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“There Must Be Some Misunderstanding’’: Sir Edward Grey’s Diplomacy of August 1, 1914

Stephen J. Valone

For over two generations, scholars have studied Sir Edward Grey’s response to the Sarajevo crisis, apparently considering every aspect of his dual effort to find a diplomatic solution while convincing the cabinet that England must intervene in a general war. Historians have generally agreed that Grey’s last hope to prevent war evaporated by the end of July, although the cabinet did not decide to intervene until August 2.¹ In this light, the events of August 1, 1914, are only considered to be either a prelude or a postscript to more significant events. The purpose of this essay is to suggest that Grey pursued two distinct, yet interrelated, courses of action on August 1, 1914: (1) for as long as he was unsure of cabinet support for intervention, he sought to make a diplomatic deal with the German ambassador so that a neutral England could salvage something from the crisis, but (2) once confident England would enter the conflict, he sought to prevent the war altogether by applying diplomatic pressure on France.

Historians have overlooked Grey’s diplomacy on August 1 primarily because of the cloud cast over the events of the day by the so-called misunderstanding between Grey and the German ambassador, Prince Karl Max Lichnowsky. The first Grey-Lichnowsky exchange took

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¹ For example, see Zara Steiner, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898–1914* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 159; Michael Ekstein and Zara Steiner, “The Sarajevo Crisis,” in *British Foreign Policy under Sir Edward Grey*, ed. F. H. Hinsley (London, New York, 1977), p. 403; K. M. Wilson, “The British Cabinet’s Decision for War, 2 August 1914,” in *British Journal of International Studies* 1 (1975): 148–59; Cameron Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War* (New York, 1971), pp. 85–86.

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place that morning when Sir William Tyrrell, Grey's private secretary, brought a message to the German embassy. After subsequently receiving a personal call from Grey, Lichnowsky, at 11:14 a.m., sent a wire to Berlin in which he indicated Grey had proposed that, if Germany "were not to attack France, England would remain neutral and would guarantee France's passivity."² Three hours later, after another message from Grey via Tyrrell, Lichnowsky again telegraphed Berlin. He reported that now Grey wished to make proposals "for England's neutrality, even in the event of our being at war with both France and Russia."³ England was apparently retreating into isolation, leaving Germany with a free hand to establish its hegemony over Europe. Kaiser Wilhelm II understandably ordered champagne when word of the second exchange reached him in Berlin.⁴ But such elation was short-lived. King George responded to the Kaiser's acceptance of Grey's first proposal by telegraphing that "there must be some misunderstanding as to a suggestion that passed in friendly conversation between Prince Lichnowsky and Sir Edward Grey this afternoon."⁵ In the subsequent explanations given by Grey and Lichnowsky, both diplomats insisted that a "misunderstanding" had occurred. Each maintained that Lichnowsky had not understood that Grey, in his first overture that morning, had implied that Britain would only remain neutral if Germany refrained from attacking either France or Russia.⁶

The debate over this exchange has been mostly confined to narrow ground: whether or not Lichnowsky misunderstood Grey's intimations. The interpretation that gained general acceptance in Germany at the close of the war held that, on August 1, Grey had not suggested British neutrality if Germany did not attack France; rather, Lichnowsky had misunderstood Tyrrell and Grey and had then not corrected his error with Berlin when he became aware of it. Weimar historians were more vituperative in their attacks on Lichnowsky's

² Lichnowsky to Jagow, August 1, 1914, *Die Deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch*, 2d ed., 4 vols. (Berlin, 1919), 3, no. 562:66 (cited hereafter as *DD*3).

³ *Ibid.*, no. 570, p. 70.

⁴ Harry Young, "The Misunderstanding of August 1, 1914," *Journal of Modern History* 48 (December 1976): 650.

⁵ King George to Kaiser Wilhelm, August 1, 1914, *DD*3, no. 612, pp. 103-4.

⁶ Grey to Bertie, August 1, 1914, in *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914*, ed. G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperly, 11 vols. (London, 1926-36), 11, no. 419:250, n. 2 (cited hereafter as *BD*11). Karl Max Lichnowsky, *Heading for the Abyss: Reminiscences*, trans. and ed. Sefton Delmer (London, New York, 1928), pp. 75-76. There is no reference made to the "misunderstanding" in either the Grey or Tyrrell papers deposited at the Public Record Office (PRO). See PRO, Foreign Office (FO) 800/35-113, 220.

"blunder" because the Allies used his memoirs, which criticized the imperial government for having frustrated the efforts at peace, as evidence that Germany had caused the war of its own free will.⁷ After World War II, Fritz Fischer and his pupil, Imanuel Geiss, continued the tradition of treating the exchanges of August 1 as Lichnowsky's misunderstanding.⁸ More recently, Harry Young has written that on August 1, Grey attempted to formulate an *arrêt militaire* between France, Germany, and Russia, but that Lichnowsky failed to include Russia in the calculations.⁹

Luigi Albertini provided probably the most noted rejection of the "misunderstanding thesis." In his *Le origini della guerra del 1914*, he argued that a dull-minded Grey blundered into proposing the abandonment of Russia through Anglo-French neutrality.¹⁰ Edward Corp portrayed Grey in an even worse light. While agreeing with Albertini that no misunderstanding occurred, Corp argued that Tyrrell persuaded Grey to allow him to offer English neutrality to Lichnowsky because he did not want England to aid Russia; in other words, a private secretary had convinced the British foreign secretary to offer Germany proposals which, in Corp's words, "made political and strategic nonsense."¹¹ Thus, the historiography of August 1, 1914, could be reduced to a debate between those who say Lichnowsky was deaf and those who argue Grey was feeble-minded.

A more satisfying interpretation can be found by assuming that Grey knew what he was doing and that Lichnowsky's hearing was normal. Hermann Lutz hinted at this alternative in his largely overlooked *Lord Grey und der Weltkrieg*. In this work, he concluded that there was no "misunderstanding" on August 1 and that the episode

⁷ See Young, pp. 644–45, 660–61, 665.

⁸ See Imanuel Geiss, ed., *Julikrise und Kriegsausbruch*, 2 vols. (Hanover, 1964), 2:530; and Fritz Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen* (Düsseldorf, 1969), p. 724.

