

## 10. The Skies Gradually Darken

### Cause To Be Alarmed

In 1907, the Foreign Office mandarin and Leipzig born Eyre Crowe drafted a "Memorandum on the present state of British relations with France and Germany." The wish was to play "on the world's stage a much larger and more dominant part than she finds allotted to herself under the present distribution of material power." Crowe's hope was this might lead Britain to enhance her own influence" by extending her domination to hinder the co-operation of other states," intent on breaking up and supplanting the British Empire." Since the 1880s, British foreign policy was one of conciliation, adroitly manoeuvring the Colonial chess pieces. By the early 1900s it was clear Britain was relatively isolated in Europe and Germany posed the biggest single threat to the British Empire.

Statistics didn't lie. In 1870, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 40% higher than Germany. By 1913 this had reversed as Germany was now 6% higher. In 1880, British share of world manufacturing was 23%, in contrast to Germany at 8%. Both were around 15% in 1913. The ratio of British to German warship tonnage was 7:1; by 1914 it was 2:1. Germany had 124 divisions, compared to 10 only in the British army and all German infantry regiments were equipped with the latest Maxim machine gun. Manpower was a mismatch too. Britain could barely mobilise a million men, compared to five million in Germany. Portents for the future concentrated minds in Whitehall.

Liberal policy was to outstrip German naval power and continue rapprochement with France. An entente cordiale had been reached in 1904 with British dominance of Egypt agreed, with a free hand for France in Morocco. Whilst making sense, there was no similar desire to create this degree of co-operation with Germany, not just in East Africa but China, the Pacific and Middle East. In Churchill's words, "We were no enemies to German colonial expansion."

The rationale was keeping not only France on board but also Russia, whose frontiers in Asia were mostly coterminous with Britain. The problem was that if France was attacked, Britain would struggle to give support, given the overwhelming size of the German army. Besides, Britain did not have conscription. Kitchener acidly remarked in 1914, "No one can say my colleagues in the Cabinet are not courageous. They have no army and (yet) they declared war against the mightiest military in the world."

British imperial hubris and arrogance of absolute power had waned, replaced by the fear of decline and uncertainty as well. Exploitation, generally, was achieved by reasonably humane treatment of indigenous populations, unlike Belgian rule in the Congo, a byword for human rights abuse by Leopold II. Historian Niall Ferguson pulls no punches on brutality inflicted in the Congo. "Such was the capacity for his regime that the cost in human life due to murder, starvation, disease and reduced fertility has been estimated at ten million, half the existing population."

The German satirical magazine, *Simplicimus*, took an amusing swipe at colonial powers in 1904 in a series of cartoons. In the German colony, even giraffes and crocodiles are taught to goose-step. In the French, relations between the races are intimate, almost to the point of indecency. In the Congo, natives are roasted over a spit, and eaten, but British colonies were more complex. Natives, force-fed whisky, are squeezed in a press for every last penny by a slider turning a gigantic handle, and then forced to listen to a sermon by a missionary. This lampooning glossed over abuses by the French in Indo-China and the Herero and

Namaqua Genocide by Germany in South-West Africa, modern-day Namibia. They paid a huge price for rebelling against colonial rule. A population of 80,000 in 1903 had, by 1906, reduced to just 20,000 with chilling claims of executions, savage beatings and also medical experiments.

### **Scheming, Plotting & Mistrust**

Was the Schlieffen Plan, devised in 1905 and kept under close lock & key, a strategy for war, defence against a triple entente of France, Russia and Britain, or simply a contingency plan to address various scenarios, most of which seemed plausible? We shall never know since the military archive in Potsdam was partially looted by the Russians in 1945 and destroyed by allied bombing. Many records were returned, inviting speculation that some were not.

The plan was the work of General Alfred von Schlieffen, German chief of staff between 1891 and 1905. It was revised annually, setting out in detail the mobilisation and movement of forces in the event of war. Often at his desk by 06:00, Schlieffen worked until dinner, apart from a horse ride in Berlin's Tiergarten, and then continued working until late. Absorbed by military history, he explored formulas to achieve military victory and ways to minimise risk.

