this moral obligation though he did not regard it as extending to a situation in which France was acting in accordance with the terms of the Franco-Russian alliance. Grey told the French Ambassador as late as August 1 that it was 'most unreasonable to say that, because France had an obligation under an alliance of which we did not even know the terms, therefore we were bound, equally with her

¹ Assistant Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign Office. ² B.D., No. 369.
by the obligation in that alliance, to be involved in war'.

Grey indeed was so much concerned with the possibility of an economic collapse in Europe that he would have regarded the maintenance of neutrality, if he had thought it possible on other grounds, as a means of preventing European anarchy. He told Cambon on July 31 that 'the commercial and financial situation was exceedingly serious; there was danger of a complete collapse that would involve us and everyone else in ruin; and it was possible that our standing aside might be the only means of preventing a complete collapse of European credit in which we should be involved. This might be a paramount consideration in deciding our attitude.'

Later in this same conversation Grey said that 'the preservation of the neutrality of Belgium might be, I would not say a decisive, but an important factor in determining our attitude'. Grey realised that, from the point of view of British interests, the neutrality and independence of Belgium were vital matters, irrespective of the other issues involved. Moreover the question of Belgium had nothing to do with Russia and could be considered apart from the Austro-Russian and Austro-Servian disputes. On July 31 Grey put a formal question to the French and German Governments whether, in the event of war, they would respect Belgian neutrality. The French answered that they would respect it, provided that it was not violated by any other Power.

Grey's fear of an economic collapse can be seen in his speech to the House of Commons on August 3, when he told the House that 'If we are engaged in war, we shall suffer but little more than we shall suffer even if we stand out. We are going to suffer, I am afraid, terribly in this war, whether we are in it or whether we stand aside.' Grey does not at this time seem to have thought that Great Britain would be involved in a vast military effort. He regarded her own position as assured by her fleet, but did not think she could escape very severe losses from a general European collapse of credit.

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Germans said that they could not give an answer without disclosing their plan of campaign. It has been said that, if Great Britain had stated earlier and definitely that she would take the side of France and Russia in a war against Austria and Germany, the latter would have compelled Austria to accept the British proposals for securing a peaceful settlement. Apart from Grey's clear and frequent warnings in the earlier stages of the crisis, the Germans were left in no doubt, after July 28, when there was still time to call a halt, that Great Britain would be drawn into a war. It is also clear that the German military authorities would not have been deflected from their course if they had been given a formal notice of British intervention. The General Staff - and the Chancellor - had accepted the Schlieffen plan with its political implication of a violation of Belgian neutrality which made British intervention more than likely, but this intervention would not be a decisive factor in a campaign involving the rapid defeat of France and the German occupation of the Channel coast from Brest to Antwerp. The Germans did not intend to risk their fleet in an unnecessary battle at sea; a British blockade, in a short war, would not be more than a temporary nuisance. The British Expeditionary Force, if it ever reached the battle line, would be defeated in company with the immensely larger French army.

From Grey's point of view an announcement, while peace and war was still in the balance, that Great Britain would intervene on the side of France and Russia was dangerous, since it might lead Russia to refuse to agree to the reasonable demands of Austria that Servia should put an end to the use of her territory for anti-Austrian activities. In any case Grey was in no position to promise intervention since the Liberal Cabinet were not in agreement about it. A majority - about two-thirds - of the Cabinet believed that Great Britain could and should remain neutral. Lloyd George took this view on economic grounds. Opinion in the City, partly, as Crowe pointed out, under German influence, was for neutrality. Morley thought that a European war might lead to the dislocation of 'order', and that a Russian victory would be a danger to civilisation. The British Cabinet indeed alone of the European Governments was taken almost completely by surprise at the sudden emergence of a crisis. Grey himself was not without responsibility for this remarkable ignorance of the unstable condition of Europe after the Balkan war. Grey himself admitted later that he should have given more attention to the problem of the future of the

1 See below, p. 32.
multi-national Habsburg Empire, and for that matter, Asquith can be criticised on more general grounds. Grey had never been much concerned with educating opinion in his own party or in the country on the realities of international politics. He was not even sure, on taking office, whether the Foreign Secretary would find it compatible with his departmental duties to sit in the House of Commons. Grey did not like making speeches; he found the social side of his office distasteful, and, like Asquith, paid little attention to the press. The left wing of his party was extremely suspicious of Russia, and much more favourable to Germany than German opinion was to England. The Liberal party was by tradition inclined to isolationism, and more interested in social questions than in questions of foreign policy. The education of most Englishmen gave them no instruction or interest in contemporary European affairs; there were no centres of information and discussion, such as the Institute of International Affairs in the years after 1919, for the dissemination of knowledge and the development of an instructed opinion. Englishmen in general were probably less informed in 1914 about tensions in Europe than they had been in the period between Waterloo and the Franco-Prussian war.

All the Great Powers except Great Britain had taken their decisions by August 1. The German declaration of war on Russia was made in the early evening of that day. The German declaration of war on France was delayed (in the hope that France would declare war on Germany) until 6.15 p.m. on August 3. Meanwhile at daybreak on August 2 German troops, in accordance with the German time-table of mobilisation and attack, entered Luxembourg. Some German troops had already crossed into Luxembourg.