⁹ Young, pp. 663–65. Young placed great stock in the fact that both Grey and Lichnowsky, in "independent" accounts of August 1 written later that month, stated that Lichnowsky had not understood the inclusion of Russia in a Franco-German stand-off. Since the two men met with each other on August 3 and again on August 5, one must, however, question the value of these "independent" explanations. It should be mentioned that the Grey-Lichnowsky exchanges of August 1 are not discussed by either of Grey's principal biographers. See George M. Trevelyan, *Grey of Fallodon* (Boston, 1937); and Keith Robbins, *Sir Edward Grey* (London, 1971).

¹⁰ Luigi Albertini, *Le origini della guerra del 1914*, 3 vols. (Milan, 1942–43), cited here in *The Origins of the War of 1914*, trans. Isabella Massey (London, 1952–57), 3:368, 385. With respect to the "misunderstanding" itself, he wrote on p. 382 of the same volume, "It is, moreover, obvious that he [Lichnowsky] can hardly have misunderstood first Tyrrell and then Grey, who over the telephone had put the direct question."

¹¹ Edward Corp, "Sir William Tyrrell: The Eminence Grise of the British Foreign Office, 1912–1915," *Historical Journal* 25, no. 3 (1982): 705.

“was a stage in the struggle between Grey’s followers and the majority of the Cabinet and an attempt, born of necessity, to keep France out of the war in the event of the interventionists failing to carry the day.”¹² Lutz, unfortunately, failed to explain himself further. Nevertheless, Grey’s cabinet problems influenced his diplomacy significantly. The Grey-Lichnowsky exchanges should be viewed as a part of his effort to ameliorate the effects of a war he feared England would not enter. Furthermore, Grey so detested war that even after he was satisfied the cabinet would permit intervention, he attempted to pressure France into taking steps that would prevent the war.

Grey’s attempts to mediate between the powers in the wake of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28 have been ably treated elsewhere.¹³ Suffice it to say that Grey only brought the matter to the attention of the cabinet on July 23, after his peaceful overtures fell on deaf ears and the crisis deepened with Austria’s ultimatum to Serbia. At the meeting of Monday, July 27, he received no clear mandate for action from his colleagues. Finding himself thus constrained, Grey deftly turned necessity into virtue and over the next few days stressed England’s “free hand” in an attempt to strengthen pacific councils in Berlin and Paris.

Austria’s declaration of war on Serbia reached the Foreign Office the evening of July 28. The next afternoon, Grey again pressed the cabinet for a declaration of support for France, but that body adjourned without taking a stand. The cabinet had “decided not to decide” as John Burns recorded in his diary.¹⁴ Grey, therefore, used England’s uncertain position to best advantage by telling the French and the Germans exactly what they did not want to hear. After discussing the European situation with Lichnowsky that afternoon, Grey warned him that he should not be misled by their cordial conversation into believing that England could stand aloof, should France and Germany enter the conflict. In his dispatch to Sir Edward Goschen, his ambassador in Berlin, Grey wrote that he had told Lichnowsky, “If Germany became involved in it [war], and then France, the issue might be so great that it would involve all European interests; and I did not wish him to be misled by the friendly tone of our conversation—which I hoped would continue—into thinking that we should stand aside.”¹⁵

¹² Hermann Lutz, *Lord Grey und der Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 1927), cited here in *Lord Grey and the World War*, trans. E. W. Dickes (London, 1928), p. 296.

¹³ For example, see Hinsley, ed. (n. 1 above). The “misunderstanding” of August 1, is not mentioned in any of the essays.

¹⁴ Burns Diary, July 29, 1914, British Library Additional MS 46336.

¹⁵ Grey to Goschen, July 29, 1914, *BD11*, no. 286, pp. 182–83.

That morning, Grey had told French Ambassador Paul Cambon what the gist of his talk with Lichnowsky would be, with one major alteration. Lest the French act on the assumption of English support, Grey insisted that, "if Germany became involved and France became involved, we had not made up our minds what we should do; it was a case we should have to consider. France would then be drawn into a quarrel which was not hers, but in which, owing to her alliance, her honor and interest obliged her to engage. We were free from engagements, and we should have to decide what British interests required us to do."¹⁶ Grey thus attempted to force Berlin and Paris to consider the prospect of a general war in the worst possible light: for France a war without, and for Germany a war against, Britain.

On the morning of July 30, Grey could believe that Berlin had provided him ammunition for his battle in the cabinet. Goschen had telegraphed that German Chancellor Theobold von Bethmann-Hollweg had intimated that, if England maintained its neutrality, Germany would guarantee the postwar integrity of Belgium and France. This pledge of "self-restraint" did not include the French colonies. Furthermore, Germany would respect the neutrality and integrity of Holland, so long as Germany's enemies did likewise. Goschen continued: "As regards Belgium, his Excellency could not tell to what operations Germany might be forced by the action of France, but he could state that, provided that Belgium did not take sides against Germany, her integrity would be respected after the conclusion of the war."¹⁷ After reading this telegram, Assistant Under Secretary of State Sir Eyre Crowe noted in a minute that "it is of interest to note that Germany practically admits the intention to violate Belgian neutrality."¹⁸ The German suggestion that England acquiesce in the invasion of Belgium, as well as in the eventual seizure of French colonies, provoked Grey to "a white heat of passion."¹⁹ He convinced Prime Minister Herbert Asquith to sanction an immediate rejection of this proposal. The cabinet approved this course the next day.²⁰

But even after this evidence of German intentions, the cabinet refused to take a firm line with Berlin. It only agreed that "British opinion would not enable us to support France—a violation of Belgium might alter public opinion, but we could say nothing to commit our-

¹⁶ Grey to Bertie, July 29, 1914, *BD11*, no. 283, p. 180.

¹⁷ Goschen to Grey, July 29, 1914, *BD11*, no. 293, pp. 185–86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Quoted in Hazlehurst (n. 1 above), p. 81.

