

REVIEWS

Douglas Newton, *The Darkest Days: The Truth Behind Britain's Rush to War, 1914*

Verso: London and New York 2015, £9.99, paperback

386 pp, 978 178 1 68816 8

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THE SNUFFER OF LAMPS

The centenary of the First World War was also a publishing deadline, with seemingly as many monographs to mark its passage as ceramic poppies—888,264, one for each British and colonial soldier killed—that spilled out of the Tower of London in November 2014. Millions more visited that installation, *Blood Swept Lands*, than will read about the war it memorialized, attesting not least to the enhanced official promotion of Remembrance Days in England in recent years. Yet the crimson solemnly affixed to buttonholes, or in moats, points to the paradox of official commemorations of the conflict; mourning for heroic sacrifice, and vindication of national honour and ultimate triumph. The cause of Britain was just: as contemporaries saw it, defence of gallant little Belgium ruthlessly invaded by the Hun; and as the better historians have since shown, saving Europe from domination by a German militarism more dangerous and reckless than any other power of the time.

Douglas Newton's *Darkest Days: The Truth Behind Britain's Rush to War* takes aim squarely at this version of 1914, and the mythologies surrounding it: that the Asquith government entered the war only after having exhausted the diplomatic alternatives—acting to restrain Russia and France and negotiate with Germany, to no avail, and finally stepping in at the last moment, to uphold treaty obligations to Belgian neutrality about which the nation was of one mind. Newton, an Australian historian whose simultaneous study *Hell-Bent* details the contribution of his own country's political

establishment to the carnage, focuses *Darkest Days* on the fortnight prior to Britain's declaration of war on Germany, delivering a meticulous day-by-day narrative of the deliberations and manoeuvres at the top reaches of the British state that led to it. His central argument is a demolition of the legend that there was a broad unanimity behind the decision. On the contrary—he maintains—it is striking how much resistance emerged, without parallel in any other European capital, and what extreme measures of deception, circumvention and intimidation were necessary to quell it.

Darkest Days opens nearly a month after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, when most of the British political class from the King downwards had nearly given up hope of heading off a civil war in Ireland over the introduction of Home Rule, and were either straining instead to see what shape it might take, or retreating to their seats in the countryside. The *attentat* in Sarajevo had not at first seemed very important. Not until the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia on 23 July were its possible consequences registered. Asquith, writing to his mistress the next evening, commented that a Balkan war could mean 'Armageddon' if it pulled in the rival continental powers, but 'happily there seems to be no reason why we should be anything more than spectators.' Three days later, on 27 July, Lewis Harcourt, the Colonial Secretary, counted eleven out of nineteen members of the government who shared this conviction, a 'Peace Party which if necessary shall break up the Cabinet in the interest of our abstention.'

Yet within a week the Cabinet would be unbroken, and Britain at war. *Darkest Days* offers a vivid timeline of how this happened, as one calculated act of preemption, concealment and sabotage by the dominant trio under Asquith—Grey at the Foreign Office, Churchill at the Admiralty, and Haldane at the War Office—succeeded another, while the four-power crisis between Austria, Russia, Germany and France escalated on the continent. On 26 July, Churchill had already given a 'stand fast order' to the fleet at Portland, announcing it to the press the next morning, without informing the Cabinet. Two days later he sent it to war stations in the North Sea against the German fleet, again taking care not to consult the Cabinet, lest this 'should mistakenly be considered a provocative action'. On the 29th Austria declared war on Serbia, and Russia ordered a general mobilization, for which it had secretly issued, with French encouragement, 'partial' instructions four days earlier. Bound in alliance to Austria, Germany now confronted the prospect of war not only with France, a contingency for which German military plans envisaged a swift advance on Paris through Belgium, but also Russia. Panicking at the news of Russian mobilization, Bethmann-Hollweg attempted to secure British neutrality by promising that if France were defeated, Germany would proceed to no annexations in Europe, leaving Belgium—post-hostilities—untouched, and taking only

French colonies overseas, an offer brusquely dismissed as dishonourable by Grey and Asquith, 'certain that the Cabinet would agree'.

