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Sir Edward Grey and the Concert of Europe:

A Final Attempt to Save Europe from War

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Introduction

Facing the possibility of another European War, but this time on a scale that would far exceed the devastation of the Napoleonic Wars, British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey worked in July of 1914 to reconvene an old system, the Concert of Europe, to mediate the growing divisions of the European Powers. Grey was very mindful of such a threat where for “the first time since the Napoleonic wars Britain actually engaged in a European war to maintain that balance in Europe.”¹

Although Britain needed peace on the Continent for the protection of itself and its Empire, Britain did enjoy a greater sense of security as it was disjointed from the mainland with a vast Empire to support it.² This buffer from the conflict on the Continent did not stop the British from feeling a sense of “‘duty’ as well as its interest to preserve the equilibrium of Europe.”³ Thus when war was on the horizon Sir Edward threw himself into the work of attempting to save the Continent as he had done before with the Concert of Europe and mediation. However, this time the Concert would fail, sending Europe into the muddied trenches of the First World War.

In the earliest years of the twentieth century, the Concert of Europe proved to be a successful tool for maintaining peace in Europe. Finally, however in July of 1914, despite the efforts of British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, the Concert failed for seemingly two reasons. Firstly, the aggressive Ultimatum sent by Austria-Hungary to Serbia forced the Concert into handling a situation of a magnitude it had not seen while contesting with an unprecedented

¹ Zara Steiner. *British Power and Stability: The Historical Record*, in Goldstein, Erik, and McKercher, B.C.J. *Power and Stability: British Foreign Policy, 1865-1965*. (London, England and Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 2003), p. 25.

² Steiner, *British Power and Stability: The Historical Record*, p. 23.

³ Steiner, *British Power and Stability: The Historical Record*, p. 25.

document and deceitful information. Secondly, Sir Edward Grey's decision to exclude Russia from his four-power meditation and his indecisive nature of not fully declaring an alliance with any state caused the internal workings of the Concert to essentially be rendered ineffective.

Historiography

A key author on the topic of Sir Edward Grey and the Concert of Europe in the era of the First World War is T.G. Otte, a Professor of Diplomatic History at the University of East Anglia. Two of his key books on the topic are *Statesman of Europe: A Life of Sir Edward Grey* and *The July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914*. He has also written an article on the topic titled, "'Almost a Law of Nature'? Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Office, and the Balance of Power in Europe, 1905-12."

Looking first at *Statesman of Europe: A Life of Sir Edward Grey*, Otte illustrates diplomacy in Europe through a biographical account of the life and work of Grey. He gives a full description of who Grey is and the work that he did from the decade before the First World War to after its conclusion. He highlights his policies pre-war, during the war, and post-war with his advocacy for the League of Nations. Specifically leading into the War, Otte explains how Grey leaned on the Concert of Europe and "he hoped, 'having dealt with so many complications will... maintain itself against any new ones.'"⁴ Furthermore, Otte highlights the complicated relationships that Grey navigated as he tried to uphold his informal alliance with France and strengthen it by maintaining one with Russia, while also not alienating the Germans in the process.⁵ Finally, after the War, he

⁴ T.G. Otte. *Statesman of Europe: A Life of Sir Edward Grey*. (United Kingdom: Allen Lane, Penguin Random House UK, 2020). p. 465.

⁵ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 502.

discusses Grey's work on advocating for the League of Nations as the only political subject after the War that he was willing to confer about.⁶

Next examining *The July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914*, Otte argues that Europe fell into the First World War as a result of failed diplomacy and statesmanship. He looks at the days that led up to the War, from the assassination, through to the Ultimatum, and all the way to the start of fighting in great detail. Otte closely examines the diplomatic relationships between the Great Powers and pays close attention to how their dynamics shifted over the course of July 1914. One specific dynamic shift he noted was the one between London and Berlin. During the previous Balkan conflicts between 1912 and 1913, he notes that Germany and Britain were able to work together to diffuse the situation, but now in 1914 the Germans were not as eager for another round of similar cooperation.⁷

Looking at Otte's final piece "'Almost a Law of Nature'? Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Office, and the Balance of Power in Europe, 1905-12," he gives an in-depth description of who Sir Edward Grey was and how he came into office. When he first began his tenure as Foreign Secretary, Otte notes that Grey worked to maintain some of the actions of his predecessors, specifically the Entente with France. In a speech in October 1905, Grey called Britain's relationship with France the "cardinal point in our foreign policy."⁸ This details some of the key features that would come to be of great importance in Grey's policy as he navigated the rising tensions in July of 1914.

⁶ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 624.

⁷ T.G. Otte. *The July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 95.

⁸ T. G. Otte. "'Almost a Law of Nature'? Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Office, and the Balance of Power in Europe, 1905-12." *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 2003. 14 (2): 77-118. p. 79-80.

