

# **Great War**

# **Factsheets**

**Irish Political Review Group**  
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Editor: Philip O'Connor

## **Blockading The Germans! With an overview of 19th century maritime law**

### **The evolution of Britain's strategy during the First World War, Volume 1**

**Eamon Dyas**

**Belfast Historical and Educational Society 2018**

This is the first volume of a Trilogy examining overlooked aspects of the First World War and its aftermath from a European perspective. Comprehensively sourced with scholarly research, it explains how Britain used a continental blockade to force the capitulation of the Kaiser's Germany by targeting not just military, but also civilian, imports, particularly imported food supplies, upon which Germany had become dependent since its industrial revolution.

After joining the European War of August 1914—and elevating it into a World War—Britain cast aside the two maritime codes agreed by the world's maritime powers over the previous almost 60 years—the Declaration of Paris in 1856 and the Declaration of London in 1909. In defiance of these internationally agreed codes, Britain aggressively expanded its blockade with the object of disrupting not only the legitimate trade between neutral countries and Germany but trade between neutral countries themselves.

Britain's policy of civilian starvation during the First World War was unprecedented in history. Whereas it had used the weapon of starvation against civilians in the past, in such instances this was either through the exploitation of a natural disaster to bring about famine (Ireland and India) or the result of pre-conceived policy against a non-industrial society (France during the Revolutionary Wars). Its use against Germany was the first time in history where a policy of deliberate starvation was directed against the civilian population of an advanced industrial economy.

This volume traces the evolution of Britain's relationship with international naval blockade strategies from the Crimean War through the American Civil War and the Boer War culminating in its maturity during the Great War. It also draws out how the United States—the leading neutral country—was made complicit in Blockading The Germans during the war and brings the story up to America's entry into the War.

Eamon Dyas is a former head of The Times newspaper archive, was on the Executive Committee of the Business Archives Council in England for a number of years, and was Information Officer of the Newspaper Department of the British Library for many years.

### **Starving the Germans**

### **The Evolution of Britain's Strategy During The First World War Volume 2**

**Eamon Dyas**

**Belfast Historical and Educational Society 2020**

This is the second volume of a Trilogy that examines the manner in which the First World War was fought by Britain and its Allies against the civilians of Germany and the Central Powers and the way in which the outcome of that war distorted the prevailing trajectory of European history.

The first volume 'Blockading the Germans' explored the way in which Britain as the world's primary naval power shaped the use of the naval blockade as a weapon against civilians from the time of the Napoleonic Wars to the advent of the First World War. It also dealt with the way in which United States' actions as the main supplier of munitions and financial credits to the Allies compromised its neutrality and made the British pursuit of that war possible.

This current volume begins at the point when the United States formally joined the war in April 1917. It shows how, through the use of food embargoes on the northern neutral countries, the United States completed Britain's food strangulation of Germany and brought misery and death to the civilian populations of those countries in the process.

It explains the way in which the terms of the November 1918 Armistice were arbitrarily expanded by the Allies to ensure that Germany was made malleable to the British demand that it accept total responsibility for the war and at the same time hampered its chances of a post-war recovery.

It further explains the impact of the Armistice on the food supply mechanism that had been established in the United States to supply its own troops and the Allies during the war. In addition it reveals the way in which the post-Armistice attempts by Herbert Hoover and the American Food Administration to use the American food surplus to feed Europe were thwarted by obstacles placed in its path by France and Britain.

Finally, the volume reveals Britain's role in formulating the reparations demanded of Germany in the face of initial American opposition. The volume ends with an examination of the way in which the powers of the Reparations Commission undermined the incipient democratic institutions established in Weimar Germany. 10

## **Lord Hankey: How We Planned The Great War**

By Pat Walsh

2015

Lord Maurice Hankey gave unparalleled service to the State he served over more than three decades. He was much more than just an Imperial Senior Civil Servant. It would be no exaggeration to say that he kept the British State together over a generation. The Supreme Command (1961) by Hankey, though largely ignored today, is the most complete inside description of Britain's Great War on Germany. It contains details of the planning for that war by the person who oversaw it, coordinated it and put it into operation from August 1914.