²⁰ Grey to Goschen, July 30, 1914, *BD11*, no. 303, pp. 193–94. Sir Edward Grey (Viscount Grey of Fallodon), *Twenty-Five Years*, 2 vols. (New York, 1925), 1:329.

selves.”²¹ In spite of the cabinet’s caution, Grey, on July 31, “took a diplomatic step that contemplated the contingency of war.”²² He asked Paris and Berlin whether or not they would respect the neutrality of Belgium provided that all other powers did likewise. Given the German proposal of the day before, he could expect an ambiguous response from Berlin.

Meanwhile, Grey continued to disappoint the German and French ambassadors in private interviews. Before the cabinet met on July 31, Lichnowsky had again heard that “if France became involved we [England] should be drawn in.”²³ Cambon had also received discouraging news. Grey denied that there was any connection between the present situation and the Agadir crisis of 1911 when Britain had supported France against Germany. He contended that “in this case France is being drawn into a dispute which is not hers.”²⁴ He also denied the charge that Britain’s attitude had encouraged German militarists and pointed out he had told Lichnowsky that England would be drawn into a Franco-German war. But Cambon could take no comfort in this assertion because Grey subsequently qualified it. As Grey explained in a telegram to Sir Francis Bertie, his offer, “of course, was not the same thing as a definite engagement to France, and I told M. Cambon of it only to show that we had not left Germany under the impression we would stand aside.” When told Britain “cannot undertake a definite pledge to intervene in a war,” Cambon begged Grey to reconsider. Grey replied that the cabinet would reconsider the situation in the event of new developments but could give no pledge at that moment.²⁵

Word of Russia’s general mobilization reached London at approximately five o’clock on July 31.²⁶ At midnight, the German embassy sent a note to the Foreign Office that concluded that the Russian action “affected Germany, whose mediation had been solicited by the Tsar personally. We were compelled, unless we wished to abandon the safety of the Fatherland, to answer this action, which could only be regarded as hostile, with serious counter-measures. We could not idly watch Russia mobilizing on our frontier. We therefore told Russia that

²¹ Quoted in Hazlehurst, p. 84.

²² Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, 1:329.

²³ Grey to Goschen, July 31, 1914, *BD11*, no. 340, pp. 215–16.

²⁴ Grey to Bertie, July 31, 1914, *BD11*, no. 352, p. 220.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 367, pp. 226–27.

²⁶ Buchanan to Grey, July 30, 1914, *BD11*, no. 347, p. 218. This telegram arrived at 5:20 P.M. on July 31. See the note added to the document that corrects the date the telegram was sent. Asquith announced news of the mobilization to the House of Commons at about five o’clock.

if she did not stop her warlike measures against Germany and Austria-Hungary within twelve hours, we should mobilize, *and that would mean war* [emphasis added]. We asked France whether in a Russo-German war she would remain neutral."²⁷ The German note prompted Asquith to draft for King George a message which begged the Tsar "to leave still open grounds for negotiation and possible peace."²⁸

Other dispatches flooded the Foreign Office in the early morning of August 1, confirming the drift toward war. News of Belgian mobilization reached the Foreign Office at 12:35 A.M.²⁹ Less than three hours later, Sir Francis Bertie, the British ambassador in Paris, reported France's resolve to respect Belgian neutrality; France would act otherwise only as a defensive measure, given prior violation by "some other power."³⁰ Yet Goschen wired from Berlin that Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Gottlieb von Jagow "gave me to understand he rather doubted whether they could answer at all [regarding German respect of Belgian borders], as any reply they might give could not fail, in the event of war, to have the undesirable effect of disclosing to a certain extent part of their plan of campaign."³¹ At 8:00 A.M. the Foreign Office received still more electrifying news: "Vice-consul at Belgrade telephones town being bombarded and shells falling around British Legation."³² Hostilities had commenced; barring quick action, war would soon spread to Russia, Germany, and France. What could Grey do to prevent war while at the same time preparing the cabinet for possible intervention?

Obviously, Grey's crucial battle would be waged within the cabinet. But what diplomatic options remained open to him? Throughout much of the day, Grey still thought in terms of avoiding a general war; as late as 3:10 P.M., he telegraphed to Goschen that "I still believe that if only a little respite in time can be gained *before any Great Power begins war* [emphasis added] it might be possible to secure peace."³³ At this juncture, Grey believed he could do no more to influence Berlin. For three days, the Kaiser had been receiving the threat—as yet empty—of English participation in a Franco-German war. Grey could say nothing more to deter Germany.

Thus, in appraising the situation on the morning of August 1, Grey

²⁷ *BD11*, July 31, 1914, no. 372, pp. 229–30.

²⁸ Grey to Buchanan, August 1, 1914, *BD11*, no. 384, pp. 235–36. See also Herbert Asquith, *Moments of Memory: Recollections and Impressions* (London, 1937), p. 198.

²⁹ Villiers to Grey, July 31, 1914, *BD11*, no. 377, p. 233.

³⁰ Bertie to Grey, July 31, 1914, *BD11*, no. 382, p. 234.

³¹ Goschen to Grey, July 31, 1914, *BD11*, no. 383, pp. 234–35.

³² Crackanorpe to Grey, July 30, 1914, *BD11*, no. 388, p. 237.

³³ Grey to Goschen, August 1, 1914, *BD11*, no. 411, p. 246.

worked under the assumptions that, with war imminent, (1) he could not dissuade Berlin and (2) the cabinet would not sanction intervention on behalf of France. This disagreeable situation demanded drastic action, lest the Germans defeat the French as they had in 1870–71. At 11:14 A.M., Lichnowsky cabled that “Sir Edward Grey has just sent word to me by Sir W. Tyrrell that he hopes that he will be able this afternoon, as a result of a council of ministers [*Ministerberatung*] that is just taking place, to make a statement to me which may prove helpful in preventing the great catastrophe. To judge by a remark of Sir W. Tyrrell’s, this seems to mean that in the event of our not attacking France, England too, would remain neutral and would guarantee France’s passivity. I shall learn the details this afternoon.”³⁴

What was Grey doing? Without the sanction of the cabinet, let alone the French, he was apparently offering Anglo-French neutrality to Germany. But under what circumstances? Both Grey and Lichnowsky subsequently maintained that Lichnowsky had missed Grey’s proposal that Germany should attack neither France *nor* Russia. Given the context of the exchange, however, this argument is unconvincing. At that moment, Austria and Serbia were at war, Russia’s partial mobilization had become general, and Germany threatened its own mobilization, which meant war unless Russia cancelled its mobilization. Those endorsing the “misunderstanding thesis” rest their case on the dubious assumption that Grey was asking Germany to stand aside and watch Russia crush Berlin’s Austro-Hungarian ally. The Kaiser could not be expected to take such a proposal seriously. On these grounds alone, let alone on those to be discussed below, it is evident that Grey actually proposed Anglo-French neutrality in a Russo-German war to Lichnowsky.