I used the pieces written by Otte to get a clearer picture of who Sir Edward Grey was and what his policies and actions were in the era of the First World War. Another key piece I used to expand my understanding of Grey's role in the First World War, was *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* by Christopher Clark, the Regius Professor of History of Cambridge. In his book, Clark looks at the start of the First World War through a diplomatic perspective rather than taking a militaristic approach. Clark notes that Grey was "the most powerful foreign minister of pre-war Europe"⁹ and was a strong Liberal Imperialist.¹⁰ Clark highlights Grey's fondness for the use of Entente's, as they allowed him to appear to be on either side of any agreement, which of course is strategic politically but can cause much confusion diplomatically.¹¹ Grey holds so strongly onto the ideal of the Entente that Clark notes, "Grey viewed the crisis unfolding in Europe almost entirely through the lens of the Entente."¹²

While I used Otte and Clark together to highlight Grey and his work specifically, I used *The Road to 1914: The War that Ended Peace* by Margaret MacMillan, a professor at Oxford, for a broader context of what was happening throughout Europe on the eve of War. I used this piece to understand the Concert situation as a final attempt to stop the rising tensions in the Balkans in 1914. MacMillan breaks down the Concert into its two groups, the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente to explain one of the reasons the Concert fell apart. She writes, "Alliance, like weapons, may be categorized as defensive but in practice their use may well be offensive."¹³ In other words, this dual system working within the Concert created a dynamic that was too divisive for any real

⁹ Christopher Clark. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. (New York: Harper, 2013), p. 200.

¹⁰ Clark, p. 201.

¹¹ Clark, p. 204.

¹² Clark, p. 495.

¹³ Margaret MacMillan. *The Road to 1914: The War that Ended Peace*. (New York, NY: Random House, 2014), p. 238.

success. Even with this, she highlights how the Great Powers believed, even as in July of 1914 countries began to arm, that the Concert of Europe would maintain the peace as it had before.¹⁴

I utilized another book by MacMillan titled *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*, to understand the creation of the League of Nations so that I could better ascertain the role Grey played in it. In this, MacMillan notes that the League of Nations was a “great experiment”¹⁵ and that many Europeans had wanted a change to international politics before the League of Nations, but when it came about it was largely viewed as a last resort.¹⁶ She goes on to detail how there were numerous proposals and plans that were sent in on how to form the League of Nations and that it was determined since there were only three Powers remaining after the war (Great Britain, France, and the US), the United States should be the one to take the lead on its development.¹⁷

I utilized these three key authors along with other sources to analyze and synthesize what role Sir Edward Grey played in the Concert of Europe, which ultimately failed and led the world into total war. It seems that a series of fatal decisions were made on the part of Grey that placed Europe in a dangerous position. For one, his reliance on Ententes and the Concert itself was simply not enough, even as he attempted to create his four-power mediation, which was itself a destabilizing choice. Further, Grey did not consider how damaged the Concert system was coming out of both Balkan Wars in 1913. Thus, these sources in conjunction highlight that there were numerous errors in judgment on the part of Grey and the other diplomats that caused an assassination to tumble into a world war.

¹⁴ MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 580.

¹⁵ Margaret MacMillan, Margaret. *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*. (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 84.

¹⁶ MacMillan, *Paris 1919*, p. 86.

¹⁷ MacMillan, *Paris 1919*, p. 86.

Methodology

The research process for this paper began with combing through secondary sources to establish what happened and to gain basic knowledge on the topic. From there, I used information that I found in the secondary sources, such as the ones described above, to find primary sources for corroboration. The key primary source that I used was written by Sir Edward Grey. It provided me with first-hand insight into the events that I researched in my secondary sources.

The foremost source by Grey that I utilized was *Twenty-Five Years: 1892-1916* which was published in 1925. This source is sort of a political memoir that Grey wrote. I especially utilized the sections of this source that dealt with the years before and during the First World War. Grey gave his state of mind about events in a reflective manner. On the War as a whole, Grey wrote,

After the outbreak of war I sometimes lay awake asking myself again and again whether the war could have been prevented by anything that I could have done in the preceding years. Sleep came every night sufficient in amount to restore strength for the next day, but there was often a wakeful time round about four o'clock in the morning — that time when vitality is low and spirits are depressed and the mind is often a prey to doubts and anxieties. I would try one hypothesis after another, considering what hope there would have been in any of them.¹⁸

Such insight was beyond compare in understanding the impact of the First World War on one of the men who tried to prevent it. Reading the words that Grey used to describe what happened provides a fuller picture than just reading how secondary source authors would express it.

I used this memoir to add a layer of contextualization to the secondary sources, such as those written by T.G. Otte. By beginning with secondary sources and using them to direct my search for primary sources, I was able to integrate the historical analysis of diplomatic relations in July 1914 with information written by those that were present at the time. This allowed me to corroborate the arguments made by various historians by incorporating evidence from other

¹⁸ Grey of Fallodon, Viscount. *Twenty-Five Years: 1892-1916*. Vol. II. (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925), p. 48.

sources so as to create a fuller picture of what happened in the days and weeks leading in the First World War. To achieve this, I laid out the arguments and evidence of various sources in a manner that identifies how Europe developed the Concert system, who Sir Edward Grey was and what role he played, what key events caused the Concert to fail, and what diplomatic missteps were taken that added to the failure, which ultimately lead to war.