He concluded, the only way to defeat an enemy was to attack. His nightmare was possible attack by Russia and France on two fronts simultaneously. An offensive strategy required surprise, though not by entering France through Alsace & Lorraine or Switzerland, but via the Low Countries. That necessitated a substantial army. Any attack by Russia, triggering France too, would surely inflame Austria-Hungary, being at loggerheads with Russia over the Balkans.

In 1912, a German war scenario confirmed that an offensive would end in stalemate against Russia which would withdraw into its vast interior. By 1914 a plan was agreed. Faced with Russian mobilisation, whatever France chose to do, Germany would attack France. A risk strategy set out clear preparation phases, in eight stages: the first was warning that a state of tension existed; then prepare for full mobilisation; third was a public announcement of an imminent threat of war with call-up of lower category reserves. Both stages four and five required full troop deployment. The last three stages placed all units in an attack mode.

Lacking was a grand co-ordinator of the competence of the sacked Bismarck, a fate awaiting Schlieffen, disliked by the erratic and gung-ho Kaiser. Resignation was an honorable option as, now aged 75 and nearly blind, he had been kicked by a horse. On New Year's Day 1906 Schlieffen left office. As German troops headed for France in 1914, General Groener wrote, "The spirit of the blessed Schlieffen accompanies us." This was in reference, not only to his meticulous planning, but an offensive strategy, optimum timing and precise detail.

Purely defensive thoughts eroded rapidly with Austrian annexation of Austria-Herzegovina in 1908, the second Morocco crisis in 1911 and the Balkan wars of 1912-14. Not only that, but Russia had recovered from the Russo-Japanese war in 1905 and was expanding its railways. Not thought through was France resisting surrender, and prospect of a protracted war that would draw in other nations. Surely Britain would come to the aid of France if attacked, and Belgium too, as their neutrality would be violated if invaded by Germany en route. German thinking was that, whilst their navy could not match the British, this may not matter too much if the British could be lured into a land war in France and neighbouring low countries, given Germany's vastly superior army.

The French military suffered considerable damage as a result of the Dreyfus Affair in 1894 when a French artillery captain, Alfred Dreyfus, was convicted of treason and sentenced to life for allegedly communicating secrets to the German Embassy in Paris. It emerged the culprit was probably Ferdinand Esterhazy, who was acquitted after fresh evidence was suppressed.

Dreyfus was accused of further charges, based on a falsified document, and in 1899 received a sentence of 10 years. Only in 1906 was he exonerated. The debacle was noted with glee by the Germans, concluding how weak the French army actually was with ill-discipline and occasional mutiny, not uncommon. Combat strength was one thing and competence another. In spite of rearmament, Russia was thought by Germany to be badly organised and poorly led. The German High Command assumed the fighting ability of Austria-Hungary was more than a match. This view was not shared by the general staff as the army had been weakened by ethnic divisions and a financial and political crisis in Hungary.

Of concern in 1909 was Austria-Hungary's continued feuding with Serbia that would draw in Russia. In event of war, Germany would support their dual-alliance ally and they expected Austria-Hungary to reciprocate if Germany was attacked by Russia. By 1910 the Russians had a good idea of German plans, having seen an extended rail network in proximity to France, with long platforms too.

All the major powers had military attaches and spies with Colonel Alfred Redl especially well placed. An officer with Austria-Hungary, he was recruited by Russia in 1901 and passed top-secret information on mobilisation plans and fortresses. Only in 1913 was his espionage discovered after German Intelligence tipped off their colleagues. A trap was laid with two envelopes containing banknotes awaiting collection at a Post Office in Vienna by Redl who was in disguise. He could not resist the bait.

