1 The necessary war, 1914–1918

The First World War continues to cast its long shadow over British culture and 'modern memory' at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and remains more controversial than the Second. Myths prevail over historical reality and today the earlier conflict is assumed to constitute 'the prime example of war as horror and futility'.[1] Yet, without claiming for it the accolade of 'a good war', as A. J. P. Taylor rather surprisingly did for the struggle against Nazi Germany, it was, for Britain, a necessary and successful war, and an outstanding achievement for a democratic nation in arms.

The following, I shall argue, are the main features in a positive interpretation of the British war effort. The Liberal government did not stumble heedlessly into war in 1914 but made a deliberate decision to prevent German domination of Europe. The tiny regular army of 1914 was transformed, with remarkable success, first into a predominantly citizens' volunteer body and then into the mass conscript force of 1917–18. The learning process was unavoidably painful and costly, but the British Army's performance compared

well with that of both allies and opponents. In such a hectic expansion there were bound to be some 'duds' in higher command and staff appointments, but it would be difficult to name many 'butchers and bunglers' in the latter part of the war: popular notions about this are based on ignorance. Military morale, although brittle at times, held firm through all the setbacks and heavy casualties. Popular support also remained steady, although changing from early euphoria to a dogged determination to see it through. Contrary to popular belief, official propaganda played an insignificant part in sustaining morale on the home front. British and dominion forces played the leading role in the final victorious advance in 1918 on the all-important Western Front. In the post-war settlement Britain achieved most of its objectives with regard to Europe, and its empire expanded to its greatest extent. It was not the fault of those who won the war on the battlefields that the anticipated rewards soon appeared to be disappointing. Indeed on the international stage it was largely beyond Britain's control that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles could not be enforced, and that Germany again became a threat within fifteen years.

It is once again fashionable to query the necessity for Britain's decision to enter the First World War. Counterfactual speculation presents a seductive vision of a neutral Britain avoiding casualties and financial decline, and living in economic harmony with a victorious Germany. Moreover, we are asked to believe, a different decision by Britain in August 1914 would have prevented the Russian Revolution, the communist and Nazi regimes and most of the evils of the twentieth century. This is heady stuff but it is not a meaningful enterprise for historians.

While it was far from certain – let alone inevitable – in the summer of 1914 that Britain and Germany would soon be at war, intense rivalry and antagonism had been building up between them for several decades. As Paul Kennedy

has shown,[2] Britain was alarmed by Germany's rapid industrial and population growth; it was vastly superior to France according to virtually every criterion, notably in military power; and Russia's ability to offset this disparity was 'blown to the winds' by defeat and revolution in 1905. Even more disturbing, Germany's rapid naval expansion posed a clear challenge to Britain's security to which the latter was bound to respond. As Kennedy comments, it is not necessary for the historian to judge whether Britain or Germany was right or wrong in this 'struggle for mastery', but the latter's aggressive rhetoric and sabre-rattling underlined the (correct) impression that it was prepared to resort to war to challenge the status quo. It was essentially a matter of timing a pre-emptive strike. Consequently, when every allowance is made for Germany's domestic and alliance problems in 1914, the fact remains that 'virtually all the tangled wires of causality led back to Berlin'. In particular, it was the 'sublime genius of the Prussian General Staff', by its reckless concentration on a western offensive whatever the immediate cause of hostilities – namely Austria-Hungary's determination to make war on Serbia – which brought the (by then latent) Anglo-German antagonism to the brink of war.[3]

On the British side insurance against the perceived German threat was manifested in a treaty with Japan (1902) and ententes with France (1904) and Russia (1907). These arrangements have been widely regarded by historians as a diplomatic triumph.[4] In themselves they did not commit Britain to a war on the Continent, nor did the military and naval conversations with France that ensued. Nevertheless they did make it extremely doubtful that Britain could remain neutral in the event of a general war resulting from a German offensive against France.

Michael Brock has shown that as the July 1914 crisis intensified, the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, his leading Cabinet colleagues and military advisers remained confident

that a limited German advance through southern Belgium would not oblige Britain to declare war.[5] The King was informed as late as 29 July that Britain's involvement was unlikely. Yet by 2 August the government was swinging towards intervention. This was due to the fact that France seemed in danger of defeat, and Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, in particular, was under pressure from popular opinion and the Foreign Office to offer British support, though perhaps short of full intervention.

What resolved the government's doubts and ended its hesitation was Germany's brutal ultimatum demanding unimpeded passage through the whole of Belgium followed by the news, on 3 August, of the latter's refusal and of King Albert's appeal to King George V for diplomatic support. On the next day the German invasion began and Britain promptly entered the war. It would not be unduly cynical to comment that, while there was fervent support for the rescue of 'poor little Belgium', Britain's intervention was motivated primarily by self-interest: a sudden realization of the strategic dangers that a rapid German conquest of France and Belgium would entail.[6]

Party political considerations played a crucial role in shaping the government's actions. Already, on 2 August, before the German ultimatum to Belgium, the Conservatives had pledged their support to Asquith in support of France. This strengthened Grey's hand and undermined the hopes of waverers that a pacifist stand could be effective. Several Cabinet members confided to friends that it was better to go to war united than to endure a coalition or even risk a complete withdrawal from office. Ministers also deluded themselves that they could wage war and control domestic politics by *liberal* methods.

