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Great Britain did not commit an error by going to war against Germany in 1914. One can establish compelling reasons it was not a mistake by considering the taxonomy of Thucydides' fear honor, and interest as contemporized by the Naval War College's Professor Genest as national security, credibility, and prosperity. First, an aggressive Germany, with a reasonable chance of quick victory against France, challenged Great Britain's national security by compromising its military capability. Second, Berlin's brazen violation of Belgian neutrality and antagonism toward France challenged Great Britain's international credibility as its partners pleaded for help. Finally, a Germany engorged from territorial conquest in Europe creates a direct threat to Britain's economic fundament and ability to compete globally. Though unprepared and probably able to reach a diplomatic accommodation with Germany, Britain chose the difficult but correct path in declaring war because it aligned with its national security interests, preserved its international credibility, and supported its long-term prosperity.

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The Unavoidable War:

Why Britain Was Correct to March Against Germany in 1914

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College, Newport, RI in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Strategy and Policy.

April 3, 2018

Great Britain did not commit an error by going to war against Germany in 1914. One can establish compelling reasons it was not a mistake by considering the taxonomy of Thucydides' *fear honor, and interest* as contemporized by the Naval War College's Professor Genest as *national security, credibility*, and *prosperity*.[i] First, an aggressive Germany, with a reasonable chance of quick victory against France, challenged Great Britain's national security by compromising its military capability. Second, Berlin's brazen violation of Belgian neutrality and antagonism toward France challenged Great Britain's international credibility as its partners pleaded for help. Finally, a Germany engorged from territorial conquest in Europe creates a direct threat to Britain's economic fundament and ability to compete globally. Though unprepared and probably able to reach a diplomatic accommodation with Germany, Britain chose the difficult but correct path in declaring war because it aligned with its national security interests, preserved its international credibility, and supported its long-term prosperity.

The threat that Germany posed to Great Britain's national security was the most important reason London's war declaration was correct. For centuries, Britain took steps across diplomatic, military, and economic spectrums to preserve a balance of power in Europe and prevent the rise of a continental hegemon. A Germany victorious in 1914 against France and Belgium would find its sea power elements as defined by A.T. Mahan, notably *physical conformation*, as totally changed,[ii] with enhanced access to the North Sea, English Channel, Atlantic Ocean, and Mediterranean Sea. While Britain outpaced Germany's robust shipbuilding efforts in the early 1900s, in the peace a victorious Germany could redouble its effort against Britain in a "second wave" naval race.

A continental hegemon was not in Great Britain's national security interests. Indeed, longstanding British policy across centuries of monarchs and governments was to prevent the emergence of a single power dominating Europe's mainland or areas across the channel. If Germany defeated France and then Russia in the First World War, Germany would be without a great power rival on the continent, exponentially increasing Berlin's diplomatic clout, military industrial potential, and economic power. Against Germany alone, France had neither the chance to defeat German military power in a short war, nor the economic resources to sustain a protracted conflict.[iii] Great Britain's traditional role as an "offshore balancer" is unsustainable in the face of German victory, with scholars suggesting that British public opinion viewed Germanic hegemony as a threat,[iv] and that Berlin would likely assume a dominant position upon victory.[v]

Beating France would not only establish Germany as a continental hegemon, but it would also provide Berlin with enhanced access to the sea. Furthermore, a German-imposed peace would give Berlin unfettered access to the French seacoast and nearly unlimited access to the Atlantic Ocean. Mahan underscores the important role that physical conformation plays in sea power,[vi] which in the case of a German victory would vastly expand its available coastline for naval bases and operations. Enhanced German access to the sea would compromise Great Britain's ability to protect its territory and contain German seapower. Historian David Stevenson underscores the importance the Low Countries play in British national security, with Belgium's position opposite the Thames river playing a critical role in London's economic health.[vii] Enhanced German access to the sea would undermine Britain's ability to function as the "roadblock" to German seapower, as noted by Professor McCranie.[viii]