All three books available from

<http://www.atholbooks.org>

## **England's Care for the Truth - by one who knows**

**both** by Roger Casement, edited by Jack Lane

Published by Athol Books 2018

These articles by Sir Roger Casement, originally published in The Continental Times of Berlin, have lain forgotten for over a century. Now, for the first time, they are published as a collection by Athol Books to bring the authentic Casement to the general public. They take up the theme of his only published book, **The Crime Against Europe**: British Foreign Policy and how it brought about the First World War. They reveal Casement as a consistent Liberal when English Liberalism failed its great test in the ultimate moment of truth in August 1914. They show Sir Roger as a consistent Irish Nationalist when the Home Rulers collapsed into Imperialism. The ground shifted under his feet but he remained solid. For Casement action was consequent upon thought and knowledge. Remaining true to his principles he attempted to forge an Irish-German alliance. Not for Casement "My country right or wrong" but who was right and who was wrong. This collection explains why Casement did what he did and how it led him to Easter 1916. It shatters the British narrative of the Great War by "one who knew". It shows why Casement was the most dangerous Irishman who ever faced up to Britain and why they had to hang him and attempt to foul his memory. In the latter, they have not succeeded.

# Great War Factsheets

## No. 1: War Responsibility

- 1 There were 3 wars that combined to make up the Great War but they were distinct and did not need to develop from one to the other.

War number 1 was the only unavoidable and justifiable one - a Balkan war involving Austro-Hungary and Serbia. Serbia was responsible for this war. As a matter of prestige Austro-Hungary had to react forcefully to the assassination of the heir to its throne by terrorists on 28<sup>th</sup> June. This was a massive provocation that had to be dealt with. Austria believed that Serbian intrigues and ambitions constituted a deadly menace to the continued existence of the Empire, and was aware that she must either curb the capacity of Serbia for further provocations or see the Empire perish. The British press was sympathetic to Vienna with the most popular paper in England saying "To Hell with Servia" and demanding it be wiped from the face of the earth, lest this rogue-state endanger the peace of Europe. The *Manchester Guardian* suggested it be towed out into the Atlantic and sunk. Capt. Grenfell (RN) says this about the Serbian reply: *"It has been the fashion among British historians to describe the Serbian reply to the Austrian note as extraordinarily conciliatory, all but two of the Austrian demands being conceded. The present author does not take that view. The two rejected demands were the key ones that alone could have made the rest effective. All the remainder, even if nominally complied with, could easily have been evaded in practice and reduced to nullity by the Serbs. The Serbian reply, which was unquestionably drawn up with the advice of France and probably Russia, could therefore be regarded as a very skilful one designed, without making any genuine concession, to put the onus of war guilt on to the Austrians."* (*Unconditional Hatred: German War Guilt and the Future of Europe* by Captain Russell Grenfell, RN). Both Austro-Hungary and its German ally wished to confine war to this local Balkan context. It was in Germany's interest to localise the Austro-Serbian dispute, so that the Serbs might be suitably dealt with by the Austrians without anyone else being involved. Russia, on the other hand, was interested in the support of Serbia and also resolved to use the Sarajevo assassination to bring on a general European war, as her actions during the crisis clearly indicate. Russia was in no way endangered by an Austro-Hungarian victory over Serbia and was assured that Vienna had no inclination toward including any more troublesome peoples in its Empire. This Balkan war would have been the only war in 1914 if Russia did not enter it. Austro-Hungary declared war on Serbia on 28<sup>th</sup> July. This was the start of the

Austro-Serbian war not the start of World War I. It was not until August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2 days after the beginning of the world war, that Austro-Hungary declared war on Russia and Serbia declared war on Germany. France did not declare war on Austro-Hungary until 11<sup>th</sup> August and Britain until 12<sup>th</sup> August. This tends to suggest a disconnection between the Entente Cordiale and the Balkan war and that the real war was the one against Germany.