One prominent minister in particular embodied these dilemmas. Lloyd George abandoned his pacifist stance and supported the declaration of war, ostensibly because of

Belgium, but really because he believed that Britain's fate was linked to that of France and it would be a political disaster to allow the Cabinet to be split over such a vital issue.[7] In these circumstances it seems virtually impossible to believe that Britain could have remained neutral. The only issues were whether Britain would intervene at once or later, and with a divided or united government and popular support. In the event Asquith had achieved a remarkable, albeit short-lived, triumph: a Liberal government had embarked upon a continental war with only minor defections from the Cabinet, with strong party, opposition and parliamentary backing, and with bellicose popular support that outstripped that of the decision-makers in its fervour.

It is one of the paradoxes of this culmination of the Anglo-German antagonism that neither had been seriously considering war against the other when the crisis began: Britain because it was preoccupied with the real possibility of civil war in Ireland, and Germany because its faith in a short-war victory made the involvement of the tiny British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and Britain's formidable navy seem irrelevant.

However, while it is true that Germany had no immediate war aims against Britain, it is clear that an early victory over France would have had disastrous consequences. Bethmann Hollweg's September Programme, drawn up in anticipation of imminent peace negotiations with a defeated France, spoke of so weakening the latter that its revival as a great power would be impossible for all time. The military leaders were to decide on various possible annexations, including the coastal strip from Dunkirk to Boulogne. A commercial treaty would render France dependent on Germany and permit the exclusion of British commerce from France. Belgium would be, at the very least, reduced to a vassal state dependent on Germany with the possibility of incorporating French Flanders. The 'competent quarters' (that is, the

German General Staff) would have to judge the military value against Britain of these arrangements. Most important of all, victory would usher in a central European economic association dominated by Germany and with Britain pointedly excluded from the list of members.[8]

Thus Britain's decision to enter the war, although forced on it by an unexpected chain of events, may be viewed as both calculated and also justified by fears of what penalties might result from neutrality. Britain (and the dominions) fought the war first and foremost to preserve its independence and status as a great imperial power by resisting the domination of Europe by the Central Powers. But a second purpose, less evident until the late stages of the war, was to gain a peace settlement which would also enhance Britain's and its Empire's security vis-à-vis its allies and co-belligerents – France, Russia and, to a lesser extent, the United States.[9]

There was, however, a serious flaw in the government's assumptions about a war whose duration and nature it completely failed to comprehend. The government, in effect, hoped to wage a short war in terms of blockading Germany, supplying its allies with money and munitions, and despatching the modest BEF to France essentially as a token of good intent. In view of accurate pre-war assessments of Germany's industrial and military power, this stance in 1914 was highly unrealistic and was soon to be exposed as such.[10]

With the wisdom of hindsight it is tempting to argue that there must have been a better alternative to the bloodletting and destruction between 1914 and 1918. While this notion can be debated endlessly as regards the general causes of the First World War, it has little bearing on the specific issue of Anglo-German antagonism. As Paul Kennedy concludes, by making minor concessions Britain 'might have papered over the cracks in the Anglo-German relationship

for a few more years, but it is difficult to see how such gestures would have altered the elemental German push to change the existing distribution of power', which was always likely to provoke a strong British reaction. Unless one of the rivals was prepared to introduce a drastic change of policy their vital interests would remain diametrically opposed. Essentially, in 1914 Britain was prepared to fight to preserve the existing status quo whereas Germany, for a mixture of offensive and defensive motives, was determined to alter it.[11]

Finally, in summing up the reasons for Britain entering the war, it is important to consider the mental outlook or moral code of thoughtful people in the very different ethos of 1914. Ignorance of the sordid realities of war allowed free play to the notion of a liberal crusade against uncivilized behaviour. If a great power were allowed to break an international agreement and invade a small neighbour with impunity, then European civilization would be seriously undermined. This outlook seemed to be accepted by all social classes and persisted to a remarkable extent for much of the war, even after the appalling costs had become clear.[12]

It cannot be over-emphasized that, when declaring war in August 1914 and despatching the small BEF to France, the government had no intention of fighting a long and costly 'total war'. Conscription, in particular, was anathema to most Liberals. Even Lord Kitchener, the imperial proconsul appointed as War Minister to inspire confidence, who *did* envisage a long war from the outset, could not foresee the pressures which the Central Powers' early successes in both east and west would impose on the Entente.