The Congress of Vienna

In 1813 Napoleon's raid across the European continent was finally coming to a halt. The Powers of Europe had formed a coalition, unique in its makeup, to stop Napoleon's army and return the map of Europe to its previously balanced condition. By 1814 the Congress of Vienna was assembled and was "the result of diplomatic transactions of the earlier part of the year at Paris and elsewhere, and it was completed by the second Peace of Paris, which was made after the return and second defeat of Napoleon."¹⁹ The question to deal with now was how to go about fixing the map of Europe, something that the Continental Powers knew they did not agree on.²⁰

Eventually, the earliest form of the Concert of Europe began to take shape. Leading such an alliance was Great Britain, who took on the work of settling the differences of the Allies while also bringing them together, and simultaneously creating a plan to stop Napoleon and establish a system to prevent another such event.²¹ The goal of any treaty created, at least on the part of the British, was to create an alliance against war, specifically against the French in this instance.²² By March 1814 the Treaty of Chaumont was signed, which bound together Britain, Austria, Russia,

¹⁹ Great Britain. Foreign Office. *The Congress of Vienna -1815*. [N. P, 1920] Pdf. p. 1.

²⁰ Great Britain. Foreign Office., p. 3-4.

²¹ Great Britain. Foreign Office., p. 11.

²² Great Britain. Foreign Office., p. 31.

and Prussia, as they called for France to accept the terms of peace.²³ This Treaty highlights the features of the balance of power that would come to mark diplomacy in Europe over the next century and the development of the Concert of Europe.

The Congress of Vienna and its establishment of the Concert of Europe was intended to prevent Europe from falling into another continental war, such as the one that Napoleon had waged. However, there were tests to this form of diplomacy, principally when Germany began its rise as a European power in 1870. In that year, Germany reunified after the Franco-Prussian War. Describing the profound nature of German reunification, Benjamin Disraeli, who was the British Prime Minister in 1868 and again from 1874 to 1880, said to the House of Commons in 1871: “This war represents the German revolution, a greater political event than the French Revolution of last century ... The balance of power has been entirely destroyed, and the country which suffers most, and feels the effects of this great change most, is England.”²⁴ The growth threatened the balance of power in Europe, and thus challenged the Concert of Europe. This disruption would again be felt in 1914 when the British would once again have to try to reconvene the Concert.²⁵

While the Concert was designed to settle disputes among the European nations, it certainly did not prevent them. During the nineteenth century Europe was by no means in total peace. Great Britain was in conflict at different points with both Russia and France, while they had a steady relationship with Germany up until Bismarck stepped down followed by a brief period of peace right before the assassination.²⁶ Along with not preventing conflict, the Concert also eventually resulted in a dual-alliance system in Europe: the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente. While

²³ “Treaty of Chaumont,” signed March 1, 1918. The Napoleon Series Archive.

²⁴ Vernon Bogdanor. 2014. “The Shadows Lengthen.” *History Today* 64 (8): 19–25. p. 20.

²⁵ Bogdanor, p. 20.

²⁶ Harry Elmer Barnes. “Assessing The Blame for The World War: A Revised Judgment Based on All the Available Documents.” *Current History (1916-1940)* 20, no. 2 (1924): 171–95. p. 174.

such a divide was not the intent of the Congress of Vienna, it still developed through the nineteenth century. Such a division, as Margaret MacMillan notes, only further divided Europe, as “The Triple Alliance, like the Triple Entente, had the effect of encouraging its members to work together in the international arena and during the increasing number of crises; it established links of cooperation and friendship and created expectations of support in the future.”²⁷ Thus, while the Concert and the Congress of Vienna worked to resolve conflict, and in some instances very well did, they also set the stage for the greatest conflict Europe would see up to this point: the First World War.

The Concert of Europe

The Concert of Europe, which as noted previously was established as a result of the Congress of Vienna, created a system where statesmen from the various European Powers would come together to consult on and manage the international affairs of Europe.²⁸ One of the key tenets of the Concert was the maintenance of the balance of power between the European nations. The idea was that if each of the Great Powers was sufficiently strong enough to act as a sort of counterweight for the other Powers, the chances of falling into conflict would be diminished. Of course, however, when discussing the balance of power, the Great Powers of Europe simply included themselves on that list, leaving the smaller states at the mercy of the decisions and whims of the Concert.

The basic tenet of the Concert was that if international tensions arose, then states needed to restrain from using independent unilateral action to solve it and instead come together and make

²⁷ MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 238.