Grey fully realized the magnitude of his action, and he may well have sought the advice of his closest friends; he apparently met with Asquith and Lord Chancellor Haldane at 10:30 A.M., half an hour before the cabinet met.³⁵ No minutes of this meeting exist, but it is likely Grey’s colleagues advised him to be absolutely sure of such a step

³⁴ Lichnowsky to Jagow, August 1, 1914, *DD3*, no. 562, p. 66.

³⁵ See Young (n. 4 above), p. 657. He noted that the strongest evidence that they met “is provided by Lichnowsky whose cable of 11:14 a.m. reported that the proposal Tyrrell had just vaguely indicated to him would issue from a ministerial consultation [*Ministerberatung*] which was taking place at that moment. After Tyrrell left him, as the prince reported further in his cable, Grey called him by telephone and said that he would make use of the prince’s assurance with regard to France in ‘today’s cabinet meeting,’ an obviously different gathering from the one taking place when Tyrrell first came to the German embassy.” Haldane also mentioned this meeting in a letter to his mother. See Hazelhurst (n. 1 above), p. 90.

before he presented it to the cabinet. Just prior to the cabinet meeting, Grey telephoned the German ambassador to ask "whether I [Lichnowsky] thought I could give an assurance that in the event of France remaining neutral in a war between Russia and Germany we should not attack the French. I assured him that I could take the responsibility for such a guarantee and he will use this assurance at today's Cabinet meeting."³⁶ Though sent in one telegram at 11:14 A.M., Lichnowsky's dispatch mentioned two different communications with Grey: Tyrrell's mission and Grey's phone call. Significantly, in this second exchange, Lichnowsky made explicit reference to French neutrality during a Russo-German war, which obviously contradicts the "misunderstanding" thesis. When reduced to its essentials, this narrative indicates that Grey, in return for guaranteeing French neutrality, received an assurance that Germany would not attack France in a Russo-German war. In other words, Grey suggested that France and England would stand aside and view the defeat of Serbia and Russia. Albertini commented that the kaiser, the chancellor, and their advisors at the Schloss were so blinded with elation that they "never stopped to ask themselves whether they were dreaming or whether Grey had gone crazy."

It may be regarded as certain that on the morning of 1 August Grey really believed in the possibility of promising Germany that France and England would remain neutral. The idea was in every sense absurd. It was inconceivable that France would betray her ally and leave her at the mercy of Austria and Germany, while it was easy to foresee that, once victory in the east had been gained, Germany would turn her strength against France. . . . Once France had been beaten the same fate would sooner or later have overtaken Britain. It seems impossible that Grey can ever have entertained such an idea. And yet he did so.³⁷

In these comments, however, Albertini failed to consider Grey's position vis-à-vis the cabinet. When Grey sent Tyrrell on his errand and when he called Lichnowsky just before 11:00 A.M., he had to assume that the cabinet would not sanction intervention. Given this scenario, Grey would be forced to inform Paris that England definitely would not intervene in a Balkan quarrel. Salvaging something from the situation, he could, at least, offer the French Lichnowsky's guarantee that Germany would not attack if France remained neutral. Paris, no doubt ringing with cries of "Perfide Albion," would then face two dis-

³⁶ Lichnowsky to Jagow, August 1, 1914, *DD3*, no. 562, p. 66.

³⁷ Albertini (n. 10 above), 3:381, 382-83.

agreeable choices: to fight and risk probable defeat, or to abandon Russia and remain neutral. Grey could hope that the French would be rational and choose the second option. Given the lack of Anglo-French support, Russia would then presumably have to avoid war with Germany and Austria. The result would be Austria's crushing of Serbia and the disruption of both the Anglo-French Entente and the Franco-Russian Alliance, but no general war. Germany and the Central Powers would have won a significant victory. However, Grey could believe that this was not too high a price to pay, given that the alternative would be the probable establishment of German continental hegemony while England remained idle.

With Lichnowsky's word in his pocket, Grey faced the cabinet. During the meeting, Winston Churchill was denied permission to mobilize the navy. The cabinet also decided that it still could not propose that Parliament send an expeditionary force to the continent.³⁸ But Grey, faced with the apparent realization of his worst fears of enforced neutrality, did not choose to make use of Lichnowsky's pledge, nor, for that matter, did he reveal that he had even talked with the German ambassador that morning. Why not?

Belgium provides the only plausible answer. The cabinet did give Grey permission to tell Lichnowsky that, "if there were a violation of the neutrality of Belgium by one combatant while the other respected it, it would be extremely difficult to restrain public feeling in this country."³⁹ Though Grey that evening said that he would have to have a "tussle" with the cabinet the next day, one must conclude that he believed this statement to be a decisive step toward intervention in the impending war. It is otherwise difficult to account for Grey's failure to mention Lichnowsky's pledge to his colleagues.

However, Grey saw quite well that there yet remained a chance that his plan for intervention would not work. The cabinet adjourned at around 1:30 P.M. At 2:10 P.M., Lichnowsky cabled Berlin that "Sir William Tyrrell has just been to see me and told me that Sir Edward Grey wants this afternoon to make proposals for England's neutrality, even in the event of our being at war with France as well as Russia. I shall see Sir Edward at 3:30 and shall report at once."⁴⁰ Whereas previously Grey had spoken of French neutrality, his scenario now included France in a continental war. Why the change? Grey realized that the key to British intervention was Belgium, and that it could still

³⁸ Grey to Bertie, August 1, 1914, *BD11*, no. 426, p. 253.

³⁹ Grey to Goschen, August 1, 1914, *BD11*, no. 448, pp. 260–61.