On 31 July, in an apparent attempt to find a rationale for intervention more acceptable to Cabinet Radicals than adherence to the Entente, Grey decided on his own to telegram Paris and Berlin, asking for pledges from each that in the event of war, Belgian neutrality would be respected. When Russia looked like upsetting this plan, launching a general mobilization *before* Germany on 31 July, a half-hearted attempt was made to restrain it: Asquith roused the 'poor King' from bed to sign a plea to his beloved cousin 'Nicky'—which Britain's Ambassador in St Petersburg failed to deliver for a day, until after Germany had declared war, and then helped the Tsar reject in writing. The next day, after receiving an official British warning over Belgium, the German Ambassador to London asked Grey whether Britain would stand aside if Germany agreed both to respect Belgian neutrality, and to guarantee the territorial integrity of France *and* its colonies—whereupon Grey told him bluntly that Britain could not promise to remain neutral even if Germany did not invade Belgium. 'In this way', Newton writes, 'Berlin was told of Britain's inflexible position: a German decision to respect Belgian neutrality would win it neither credit nor advantage. Britain would still probably rush to the assistance of France and Russia if it came to war.'

The only condition under which Grey would—twenty-four hours later—contemplate Britain remaining neutral was if there was no war between Germany and France in the West, letting the Central Powers and Russia fight it out in the East, a prospect unthinkable for France, since the Serbian crisis often more bellicose than Russia itself, and outraging George V, who—with a conciliatory cable from his less beloved cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm, in hand—summoned Grey to the Palace for a dressing down and retraction. That night, Churchill fully mobilized the Naval Reserves, 'notwithstanding the Cabinet decision' against it, as he observed, and with no more than a complicit 'look' from Asquith after a dinner-party at Downing Street, attended by the Russian Ambassador. Two days later, in a long and meandering speech, Grey told the House of Commons that Britain must intervene if Belgian neutrality was violated. There was neither any Cabinet decision nor any Parliamentary vote on British entry into the war. Most ministers never even saw the ultimatum sent to Germany on 4 August, after its troops crossed the frontier of Belgium. Nor did they approve the formal declaration of war that followed it that night, a step taken in the Privy Council, composed of just three peers and the monarch.

Newton's indictment of the sequence of diplomatic subterfuges that drew Britain into the Great War is damning. That these were so necessary speaks to his case that opposition in the Cabinet to the entry into war was a real obstacle to its architects, who could not afford such resignations

from it as would bring down the government. But the fact remains that of the eleven ministers Harcourt claimed were firmly opposed to intervention, all but four accepted it; of the quartet who did resign, two returned within twenty-four hours after tearful exchanges with Asquith; and the other two—Gladstone's biographer Morley, and Burns, the only workingman in the government—uttered not a squeak of objection in public. Their actions had nothing to do with the German invasion of Belgium. All four resignations, whether retracted or maintained, were in protest at British backing of the Entente, set in motion on 2 August, when Grey secured from his colleagues a pledge of naval support for France should the German fleet enter the Channel—a decision, said Burns, 'tantamount to a declaration that we take part in this war.' But once war was declared, opposition to it collapsed overnight. A handful of backbench Radical MPs criticized the government, but none opposed War Credits for it.

Newton leaves this parabola unexplained. If the strength of his narrative is the magnifying glass it brings to the British Cabinet in the last fortnight before the war, its limitation is that it never pulls back to any longer-range view of either the party that plunged the country into it, or the international system that governed the decisions of all the powers of the period. Without a sharper characterization of the dynamics of British Liberalism, the political field in which it operated, and its deep implication in imperial strategy, the actions of its individual representatives in July and August are hard to understand. In the late nineteenth century, the Liberal Party had split over Gladstone's belated conversion to Home Rule in Ireland, a division condemning it to some twenty years in the wilderness, with brief intermissions in the 1890s. By the time it returned to power, finally winning an electoral landslide in 1906, the political landscape had been altered by the emergence of the Labour Party to its left, and growing pressures for social and economic reform within its own ranks. Once in office, the agenda of the party was dominated by domestic issues—trade-union, fiscal, educational and welfare reforms—in a climate of intense polarization: Conservative obstruction of a redistributive budget leading to constitutional reduction in the rights of the House of Lords itself. In the battles over these questions, Radicals in the party were in their element. Home Rule, a still more explosive issue, was prudently shelved until the Liberals lost their majority in the 1910 election, and had thereafter to rely on the Irish Nationalist Party to form a government. The price for this was Home Rule, put back into play over furious Conservative opposition. All this—along with worker and suffragette militancy—occupied the scene once classically portrayed by George Dangerfield's *Strange Death of Liberal England*.