All was not going well in France with accusations of weak leadership, a fiasco over uniforms, political interference, out of date and ineffectual training, low staff officer quality and tactical deficiencies. Then there were issues of promises made as France did not completely trust Russia. In 1911, although France thought a German advance would be through Luxembourg and part of Belgium, it would not take action until Belgian neutrality was violated for fear of alienating Britain. The French preferred to go on the offensive, taking the view that with support by the British the German army could be defeated, overlooking that France was behind Germany in the size of its army, military artillery and tactics. The French contended that light artillery was better in modern fast-moving warfare. The Germans begged to differ.

### **Drumbeats Of impending War**

In spite of peace movements convinced by the futility of war, let alone cost, the arms race intensified with European nations suspicious of each other and motives. A trio of German cartoons captured this. The first showed a row of prosperous houses bearing national flags. In the second, the houses were looking the worse for wear, and decidedly dilapidated in the third. The caption reads, "The more the nations try to outdo their neighbours in the arms race, the more their own people will suffer."

In May 1913, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia was invited by Kaiser Wilhelm II to the wedding of his only daughter, Victoria Louise, to the Duke of Brunswick. When George V tried to talk to the Tsar in reasonable privacy he said, "the Kaiser's ear was glued to the keyhole." The King

was harangued by the Kaiser "for making alliances with a decadent nation like France and a semi-barbarous one like Russia," instead of supporting the upholders of progress and liberty.

Most nations had endured the legacy and memory of bitter experiences. For France it was defeat and isolation by Germany; for Britain the Boer War; for Germany the Moroccan crisis and for Russia the Russo-Japanese War and Balkan Wars. A naval race between Britain and Germany contrasted with rivalry between Austria-Hungary and Russia in the Balkans, the rift between Germany and Russia, French suspicions of Germany and the tatters of the Ottoman Empire, with several nations seeking the spoils. Fear, nationalism and heightened tensions were fuelled by media speculation. In Britain, stories circulated of German spies dressed up as waiters, and of invasion plans.

The 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Romanov rule was held in 1913. Nicholas and Alexandra travelled across Russia on a rare public excursion, but were disappointed at sparse crowds and a lack of enthusiasm. In the countryside, peasants had tried unsuccessfully to seize farms from the landed classes; divisions in the Duma deepened; the far left made its presence felt in cities with the Bolsheviks prominent, and unrest increased in the Baltic, Ukraine and Caucasus. A chill wind was blowing across the Russian Steppes. The country was sitting on top of a now active volcano that could erupt unpredictably at any time.

Austria-Hungary was not in much better shape. Its economy had taken a battering in the two Balkan Wars and the working classes were now more militant. In the Hungarian sector, upper classes resisted universal suffrage, and in the spring of 1912 massive demonstrations were held, leading to pitched battles in Budapest. The Romanian National Party demanded not only concessions but more autonomy. In the Austrian part, Ruthenians sought freedom from their Polish overlords whilst Czechs and Germans continued to bicker over power, and Serbia was a constant menace. No wonder the German ambassador sighed and said, "It is falling apart at the seams."

Nor was Germany buoyant, even though trade and industry were. Fears of encirclement by France, Britain and Russia were heightened by British naval supremacy, a revitalised France and growing power of Russia, and unreliability of its own allies. On 8 December 1912, the Kaiser read a dispatch from his ambassador in London. He said Edward Grey and Richard Haldane, British War Minister, had warned that, if a general war on the Continent broke out, Britain would almost certainly enter the conflict to prevent France from being destroyed by Germany. This was hardly news to the Kaiser who flew into a rage at what he regarded as impertinence and a betrayal.

For Germany, war was most likely, if not inevitable. The mood of the German public was observed by the French military attaché in Berlin, saying it might induce "a sense of anger and national pride" which could easily lead to war. Even the military was accepting war as inevitable, if not desirable. Germany was now at stage three of the Schlieffen Plan, needing to persuade the public that war was just and necessary. Meanwhile, France and Russia continued to increase the size of their armies by extending conscription and, in the case of Russia, carrying out trial mobilisations too.