²⁸ MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 22.

a plan in which each state gave its consent.²⁹ The Concert was viewed as a sort of last option in the international arena as the overarching goal was to avoid any sort of international crisis. A final aspect of the layout of the Concert was that its intent was to prevent any one of the Great Powers from becoming the focal point for international relations, thus disrupting the balance of power which was held onto so dearly. In other words, the Concert was supposed to prevent Britain, France, Russia, or eventually Germany from becoming the powerhouse of diplomatic relations and dictating all interstate policy on the Continent.³⁰

Before the summer of 1914, the Concert of Europe had succeeded in multiple crises at preventing full-on war. MacMillan writes, “Europe had always managed to pull back in time. In 1905, 1908, 1911, 1912, and 1913, the Concert of Europe, a much weakened one, had held.”³¹ The Concert successfully managed the Moroccan crises, the crisis over Bosnia, and the various crises in the Balkan states.³² Even leading up to July 1914, Grey felt somewhat optimistic about the Concert and international relations. He wrote, “In the early months of 1914 the international sky seemed clearer than it had been. The Balkan clouds had disappeared. After the threatening periods of 1911, 1912, and 1913 a little calm was probable, and, it would seem, due.”³³ With this feeling, many of the statesmen of Europe felt that once the July crisis struck, the Concert would somehow manage to calm tensions and return Europe to peace. However, this would not be the case.

²⁹ F.H. Hinsley. “The Development of the European States System Since the Eighteenth Century.” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 11 (1961): 69–80. p. 75-76.

³⁰ Hinsley, p. 75-76.

³¹ MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 503-504.

³² MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 499.

³³ MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 529.

The final success of the Concert was during the first Balkan war in 1912 and the second Balkan War in 1913. After the Second Balkan War, “Grey sponsored a Conference of Ambassadors in London to secure a negotiated peace between the Great Powers.”³⁴ The Second Balkan War began in 1913 when Bulgarian forces attacked the Greek and Serb forces in Macedonia. By December of that year, Sir Edward Grey called the Ambassadors Conference, or the Conference of London, in an attempt to diffuse the rising tensions in the region.³⁵ The situation had become quite volatile as many Great Power interests had come into play, specifically those of Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Russia.³⁶ The crux of the issue, going back to the First Balkan War in 1912, was the debate over Albania, as “The military measures taken by Austria-Hungary in November 1912 in Galicia and Bosnia-Herzegovina because of the Serbian move into Albania and directed not only against Serbia but also against Russia exacerbated the situation.”³⁷



Image 1: Meeting of the London Conference (Ambassador's Conference) 1913

³⁴ Bogdanor, p. 21.

³⁵ Richard Hall. *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913: Prelude to the First World War*. (London, UK: Routledge, 2000), p. 72.

³⁶ Hall, p. 72

³⁷ Hall, p. 72.

At the very beginning, the Great Powers had made some progress as they agreed on making Albania its own independent state,³⁸ but this temporary agreement was short-lived. It became clear that Russia and Austria-Hungary had differing ideas about what the borders of the Balkan region should be, although each did make some initial concessions early in 1913, when “Austria conceded to Serbia the towns of Ipek, Prisen, Dibra and Djakova, while Russia agreed that Scutari should be included in Albania.”³⁹ Once an agreement was made on Albania, Grey called it “the anchor by which we must hold in order to preserve peace.”⁴⁰

This was a very fragile anchor for the Concert to be relying on, as other Powers, primarily Austria-Hungary, began to flout the agreements made by the Concert, which put the Concert in a very precarious position, as respect for its decisions was essentially the only enforcement it had. Specifically, the Concert feared any Austro-Hungarian action in Scutari and the rest of Albania.⁴¹ Elaborating on the idea that the Concert relied on respect for its decisions, British Diplomat Sir Eyre Crowe stated, “it is entirely conformable to our view that the boundaries as laid down by the Ambassadors’ Conference should be integrally respected.”⁴² In other words, the boundaries for Albania that the Concert created were just simply to be respected by the minor Powers, meaning that any moves that Austria-Hungary or other states made seemingly threatened the very foundation of international relations in Europe. This challenge to the Concert’s dominance over Europe is what led to its fragility as the Continent pushed down the path to World War One.

³⁸ Hall, p. 74.

³⁹ R.J. Crampton. “The Decline of the Concert of Europe in the Balkans, 1913-1914.” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 52, no. 128 (1974): 393–419. p. 395.

⁴⁰ Crampton, p. 395.

⁴¹ Crampton, p. 396-397.

⁴² Crampton, p. 398.

Despite the series of meetings and delicate tensions, they were able to be mitigated and the Concert was successful with the signing of the Treaty of London in 1913. What made the London Conference appear as a great success for the Concert was the region it had diffused, but one should note the damage this diffusion caused to the structure of the Concert. MacMillan writes, “What made the Balkans so dangerous was that a highly volatile situation on the ground mingled with the Great Power interests and ambitions.”⁴³ Even with the success, this would mark the end of the Concert of Europe, as the July Crisis of 1914 proved to be more than the weakening institution could handle, given it just barely in many respects prevented war in 1913.⁴⁴

The Concert of Europe and the balance of power were the ideals that the British used as a lens to view the crisis in 1914 through. Highlighting this perspective Leo Amery, a ‘young Edwardian imperialist,’ said in 1915 to Lord Milner [British statesman and colonial administrator], that “the war against a German domination of Europe was only necessary because we had failed to make ourselves sufficiently strong and united to be able to afford to disregard the European balance.”⁴⁵ Even Sir Edward Grey speaking on August 3rd, 1914, at a time when he realized the Concert had failed, still spoke of the success in 1913 demonstrating the belief in the Concert, “Throughout the Balkan crisis, by general admission, we worked for peace. The cooperation of the Great Powers of Europe was successful in working for peace in the Balkan crisis.”⁴⁶ Despite the hope of utilizing the Concert once again in the summer of 1914, Grey and the rest of Europe would

⁴³ MacMillan, *The Road to 1914* p. 477.