⁴⁰ Lichnowsky to Jagow, August 1, 1914, *DD3*, no. 570, p. 70.

fail him in either of two instances: (1) German respect for Belgian neutrality or (2) a lack of Belgian resistance to German invasion. By August 1, if not earlier, a German attack on France through Belgium seemed probable.⁴¹ But would the Belgians actively defend themselves? Grey's "tussle" in the cabinet would be difficult indeed if he sought to send British soldiers to die for the honor of Belgium while Belgian soldiers remained mere neutral observers or offered only token resistance.

So long as the ultimate Belgian response remained uncertain, Grey still had to plan for any eventuality. The proposal made to Lichnowsky after the cabinet meeting left the door open for Britain and Grey to salvage something from the debacle caused if Belgium allowed German troops passage through the country. In that event, Grey might yet wring concessions from a Germany still eager to buy British neutrality, even if he had to accept a deal along the lines of Bethmann-Hollweg's offer of July 30.

Fortunately for Grey, the Belgians were resolute. Grey probably had a good impression of Brussels's intentions when the cabinet met, for, as noted above, the Foreign Office had received word of Belgium's general mobilization at 12:35 A.M. that morning. However, Grey received "encouraging if not conclusive" news from Sir Francis Villiers, the British ambassador at Brussels, when he had a chance to review information received while the cabinet met.⁴² In a telegram that arrived at 12:25 P.M., Villiers reported that the Belgian minister of foreign affairs stated "that Belgium will to the utmost of her power maintain neutrality, and desires and expects other powers to observe and uphold it.

"He begged me to add that the relations between Belgium and the neighboring Powers were excellent and that there was no reason to suspect their intentions, but that [the] Belgian Government believed that in case of [a] violation they were in a position to defend the neutrality of their country."⁴³ Finally, as if he needed any further confirmation of German intentions, at 3:00 P.M. Grey received word from Goschen in Berlin that the "Military Attaché [is] confident [that] in [the] event of war Germany will pass part of her forces through Belgium."⁴⁴ Thus before he met with Lichnowsky, the fears that had motivated both of Tyrrell's informal missions had been dispelled: the

⁴¹ Herbert Louis Samuel, *Memoirs* (London, 1945), p. 101.

⁴² Hazlehurst, p. 99.

⁴³ Villiers to Grey, August 1, 1914, *BD11*, no. 395, p. 240.

⁴⁴ Goschen to Grey, August 1, 1914, *BD11*, no. 404, p. 243.

cabinet had moved toward a commitment to Belgium, and the Belgians had indicated that they would defend themselves against a German invasion. Grey could now anticipate British participation in a European war.

Grey could not have looked forward to his 3:30 P.M. meeting with Lichnowsky. He had, of course, made no firm offer to Germany, yet he did face the ticklish task of dismantling his own initiatives. In a summation to Berlin of the day's exchanges as well as of his 3:30 meeting with Grey, Lichnowsky telegraphed Berlin:

He [Grey] had been wondering whether it would not be possible for us and France in the event of a Russian war to remain facing each other without either side attacking. I asked him whether he was in a position to give me an assurance that France would agree to a pact of that sort. Since we intended neither to destroy France nor to annex parts of her territory, I could imagine that we might enter on an agreement of that sort since it would assure us of Great Britain's neutrality. The minister said that he would enquire, but was not blind to the difficulties of restraining two armies and keeping them in a state of inactivity.⁴⁵

Grey thus not only backed away from his earliest offer of French passivity but revealed that he had made it without having consulted the French. His answer also sheds light on another aspect of the alleged "misunderstanding" of August 1. Lichnowsky here specifically asked about the possibility of French neutrality during a Russo-German war, in exact accord with his telegram of 11:14 A.M., and Grey's only reply was a weak intimation that it might prove impossible to restrain two mobilized armies while Germany attacked Russia; thus when offered a perfect opportunity to tell Lichnowsky that he had misunderstood the conditions under which he had earlier proposed Anglo-French neutrality, Grey did not do so. No misunderstanding had occurred.

At the 3:30 P.M. meeting, Lichnowsky of course did not receive the proposals for England's neutrality during a German war with the Franco-Russian Alliance that Tyrrell had suggested in his second trip to the German Embassy. Rather, Grey made a statement of conditions under which the British might intervene. The violation of Belgian neutrality of course headed the list. The German ambassador remained calm in spite of this discouraging turn of events. He asked whether Grey could give a definite assurance of British neutrality if Germany agreed to respect Belgium's borders. Young wrote that "this clever

⁴⁵ Lichnowsky to Jagow, August 1, 1914, DD3, no. 596, pp. 89-91.

question, consistent with the search for a means to assure military passivity in the West, caught Grey unawares."⁴⁶ But this question undoubtedly embarrassed Grey more than it surprised him. Lichnowsky had exposed Grey's weakest point: to intervene, Grey needed Belgian resistance to a German invasion because the cabinet had shown no inclination to fight for France, let alone Serbia and Russia. Grey could not make such a statement since the Germans might accept the offer, spare Belgium, and thus doom his attempt to trigger English intervention. He could only reply that a violation of Belgium would greatly affect public opinion and make it "very difficult for the Government to adopt a benevolent neutrality."⁴⁷

Lichnowsky concluded his telegram by stating the general impression that "people here would like, if at all possible, to keep out of the war" but that the lack of a pledge to respect Belgium had made a "very unfavorable impression."⁴⁸ The German ambassador, for all intents and purposes, considered Grey's earlier intimations no longer valid and the affair closed.⁴⁹ However, owing to the time lag involved in communication between London and Berlin, the kaiser cabled acceptance to the first Lichnowsky telegram early that evening, which would cause Grey acute embarrassment.

Grey had dealt with Lichnowsky as tactfully as possible.⁵⁰ He no longer harbored significant doubts that England would intervene, but having found the means to secure involvement in a European war, Grey so wished to avoid bloodshed that he made one last effort to keep the peace. In a series of remarkable, if overlooked, communications with French Ambassador Paul Cambon as well as to his ambassador in Paris, Sir Francis Bertie, Grey attempted to bludgeon France into neutrality and thus either localize or prevent the war. Bertie, in his diary entry of July 29, provided a clue as to Grey's probable line of thought: "The French should put pressure on the Russian Government to moderate their zeal. If we gave an assurance of armed assistance to France and Russia now, Russia would become more exacting and France

⁴⁶ Harry Young, *Prince Lichnowsky and the Great War* (Savannah, Ga., 1977), p. 117.