But while its Radical side set the pace at home, abroad the New Liberalism was from the outset a quite distinct regime, in different hands. There, policy

was driven by a triumvirate dating back to the 1890s, formed under the aegis of the last Liberal Premier of the century and its most openly avowed imperialist, the erratic Earl of Rosebery, who argued it was essential for the party to reclaim the centre of British politics by demonstrating that it could be as militantly patriotic in foreign and colonial policy as the Conservatives. Attributing the electoral exile of the party to the 'Little Englanders' within it, the group around him claimed that Cobdenite traditions were obsolete in two senses which went beyond the basic objection that they had become unpopular. Expansion abroad was now the complement to social reform at home, where welfare measures were needed to raise up an imperial race—a matter of national survival in an age of fierce economic and geopolitical rivalries, the rise of Germany uppermost in their minds.

Rosebery's leading followers were Asquith, Grey and Haldane, along with him proudly terming themselves Liberal Imperialists. Of the three, Grey was the most zealous empire-builder, embarrassing even Rosebery's administration by braying for British control of the entire Nile valley and seizure of Uganda. At a time when there was intense opposition within the Liberal Party to the machinations of Chamberlain and Rhodes in South Africa, he supported the cover-up of responsibilities for the Jameson Raid and backed their grab for the Transvaal and Orange Free State, parroting the claim that Britain was a victim of Boer aggression. Neither he nor Asquith, who as a leader-writer for the *Economist* had applauded repression in Ireland, had any time for Home Rule. At Haldane's instigation, the trio had tried to block Campbell-Bannerman, whom they regarded as culpably weak on the Boer War, from becoming effective Prime Minister in 1905, a bid he fended off only by handing them control of the Exchequer, Foreign and War Office.

Grey received the Foreign Office not because he had any diplomatic, let alone intellectual qualifications for it—he spoke no foreign languages and disliked going abroad; his highest mental achievement was a manual on fly-fishing—but for two other reasons. He was a large landowner from an aristocratic family, in a period where pedigree was a requirement for the position in every European country save France, and a party where there were few others of such background available; and he was considered absolutely sound by the Conservatives, as an outspoken guarantor of 'continuity' with their foreign policy. That had altered since the time of Salisbury's 'splendid isolation'. By the turn of the century, the Tory managers of empire had come to the conclusion that with the rise of competing imperial powers in Europe—above all Germany; but with Russia in Asia, too—it was no longer possible to preserve the British Raj worldwide without allies. Even its status as the top naval power was under challenge from German, American and Japanese newcomers. 'I am gradually coming round to the opinion that we must alter our foreign policy and throw our lot in, for good or bad,

with some other Power,' wrote Lord George Hamilton, Secretary of State for India, to Lord Curzon, Viceroy in Calcutta, in 1901. 'Our interests are so vast and ramified', it was 'almost impossible' to focus 'the pressure and power of the Empire so as to deter foreign nations from trying to encroach upon our interests'. In 1904 the Balfour government had reached, in line with Hamilton's logic, a tentative Entente with France.