⁴⁴ Bogdanor, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Michael Howard. *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London, England: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972), p. 34.

⁴⁶ Robert Threshie Reid Loreburn and Edward Grey. *How the War Came*. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1919.), p. 323.

come to see that this simply would not stop the oncoming crisis, as ideas that once previously held onto were no longer being maintained.

Sir Edward Grey

Entering the stage in December of 1905, Sir Edward Grey, the newly appointed Foreign Minister for Great Britain, would successfully manage the crises of Europe through the Concert system up until 1916. Grey served an exceptionally long term, which made him “the most powerful foreign minister of pre-war Europe.”⁴⁷ Politically, Grey was considered a Liberal Imperialist but his policies looked to the continent of Europe rather than the Empire as a point of security for Britain.⁴⁸ As Foreign Secretary, he “knew little of the world outside Britain, had never shown much interest in travelling, spoke no foreign languages and felt ill at ease in the company of foreigners.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, his colleagues described him as “devoid of personal ambition, aloof, and unapproachable,”⁵⁰ preferring instead to spend his time outside fishing.

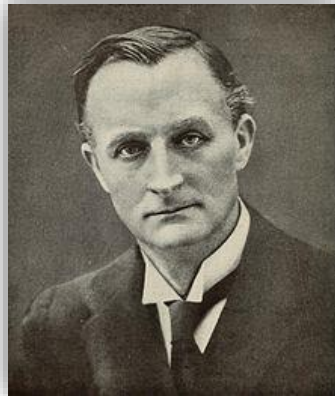


Image 2: Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary

⁴⁷ Clark, p. 200.

⁴⁸ Clark, p. 201.

⁴⁹ Clark, p. 200-201.

⁵⁰ Clark, p. 202.

Seeing as how Grey did not appear to be the ideal candidate for Foreign Secretary based on his personal characteristics, he needed the support of King George V and Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, both of whose support he had. Grey's appointment was part of a larger scheme to create a "Liberal League" to quell any fears of radicalism under the new Parliament that some, including the King, greatly feared.⁵¹ Grey's policies made him an important member of the new group that was forming, such that once in office, Grey was allowed to take the lead, by the Prime Minister and the King, in international affairs.⁵²

Michael Dockrill, cited by Clark in *The Sleepwalkers*, described Grey and his policies as, "a cautious Foreign Secretary, disinclined, like Salisbury and Lansdowne, to take risks, and highly conscious of the element of continuity in British foreign policy."⁵³ A key aspect of Grey's policy was to utilize a system of ententes, or friendships, rather than alliances. This came into play when Grey created an Entente with Russia and maintained the one with France leading up to the start of the First World War. However, this decision would come to harm British policy as, "The semi-committed position did, however, contribute to the fragility of the existing balance. The French and Russians gained in confidence; Germany was not deterred. Grey's balancing act was a failure because he was already committed to one side."⁵⁴

The key to Grey's use of establishing an entente without giving over to a full alliance was "Holding out the possibility of British intervention without promising it"⁵⁵ as a way of ensuring the balance of power. This allowed Grey to appear to the British parliament that he had not

⁵¹ Niall Ferguson. *The Pity of War*. (New York, NY: Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 1999), p. 56-57.

⁵² Clark, p. 200.

⁵³ Otte, 'Almost a Law of Nature?' p. 79.

⁵⁴ Steiner, *British Power and Stability: The Historical Record*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Gordon Martel. *The Month that Changed the World: July 1914*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 45.

ensnared Britain with the task of defending another nation, while also creating a sort of friendship with other European states that allowed Britain to ensure its own safety and stability. The issue with this came to light in July of 1914 when Grey's crafted system of ententes began to fall apart. Despite this, Grey strictly held to the philosophy of the Concert of Europe, something that would show not only in 1914 but again at the end of the War with his support of the developing League of Nations.⁵⁶



Image 3: Print of Sir Edward Grey addressing Parliament right before the start of the First World War.

When the time came again in 1914 for the Concert to be regrouped, Sir Edward Grey stepped forward to begin its reconvening. Grey was seen as a ‘reassuring figure’ who had been handling foreign affairs rather successfully for about nine years.⁵⁷ In his line of international

⁵⁶ Bogdanor, p. 22.

⁵⁷ Martel, p. 44.

successes, he had strengthened the Entente with France by creating one with Russia, he headed the London Conference that resulted in the great success of bringing the Balkan Wars to a close, and he believed in the importance of creating and maintaining a long and stable period of peace in Europe.⁵⁸ But despite his qualifications and successes, he ultimately failed to bring the Concert together to stop the start of the First World War.