A victory over France and eventually Russia (which Berlin achieved against Moscow in 1917) would have enabled Germany to consider resuming a naval arms race. Though the race between Great Britain and Germany to produce battleships tapered off in the years prior to the World War I (at the time in favor of London), it is nevertheless an important element to consider. Though a hypothetical outcome, a hegemonic Germany with Europe's resources at its fingertips would have the opportunity to resume construction of its battle fleet, which could possibly combine with captured French or Russian units. Paul Kennedy, in *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, asserts that "…Britain's naval position and the balance of power in Europe were inextricably linked…", and suggests that the combined industrial strength accessible to a victorious Germany would enable it to "outbuild the British, whatever the efforts of [Great Britain]."[ix] In addition to the implications that would bear out in the Second World War noted earlier, Kennedy considers the consequences of Germany acquiring the French fleet in 1940, the threat of which drove the British to take preemptive military action to neutralize it. The combination of potential German hegemony on the continent, prospect of increased German access to the sea, and the risks of Germany resuming the naval race from a position of strength was a direct challenge to Great Britain's national security. Therefore, going to war to oppose Germany was the correct decision for Britain.

In addition to national security, Great Britain's international credibility was at stake in August 1914 as the remainder of Europe marched into conflagration. Britain prided itself as a country based on the rule of law and the word of its government. As a party to the 1839 Treaty of London, Great Britain committed itself as a guarantor of Belgian neutrality, as did France and Prussia. London, backed by British public opinion, felt it important to stand against a violation of Belgian neutrality. Stepping back would call into question the sanctity of British

commitments globally. Prussia avoided this complication during its war with France in 1870-1871 by not impinging on Belgian soil, and France was careful to avoid preemptive troop deployments there in 1914 to uphold its own 1839 obligation (despite the negative consequences to its contingency planning and military deployment at the outset of war).[x]

Thus, the international norm for upholding the 1839 accord rested on 85 years of precedent. Stevenson proposes that Germany's ultimatum to allow the free passage of its forces through Belgium to attack France "or else" created a moral obligation for Great Britain to assist the Belgians in their moment of dire need. It is important to note there was significant disagreement in London on what constituted an "acceptable" violation of Belgian neutrality – such as the uneventful, temporary passage of a limited number of forces in a remote corner of the country. However, the wholesale violation of neutrality in both the letter and spirit of the 1839 commitment could not go unanswered, lest London lose its credibility internationally.

London had to support Brussels not only out of solidarity to the Belgian people, but also because of the country's strategic importance to the continental powers due to its access to the English Channel, ports, and rivers. In *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger asserts "[t]here was no cause for which Great Britain had fought as consistently or implacably as the independence of the Low Countries."[xi] If Britain took a neutral stance in the First World War, it would almost certainly have negative impacts to its credibility on other long-standing security priorities, such as defending its imperial possessions. If Britain could not make good its commitment to Belgian neutrality 30 miles from its coast, how could it be expected to react to threats 3,000 miles away?

Britain's international credibility was not only at stake with its commitment to Belgium. Great Britain's growing ties with France evolved into an important alignment, if not an explicit alliance. Great Britain could not easily "look the other way" while an aggressive Germany

steamrolled a fellow democracy. Though traditional rivals, Britain and France set aside their strategic disagreements in the 1905 *Entente Cordiale*, abating centuries of rivalry. London also increased its ties and settled disagreements with Moscow via the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 and through instruments like the Triple Entente. The improved relationship with France extended beyond easing of tensions and competition. In 1912, the British and French loosely codified their approach to maritime security by agreeing that the Royal Navy would maintain primary responsibility for the Atlantic and North Sea, while the French Navy would be responsible for maritime security in the Mediterranean.[xii] Indeed, this arrangement helped the British to concentrate naval power in the North Sea against its primary maritime opponent: Germany. As a result, London's division of maritime security responsibility with France created what Kennedy calls a "moral" obligation to "defend [France's] northern coastline against German attack."[xiii] Leaving Paris in the lurch left France completely vulnerable to German naval attack along its entire Atlantic seaboard. The loss of international credibility Britain would suffer if it did not come to Belgium and France's aid would have been felt across the British Empire and impacted its new tentative partnership with the superpower-destined United States. The arguments for Moral obligation alone makes Britain's decision to go to war the correct one.

