

# July - August 1914: Achieving the Seemingly Impossible

*British entry into the war offered the first test of Liberal values and of the calibre of Prime Minister Asquith. Dr Michael Brock examines the events surrounding the declaration of war on 4 August 1914.*

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When Asquith died, the tributes in the House of Commons included one by T.P. O'Connor. Referring to August 1914, 'T.P.' said: 'On his will and ... opinion depended largely ... the tremendous and tragic question of peace or war. In that hour he did not fail.'

The justice of that assessment is undeniable. No British government could have averted the war. The German general staff were convinced that 1914 represented virtually their last chance of achieving a German hegemony. Within a very few years the growth of Russian power would have made that objective unobtainable. There was no possibility of the French conceding German supremacy without a fight. Desperately anxious as the French government was to enlist Britain's aid, it was determined to resist even if that should be withheld. It is almost equally impossible to see how any British government could have avoided being drawn into the war at an early stage. These constraints on the Liberal Cabinet's actions do not make Asquith's conduct of the crisis less impressive or less important. Had he been less sure-footed, Britain would have entered the war too late and as a divided country. In that event, the ensuing disasters would almost certainly have exceeded those which history records. We recoil from the conclusion that the horrors of 1914-18 could have been exceeded, but during the twentieth century we have had to become used to conclusions from which we recoil.

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Until the last days of July 1914, most British people had no expectation of aggression from Germany. In December 1913, when the editor of the *Morning Post*, one of the leading Conservative papers, mentioned 'the German danger' to his friend Rudyard Kipling, the response was: 'Does it occur to you that a betrayed Ulster will repeat 1688 in the shape of a direct appeal to Germany?' The Ulster crisis had become an all-absorbing preoccupation in Britain. Conservative spokesmen had long made clear that the Ulster protestants would prefer the Kaiser's rule to that of Dublin. On 27 May 1914 a Conservative MP, giving the toast when a party of German journalists visited London, 'affirmed the unbreakable ties of friendship between [the] two peoples'. In June, when the British fleet visited Kiel during the celebrations for the widening of the Kiel Canal, the *Morning Post* and the *Daily Graphic* (also a Conservative paper) hailed the Kaiser as Britain's friend. On 23 July, when the *Morning Post* reported a rumour that the Austrian government planned to send very severe demands to Serbia, its leader writer commented 'that is hardly a credible forecast'. The Liberals had more general reasons for dismissing the possibility of trouble from Germany; they were preeminently a pacific party. During July Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, told first a Mansion House audience and then the House of Commons that 'relations with Germany' were 'very much better' than they had been 'a few years ago'. On the day of that assurance to the

Commons (and of the *Morning Post's* leader) the Austrian government sparked off the crisis by sending to Belgrade the most formidable demands ever sent within living memory to an independent country.

In the aftermath of that ultimatum, Asquith came under pressure from both sides. On 25 July, John Simon, then Attorney General and a cabinet minister, speaking at Belle Vue, Manchester, said: 'Let us all resolve that ... the part which this country plays shall from beginning to end be the part of a mediator'. Two days later the first leader in *The Times* took the opposite stance and assumed that the British government would stand by the other two entente powers, France and Russia: 'Should there arise ... a desire to test our adhesion to the principles that inform our friendships, and that thereby guarantee the balance of power in Europe, we shall be found ... ready and determined to vindicate them with the whole strength of the Empire'.

Asquith started with the hope that Britain would be able to keep out of the war. 'We are within measurable, or imaginable, distance of a real Armageddon,' he told Venetia Stanley on 24 July; 'happily there seems ... no reason why we should be more than spectators'. The entente with France fell short of an alliance. Sir Edward Grey, the foreign secretary, had exchanged letters with the French Ambassador in November 1912. This exchange bound the two countries to consult together in a crisis, but recorded that 'the disposition ... of the French and British fleets' was 'not based upon an engagement to cooperate in war'.

The 1839 treaty guaranteeing the neutrality of Belgium left open the crucial questions. Now that Germany and Austria-Hungary faced three entente powers, the Belgian ministers were understandably wary of asking to be rescued if attacked. They suspected that their 'rescuers' might be more concerned with their own safety than with that of Belgium. Whether the Belgian Cabinet would overcome these suspicions, and call on the guarantor countries for military aid in case of invasion, depended mainly on the routes through Belgium which the German army might take in an attack on France. In August 1911 Henry Wilson had told Asquith, and some other members of the Committee of Imperial Defence, that the German divisions were likely to confine their flanking movement to the Ardennes, and to remain south and east of the Sambre-Meuse river line. It was generally expected that, if this route were chosen, the Belgian government would offer no more than token resistance and would avoid calling on the guarantor powers. 'I do not say,' the Belgian foreign minister told a British official in September 1911, 'that if the invasion took place in that corner of the kingdom ... we should make our last stand there or that we should die there to the last man'. Early in 1914, what looked like a version of the Schlieffen plan, in which the German advance was restricted in this way, was published in a French military journal. It was said to have been taken from German staff papers mislaid in a railway carriage. A comment on this article by the political director of the Belgian foreign ministry survives. He wrote that, if the German army took this Ardennes route, the best course would be to enter a formal protest, to withdraw the Belgian troops

north of the Meuse, and to stay quiet. It was not appreciated that the German general staff meant to attempt the apparently impossible.