Europe was divided into two alliance systems: entente with France, Russia and Britain and the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. Only Britain refused to sign up to the entente, wishing to keep a free hand said Grey, who wanted both alliances to live stably side by side. The problem was Britain's position had sent mixed messages to the entente,

especially to France and the Triple Alliance, as what would Britain's position be in the event of Germany invading France? Indecision was seen as weakness.

Permanent Under-Secretary, Arthur Nicholson said, in veiled reference to the Cabinet, "I do not think that people quite recognise that, if we are to assist in preserving the peace, and status quo, it is necessary to acknowledge our responsibilities" to include material assistance. This contrasted with France saying that if Russia entered a war they would too, and also if Germany was to mobilise. The British Cabinet remained divided on their position which may explain Grey's ambiguous statement. In November 1912, with the support of the Cabinet, Grey gave a rather bland assurance to hold talks immediately if there was an unprovoked attack by a third Power. This position was maintained virtually to the outbreak of war.

The Balkan Wars between 1912 and 1914 sparked another wave of spending on arms and on increasing the size of military forces. German spending increased by 30% in two years and Russia by half. Army intelligence in Vienna in early 1914 stated: Greece is tripling spending, Serbia is doubling and Romania, Bulgaria and Montenegro have increased theirs.

Military preparation was seen as a deterrent by some. The British Ambassador, in discussion with George V, commented, "The best guarantee of peace between the Great Powers is if they are all afraid of each other." The difficulty with this argument is deterrence only works if the other side thinks you are serious, and not bluffing. This may lead to inflated statements, and confusing messages, as conflict may be sparked inadvertently if failing to follow through a threat.

In an attempt at détente, in January 1912, Britain suggested talks with Germany over naval build-up as financier Sir Ernest Cassell had good links with German shipping magnate, Albert Ballin. A brief memorandum was presented for agreement. Germany had to accept British naval superiority and freeze or cut back their programme and, in return, Britain would offer some colonies. The issue of British naval superiority was expected but intriguing Germany more was, "neither country should prepare plans for acts of aggression against each other."

The Kaiser suggested Britain send a representative for talks. Richard Haldane, Secretary of State for War and a fluent German speaker, was sent. It soon emerged the two sides were far apart. Britain wanted an end to the naval race, and Germany an assurance that Britain would stay neutral if conflict arose, a condition which Britain was not prepared to accept. The Kaiser ended talks. Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg said later a deal might have been possible. An olive branch by Britain of a naval holiday was firmly rejected. In the summer of 1913, Britain offered Germany colonial possessions of Portugal in Africa but this prompted little reaction.

A strange combination of unease and complacency existed in Europe. It had been afflicted by many crises for so many years, and had been put to the test so many times without war ever breaking out, that it almost ceased to believe in the threat of further escalation in the Balkans that was now posing a very real threat to stability in Central Europe.

### **Teetering On The Brink**

After Home Rule Bills were defeated in 1886 and 1893, a third attempt was made in 1912. It aroused immense hostility in Ulster that threatened to establish a provisional government. It sought volunteers should a militia be required. By late September 1913, some 60,000 had signed and a further 40,000 within weeks. The Cabinet agreed to Lloyd George's proposal of excluding Ulster for five or six years but Nationalists opposed this. By November, they too

formed potential militias from Sinn Fein, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Gaelic League and the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood.

The King's Speech in 1914 promised resubmission of the Bill. Edward Carson, Leader of the Unionists, referred to force meeting force, and to the British carrying out their "first great measure in Ireland by using British bayonets and British bullets." A highly nervous Asquith stated, "Every one of us must desire to avoid civil war and bloodshed." Intelligence reports in March indicated the UVF were about to storm Carrickfergus Castle, seize the ammunition, to augment their own almost 10,000 rifles, and march on Dublin. British troops moved quickly to avert this and protect stores in Armagh, Omagh and Enniskillen. Tensions mounted in the South too. The police were reluctant to become embroiled and senior military officers too. They knew full well the UVF outnumbered their troops. Resignations were threatened in the face of dismissal if ordered to Ulster.