⁴⁷ Lichnowsky to Jagow, August 1, 1914, DD3, no. 596, pp. 89-91.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Albertini (n. 10 above), 3:386.

⁵⁰ In his memoirs, perhaps as an apology to Lichnowsky for the trouble he had caused him, Grey wrote, "Do his [Lichnowsky's] countrymen yet recognize, not only how clear he was of any responsibility, but the debt that is owed him for his efforts for peace during the whole of his Embassy in London? We, at any rate, remember him gratefully for having tried to avert a war that has been a calamity for everyone, victors as well as vanquished." See Grey (n. 20 above), 2:233.

would have to follow in her wake.”⁵¹ But by the afternoon of August 1, the French had not managed to moderate the Russians, and Grey knew that England, too, would follow the Russian wake into war. Grey now took Bertie’s thoughts one step further: England would pressure France into pressuring Russia.

For their part, the French had frantically attempted, but failed, to find a way to earn a firm pledge of English support. The French government had given a quick and affirmative reply to London’s request for a guarantee of Belgian neutrality.⁵² French soldiers had withdrawn ten kilometers from the German frontier to avoid giving even the appearance of provocation.⁵³ Finally, the French Embassy received instructions to draw Grey’s attention to the Italian declaration that the present war was not defensive and that for this reason the *casus foederis* under the terms of the Triple Alliance did not arise.⁵⁴ The French had done all that prudence dictated and, if nothing else, Paris could hardly expect criticism for having drawn Britain into an aggressive war. But Grey perceived that French caution alone was insufficient to act as a moderating influence on St. Petersburg and that stronger measures were necessary.

He apparently began this campaign during the 10:30 A.M. meeting with Asquith and Haldane. Lt. General Sir Henry Wilson, the director of military operations and an ardent supporter for intervention on behalf of France, subsequently noted with disgust in his diary that “at 11:30 a.m. ’Squiff [Asquith] wrote to C.I.G.S. . . . ‘putting on record’ that the Govt had never promised the French the E[xpeditionary] F[orce]!!”⁵⁵ Hazlehurst concluded that Asquith’s intentions regarding this letter are impenetrable: “What is most difficult to understand is why Asquith should have sent such a message to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff *before* a cabinet decision had been taken.”⁵⁶ Asquith’s intentions become clearer if one considers the letter as part

⁵¹ Lady Algernon Gordon Lennox, ed., *The Diary of Lord Bertie, 1914–1918* (New York, 1924), p. 5. There are other similarities between the thoughts of the two men. That same day Bertie also wrote that “People, however, do not realize, or do not take into account, the difficulty for the British Government to declare England *solidaire* with Russia and France in a question such as the Austro-Servian [*sic*] quarrel.” On August 2 he prophesied, “The war will not be over soon. What carnage and suffering, and how disgusting the cause!” See Lennox, pp. 5, 9.

⁵² Bertie to Grey, August 1, 1914, *BD*11, no. 382, p. 234.

⁵³ Bertie to Grey, August 1, 1914, *BD*11, no. 403, p. 243.

⁵⁴ August 1, 1914, *BD*11, no. 406, p. 244.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Hazlehurst (n. 1 above), p. 90. Note that Wilson apparently meant that the letter arrived at 11:30 because Asquith presided over the cabinet from 11:00 A.M. to 1:30 P.M.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

of Grey's effort to preserve peace by declaring that no formal obligation bound England to aid France. Wilson advocated cooperation with the French and favored a declaration of support for the entente. He was also in close contact with the French embassy⁵⁷ and could be expected to convey the contents of the letter to the French, thus serving Grey's efforts to moderate French and Russian zeal.

In his first dispatch to Bertie after his talk with Lichnowsky, Grey continued to apply pressure: "I have definitely refused all overtures to give Germany any promise of neutrality, and shall not entertain any such suggestions unless it were on conditions that secured real advantages for France."⁵⁸ "German Ambassador here seemed to think it not impossible, *when I suggested it* [emphasis added], that after mobilization on western frontier French and German armies should remain, neither crossing the frontier as long as the other did not do so. I cannot say whether this would be consistent with French obligations under her alliance. If it were so consistent, I suppose French Government would not object to our engaging to be neutral as long as German army remained on frontier on the defensive."⁵⁹ Grey summarized for Bertie the gist of his 11:14 A.M. exchange with Lichnowsky. However, this was disingenuous because he had just told Lichnowsky that Franco-German passivity would not work because of "the difficulties of restraining the two armies and keeping them in a state of inactivity."⁶⁰ But here Grey implied to Bertie that military passivity in the West could be advantageous to France. This was surely not the sort of statement those in Paris, counting on British support, wanted to hear.

Grey's handwritten draft of this telegram also contains clues to what happened on August 1 that are not available to those relying on the text provided in *British Documents on the Origins of the War*. Grey at first began his draft with the word "I," which was stricken out and for which was substituted the word "We."⁶¹ The records of the Paris embassy reveal that this correction was made in the official telegram sent to Bertie.⁶² While this is only a minor point, Grey's original wording, which was accidentally used in *British Documents* (cited hereafter

⁵⁷ Ekstein and Steiner, in Hinsley, ed. (n. 1 above), p. 405.

⁵⁸ In the Paris embassy copy of this telegram, the word is "secured," not "seemed," as is recorded in *BD11*. See PRO, FO 146/4411. In Grey's original draft, it is unclear whether he wrote "seemed" or "secured." See PRO, FO 371/2160. I have used "secured" because it was used in the embassy copy and makes more sense grammatically.

⁵⁹ Grey to Bertie, August 1, 1914, *BD11*, no. 419, p. 250.

⁶⁰ Lichnowsky to Jagow, August 1, 1914, *DD3*, no. 596, pp. 89–91.

⁶¹ See PRO, FO 371/2160.