Grey, who came to office with an *idée fixe* that Germany was Britain's 'worst enemy and greatest danger', had already determined that Britain must throw in its lot with France and Russia, whose cooperation in Asia would mean the most in security and savings. He wasted no time in extending the Anglo-French understanding he had inherited to an Anglo-Russian deal in 1907, agreeing to carve up Persia between London and St Petersburg as an undeclared protectorate. Since France and Russia had for some time been bound in a formal alliance, the underlying logic was the crystallization of a Triple Entente arrayed against the Central Powers of Germany and Austro-Hungary. Geographically and culturally closer to England, in such an arrangement France was necessarily the key partner. When Germany challenged French seizure of Morocco four years later, Britain immediately sided with Paris, amid threats of war if Berlin did not back down. The following year Grey sealed a secret pact with France, releasing the French navy to patrol the Mediterranean while the British fleet guarded the Channel. Meanwhile, acting at the War Office, Haldane readied six divisions for a British Expeditionary Force to aid France in the event of a land war and—again in complete secrecy—the General Staffs of the two countries started to plan for joint operations in the event of a conflict with Germany. Grey's repeated protestations, to the Cabinet and to Parliament, that Britain had made no commitments to any continental power—its 'hands were free'—bore no relationship to the truth. The phrase was still taboo, but the reality was in place: Britain was locked into a Triple Entente that made its entry into any major war involving France and Russia all but inevitable.

When it came, Grey did not relish the prospect, and a halo of sanctimony has mostly preserved him from the criticism that historians have levelled at his peers in Vienna, Berlin and (latterly) St Petersburg and Paris. But his reluctance simply reflected the structural posture of British imperialism, as the supremely satisfied predator among its rivals, whose strategic concern was by now mainly defensive: not to enlarge but to preserve the lion's share of the global spoils it had accumulated. Though he lacked positive eagerness for war, he obdurately insisted on it once the Entente so required—a resolve driven by the fundamental motive for British intervention, captured by one of the rare Radicals of principle in the Commons, Arthur Ponsonby, in his diary: 'We are not fighting to protect a weak and small nation. We are not fighting to preserve Belgian neutrality. We are

fighting because we are jealous of the power of Germany.' There, Grey's emotions were never in doubt. In a memorandum of 1906, no sooner had he taken office than he expressed his determination to go to war with Germany if it should ever attack France—a resolve he expressly reiterated to the Russian ambassador in the crisis of 1911. These were declarations of the politician who, in Christopher Clark's words, 'was without doubt the most powerful foreign minister of pre-war Europe'. He is remembered for the portentous hypocrisy he is supposed to have uttered, looking out from the Foreign Office at dusk, in 1914: 'The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our life-time'—this, it would later be remarked, from one of those who snuffed them out.

Asquith, a quite different specimen of the Edwardian political class, was less ideologically precommitted, but incapable of separating himself from Grey, whose threat of resignation should Britain fail to do its duty by France made any other course unthinkable. Asquith's style as a ruler was not priggish, but incurably frivolous. An alcoholic downing whiskey and soda before breakfast, penning *billets-doux* to his mistress Venetia Stanley as the Cabinet met, alternatively swaggering—the invasion of Belgium 'simplified matters'—and confessional, his performance at the height of the crisis was recorded by his wife Margot, whom he found in bed on returning home after sending a 'precautionary telegram' throughout the Empire. 'I never saw Henry so keen . . . Passionately moved, I sat up, and felt 10 feet high. How thrilling darling!' H. 'quite gravely kissed me and said it will be very interesting.' Over bridge with Grey, Haldane, and other ministers two days later, Edwin Montagu—Financial Secretary to the Treasury and Venetia's future husband—'jumped up from the card table', grabbed Margot, 'and in a violent whisper said, "We ought to mobilize tomorrow, and declare it!"' Asquith conducted the war as he entered it—'supine, sodden and supreme' (Churchill), 'a fleshy, sanguine, wine-bibbing medieval Abbott' (Strachey), until even the outstanding talent he did possess—for political survival—petered out, and he met his deserts in 1916.