Asquith was exhausted by his burdens at the War Office, the relentless hostility of the Irish and Unionists, concerns of the army in regard to manpower and resources, and militancy of trade unions and suffragettes. He was very close to breaking point. On 6 April 1914, the Government of Ireland Bill was given a second reading by 356 votes to 272. In the debate, Carson rejected the offer of six years exclusion on the basis this would "make a hell of Ulster for six years." Two weeks later, between 25,000 and 35,000 German rifles were landed at Larne and 3 million rounds of ammunition, intended for the UVF. Telegraph and telephone wires were cut to prevent the alarm being raised as thousands of UVF personnel surrounded the harbour to ensure safe off-loading of weapons.

An amending bill to the Home Office Bill was introduced on 12 May to permit the exclusion of four, six or all nine counties of Ulster. Carson, with his firm pronouncement of 'No Home Rule', was an effective recruiting sergeant for Nationalists who now had 100,000 volunteers, with a third in Ulster. At the third reading on 21 May, precise details were lacking but the Commons still passed the Bill four days later. Nationalists were appalled and recruiting at the rate of 5,000 a week continued. Finally, on 23 June, details emerged. This permitted any county in Ulster to exclude itself for six years. The Lords considered wrecking the Bill that could not be given Royal Assent. The sticking point was the large Catholic populations in Fermanagh and Tyrone. In response the Lords excluded Ulster entirely.

On 8 July Asquith referred to a long Cabinet meeting, "trying to get a quart into a pint pot." Four meetings on successive days from 21 to 24 July produced predictable deadlock. "I have rarely felt more helpless in a practical affair," Asquith told Venetia Stanley, pointing to a real tragedy of epic proportions. Assent required the same Bill being approved three times which meant the Bill had stalled. Asquith reported back to the Cabinet who were focused on events in Europe, "about as bad as they could be."

Two days later, a yacht packed with arms from Germany arrived at Howth, met by 1,000 Nationalists. Unsuccessful attempts to disarm them were made by the Metropolitan police from Dublin, and soldiers. On returning to barracks the soldiers, attacked by an angry mob, fired 31 rounds. Three volunteers were killed and 30 injured. Nationalists were enraged, and by the actions of 5,000 UVF volunteers, brazenly displaying machine guns in Belfast. Asquith required the support of the Irish Parliamentary Party, led by John Redmond. He complained of double standards and issued a threat. "Let the House clearly understand that four-fifths of the Irish people will not submit any longer to be bullied, punished, or penalised,

or shot, for conduct which is permitted to go scot-free in the open light of day in every county in Ulster, by other sections of their fellow countrymen.”

The European crisis had now overtaken the Amending Bill, to be replaced by a Suspensory Bill that delayed Home Rule indefinitely, pending the end of likely war, whenever that would be. Redmond pledged his support to Protestants and Nationalists collaborating against a foreign enemy, but voiced concerns about postponement. Britain had capitulated to Ulster, raising fears Home Rule would continue to ignite tensions on an unpredictable scale. Voices of reason might not prevail, as Ireland was insisting on at least a commitment in principle to its justifiable claims, not only for independence but a fully united Ireland.

### **The Tinder Box Ignites**

The news of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie on 28 June 1914 provoked a mixture of gloom, dread and indifference. This potentially was the spark that could engulf Europe and draw in other nations too. The blame was put on fanatical and violent Bosnians, influenced by anarchists and revolutionaries in Russia. Their leader was a Bosnian Serb, Gavrilo Princip, who had some useful contacts in the government and army. A sympathetic major provided six bombs and four revolvers for the conspirators.

On the fateful day, as the Archduke and his wife toured Sarajevo in an open-top car, a bomb was hurled as the car drove along Appel Quay by the river. The alert driver accelerated and the bomb exploded under a following car, injuring some passengers and bystanders. The Archduke insisted the tour continue and, after a speech at the town hall, the party returned by the same route. The vehicle slowed, giving Princip the perfect opportunity to jump on the running board, shooting dead Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Sophie at point-blank range.