By this time the British Government had decided upon immediate

1 Parl. Deb., 4th ser., H. of C., vol. 152, cols. 803–4. Grey's predecessors for nearly forty years had sat in the House of Lords. Grey thought that the House ought not to accept 'the doctrine that it is impossible for the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to be a member of the House of Commons'.

2 On August 2 the French Government withdrew the order to their forces to keep ten kilometres from the frontier, though they were still forbidden to advance beyond it.

3 Some German troops had already crossed into Luxembourg.
intervention. They had reached this decision by stages. On August 1
the Cabinet authorised Grey to tell Lichnowsky that the violation of
Belgian neutrality would have a very strong effect upon British public
opinion. When Lichnowsky asked whether Germany would remain
neutral if Belgian neutrality were preserved, Grey would give no
promise. Lichnowsky then enquired whether Great Britain would
remain neutral if Germany agreed to respect the integrity of France
and her colonies. Grey again refused any promise. On the same day
Grey also refused a French appeal for British intervention. He promised,
however, to ask the Cabinet to consider giving a pledge to defend the
north coast of France against a German naval attack.

On August 2, after the news of the German entry into Luxembourg
had reached London, the Cabinet decided that Grey should assure the
French Government that, if the German fleet came into the Channel
or through the North Sea 'to undertake hostile operations against
French coasts or shipping, the British fleet would give all the protec-
tion in its power'. In fact the Germans had no intention of sending
their fleet into the Channel or the North Sea, but the French Ambass-
ador realised that this promise was decisive for Great Britain. He has
recorded his relief at Grey's statement in the words: 'A great country
does not wage war by halves. Once it decided to fight the war at sea,
it would necessarily be led to fighting it on land.'

Nevertheless the Cabinet had still to resolve whether it would go
beyond the promise of limited intervention. Asquith, Grey, Haldane,
and Churchill, who thought it necessary to go the whole way, were
supported by a letter received during the morning of August 2 from

1 B.D., No. 448. A curious misunderstanding between Grey and Lichnowsky
occurred on August 1. Grey asked whether Germany would agree to remain
neutral, and not to attack France, if Great Britain also agreed to remain neutral,
and to secure the neutrality of France. Lichnowsky understood this question
to refer to German neutrality towards France and French neutrality towards
Germany in a Russo-German war. Grey has stated that he meant German neu-
trality in a war between Austria and Russia. Lichnowsky telegraphed his in-
terpretation of Grey's proposal to Berlin, where William II took it as a definite
proposal which would imply the end of the Triple Entente. The Emperor now
wanted Moltke to concentrate the German forces solely against Russia. Moltke
had to point out the impossibility of changing German war plans at short notice.
A later message from Lichnowsky corrected the misunderstanding. It is still not
altogether clear how such a misunderstanding could have arisen. The most likely
explanation is that both Grey and Lichnowsky were affected by the strain and
anxiety of these days during which both men were trying to find a solution
which might prevent the outbreak of general war.

2 B.D., No. 447.  
3 B.D., No. 487.
the Unionist leaders, Lansdowne and Bonar Law, offering the full backing of their party for all measures in aid of France and Russia.\(^1\) The Prime Minister was now assured, in the event of a split in the Cabinet, of an adequate parliamentary majority for a coalition in favour of intervention.

Moreover the anti-interventionist party began to waver, now that a German invasion of Belgium was certain. In the evening of August 2 the Cabinet decided that a substantial violation of Belgian neutrality would be a *casus belli*. Morley and Burns resigned at once; Simon and Beauchamp resigned on the following day, but withdrew their resignations.

In the afternoon of August 3, after the Belgians had rejected the German ultimatum, Grey spoke strongly in the House of Commons in favour of intervention. He explained that Parliament was free to decide on the question; there were no binding commitments to France and Russia except the promise given on the previous day to protect the French coasts and shipping. Grey spoke of the British *entente* with France, and left it to the judgment of the House to decide how far Great Britain was morally bound to come to the assistance of the French. He then turned to the Belgian question. Here he gave his view that Great Britain was bound to honour her obligations and to respond to a Belgian appeal. Grey’s speech carried the great majority of the House. On August 4 Asquith announced to Parliament that the Germans had invaded Belgium. The German Government had appealed to Great Britain to allow this violation of an international treaty as an act of necessity. The British reply was an ultimatum with a time-limit expiring at midnight.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Asquith knew on August 1, from a conversation of Churchill with F. E. Smith, that he could count upon Unionist support. A few days earlier he could not have been altogether certain. Bonar Law was then doubtful whether his party would be ‘unanimous or overwhelmingly in favour of war’ except for the defence of Belgian neutrality. Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, i, 337.

\(^2\) At an interview with the British Ambassador after the delivery of the British ultimatum, Bethmann-Hollweg made a lengthy set speech in English in which he accused Great Britain of going to war ‘just for a word “Neutrality”, a word which in war-time had so often been disregarded, just for a scrap of paper’. B.D., No. 671. Bethmann-Hollweg had described the invasion of Belgium as an act of political necessity. Within a few weeks, when he was still expecting a rapid German victory, he drew up a confidential memorandum in which he laid down that Belgium could not be given back her independent status but must remain in political, economic, and military vassalage to Germany. The particular degree of servitude which he proposed from time to time to fasten on Belgium is a remarkable measure of Bethmann-Hollweg’s changes of view about German chances of victory. See below, Chapters 15 and 27.