Churchill had still fewer reservations on behalf of the Entente than Grey, even as he formed a glaring temperamental contrast to him. Churchill was not in origin a Liberal Imperialist, but a Conservative who had made his name as a hero in the Boer War, at a time when Chamberlain was mocking the group as hamstrung 'Limps'. Taking against Tariff Reform, however, Churchill had crossed over to the Liberals in 1904 without losing any of his enthusiasm for war and ardour for empire. At the head of the Admiralty, he was in charge of the naval arms race against Germany and prosecuted it with vigour. When 1914 came, few politicians anywhere in Europe were so unabashedly exhilarated by the prospect of a conflagration, and prepared to ignore convention of office in pursuit of it. Coming up for air during

the July crisis, he gaily exclaimed to his wife Clementine: 'Everything tends toward catastrophe and collapse. I am interested, geared up, and happy. Is it not horrible to be built like that?' Having bounced the Government into naval stations poised for war, his first proposal within hours of Britain entering it—supposedly to defend Belgian neutrality—was that it should violate Dutch neutrality by blockading Amsterdam, to bottle up the Rhine. The slaughter that ensued did not alter him. Two years later, he was writing: 'I love this war. I know it's smashing and shattering the lives of thousands every moment—and yet—I can't help it—I enjoy every second of it'. That was after his debacle at Gallipoli.

If these were the most prominent interventionists, what of the Radicals, who played, according to Newton, a nobler part in resisting the drumbeats of war? In the public eye, far the most prominent among them was Lloyd George, author of the 'People's Budget' and hammer of the House of Lords. By this time, however, the pro-Boer firebrand of 1900 was already well advanced in the mutation that would make of him the win-at-all-costs warlord of 1916 and victor of the Hang the Kaiser campaign of 1918. After a bitter clash in 1909, he had signed off on rising naval estimates, and in 1911 threw his full weight behind France, publically warning Germany that Britain would never 'accept peace at any price' where it had 'vital interests'. When the crisis came in 1914, his mistress Frances Stevenson—who herself 'prayed that the Germans would invade Belgium'—confessed that his mind was 'really made up from the first, that he knew we would have to go in, and that the invasion of Belgium was, to be cynical, a heaven-sent excuse for supporting a declaration of war'. The leading minister who did resign was Morley, hardly a consistent keeper of the Radical flame—not only a resolute opponent of the trade unions and legislation for an eight-hour working day, but a pillar of repression in India, cracking down on any kind of 'sedition' that could threaten the hold of British imperialism on the subcontinent.

As for 'Loulou' Harcourt, orchestrator of the original opposition to British intervention, who vowed to resign and break the Cabinet over it, he took the plunge just behind Grey and Asquith, drafting plans the very next day to seize German East and South-West Africa, Togoland, the Cameroons, New Guinea, Nauru and Samoa, reporting to his colleagues on August 6: 'German colonies: I shall take most of them.' It would be dangerous to send a British Expeditionary Force to Africa right away, since troops could be needed to hold down India and 'deal with a possible revolution' in the North of England itself. By the spring of 1915 he was submitting a secret memorandum to the Cabinet bluntly entitled 'The Spoils', calling for further expansion of the British Empire not only in Africa, but Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific. None of this represented a sharp break with the predominant mentality of Asquithian Liberalism, shared by Imperialists and

Radicals alike. The Official Secrets Act of 1911, opposed by none, whose notorious provisions still gag Britain's press today, stands as a portent of what was to come. What good was secret diplomacy without laws against disclosing it—and a hidden clause in the law, setting up a list of German and Austrian aliens in Britain?

The Radicals in the Cabinet were not simply bamboozled. Accepting Grey's policy of 'apparent indecision'—a tortuous refusal, until the last minute, to spell out the conditions under which Britain might or might not intervene—was a recipe for avoiding the downfall of the Government, not a European war. A majority of Radicals accepted the naval pledge to France on 2 August: outmanoeuvred, they agreed, however heavy their hearts. The following day the four Cabinet members as well as one junior minister resigned. Their actions were not only unique in Europe, argues Newton, but still remain largely unknown: 'few historians have even noticed it. Fewer still acknowledge it as a remarkable protest.' But the scant attention historians have paid to this 'singular event' is less difficult to explain when its upshot is considered. As Grey addressed the Commons on 3 August, they sat wordless behind him, leaving likeminded dissenters in their own party in the dark. With no lead from the front, backbench Radicals in the Liberal Foreign Affairs Group—unaware of the Cabinet quarrels, or that Belgium played no part in them—began to splinter after Grey spoke. Philip Morrell, exposé of Belgian crimes in the Congo (which Grey had typically sought to mitigate), barely secured a few hours' debate in the Commons, and that merely on a motion of adjournment. Newton honours those who still spoke out two days later, after war was declared. But he tends to elide all forms of dissent—from open defiance to private grumblings to belated expressions of regret—glossing over how quickly most politicians fell into line. The £100 million vote of War Credits on 5 August is a case in point. Newton enumerates those Liberal MPs who 'found their voices' and 'refused to leave uncriticised' Grey's foreign policy—and then? 'Most announced immediately that they would support the Vote of Credit.' Wedgwood, the pottery magnate, began: 'As I do not want my country to be beaten, I shall certainly vote for this Vote of Credit.' It passed the House without even a division.