The July Crisis and the Ultimatum

On June, 14th, 1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, a moment that many historians point to as a triggering point for the series of conflicts that resulted in the First World War. Through the month of July, statesmen from across Europe were tested by a series of diplomatic crises, eventually culminating in the Ultimatum sent to Serbia by Austria-Hungary. At first, Sir Edward Grey wanted to prevent Britain from having to make any decision that would permanently align them. The issue then became how to go about using the Concert in a way that would allow this to happen. Grey had to decide whether he should try to establish another Conference of London or if the Concert should move directly to exerting pressure on states such as Serbia and Austria-Hungary and push them to the negotiating table.⁵⁹

When it seemed that the decision would be a convoluted one in which neither of the two proposed strategies would be sufficient, Grey proposed a four-power mediation, which was essentially another meeting of the Concert of Europe but with only specific Powers meeting. The plan was for France, Britain, Germany, and Italy to work together to get Russia (Serbia's ally) to speak with Austria-Hungary in hopes of coming to some sort of settlement.⁶⁰ Grey believed these

⁵⁸ Martel, p. 44.

⁵⁹ MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 490-491.

⁶⁰ MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 490-491.

four to be the ‘disinterested Powers’ who had no real stake in the rising tensions in Serbia and the Balkans, which therefore put them in the position of mediators.⁶¹ However, once Austria-Hungary issued its Ultimatum on July 23rd and eventually its declaration of war on Serbia on July 28th, it became clear that Grey’s mediation proposals would be of no avail.⁶²

The Ultimatum that Austria-Hungary issued to Serbia came without warning to every nation except Italy and Germany.⁶³ Before the issuing of the Ultimatum, Sir Edward Grey spoke to Count Mensdorff, the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador, and urged him to press his government to maintain “prudence and moderation” in their dealings with Serbia.⁶⁴ However, upon reading the Ultimatum, Grey concluded that “‘The note seemed to me,’ he told Mensdorff, ‘the most formidable document I had ever seen addressed by one State to another that was independent.’”⁶⁵



Image 4: Count Albert Graf von Mensdorff-Pouilly-Dietrichstein, the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador to London on the eve of WWI

⁶¹ Martel, p. 189.

⁶² MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 490-491.

⁶³ MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 496-497.

⁶⁴ *The Story of the Great War: Diplomatic and State Papers*. Vol. II. (New York: P.F. Collier and Sons, 1916), p. 487.

⁶⁵ MacMillan, *The Road to 1914*, p. 491.

Looking at the actual text of the Ultimatum, the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy wanted the Serbs to stop all propaganda within Serbia that opposed the monarchy. The Ultimatum states, “To achieve this end the Imperial and Royal Government see themselves compelled to demand from the Royal Serbian Government a formal assurance that they condemn this dangerous propaganda against the Monarchy.”⁶⁶ Further, the statement calls for Serbia to take complete blame for the assassination and to publish a statement, both to its citizens and its military, condemning any anti-Austro-Hungarian propaganda.⁶⁷ In addition, Austria-Hungary created a list of ten demands, which included punishing those who produced propaganda, both those in military service and civilian, and to allow Austro-Hungarian forces into Serbian territory to investigate the assassination and be involved in the judicial proceedings.⁶⁸ For many diplomats at the time, this contention of Austro-Hungarian forces operating within Serbian territory violated the norms of the principle of sovereignty and thus caused outrage. The Serbian government was given a deadline for response, originally being 5 o’clock on July 25th, however, due to a delay in delivery, this was pushed back to six o’clock the following day.⁶⁹

In response, the Serbian government wrote, “[Serbia] cannot be held responsible for manifestations of a private character, such as articles in the press and the peaceable work of societies.”⁷⁰ Along with not accepting responsibility, they note, “[The Serbian government] have been pained and surprised at the statements, according to which members of the Kingdom of Serbia are supposed to have participated in the preparations of the crime.”⁷¹ Thus, they did not intend to take responsibility for allowing the Archduke to be killed. Furthermore, the Serb government noted

⁶⁶ “Primary Documents - Austrian Ultimatum to Serbia, 23 July 1914.” First World War.com, 2009.

⁶⁷ “Primary Documents - Austrian Ultimatum to Serbia, 23 July 1914.”

⁶⁸ “Primary Documents - Austrian Ultimatum to Serbia, 23 July 1914.”

⁶⁹ “Primary Documents - Austrian Ultimatum to Serbia, 23 July 1914.”

⁷⁰ “Primary Documents - Austrian Ultimatum to Serbia, 23 July 1914.”

