Lessons from the Great War

The commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, besides being an occasion to reflect on how this tragedy came to engulf Europe and Britain, offers a chance to see what lessons the events of 1914 have for Britain today.

In 1914, Britain plunged from peace to war in just a few days. By contrast, a century later, the peaceful absorption of Britain in the EU project has been going on for over 40 years. Yet many of the dynamics and determinants on both occasions have similarities, as one would expect when the future direction of a state on key matters becomes an issue.

One of the most obvious parallels between the crisis of 1914 and the current day entanglement of Britain in the EU is that, in each case, Britain played a reactive role. Britain had no interest in waging a war in 1914. Similarly, today, Britain has never proposed any move to ever-closer union or, indeed, any European Union at all, yet both happened.

On both occasions, British politicians misunderstood the nature of what they were involved in. Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, said, on 3 August 1914, that "The Triple Entente was not an alliance, it was a Diplomatic Group". In fact, Britain was attaching itself to a highly integrated Franco-Russian military alliance with numerous trigger points. Similarly, in modern times, British politicians have attached themselves to what they often misrepresent as a trading area with limited political context when, in reality, they are making Britain part of an embryonic state with massive geographical, demographic and ideological objectives.

Then there was, in 1914, the constant reiteration by Grey and Herbert Asquith, the Prime Minister, that Britain had not committed itself and had a 'free hand'. This is matched by today's politicians who constantly make speeches about their 'vision of Europe', which is very different from that of other EU leaders or the texts of the EU treaties.

In 1914, Britain declared war amid much self-congratulation that it was taking a moral stance in upholding the Belgian Treaty of 1839, which the German Chancellor, Bethman-Hollweg, derided as "a scrap of paper". Yet it is clear from the records of successive agonised Cabinet discussions and other documents, that much of the Liberal Cabinet was not convinced the Belgian Treaty should be the determinant for war. Confusion also extended to the Opposition. The Conservative Leader, Bonar Law, wrote a letter of support to Asquith on 2 August urging him to "support France and Russia" – and did not even mention Belgium. Supporting Tsarist Russia's adventurism into the Balkans was anathema to the Liberals and would certainly have been an unpopular policy. Next day (possibly at Grey's instigation) the Conservatives fell into line and put Belgium's neutrality at the centre of their stance.

Britain may have seen itself as a peacemaker. However, both France and Germany had taken the decision to go to war, as had Austria and Russia, without knowing the final British decision. The lack of clarity and the constant desire to have "a free hand" meant that, in the final analysis, Britain exerted no influence on the decision of the other powers. Britain had a 're-active role'.

The rationale for Britain declaring war in 1914 was the view of the British government that it could not allow France to be crushed or massively weakened as this would threaten Britain's independence of action and, ultimately, its security. The British declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914 is

In Flanders fields... Tyne Cot cemetery in Belgium is the resting place for just some of the million British Empire troops to fall in World War One.

widely agreed to be the most critical and far-reaching decision taken by any British government in the last two hundred years. By the end of the First World War, a million British Empire soldiers were dead, the map of Europe had been torn up, and much of the accumulated savings of the great Victorian age had been squandered. Such political instability had been injected into Europe that, within twenty years, a further bloody war had to be fought and the ties of the British Empire were so frayed that Britain made a rapid retreat from Empire after 1945.

All these developments led to a crisis of confidence among some British politicians who, by the 1960s, saw absorption in the project of European unity as an attractive option. Yet the attachment of Britain to the European project, which spread to almost all of the British political class from the 1980s, was based on some of the same weaknesses that had led to the week of crisis in August 1914. In the 1970s, joining the European project only attracted the support of slightly more than half of all MPs but, by the end of the 1990s, there were only a handful of MPs who were willing to contemplate withdrawal. This was a marked solidification of opinion.