In the collapse of Radical opposition to the war, three factors came into play, on each of which Newton touches. In the Cabinet, besides the obvious considerations of careerism, Grey's announcements that he would resign unless he had his way allowed Asquith to threaten his colleagues that if Grey went, he would join him and the Government would fall, playing on Radical fears of a Conservative return to power in a coalition regime: in the event, just what the War brought about, rather than averted. In the Commons, appeals to Gladstonian tradition had the desired effect. *The Darkest Days* makes it clear no minister resigned over Belgium—as the Cabinet had

minuted on 29 July, 'policy' not 'legal obligation' would determine Britain's course, while the actual decision for war was taken two days before the invasion. But when Grey invoked Gladstone in Parliament to maintain that Britain had a moral duty to defend small nations struggling to be free, his rhetoric resonated for a reason. Radicals who had opposed the Second Boer War on Gladstonian grounds of 'international morality' could be rallied to defend Belgium in the same spirit. Its murder of millions in the Congo was no more relevant to the ethical standards set by the Grand Old Man than was his seizure of Egypt. There was also the abiding lesson of his frugality—'retrenchment', or inexpensive government. Intervention could come on the cheap, with a quick campaign on the high seas. 'For us', Grey told the Commons, 'with a powerful Fleet, which we believe able to protect our commerce, to protect our shores, and to protect our interests, if we are engaged in war, we shall suffer but little more than if we stand aside.' Churchill played a hand that had won him many a previous trick when he passed Lloyd George a note: 'The naval war will be cheap—not more than £25 million a year.' By 1917 it was costing £7 million a day. A Liberal Government whose last peacetime budget of £207 million was considered revolutionary, in part because of Lloyd George's modest spending on 'the people', displayed far greater munificence in sending them to the slaughter—£9.5 billion over the next four years.

More ignominious even than the rallying of most Radicals to the colours in 1914 was the surrender of the Irish Parliamentary Party to the imperial chauvinism of the hour. Its leader Redmond and his deputy Dillon both welcomed suspension of the Home Rule that was their party's *raison d'être* for the duration of the war, calling on Catholics and Protestants alike to 'join arms' to 'defend the coasts of our country'—Redmond urging his compatriots to volunteer for death in the service of their colonial masters in France, even as Dillon was privately scathing about English war guilt. Redmond, expiring in 1918, was not to see the richly deserved retribution for his party's opportunism, after the War swept it into oblivion for colluding with British imperialism. The Labour Party, predictably, came out in support of the war. Ramsay Macdonald, who opposed it at first, was writing within a few months that 'there was nothing sordid or chauvinist in our intentions', and he and Keir Hardie were soon explaining that it was a just war that had to be fought to a just peace.

Newton's treatment of the scene outside Parliament is much thinner. Pointing out a proto-popular-front protest in Trafalgar Square on 2 August, a meeting of suffragettes and trade unionists at Holborn, demonstrations in Bolton and Birmingham, dissent in towns and villages of Scotland, he argues that 'the dash toward war simply outpaced the peace movement'. But these are asides. 'The uplifting side of the story' about the Great War,