- 2 War number 2 was a European war involving the Balkan participants plus Russia, France and Germany. Russia was mainly responsible for this war since it depended entirely on Russian mobilisation. Russia began mobilising on the day of the Serbian reply to Austria, **25<sup>th</sup> July**, and the Tsar ordered full mobilisation on **30th July**. Germany clearly warned Russia (and France) of the implications of its mobilisation and only begins mobilising itself on **31<sup>st</sup> July**, the day after the full Russian mobilisation began. France was also responsible because it refused to restrain its ally Russia and actually encouraged its mobilisation. Poincare assured Russia that it could count on France in any war on Germany no matter the issue since it wanted to engage in a European war to recover the mixed-nationality provinces of Alsace/Lorraine it had lost to Germany in its aggressive war of 1870/1. Germany was tied by treaty obligations to Austro-Hungary and could not allow its ally to be crushed by an inherently expansionist state which had no concept of borders. Once Russia refused Germany's demand to stop mobilising its massive forces on Germany's eastern frontier and France mobilised as Russia's ally Germany had to mobilise to protect itself from encirclement. French mobilisation began on **26<sup>th</sup> July**, 5 days before Germany began, and the French ordered full mobilisation on **1<sup>st</sup> August**, an hour before German full mobilisation is ordered. Germany declares war on Russia on **1<sup>st</sup> August** and France on **3<sup>rd</sup> August**. This is the start of the European war but not the world war.
- 3 War number 3 was the world war or Great War. This was Great Britain's responsibility. If Britain had not entered the European war it would have remained a European war. The world war officially began on **August 4<sup>th</sup>** when Britain declared war on Germany. The Royal Navy was secretly mobilised between **23<sup>rd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> July** by Churchill and took up pre-arranged battle stations off the German coast on **August 2<sup>nd</sup>**, 2 days before war was declared. The British Expeditionary force of 100,000 men was ordered to be despatched to France by Asquith on **August 5<sup>th</sup>**. It arrived

complete in France less than 48 hours later on **August 7<sup>th</sup>**.

- 4 The Great War was Britain's war because Great Britain made it what it was. It would not have been the Great War it was without Britain's participation. It was a war of gigantic scale and long duration. The only 2 previous world wars were also British wars (i.e. the Seven Years War of 1756-63 and the War on France of 1793-1815). The following factors provided distinctly by Britain gave the Great War its distinct character:
  - The globalised maritime character was provided by the Royal Navy which had the objective of seizing German shipping and trade on a world-wide basis. No other European navy had this capacity or intention.
  - The globalised land character was provided by Britain's Imperial ambitions to seize German territory in Africa, Ottoman territory in Asia and

facilitate its allies to do likewise – something which would have been beyond their capacity to do without the help of the Royal Navy and Britain's acquiescence.

- The moral character of the war which made it unstoppable was provided by Liberal England (and Redmondite Ireland). The war was proclaimed to be about good versus evil, civilisation against the barbarian, Europe against the Hun, Democracy against autocracy etc. This gave the Great War its distinctive character which made peace attempts very difficult since there could be no negotiating with evil.

The last element was Britain's insistence in concluding secret treaties with its allies and neutrals to draw them into the war. Parts of the middle-east, Europe etc. were promised in secret deals with France, Russia, Italy, Greece, Zionists, Arabs etc. that made peace negotiations proposed by the US and Germany on the basis of no annexations impossible to accept by Britain and its allies.