Almost at any price, Germany had to support Austria-Hungary, its closest ally, and issued a blank cheque for whatever reprisal was required against Serbia. Should war result then so be it. Timing was good for Germany in terms of build-up and being mid-summer. Besides, the Schlieffen plan was mapped out in detail. Backing down was not in the German military psyche. The Kaiser had already said in late June the Serbs must be disposed of, and soon.

An ultimatum to Serbia was drafted within two weeks of the assassination. All nationalist officers were to be dismissed from the Serbian army and their societies disbanded; the King of Serbia must tell his people that he would abandon plans for a Greater Serbia, and he must also agree to a special agency being established in Belgrade. Serbia was given an ultimatum on 23 July and had until 18:00 on 25 July to respond. Predictably, the Serbian government refused any interference into their own affairs and formal relations were severed.

In Britain, with the Liberals dependent on support from the Protestant Ulster Unionists, there was scant prospect of resolving the issue of Home Rule for Ireland, now at crisis point. In a last-ditch attempt, George V invited the leaders of both sides to a conference at Buckingham Palace but on 24 July 1914 this ended in failure.

The Tsar said he found preoccupation with Ireland difficult to understand when the tinder box of Sarajevo had been ignited on 28 June, especially as the Serbs rejected the ultimatum the day before the conference in London finished. Germany and Austria-Hungary took a rather different view, hoping with any luck that Britain would be too divided and distracted to fight a war that was only a matter of time.

Over dinner on 23 July 1914, before either had seen the text of the ultimatum, Edward Grey and Richard Haldane sounded out Albert Ballin for a German view, knowing full well Ballin would report back to Berlin on the British stance. Recollections differed. Haldane stated he and Grey had warned if, France was attacked by Germany, it should not count on Britain remaining neutral. The message given to the Kaiser and German High Command was of British concern, mainly with the balance of power on the Continent. Provided Germany did not swallow up France after any war, apart from a few French colonies maybe, Britain would not intervene.

Grey told the Cabinet on 24 July that if Russia attacked Austria-Hungary this would draw in their staunch ally Germany. That evening the German Ambassador was informed that Britain would be prepared to extend the ultimatum time limit if Germany agreed. The Kaiser was not impressed; "useless" he scribbled. The Cabinet at its meeting on 27 July was split down the middle on action. An equivocating Grey said that, if Britain failed to join France and Russia, then "Germany would almost certainly attack France whilst Russia was mobilising" but on the other hand, "if we threw in our lot with the entente, Russia would at once attack Austria."

The view of the Kaiser was the Serbian response was reasonable but military leadership in Germany had already made up its mind that war was inevitable. Talks between Russia and Austria-Germany started on 27 July but were abandoned the next day as a result of German pressure. There was no going back now. All conciliation processes had come to an end. On 28 July Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and started to mobilise.

The British Cabinet met at 11.30 the next morning. No decision was made in regard to the declaration of war, or violation of Belgian neutrality, still hoping that diplomacy might prevail. After the Cabinet meeting, Grey met with the German Ambassador and said privately, "It would not be practicable to stand aside and wait for any length of time." This filtered back to an enraged Wilhelm. His margin notes included the words cheat and cur.

Later the evening the German Chancellor offered the British Ambassador an olive branch to remain neutral, perhaps echoing King George V's comments relayed to Berlin. The offer was rejected and met with derision by Grey who said British acceptance meant ignoring Belgian neutrality and standing aside as France was invaded. The same day, the Tsar sent Wilhelm II a telegram. After pleasantries, the Tsar mentioned overwhelming pressures placed on him to take extreme measures that would lead to war. A dismissive Kaiser said this was more to do with the Tsar's personal weakness, and his trying to put the blame on Germany.

The Tsar sent a conciliatory telegram the day after, 30 July, insisting Russian mobilisation was partial and defensive. He was too late and playing for time stated the Kaiser. He was right. Later that day Russia made the decision to fully mobilise but so had Germany also, advancing to the next stage of the Schlieffen Plan. Helmuth von Moltke, German military commander, sent a telegram to his opposite number, imploring Austria to mobilise and move to a war footing.