⁶² See PRO, FO 146/4411.

as *BD*), reflected accurately the extent to which British diplomacy on that day was his work alone. This slip on Grey's part supports the interpretation that the principal permanent officials in the Foreign Office, Sir Eyre Crowe and Sir Arthur Nicholson, both of whom strenuously urged support for France, had little influence on Grey during the crisis.⁶³

Grey's draft contains yet another, much more important, piece of evidence. Historians have previously noted the significance of Grey's admission, "when I suggested it," with respect to the prospect of Franco-German neutrality and used it against proponents of the "misunderstanding thesis." In Grey's draft the words, "when I suggested it," *were inserted into the original text*.⁶⁴ Thus, this statement was not unconsciously or mistakenly put into the dispatch; Grey wrote the note, realized that, as written, it appeared that the proposal for Franco-German passivity was Lichnowsky's, and added the words "when I suggested it" to correct this impression.

At 8:20 P.M., Grey telegraphed to Bertie an account of his afternoon interview with Cambon. He now presented the scenario portrayed in the previous telegram much more forcefully:

After the Cabinet to-day, I told M. Cambon that the present position differed entirely from that created by the Morocco incidents. In the latter, Germany made upon France demands that France could not grant, and in connection with which we had undertaken special obligations towards France. In these, public opinion would have justified the British Government in supporting France to the utmost of their ability. *Now, the position was that Germany would agree not to attack France if France remained neutral in the event of war between Russia and Germany* [emphasis added]. If France could not take advantage of this position, it was because she was bound by an alliance to which we were not parties, and of which we did not know the terms. This did not mean that under no circumstances would we assist France, but it did mean that France must take her own decision at this moment without reckoning on an assistance that we were not now in a position to promise.⁶⁵

Bluntly stated, Britain could offer to spare France an invasion, and if Paris could not accept the offer because of the alliance with Russia,

⁶³ Ekstein and Steiner wrote that, "Grey made his own policy during these July days. At the start he did not consult his officials; as the crisis developed, he often disregarded their advice." See Ekstein and Steiner, "The Sarajevo Crisis" in Hinsley, ed., p. 409.

⁶⁴ See PRO, FO 371/2160.

⁶⁵ Grey to Bertie, August 1, 1914, *BD11*, no. 426, p. 253.

France would have to act without a promise of English support. Cambon replied that he could not transmit such a statement to Paris; he was so shaken that he asked for authorization to say, instead, that the cabinet had not yet taken any decision—in other words, to convey the same message which he had protested against so strongly just the day before. Grey was adamant: ‘I said we had come to a decision: that we could not propose to Parliament at this moment to send an expeditionary military force to the continent. Such a step had always been regarded here as very dangerous and doubtful. It was one that we could not propose, and Parliament would not authorise unless our interests and obligations were deeply and desperately involved.’⁶⁶ He would only admit that a German violation of Belgium or an attack on the French coasts by the German fleet ‘might alter public feeling’ and that Cambon could report that the cabinet had not yet made a decision on these points.

But would such a forceful statement lead to French pressure on the Russians for peace? Grey had certainly gotten his point across to Cambon. Harold Nicolson related in his biography of his father that, after this conversation, ‘white and speechless, he [Cambon] staggered into Nicolson’s room. Nicolson went towards him and took his hands to guide him to a chair. ‘Ils vont nous lâcher, ils vont nous lâcher,’ was all that the Ambassador could say. Nicholson went upstairs to interview Sir Edward Grey. He found him pacing his room, biting at his lower lip. Nicolson asked whether it was indeed true that we had refused to support France at the moment of her greatest danger. Grey made no answer beyond a gesture of despair. ‘You will render us,’ Nicholson said angrily, ‘a by-word among nations.’’⁶⁷

Bertie was similarly affected. On August 2, in despair over England’s apparent inaction, he confided in his diary, ‘‘It will not be long now before it is ‘Perfide Albion.’’’ Marked ‘‘later,’’ under the same day, he lamented, ‘‘I have been feeling so sick at heart, and ashamed, that ‘Perfide Albion’ should really be applicable. I suppose the hope is that the French will win without us, but if they do, and that is doubtful, we should not receive much consideration in the Treaty of Peace at the end of the war; and if the Germans be the conquerors what will be our fate?’’⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Harold Nicolson, *Sir Arthur Nicolson, Bart., First Lord Carnock* (London, 1930), p. 419. Grey wrote in his memoirs that ‘‘the interviews with Cambon were distressing to both of us, but must have been even more so to him than to me. The very existence of his country as a great nation was at stake, and it was vital to France to know what Britain would do.’’ See Grey (n. 2 above), 1:339.

⁶⁸ Lennox, p. 8.

He need not have worried. After his 8:20 P.M. telegram to Paris, Grey never again placed such extreme pressure on France. But why did he abandon the course he had steadfastly pursued throughout the day? The turning point for Grey occurred shortly after he sent this telegram to Bertie, when the kaiser's acceptance of Grey's "proposal" of French passivity arrived in London. Those unaware of Grey's maneuvers, quite possibly everyone in the Foreign Office except for Tyrrell, could only be shocked to learn that the kaiser had "just received the communication from your Government offering French neutrality under guarantee of Great Britain."⁶⁹

Grey received word to present himself at Buckingham Palace to explain the kaiser's telegram and draft a reply. Sometime between 8:30 and 9:30 P.M., he penciled that "there must be some misunderstanding as to a suggestion that passed in friendly conversation between Prince Lichnowsky and Sir Edward Grey this afternoon."⁷⁰ Thus the birth of the myth that has since puzzled scholars. King George's reply flogged again the dead horse of Franco-German neutrality that both Grey and Lichnowsky considered buried after their 3:30 P.M. meeting. But Berlin did not receive word of the results of that meeting until 10:02 P.M., hours after the kaiser sent his telegram to London.

The meeting with the king meant the end of Grey's hope of avoiding war by pressuring France into neutrality. He realized that once he had to reject openly the idea of Franco-German neutrality, he could no longer use it as a means to influence French diplomacy. Although Grey had failed to secure peace, Belgium's resolve to defend its neutrality allowed Grey to take some comfort. England ultimately would not abandon France.