## **Great War Factsheets**

### **No.2: Britain's War**

1. From 1904 to 1908 there was a revolution in British Foreign policy in which England made a strategic readjustment to direct its Balance of Power strategy away from its former enemies, France and Russia, toward a new enemy, Germany.
2. Germany was singled out as the Carthage to Britain's Rome largely for reasons of commercial rivalry. German goods were outselling British goods in the world's markets and it was capturing a greater and greater share of world commerce. Its goods had a competitive edge over British products both in price and quality and it was felt that Britain could not compete in the free market with the Germans.
3. In response to the increase of its commerce and in joining the world market in which it became necessary to import food to supply its industrial workforce Germany began to construct a navy. It was a much smaller navy than Britain's but England saw this as a threat to its command of the seas. There were public threats made by Royal Navy men, such as Admiral Fisher, to "Copenhagen" the German naval development – i.e. destroy it in port before a formal declaration of war was made as Nelson did to the Dutch fleet a century before. In response Britain doubled its spending on naval construction until it reached a quarter of all state spending and represented three times what Germany was spending.
4. An Entente Cordiale was signed with France in 1904 by the Unionist Government. In January 1906 Sir Edward Grey the incoming Foreign Minister in the new Liberal Government sanctioned ongoing military conversations between the British and French General Staffs concerning cooperation in a future war with Germany. These were organised by Colonel Repington and General Henry Wilson but were done behind the Prime Minister's back and only known about by Grey and Richard Haldane, the Secretary of State for War.
5. The Entente Cordiale gave the French hope of recovering Alsace/Lorraine in a future war with Germany, aided by Britain and Russia.
6. The Liberal Imperialists, Grey, Haldane, Henry Asquith and Winston Churchill had the intention of organising preparations for war on Germany behind the back of both the cabinet and parliament knowing that the bulk of the Liberal Party would be greatly opposed to such measures.
7. War planning, including Royal Navy contingencies for economic warfare and a starvation blockade on Germany were planned with meticulous detail. The overall strategy was coordinated through the Committee of Imperial Defence, a cross-party body containing military specialists. Plans were also devised for war on the Ottoman Empire, including an attack on the Dardanelles and landings in Mesopotamia. As Captain Grenfell noted "Preparations for war against Germany had been

*in progress for ten years; intensively for three years at least.” (Sea Power)*

8. Haldane reformed the British Army and created a British Expeditionary Force of 160,000 that could be transported in 2 days to the left of the French line for engaging in a war with Germany. This was a revolutionary change in British military affairs. The biggest army England had put on the continent was at Waterloo in 1815 of 30,000 men. It had been a long-standing strategy not to commit large numbers of soldiers to the continent but to leave allies to do the fighting there. The Navy was concerned at this military intervention since it implied a commitment to continental warfare in conjunction with allies and a relegation of the senior service to a support role. It signified a definite and innovatory plan for war that bound Britain in to continental warfare at the French insistence. Haldane also militarised British society through the promotion of gun clubs, territorial's, popular military lectures etc.
9. In 1907 Britain concluded an agreement with Tsarist Russia involving a settling of accounts in the Great Game and the partition of Persia between England and Russia. Edward Grey sold the agreement in England as a peace policy and that was music to the ears of the Liberal backbenchers, who despite their detestation of 'Russian autocracy' were prepared to celebrate the agreement as securing the peace of the world. An alliance with France was, by itself, of no use to England against Germany. The great prize was also an understanding with Russia coupled with the Entente Cordiale. Britain was an island nation and it was primarily a sea power. It did not have a large army and it had opposed conscription. Therefore, it would have been impossible for Britain to have defeated Germany by itself. It needed and wanted the large French army and the even larger Russian army to do most of the fighting on the continent for it. The Russian Army was particularly important and it was seen to be like a 'steamroller' that would roll all the way to Berlin, crushing German resistance by its sheer weight of numbers. Britain's main weapon of war and her instrument for the strangulation of Germany was the Royal Navy. A British blockade of Germany could only be effective if Russia was at war with her at the same time and sealing off her supply of food from the east. If not, Germany could derive an inexhaustible supply of food and materials from Eastern Europe and could not be strangled by the Royal Navy - despite its immense power. And even an alliance between England and France could not achieve the crushing of Germany since only one frontier could be blocked.
10. The agreement with Russia gave the Tsar the chance to expand into the Balkans and possibly to the Straits at Istanbul where he desired an exit point for his fleet – a desire of Russia's for centuries and the Tsar's first strategic priority which Britain had up till then taken great care to prevent. Half of all Russian trade went through the Straits and grain exporting was essential in creating the agricultural reforms necessary to produce a stable class of Russian peasantry. Britain forbade Russian naval entry into the Mediterranean and war involved the closure of the Straits to shipping. So the Tsar was desperate to secure this outlet with British consent. Grey turned the foreign policy of a century around to organise the war alliance against Germany. In doing so he made war on, and the destruction of, the Ottoman Empire a prerequisite of the new British Foreign Policy.
11. In April 1915 Grey formally agreed in the secret *Constantinople Agreement*, later published by the Bolsheviks, to hand over the Ottoman capital to the Tsar. The British did this to keep the Russians fighting when they showed signs of wavering and perhaps exiting the war. In doing so the British Government, in conjunction with the Tsar, ensured a catastrophe for the Russian State, and the subsequent triumph of Lenin and the Bolsheviks.
12. All these secret plans, conversations and arrangements were not revealed to the cabinet until 1911 when they were partially revealed in response to the Agadir crisis and not fully until July 1914.
13. Asquith, Grey and Haldane denied all knowledge of them continually to Parliament using language that was very careful but conveyed the impression that nothing was in place that committed England to a war on Germany in conjunction with France and Russia.
14. John Dillon of the Irish Party subjected the Government to scrutiny on the matter but the necessity of the Home Rule alliance encouraged him and Liberal backbenchers who were suspicious to drop it.
15. The fleet was mobilised to battle positions prior to the declaration of war on Germany. The British Expeditionary Force was landed in less than 48 hours in France after Asquith's orders.
16. The Royal Navy cut the German undersea cables on the opening day of the war making the Germans reliant on the British cables for communicating across the Atlantic and to other parts of the world.
17. On 5<sup>th</sup> August 1914 the British war plans were revealed in a series of Royal Proclamations on the day after war was declared: It was made an act of treason for any British subject to trade with any German individual or organisation; owners of