⁷¹ “Primary Documents - Austrian Ultimatum to Serbia, 23 July 1914.”

that they cannot be held responsible to regulate propaganda against the dual monarchy. Lastly, in response to the contention that Serbia allows Austro-Hungarian law enforcement to operate within Serbia, they state “[Serbia] cannot accept such an arrangement, as it would be a violation of the Constitution.”⁷²

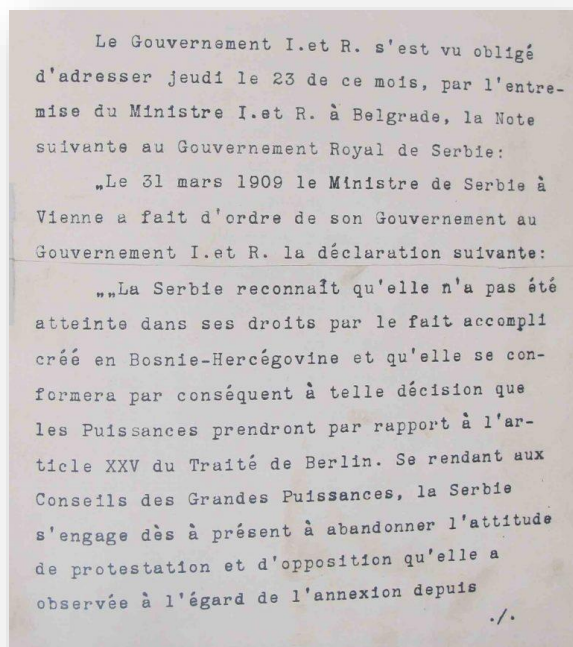


Image 5: Text of the Austro-Hungarian Ultimatum sent to Serbia on July 23rd, 1914.

The Austro-Hungarian government called the note they sent to Serbia a demarche, but the Serbs called it an Ultimatum.⁷³ Grey simply could not fathom such a correspondence, as his statement of formidability notes. Other members of the British government viewed the Ultimatum in a similar light, as British Ambassador in Vienna, Sir Maurice de Bunsen noted that it represented a change in the Austro-Hungarian Government’s willingness to negotiate, such that he stated, “I

⁷² “Primary Documents - Austrian Ultimatum to Serbia, 23 July 1914.”

⁷³ Otte, *The July Crisis*, p. 223-224.

cannot believe Austria will resort to extreme measures.”⁷⁴ Further, Prime Minister Asquith in his description to the King called the delivery of the Ultimatum, “the gravest event for many years past in European politics.”⁷⁵ Looking beyond Britain, the Russian Ambassador and Foreign Minister Sergey Sazonov, regarding the Ultimatum stated, “The Austrian Ultimatum seems to me to provoke the dangerous crisis I have anticipated for a long time. Henceforth we must recognize that war may break out at any moment. That prospect must govern all our diplomatic action.”⁷⁶



Image 6: Sergey Sazonov, Russian Ambassador and Foreign Minister from 1910-1916.

While there is scholarly debate over the harshness of the Ultimatum’s demands, the resulting diplomatic impact was great. As T.G. Otte writes, “Up to now, Grey had also shown himself sympathetic to Austria-Hungary’s plight, and he did not attempt to delegitimize her case against Serbia. Austria-Hungary’s Ultimatum severely tested that sympathy.”⁷⁷ Beyond simply viewing Austria-Hungary in a different light, the Ultimatum would test the diplomatic negotiations

⁷⁴ Richard Dunley. “The Most Formidable Document.” The National Archives - UK, 2014.

⁷⁵ Dunley.

⁷⁶ *Last French Ambassador to the Russian Court: An Ambassador’s Memoirs*. Translated by F.A. Holt, O.B.E. Volume I, Chapter II, July 24 - August 2, 1914. (Alexander Palace, 1923).

⁷⁷ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 502.

that Grey had worked to establish, such that it left Russia with little room for diplomatic maneuvering and limited any chance of mediation, such that the entire plan for the de-escalation of tensions between Austria-Hungary and Russia would fall through.⁷⁸

Now, Grey had to manage new rising tensions over the Ultimatum while also attempting to halt the existing tensions that were triggered by the assassination. It became clear that Austria-Hungary would require “some compensation in the sense of some humiliation for Serbia,”⁷⁹ which would of course only anger the Russians. Thus, he looked to Germany in an attempt to calm Austria-Hungary, which in turn would allow Russia to simmer down.⁸⁰ With the challenge of tempering two nations, Grey was still hopeful that tensions could be relieved. But even as Austria-Hungary attempted to explain, through their Ambassador in London, Count Mensdorff, that the Ultimatum was not a ‘formal Ultimatum’ but was simply a political initiative with a time limit of eight days attached,⁸¹ it would become clear that if the Serbs did not meet the Austro-Hungarian demands, they would begin preparing for war. Thus, this would come to be seen as truly more of a ‘formal Ultimatum.’⁸²

A critical factor that contributed to the Concert not being able to effectively respond to the Ultimatum, was as previously noted, that it came without warning for most of Europe. Britain was especially ill-prepared for such a demand because three days prior, Grey was assured that no such move would be made, as:

On July 20, 1914, Sir Edward Grey, British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, wrote to Sir Horace Rumbold, British Charge d’ Affaires at Berlin, recounting a conversation with the German Ambassador, Prince Lichnowsky. The prince said that Austria was certainly going to take some step in the Serbian matter; that the situation was uncomfortable, and that it would be desirable if Russia

⁷⁸ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 502-503

⁷⁹ Ferguson, p. 154.