Historians have ignored the evidence that suggests that the king's telegram to the kaiser marked a turning point for Grey's diplomacy. The minutes under the 3:30 A.M. telegram of 1 August, whereby the German government refused to guarantee Belgian neutrality, contain the notation: "Repeat to Paris (no. 300 Aug 1, 9:45 p.m. [emphasis added])."⁷¹ The Foreign Office had held this information for over eighteen hours, apparently only forwarding it to Paris on Grey's return from his audience with the king. Was this mere inefficiency or coincidence? It seems unlikely. Almost concurrently with this telegram (*BD*

⁶⁹ Kaiser Wilhelm to King George, August 1, 1914, *DD3*, no. 575, pp. 74–75. Furthermore, word arrived soon after of Germany's declaration of war on Russia. Given that Grey had still hoped for peace "before any Great Power begins war," such news effectively ended all hope of avoiding war. Grey to Goschen, August 1, 1914, *BD11*, no. 411, p. 246.

⁷⁰ King George to Kaiser Wilhelm, August 1, 1914, *DD3*, no. 612, pp. 103–4.

⁷¹ Goschen to Grey, July 31, 1914, *BD11*, no. 383, pp. 234–35.

no. 383), Goschen had sent another telegram to Grey (*BD* no. 385), which arrived fifteen minutes after the neutrality statement but which was repeated to Paris at 1:45 P.M., a full eight hours earlier.⁷² Grey, who had told Cambon of the important role played by Belgium with respect to British public opinion, with this telegram at last conveyed an encouraging message to Paris.

Winston Churchill gave further testimony that Grey's diplomacy changed after the kaiser's telegram. When Churchill received word of Germany's declaration of war on Russia shortly after 9:30 P.M., he told Asquith of his intention to mobilize the fleet. Asquith did not disapprove, and, as Churchill left, Grey told him: "You should know I have just done a very important thing. I have told Cambon that we shall not allow the German fleet to come into the Channel."⁷³ Cambon fully realized the significance of this pledge. Though it is clear that he was, in fact, referring to the events of August 1, 1914, in a letter to his son on August 2, 1916, he wrote: "The day of 2 August 1914 is the one in which I spent the gravest moments of my life. It was only in the evening about ten p.m. that Grey sent to me the paper by which the British Government promised to protect our coasts. *That sufficed to involve England against Germany.* The next day, Belgian territory was violated and English intervention became obligatory to the eyes of the most recalcitrant."⁷⁴ Grey's efforts to keep the peace thus ended on the evening of August 1.

⁷² PRO, FO 146/4411.

⁷³ Quoted in Ted Morgan, *Churchill: Young Man in a Hurry* (New York, 1982), pp. 393-94.

⁷⁴ Paul Cambon, *Correspondance* (Paris, 1940-46), vol. 3, pp. 119-20. In addition, note that the Germans invaded Belgium on August 4, not August 3, as Cambon wrote in the letter. The records contained in *Documents Diplomatiques Français (DDF)* seem to support the contention that Cambon was referring to the events of August 1, 1914. In *DDF* no. 579, which was sent at 11:20 A.M. on August 2, Cambon wired that Grey had told him yesterday evening (*hier soir*) that "he will propose to the Cabinet to declare that the naval forces of England would prevent all operations against France." With respect to Cambon's no. 171 is so consistent because in this telegram Cambon did not mention Grey's offering any support to France or Belgium. In no. 172, Cambon reported that Grey "will demand authorization to declare Monday to the House of Commons that the Government of Britain will not permit a violation of Belgium" and that the British fleets "will oppose passage into the English Channel by the German fleets, or if they have already passed, any demonstration against the French coasts." These declarations of British support are completely different from Grey's message to Bertie at 8:20 P.M. Finally, insofar as the actual timing of telegram no. 172 is concerned, Cambon reported, "The English fleets are mobilized." Thus it would seem that no. 172 was written sometime after 9:30 P.M. on August 1.

Grey finally had his “tussle” with the cabinet on August 2. The letter of summation the cabinet sent to the King showed that Grey’s assumption on August 1 about the future direction of the cabinet had been correct: “It was agreed, without any attempt to state a formula, that it would be made evident that a substantial violation of the neutrality of that country [Belgium] would place us in the situation contemplated as possible by Mr. Gladstone in 1870, when interference was held to compel us to take action.”⁷⁵ Hazlehurst wrote that this guarded formula indeed meant that “the point of no return had been reached.”⁷⁶

At 4:00 P.M. on Monday, August 3, Grey addressed the House of Commons, which gave receptive cheers in support of a British defense of Belgium. At six o’clock “the Secretary of State was leaning gloomily by the window. Nicolson congratulated him on the success of his speech. Sir Edward did not answer. He moved to the center of the room and raised his hands with clenched fists above his head. He brought his fists with a crash upon the table. ‘I hate war’ he groaned ‘I hate war.’”⁷⁷

Clearly there was no “misunderstanding” on August 1, 1914. Rather, historians have misunderstood Grey’s attempt to make contingency plans through Lichnowsky in case a continental war found England neutral. The mere fact that he had been forced to guard against such a situation must have been highly distasteful to Grey, who allowed the “misunderstanding” myth to cloak the affair.

More important, within Sir Edward Grey on August 1, 1914, there struggled two absolute convictions: (1) that the unfolding situation must not result in a European war but (2) that, if it did, England must stand beside France and Russia. By his actions of that day, Grey gave precedence to the former, since he toiled for peace long after the cabinet had taken what he considered to be significant steps toward intervention. But Berlin dashed Grey’s last efforts at peace with its retarded acceptance of the long-dead proposal of French neutrality. A European war and British intervention remained the only alternative.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Quoted in Hazlehurst (n. 1 above), p. 98.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Nicolson, p. 422. The next day, in an interview with U.S. Ambassador Walter Hines Page, after saying, “Everybody knows that there will be war,” Grey’s eyes filled with tears and he concluded, “Thus the efforts of a lifetime go for nothing. I feel like a man who has wasted his life.” From Burton Hendrick, *Life and Letters of W. H. Page* (New York, 1924), 1:313.

⁷⁸ Ekstein and Steiner conclude that, “While Grey led the Cabinet into war, he more than anyone had a horror of war and forebodings about its consequences. Britain’s entry into war was both a victory and a defeat.” See Hinsley, ed. (n. 1 above), p. 410.