British merchant ships were warned that their ships would be confiscated if they carried 'contraband' between foreign ports; exporters were warned not to sell 'contraband' to any foreign buyers.

18. The War Room which had been monitoring and plotting the position of every German naval vessel and large merchantman at eight hourly intervals since 1907 communicated its information to the Royal Navy. Within a week all German maritime trade was driven from the seas.
19. Lloyds of London issued an order for all ships to proceed to the nearest British port or lose insurance cover. Any carrying foodstuffs and proceeding east were seized and their cargoes confiscated and declared 'prize.' All German owned ships were declared 'prize'.
20. Neutral ships were prevented from leaving British ports unless they surrendered their cargoes.
21. The Blockade of Germany and Europe as a whole began.

## **Great War Factsheets**

### **No.3: Belgium**

1. Belgium had been artificially constructed by Lord Palmerston and Britain by splitting off the Catholic French-speaking Walloon part of the Netherlands and joining it with the Flemish territory to form Belgium – an unusual thing for Protestant England to do in helping to construct a Catholic state. But such was the Balance of Power policy! The important point was to prevent the Flanders coast becoming part of France. Belgium was not a natural entity and was a state rather than a country, made up of two distinct peoples who did not like each other.
2. Belgium was kept together to serve a strategic purpose for Britain, which then claimed a right of hegemony over it. Because Britain had helped create Belgium it believed it had the right to use the country as an instrument of its foreign policy (as it similarly did with Greece).
3. Belgium was not as neutral as it was suggested. It was well known in Belgian governing circles that England was pursuing a secret policy of war against Germany. The Belgian Ambassadorial record tells us this. The Belgian state was really part of the political front against Germany and a kind of unofficial member of the Entente. Belgium had its own war aims of an Imperial kind - and subsequently did very well out of the spoils of victory in 1919. Prior to 1909, the Belgian army numbered 100,000 men recruited by volunteering. In 1912 Belgium adopted a military programme raising the war strength of its army to a massive 340,000. In 1913 the Belgian Parliament introduced the principle of universal compulsory service, in preparation to meet her obligations and responsibilities to her 'allies.' In August 1914, Belgium was able to put a larger army in the field than Britain - despite, in theory, being a neutral country.
4. Belgium was not "*poor little Belgium*." When W.T. Stead (a well respected author) visited Belgium in 1888, he took it for granted that it would be implicated in any future European conflict - despite its supposed 'neutrality'. He described not the "*poor little Belgium*" of future British war propaganda but a highly militarised society at the centre of the world's arms industry. And Stead made it clear that if there was a war between France and Germany an attack by either nation would have to cross Belgian territory if it was to be a success because since the Franco-Prussian War "*the two Powers have been busily engaged in rendering their respective frontiers impassable, by constructing lines of fortresses against which an A invading army from the other side will break its head in vain*". (*The Truth about Russia*, p.2)
5. It was one of the most brutal and reactionary of the Imperialist powers. One of its possessions in Africa was referred to, before the war in Britain, as "*The Congo Slave State*", where the Belgians worked millions of natives to death. Britain had the moral ascendancy over Belgium at the time, on account of the atrocities in the Congo, revealed shortly before in the Casement Report, which it had pigeon-holed, but which could be used as a means of exerting pressure in the future.
6. In 1887 the official organ of the Conservative Party, '*The Standard*', made it clear that Britain would not regard the violation of Belgian neutrality by either France or Germany as a cause of war as long as the intention of either country was to merely cross Belgian neutrality because of military necessity. In such a circumstance Britain would not see itself obliged to defend Belgium because its existence as a neutral state was not threatened. In August 1914 the Germans were careful to make it clear that they were crossing Belgium merely to engage France and had no territorial ambitions with regard to Belgium.