There has been a repeated refusal to conduct a cost/benefit analysis of EU membership, an analysis which was done as a matter of course by the Swiss government when it considered joining the European Economic Area. There has also been over-literal adherence to the EU treaties in matters that should be interpreted according to changed circumstances and British interests – and certainly not decided by foreign lawyers. Others in the EU have been more realistic.

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Gladstone's analysis of the obligations of the Belgian Treaty in a speech on of 10 August 1870 and the manner in which these should be construed should be commended to the present British government when considering their obligations under the Treaty of Accession of 1972. He stressed that any action must be "practicable":

"It brings the object in view within the sphere of the practicable and attainable, instead of leaving it within the sphere of what might be desirable, but which might have been most difficult, under all the circumstances, to have realized."

Take the question of free movement of people in the EU. For a long time, this Treaty clause did not cause any difficulty for the UK

but now it does, particularly when almost half of EU migrant labour has taken up jobs. Gladstone's injunction was clear:

"I am not able to subscribe to … what plainly amounts to an assertion, that the simple fact of the existence of a guarantee is binding on every party to it, irrespectively altogether of the particular position in which it may find itself at the time when the occasion for acting on the guarantee arises."

It was quite clear that the freedom of movement principle could lead, in some circumstances, to extreme numbers of migrants – as it has done with consequent impoverishment of Britain's poorest people. It was politically and socially in British interests to withdraw from this obligation, yet British ministers seem to be incapable of following Gladstone's sensible analysis.

Moreover, the European Union Treaty was not to be considered a static document, but had built into it the mandate for "ever closer union", which meant that it would always be an irritating factor. Every controversial new EU law or agreement has had the same effect on British-EU relations as the launch of a new battleship for the High Seas Fleet had on Anglo-German relations before 1914.

Since the 1960s the British political class seems to have been driven by ever more obscure and unfathomable motives. Even today they remain unclear about what is unacceptable to Britain about the EU as it now stands, and David Cameron seems to have great difficulty in even formulating the details of what he wishes to renegotiate. It is, of course, possible to argue that membership of the EU increases the power of the British political class in Britain itself. Membership of the EU means increasing government, increased complexity and increased contact with other governments and EU institutions, all of which has to be mediated by the political class with ensuing power, perquisites and prominence. At the same time, the existence of EU institutions, along with other transnational bodies that often lay down the template for EU activity, allow more responsibility for major issues to be outsourced by British politicians. Increased power, with diminished responsibility, together with the crisis of confidence during and after the 1960s, is a hidden determinant of British policy.

It is important to realize, as noted by former President Giscard, that it is British politicians who have agreed to all the extensions of EU powers, well beyond the Treaty of 1972. They have agreed to decisions by majority vote, to massive budget contributions, to new powers in justice, social affairs, and so forth. The emotional commitment to the EU as a symbol of progressive, modern political action, like Grey's moral commitment to France before 1914, became a fixed political idea. Similarly, the emotional commitment to the EU evolved into a political decision that it was in Britain's interest that Britain must remain in the EU and, therefore, negotiate and allow further moves to "ever closer union". In both cases, the chain of reasoning was faulty.

The events which so abruptly shattered the complacency of the Liberal government in 1914 are relevant to understanding the tangle into which successive modern British governments have enmeshed themselves, and the British people, in their membership of the EU. Searching questions have rarely been asked, and those who raised them have been disgracefully smeared as 'narrow nationalists' or 'xenophobes'.

There will be many commemorations over the next few years, and much regret will be expressed over the tragedy and the human losses and miseries that were the result of the First World War. But the political principles are clear. Politicians must not be afraid to ask searching questions. They must seek clarity and precise definitions in regard to obligations. They must avoid secrecy and evasiveness to Parliament and the people.

Especially, they must follow Gladstone's dictum about the commitment to treaties being dependent on the circumstances of the time, and Sir Edward Grey's repeated assertions that policy decisions must be based on British interests. ■

FURTHER READING

A longer version of this article, by Anthony Scholefield , appears in *A FUTURUS Special – Britain and Europe, 1914 and 2014.* http://www.futurus-thinktank.com/