Kitchener's plan was that his volunteer New Armies, raised in 1914–15, should be conserved as much as possible to ensure that Britain would be the strongest military power at the peace conference. The French and Russian armies would bear the brunt of attrition warfare in 1915–16 before

the British forces intervened in strength to deal the decisive blow. This calculated strategy was undermined by enormous French losses in the first year of the war, by similar Russian losses and a hectic retreat in the summer of 1915, and by Britain's failure at the Dardanelles. Consequently, in mid-1915, British policy-makers were reluctantly forced to conclude that, in order to save the Entente, its forces must play a full part in the continental land war. The disastrous battle of Loos in September 1915 marked the first stage in this drastic change of policy, the adoption of conscription early in 1916 the second stage, and the Somme campaign the third. The proponents of a limited war effort using only volunteer forces were overwhelmed by events. The risk of heavy casualties and bankruptcy seemed preferable to defeat.[13]

In retrospect it is tempting to believe that either group of allies would have done better to negotiate a 'peace without victory' once the initial hopes of a quick decision had been thwarted. But the trajectory of the war and the myriad conflicting interests involved suggest that this was never a realistic option. Germany's extensive territorial gains in 1914 and 1915 did not incline its leaders to moderation, and even the severe effects of attrition at Verdun and on the Somme in 1916 were offset by victory over Romania and confidence that Russia was tottering towards defeat. Indeed the Central Powers' Peace Note in December 1916 was prompted largely by the victory in Romania; its tone was bellicose and no specific conditions were mentioned. The Entente correctly assumed that the terms would be unacceptable. Bethmann's annexation proposals were in fact made harsher on every point by Hindenburg and Ludendorff: they opposed any territorial cession to France, required Luxembourg to be annexed, and demanded that the Belgian and Polish economies be subordinated to Germany's. After the Entente's rejection of the Note,

Hindenburg hardened his position further, demanding additional annexations in east and west. The military, naval and colonial authorities all grew more extreme in their demands. In short, German high-level decision-making was a shambles, with the military leaders increasingly dominant and unwilling to compromise.[14]

On the British side, the conflict was presented as not only a traditional strategy to defend the home islands and the empire, but also as a crusade for a more peaceful and democratic world order. As David Stevenson has pointed out, British policy 'combined uncertainty and even altruism within Europe with *Realpolitik* outside'. Above all, Germany must be destroyed as a colonial and naval threat. Britain had no territorial claims against Germany, but the rhetorical aim of 'smashing Prussian militarism' could only be achieved, if indeed at all, through a decisive military victory. Though flexible in some respects about a settlement with Germany, Lloyd George was committed to 'punishing aggression' and 'promoting democratisation'. Consequently Britain 'remained far removed from a negotiated settlement with the Central Powers'. Even the defection of Russia and the intervention of the United States in 1917 did not alter the fundamental conviction that only a clear-cut victory would make possible a lasting peace. The extremely harsh terms which Germany imposed on Russia in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918), followed by a drive deep into the Caucasus, beyond the treaty's terms, demonstrated what penalties the Western Powers might expect if they were defeated. President Woodrow Wilson was also now convinced that a just and lasting peace could only follow after the clear military defeat of the Central Powers.[15]

It is very difficult now, particularly in comparison with the Second World War, to interpret the First World War in ideological terms. Yet without a powerful input of idealism it is impossible to understand why Liberal intellectuals

such as C. E. Montague were so enthusiastic at the outbreak of war, and why 'liberal opinion' continued to support the war when its appalling costs became clear. The notion of the conflict as a crusade on behalf of liberal idealism embodied a startling paradox: war would be waged to remove the causes of war.[16] An Entente victory, despite the embarrassment of tsarist Russia as an ally, would entail the defeat of 'militarism'. These lofty ideals sat uneasily with more tangible political goals such as the restoration of Belgian independence and the defeat of the German navy.

From the very outset German actions were, to say the least, careless and reckless with regard to neutral opinion and enemy propaganda. The flagrant violation of Belgian neutrality made Germany an international pariah. The destruction of the mediaeval library at Louvain and the Cloth Hall at Ypres, the murder of Belgian civilians and the first large-scale use of poison gas in 1915 all outraged civilized opinion. Even where the line between humanitarian restraint and military necessity was blurred – as in the sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania* – a German firm presented a propaganda gift to their opponents by striking a vainglorious commemorative medal. British morale was continuously fuelled by moral outrage at enemy atrocities. Consequently, in John Bourne's striking summary, 'British public opinion camped throughout the war on the moral high ground, [and] Asquith pitched the first tent' with his rhetoric of fighting for principles 'vital to the civilisation of the world'.[17]

Although 'propaganda', in the sense of exploiting news to the full, sometimes without undue concern for strict accuracy, was employed by all sides and to an extent that may strike us now as disgraceful and nauseating, its importance as regards home morale must not be exaggerated. Propaganda could sustain morale by blackening the enemy's image and gilding one's own, but it could not create high