7. The government press did not believe there was any treaty obligation binding England to protect the neutrality of Belgium. Both the *Manchester Guardian* and *Daily News* debated the matter on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1914 and quoted Lords Derby and Granville, the architects of the treaties in 1839 and 1870, to the effect that: “*Such a guarantee has...the character of a moral sanction to the arrangements which it defends rather than that of a contingent liability to make war. It would no doubt give a right to make war, but would not necessarily impose the obligation. And that is the view taken by most international lawyers. We are, therefore, absolutely free; there is no entanglement with Belgium.*”
8. The government’s legal advisers did not believe there was any treaty obligation binding England to protect the neutrality of Belgium. The Treaty of 1839 only bound the signatories not to violate Belgian neutrality themselves. It did not in any way bind them to intervene to protect Belgian neutrality. The Treaty’s purpose was to maintain the separation of Belgium from Holland and did not take into consideration the matter of military incursions. From Britain’s point of view, as Lord Loreburn, the former Lord Chancellor, pointed out, the objective was simply that Belgium “*should be a perpetually neutral state. We bound ourselves, as did the others, not to violate that neutrality, but did not bind ourselves to defend it against the encroachment of any other Power.*” (*How the War Came*). Dr. J.S. Ewart, the British jurist, agreed: “*The Belgian treaty (really treaties) of 1839 contains no obligation to defend Belgium or Belgian neutrality.*” (*The Roots and Causes of the Wars*)
9. Britain did not go to war over Belgium neutrality although this was proclaimed to be the issue. On 1 August the German Ambassador asked Sir Edward Grey if Germany gave an assurance not to violate Belgian neutrality would Britain give Germany an assurance of British neutrality. Grey refused. The German Ambassador then asked Grey to specify the conditions under which Britain would remain neutral in a European war. Grey replied that Britain could not do so and would “*keep her hands free.*”
10. Grey would have gone to war on Germany even without Germany violating Belgium neutrality. He makes this clear in his memoirs (*Twenty Five Years*). On 2 August Bonar Law, leader of the Unionist Party, made it clear to Grey in a letter that his party would support immediate war on the side of Russia and France against Germany. This was before the Germans entered Belgium and there was no precondition of support based on a violation of Belgian neutrality. The conclusion, therefore, is that Belgium was only an excuse which the British Government made use of to lead Britain into war on Germany. If Germany did not a Liberal Imperialist/Unionist coalition would declare war. And Grey confirmed as much when he used the threat of resignation and formation of coalition with the Anti-Home Rulers to rally the Liberal Cabinet behind the war at a subsequent cabinet meeting.
11. If Germany hadn’t violated Belgian neutrality England and France would have done it. The Franco-British military plans of 1911, 1912 and 1913 were based on the assumption of an advance through Belgium.

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Pat Walsh

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Pat Walsh

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An extract from the account of the Great War given by *Charles James O'Donnell* in *The Irish Future with The Lordship Of The World* (1929). With Introduction by *Brendan Clifford*

**The Christian Brothers' History Of The Great War.** Reprint of the monthly comment on the War between 1914 and 1918 in the Christian Brothers magazine, *Our Boys* (2007)

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