Alongside national security and international credibility, Great Britain's long-term prosperity was at stake in 1914. German victory over France and Russia would leave Berlin an economic superpower. The resources and markets Germany would gain from victory would reshuffle the centers of economic power globally and provide Britain with an additional overseas competitor. Germany's acquisition of French and Belgian colonies would provide new overseas territory and bases to secure those economic opportunities that would transform it into a global challenger. Synchronized with German leads in science and industrial potential, Berlin would

become an increasingly challenging economic adversary, leaving Britain and her creaking empire sandwiched between a booming United States and a thriving German Reich.

Great Britain's economy was slowing vis-à-vis that of the United States and Germany in the early 1900s, and its economic rank was sinking globally. Kennedy describes the economic underpinnings of the *Pax Britannica* as "beginning to rest on shaky foundations," and cites Britain's percentage of world trade as shrinking from 25.2 percent in 1860 to 17.1 percent in 1898, while Germany's growth as a percentage of world trade increased from 8.8 to 11.8 percent in the same period.[xiv] While this economic decline did not have a direct impact on Britain's ability to out produce Germany in battleships in the near term, over the long term Britain would be strained to the breaking point, should an Anglo-German naval race ensue post-war. The economic trends of Britain before the First World War were those of decreasing productivity and competitiveness.[xv] A victorious Germany, bolstered by an infusion of economic opportunity as the new master of Europe, would exacerbate the declining trend in British economic clout. As British naval theorist Julian Corbett proposes: "[w]hen all things are equal, it is the longer purse that wins."[xvi] A German victory in 1914 leaves Berlin with the longest purse in Europe.

Turning to Germany, most agree its prospects of victory over France and Russia were favorable without British intervention. Such a victory would leave Germany as an economic power in Europe without rival, with Britain as a distant second. In addition to having land access to all the foodstuffs and raw materials it would need to prosper economically, it would not necessarily depend on seaborne commerce to receive them. Furthermore, German production of steel becomes nearly trebled when compared to that of Britain, should German and French production be combined: Kennedy's 1913 steel production figures show Britain producing 7.7 million tons, Germany 17.6 million tons, and France 4.6 million tons. In terms of industrial

potential, Germany's eight percent lead in 1913 over Britain would be widened to 35 percent, should the capacity of Germany and France combine. While we cannot be certain that French industrial power would be completely retooled to be at the disposal of Berlin's war machine, a German victory would solidify its lead over British industrial capacity indefinitely.

Finally, Germany would become an even greater global competitor to Britain if it won the war. A victorious Germany would acquire significant colonial possessions from Belgium and France in the event of victory. Kaiser Wilhelm II was already seeking opportunities to expand the German Reich overseas, and a broken France and Belgium would almost certainly be compelled to yield significant portions of Africa and Southeast Asia to German control.[xvii] Stevenson argues that even if Germany did not exercise territorial annexation in Europe upon victory, it would absolutely demand that France and Belgium turn over their colonial possessions.[xviii] Such overseas annexations would have two important implications for British prosperity. First, it would create access to resources and new overseas markets for German goods that would increase her economic competitiveness. Second, it would provide Berlin new overseas bases directly opposite British possessions, compelling the British to increase their defense spending to counter the German overseas military buildup that would inevitably follow. Given Great Britain's relative economic decline before the outbreak of war, this would place additional economic strain on the British Empire. Ultimately, the combination of Britain's economic decline combined with the economic and colonial benefits Germany would attain in victory, were a threat to London's long-term prosperity.

Despite the case that declaring war in 1914 was in its interests, it can be argued that Britain committed an error by going to war. The First World War ultimately weakened the British Empire to near collapse, and at best inaugurated its permanent decline. Given the

diplomatic overtures between London and Berlin in the 1890s and early years of the 20th century, Britain might have worked with Germany in partnership to balance the rising United States and Russia, while avoiding a continental war for which it was utterly unprepared.