On Friday 31 July, the British Cabinet met again but could still give no assurance to Cambon, French Ambassador. An outraged Eyre Crowe said this meant abdication; the entente was meaningless if Britain did not stand by her ally. He was not alone. The Times said Britain had a moral obligation to France and Russia. The public mood was one of support.

For Germany, mobilisation would be in accordance with all steps in the Schlieffen Plan which meant a "state of imminent threat of war" with specified troop deployments, and all detailed

logistics in place. In taking this decision, Russia was given an ultimatum the same day to stop all war preparations within twelve hours. France had already been given an ultimatum to be neutral in the event of conflict. The stakes were dramatically raised but who would be first to light the touch-paper?

The British Cabinet met on Saturday 1 August. Once again, indecision was not the response Cambon wanted, or expected. White-faced, he staggered into the office of Arthur Nicholson, Permanent Under-Secretary of State, repeating the statement, "They are going to abandon us." Nicholson asked Grey whether this was true, protesting that, in the event of German aggression, Britain would surely come to the assistance of France. Yes, replied Grey "but he has nothing in writing." Eyre Crowe spoke for several in prominent positions in thinking of resigning.

By Sunday 2 August, Russian cavalry troops crossed the border into Germany, whilst German troops entered Luxembourg. In Britain, the Cabinet met at 11.00 but could not agree a clear response. They met again at 18:30. A tentative statement was agreed to intervene if there was a "substantial" violation of Belgian neutrality. At about 19:00, Belgium was informed by Germany the French intended to advance through their country to attack Germany. The statement requested free movement of German troops and assured Belgium of "benevolent neutrality." Their government, given twelve hours to respond, rejected this deceptive ploy.

In London the next day, Monday 3 August, the Cabinet met in the morning to decide what Parliament should be told that afternoon. Full mobilisation was agreed. At 16:00, a weary Edward Grey stood up to speak to a packed House of Commons. He talked of friendship, obligation and honour, and of losing all respect. His last words were drowned out by loud cheers. No vote was taken as it was clear the government had the support of the House.

Towards dusk, Nicholson joined Grey in his office overlooking St James Park. His thoughts were elsewhere. Watching the daily round of lighting up gas lamps as dusk fell, a sombre Grey said, "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall never see them lit again in our lifetime." Later the same evening, the French Prime Minister was handed a declaration of war by the German ambassador. Advances into Alsace, antics of French aviators and a bomb left on a railway line had left Germany with no option. Britain was to hear similar pretexts and propaganda some 25 years later.

An ultimatum was sent by the British Government the next day, 4 August, to provide a clear assurance that it would respect the neutrality of Belgium. A deadline of 23:00 was set. In Berlin, the German Parliament was informed of the invasion of Belgium and Luxembourg as French threats had made swift military action necessary. At midnight Big Ben chimed. Large crowds had gathered in Whitehall and the Mall, singing patriotic songs. Churchill dispatched a telegram to the fleet. COMMENCE HOSTILITIES AGAINST GERMANY.

In spite of dark skies across Europe, and carnage of World War 1, the Edwardian era and the years leading up to 1914, witnessed a period of huge progress and unstoppable change. In his conclusions, Roy Hattersley was referring to profound political and social developments, and a fairer society. From a strategic standpoint, Britain was losing an overstretched Empire as nations would gradually seek independence.

More than this was a failure to invest in the future, and complacency too in believing all was well as living standards for most had improved. The problem was other nations, especially Germany and USA, had grown more rapidly but, most worrying of all, was the continuation

of tried and tested remedies in business and commerce in securing the economic lifeblood of the nation, and in education, in failing to equip British children for the modern world.

This would haunt Britain, faced with the considerable burden of having to pay its share of a protracted and costly war, engulfing Europe and much of the world. The reality was Britain's authority and status had diminished. So had its claim to be the most powerful nation in the world, economically and militarily.