On 29 July the Cabinet reviewed Britain's obligations should continental Europe be engulfed in war. Two days later Grey asked the French and German governments for assurances that they would respect Belgian neutrality. While the French complied, the German government refused to do so. On Sunday 2 August the leaders of the Conservative opposition, Bonar Law and Lansdowne, told Asquith of their view that 'it would be fatal to the honour and security of the United Kingdom to hesitate in supporting France and Russia at the present juncture,' and offered their 'full support' for 'any measures' which the government might consider necessary. Bonar Law's letter did not mention Belgium, but for Asquith it was the key. The Cabinet met twice on that Sunday. At the first meeting, it was decided that the Royal Navy would not allow the German fleet to enter the Channel and bombard the French coast. This decision had less importance than was thought; the German battle fleet was not designed to operate at any considerable distance from its bases. At the second meeting, the Cabinet agreed that a 'substantial violation' of Belgian neutrality would 'compel us to take action'. In replying to the Conservative leaders, Asquith had written: 'it is right, ... before deciding ... what action on our part is necessary, to know what are the circumstances and conditions of any interference with Belgian territory'. Even these cautious decisions brought the resignations of Burns and Morley.

By midday on 3 August, it was clear that Asquith's calm, wait-and-see approach had been the right one. As the ministers dispersed after the second of those Sunday Cabinets, an ultimatum demanding passage for the German armies through the whole of Belgium was being delivered in Brussels. This transformed the government's position. Liberals were very doubtful about intervening on the side of France and Russia, but about the need to honour Britain's obligations under the Belgian treaty, and to prevent a small and pacific country from being trampled underfoot, they had no doubt. Grey's plea in the Commons on Monday afternoon for intervention met with overwhelming support. An ultimatum was sent to Berlin

to expire at 11 p.m. (London time) on Tuesday 4 August. That hour represented the first moment at which the British Navy could be in complete readiness. A leading Conservative historian, Lord Blake, concludes: 'Asquith's able management, aided by German folly, had achieved the seemingly impossible – a united Liberal Cabinet convinced that England must fight.'

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Asquith's conduct during the crisis needs little explanation. His ability to wait for the right opportunity, and to prevent cabinet splits, had been proved time and again by July 1914. The clue to the 'German folly' lies in the fact that the last word lay, not with the government, but with the general staff. The Schlieffen plan had been much modified by 1914. Specifically, it had been decided some five years earlier that the great encircling movement must be achieved without any incursion into the Netherlands. This meant that, to open the route through central and northern Belgium, the German army had to seize Liège. It was the difficulty of doing this quickly which had convinced so many observers that the Ardennes route would be used. Surely the general staff would not adopt a strategy which seemed beyond German strength when it was subject to an enormous initial difficulty. It was not known that Moltke and his colleagues had just acquired an overwhelming temptation to embark on this reckless gamble. They had seven new howitzers of 420 mm (16.5 inches) calibre – just enough to batter down the Liège forts. That their strategy entailed political risks even greater than the military ones was of secondary importance to them. Asquith controlled his country's decisions; the Kaiser and his Chancellor had no such control.

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## The Impact of War

*Book Review: The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935 by Trevor Wilson (Collins, London, 1966)*

*Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Baines*

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Trevor Wilson's book is now best known for setting out the metaphor of the early twentieth century Liberal Party as an ailing man run over by the bus of the First World War. This has provoked considerable debate: over the issue of the man's illness; whether it was fatal or not; and even, more recently, over whether he was ill at all. With such a powerful image, it is not surprising that the bulk of the book looks at the Liberal Party's reaction to the war. The remainder is a very long coda, covering the Liberals' sorry performance in the postwar elections until 1935, when it was finally clear to all that the party was in near-terminal collapse.

The war's impact is seen primarily in ideological terms; in particular Wilson argues that it fitted better with both Conservative and Labour world outlooks than it did with Liberal. For the Tories, the war reinforced their role as the nationalist party *par excellence*,

and confirmed their pre-war anti-German jingoism as justified by events. For Labour, despite its pacifist wing, the war provided an opportunity for the trade unions to become part of the political establishment, and powerfully reinforced impulses towards economic collectivism everywhere. By contrast, the war dealt a serious blow to a whole range of Liberal beliefs. Internationalism, free trade, peace with Ireland, and personal liberties were all put under question. The pressure under which the Asquith government gave way to introduce censorship and the draconian Defence of the Realm Act left many Liberals doubtful that the party was still a fit custodian of their values.

More recent commentators have often labelled Wilson as falling firmly into the Asquithian camp in the perpetual dispute over which of the two great Liberal leaders, Asquith or Lloyd