First, there is some evidence that Germany and Great Britain could have found an accommodation. Indeed, talks between London and Berlin were ongoing from 1898-1901 for an alliance that would have theoretically led to a stable marriage between the ultimate "whale and elephant" in Europe.[xix] Most of Great Britain's resources and imperial acquisitions lay outside the European sphere, and the paucity of German overseas possessions (and forward-deployed military power) in Africa and in the Pacific at the outset of war did not threaten British security. Even as late as 1912, Germany looked to forge a diplomatic understanding with Great Britain, which dovetailed with the slowdown of Germany's robust shipbuilding program.

Second, one can argue that Britain made a mistake by seeking a "war of choice" with a near-peer power it could treat with while being totally unprepared for war on the European mainland. A widely held view was that the British Army in 1914 did not have a force anywhere approaching the scale that would make a difference on a continental European battlefield. While well-trained with combat experience in the Boer War over a decade earlier, the idea that the tiny British Expeditionary Force could amount to anything more than a token contribution was folly.[xx] Without the ability to engage decisively on land, Britain could not defeat Germany through the use of sea power alone, especially in the age of railroad transportation. Even Britain's use of a "disposal force" as advocated by Julian Corbett proved to be a disaster in practice during the Dardanelles campaign.[xxi]

Though the reasons Britain could have avoided war seem compelling, they are flawed. Considering a potential Anglo-German entente, Berlin also took very aggressive policy decisions

that undermined the long-term health of that relationship, most notably the German naval buildup. A German race to build a fleet of significance could only have one potential adversary: the Royal Navy.[xxii] In effect, the seeds of future German-British confrontation were laid with the keels of Tirpitz's battleship program. Turning to preparedness, while Great Britain lacked a continental Army, its small British Expeditionary Force nevertheless played an important role in staving off French collapse in 1914, and Great Britain adapted its military posture to deploy a large and effective land force alongside France that was instrumental in Germany's ultimate defeat. Finally, one cannot underestimate the centuries of naval preparedness advantage Britain enjoyed over Germany, with the mere presence of the Royal Navy denying the Germans access to the English Channel and a range of potential naval operations against the French coast.

The decision for any country to decide to go to war is seldom a straightforward one. Kennedy underscores that Britain's choice for war became a selection of the "lesser of two evils." The lesser of these two evils was for Great Britain to go to war against Germany. Britain's national security, international credibility, and prosperity were all at stake -- and any of those reasons alone can serve as justification enough. The siren song of non-intervention proposed by some would have ultimately led to disaster, with Great Britain losing her empire, her soul, and her way of life, joining the ranks of Spain and the Netherlands as humbled imperial powers. History had other plans for Britain.

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[i] Marc Genest, "Man, the State, and the Peloponnesian War" (lecture, U.S. Naval War College Strategy and Policy Department, Newport, RI, March 19, 2018).

[ii] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Mahan on Naval Strategy Selections from the Writings of Rear Admiral Thayer Mahan*, ed. John B. Hattendorf (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991), pages 31-47.

[iii] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 1987), page 223.

[iv] David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), page 27.

[v] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), page 213.

[vi] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Mahan on Naval Strategy Selections from the Writings of Rear Admiral Thayer Mahan*, ed. John B. Hattendorf (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991), page 37.

[vii] David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), page 27.

[viii] Kevin McCranie, "Maritime Strategy: Sir Julian Corbett" (lecture, U.S. Naval War College Strategy and Policy Department, Newport, RI, April 2, 2018).

[ix] Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (New York: Humanity Books, 1998), page 231.

[x] David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), page 26.

[xi] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), page 205.

[xii] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 1987), page 253.

[xiii] Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (New York: Humanity Books, 1998), page 226.

[xiv] Ibid, pages 189-190.

[xv] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 1987), page 228.

[xvi] Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988; Originally published by London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1911) page 102.

[xvii] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 1987), page 211.

[xviii] David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), page 34.

[xix] Ibid, page 16.

[xx] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 1987), page 267.

[xxi] Kevin McCranie, "Sir Julian Corbett" (lecture, U.S. Naval War College Strategy and Policy Department, Newport, RI, April 2, 2018).

[xxii] Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (New York: Humanity Books, 1998), page 215.