he writes, 'lies in the struggle to avert it'. Much greater courage and intelligence, however, was required to oppose the war once it had started. Newton, who scarcely touches on the intelligentsia as distinct from the political class of the time, pays little attention to those who did so. L. T. Hobhouse, whom he does mention, may have been 'white hot with temper' in a letter to his sister Emily in August, but he soon cooled—denouncing the pernicious strains of force in German thought running from Hegel to Nietzsche, which only 'the humble and prosaic inductions and deductions' of civilized Englishmen could defeat. After a spirited defence of neutrality in July, C. P. Scott's *Manchester Guardian* travelled a similar path, backing Lloyd George as the man to achieve victory in 'a nation marshaled and regimented for service'. Liberal thinkers whose resistance to the war was more consistent—from Francis Hirst on the right, who lost his job at the *Economist* for his intransigence, to J. A. Hobson in the centre and Bertrand Russell on the left, the latter dismissed from Trinity and later imprisoned—remain off-stage. The sharpest single comment on British entry into the war to be found in Newton's book comes from Wilfred Scawen Blunt. For whom, he asked in his diary, was Britain fighting? 'For Russia, the tyrant of Poland, Finland, Persia and all northern Asia. For France, our fellow-brigand in north Africa, and lastly for Belgium with its abominable Congo record'. Such, he noted savagely, was 'what we call English honour'.

There is, however, one important exception to an otherwise somewhat tenuous contextualization of the run-up to the war. Newton devotes a powerful chapter to the sweeping crusade for British participation launched by the top levels of the Conservative party and press, in league with the high command in the Army and senior officials of the Foreign Office. At the centre of this network, he shows, was the rabid Ulster general Sir Henry Wilson, fomentor of the Curragh mutiny, Director of Military Operations at the War Office, and chief planner of the British Expeditionary Force for dispatch to France—after the war, executed on his doorstep by the IRA. Mobilizing every resource he possessed, he called for a 'pogrom' to intimidate doubters and cowards in the ranks of the government and its supporters, and fire up Tory attacks on any sign of weakness in British diplomacy. This was not a term to cause qualms in Northcliffe's press, where *The Times* and *Daily Mail* thundered against the dangers of pacifist 'Jewish finance' in the City. Newton, if anything, understates the power of the Conservative front in the press, at times contrasting its organs to their Liberal counterparts as if the two had comparable sway. In fact there was a drastic imbalance. The newspaper he describes as the most important voice of Liberal opinion, the *Westminster Gazette*, was a clubman's publication with at most 20,000 readers, when *The Times* had a circulation of over 150,000. The Liberal sheet with the widest readership, the *Daily News*, sold 500,000 copies; the *Daily*

Mail sold a million. Against the backdrop of this chauvinist barrage, contacts between leading Conservative politicians and Liberal ministers were close and continuous. British propensity for peace was a self-serving myth. As Newton writes: 'It is often imagined that all sensible people oppose war. In fact, in July 1914, many people in Britain looked forward to war with relish. Influential people given to portraying themselves as keepers of the national flame—in politics, the press, the Foreign Office, and the military—urged military intervention from the very first days of the crisis.'

Where does *The Darkest Days* stand in the contemporary historiography of the First World War? Broadly speaking, two conventional interpretations have dominated the field. The first reflected the mutually satisfactory confluence between British—also Anglophile American—self-congratulatory, and German self-denigratory, historians. That Britain entered the Great War in a disinterested spirit of *noblesse oblige*—in the title of an editorial in *The Times* on 1 August 1914, as 'A Democratic Duty'—was an article of patriotic faith from the beginning and has gained new ground since the 1980s among British military historians. Conversely, the German school associated with Fritz Fischer, a historian compensating for his Nazi past with an extravagant construction of Wilhelmine war guilt, attributed overwhelming blame for the outbreak of the Great War to the Second Reich, portraying the hapless Bethmann-Hollweg as 'the Hitler of 1914'. Naturally, this made a congenial pendant to claims of British war-innocence. In recent years, Fischer's breast-beating—an archivist precursor of hysterical 'Anti-Deutsch' (sc. pro-Israeli) currents in today's Federal Republic—has fallen into discredit and, to a lesser degree, Anglo-pieties along with it.

The new orthodoxy is more even-handed than the old, but not much more lucid. It tells a story of sheer, tragic accident, in which the unwitting blunders and miscalculations of statesmen in all the Great Powers intersected to generate world-historical bad luck for Europe. An extraordinary series of mishaps, starting with Archduke Franz-Ferdinand's chauffeur turning down a wrong street in Sarajevo, detonated the disaster: no deeper causes need be invoked. Such is the message easily read into the two most commanding recent syntheses on the origins of the First World War, Christopher Clark's *Sleepwalkers* and Sean McMeekin's *July 1914*. Neither deny that malignant symptoms were present in the pre-war order. But the effect of each is to suggest the catastrophe was contingent: it could so easily have been otherwise.

Newton's work has no truck with the first version, roundly attacking apologies for the British role in the conflict, and taking his distance from neo-German attempts to uphold the verdicts of Versailles. The war was neither just nor necessary. But on the second, he equivocates, with a contradiction that undermines the intention of his work. For on the one hand, he insists that it was not blind or reckless leaders, but the social order of which

they were products and in which they were enmeshed, that produced the war. 'A focus upon guilty persons will only distract us from understanding the complex systemic causes of the war. Apportioning blame among *those* who were to blame does not help us to see *what* was to blame. The larger truth of the tragedy of 1914 is that the economic, political and diplomatic systems across Europe were defective, and all the Great Powers shared in these systemic defects—the New Imperialism, Social Darwinism, economic nationalism, ethnically conscious chauvinism, a creeping militarism that looted national treasuries, weak international institutions and a new popular press that debased political culture and poisoned the popular mind.' In the grip of these forces, 'Europe was sick—and Britain was not free from the infections that disabled and disoriented others'. In 1914, 'the tragedy of war engulfed a rotten system.'

Yet at the same time, the narrative thrust of the book as a whole depends on the entirely contradictory premise that the tragedy was not inevitable. 'At the heart of this book is the belief that war was not irresistible'—indeed, 'perhaps war was entirely avoidable'. In this version, it is precisely reckless men who forced England into a gratuitous war, and far-sighted men who strove to prevent them. The claim of avoidability is why Newton works so hard to recover Radical protest. It is also the reason he stretches it out of shape—conflating all kinds of dissent, whether Cobdenite, Quaker, or quasi-Marxist, public, private, retrospective—and crops it, since criticisms made in advance of the war so often faded once it was under way. The truth is that his narrative actually delivers the opposite of the message he intends. If all that could be mustered to bar hostilities were the feeble misgivings of the Radicals in the Cabinet, none of whom could bring themselves to speak openly, there could hardly be plainer evidence that the drive to war was inescapable.

The structural reality is that the First World War took place over empires, for empires, and between empires. For a clear-eyed portrait of the world that it yielded, there is no better place to start than the opening chapter of Dominic Lieven's study of Tsarist Russia's road to war, *To the Flame*, the latest major contribution to the scholarship of the conflict. In it, Lieven lays out the codes and aims of conduct shared by the ruling classes of Europe, saturated with considerations of honour, prestige and virility, for whom territorial aggrandizement was an automatic criterion of status as a major power. As he shows, in 1914 the British realm bore more than a passing resemblance to the Austro-Hungarian—for Bosnia read Ireland. Even far weaker states such as Italy and Spain were bent on colonial expansion in North Africa. The competing militarism and annexationism of the European system, leading to repeated near misses at a general conflagration before 1914, answered to the logic of Schumpeter's

diagnosis of imperialism, as a reflex product of aristocracies whose values were still largely pre-capitalist. But this was a world of industrialized capitalism whose dynamic detonated the explosion of the system. Lenin's diagnosis, made two years into the conflict, remains foundational for any reckoning with it. As he saw, it was the uneven development of capitalism, generating the mismatch between Germany's rise to the position of the leading industrial power in Europe, and its paltry share of imperial spoils worldwide—even such miniature states as Portugal, Belgium and Holland had a more valuable slice of them—that blew the Belle Époque apart. The discrepancy was too great for any stable balance of power, and the imbalance only became more combustible once Germany, the strongest of the major capitalist states in Europe, was yoked in alliance to the weakest, Austro-Hungary. Beneath the diplomatic and political smash-up of 1914 lay an implacable economic baseline. Analytically speaking, Schumpeter and Lenin were walking side by side.