⁸⁰ Ferguson, p. 154.

⁸¹ *The Story of the Great War: Diplomatic and State Papers*, p. 500.

⁸² *The Story of the Great War: Diplomatic and State Papers*, p. 500.

could act as a mediator with regard to Serbia. Sir Edward Grey presumed that the Austrian Government would not do anything until they had first disclosed to the public their case against Serbia, founded upon what they had discovered at the trial of the Sarajevo assassins. This would make it easier for other powers, such as Russia, to counsel moderation in Belgrade.⁸³

Another aspect of importance is that the European Powers were not ready to take any action while awaiting the Austro-Hungarian move. In other words, “For close to a month since the assassination the diplomats of the Entente had stood on the sidelines, waiting for the Austrians to act.”⁸⁴ Thus, when the Ultimatum finally did arrive, the Great Powers had presumed some sort of action “but no one had guessed their demands would be deliberately designed to make them impossible for Serbia to accept.”⁸⁵

To compound the issue of not expecting such an Ultimatum and not having any sort of plan for when it was delivered, Grey himself was receiving untrue information that led him astray in his decisions. Particularly, the Germans were not being completely forthright with Grey, such that Prince Lichnowsky, the German Ambassador, told him that Germany had no prior knowledge of the Ultimatum (which was not the case) and goes further by saying that it seemed likely that Austria-Hungary would accept mediation, something that would after the fact seem very unlikely.⁸⁶ However, Grey would eventually see that Austria-Hungary was seeking war through their Ultimatum. Another discrepancy was that Germany was not even disclosing proper information to their ambassador in Britain, Prince Lichnowsky. The result of this was that while Prince Lichnowsky was assuring the British that Germany had not given its complete support to

⁸³ *The Story of the Great War: Diplomatic and State Papers*, p. 482.

⁸⁴ Martel, p. 189.

⁸⁵ Martel, p. 189.

⁸⁶ Martel, p. 201.

Austria-Hungary, they had indeed given over a “blank-check” of support to their ally, thus misleading both their ambassador and the British.⁸⁷



Image 7: Karl Max, Prince Lichnowsky, German Ambassador to Britain in July of 1914.

Anglo-German relations, while they had been improving in the years leading up to the war, began to decline sharply during the July Crisis. Grey noted the declining relationship as Berlin developed a habit “for extracting a high price for somewhat equivocal offers of support... [and] seeking to exploit any tensions between Britain and other powers for its own gain made him wary of cooperating with Germany.”⁸⁸ Specifically, Berlin looked to strain the relationship between France, Russia, and Britain. Thus, when Germany misled Britain, they did so because of a declining relationship. This combined with the improper information from Germany, left Europe

⁸⁷ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 498.

⁸⁸ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 198.

to see that the strategy that may work in stopping the conflict was Grey's plan for mediation or the Concert of Europe.⁸⁹

While Grey attempted to lead the world toward mediation, he also made a less intense proposal specifically to Germany as an ally of Austria-Hungary. The proposal he gave to Prince Lichnowsky was that if Germany could work with Austria-Hungary to create a reasonable proposal that would create peace, that could be accepted by both the French and Russians, Britain would support it.⁹⁰ However, the proposal was not taken well by either the Germans or the French, as it called for France remaining neutral in any future war, and in return, the Germans would not attack France if Russia and Germany went to war.⁹¹



Image 8: Print of a meeting at the Foreign Office. In attendance: Sir Edward Grey (left, standing), Count Berckendorff (second from left, standing), Paul Cambon, and Prince Lichnowsky (standing center).

⁸⁹ Martel, p. 220.

⁹⁰ Ferguson, p. 159.

⁹¹ Ferguson, p. 159.

The Ententes and the Concert: Exclusion of Russia and Failure

In the years leading up to the War, Grey had created and maintained a system of Ententes within the Concert of Europe system. While his plan was to use the Concert for mediation, in truth, Grey looked through the lens of the Entente system to view the evolving crisis in July of 1914.⁹² The Ententes contributed to the downfall of the Concert as “the division of Europe into two alliance blocs cut across the logic of the Concert.”⁹³ Grey’s actions in creating friendships with France and Russia in the Triple Entente, only led to the strengthening of its counterpart, the Triple Alliance. This division undermined the Concert, as “Concert diplomacy required mediation between the Great Powers, whereas the diplomacy of the balance of power divided Europe into two separate, if not always antagonistic, blocks.”⁹⁴

The Entente was made up of two agreements: one with France and one with Russia. The Franco-British Declaration of 1904 was an agreement set to last for thirty years. The Declaration was written as an agreement between the French and the British over imperial possessions. For example, Article Four states: “The two Governments, being equally attached to the principle of commercial liberty both in Egypt and Morocco, declare that they will not, in those countries, countenance any inequality either in the imposition of customs duties or other taxes, or of railway transport charges.”⁹⁵ Thus the actual text of the treaty does not align France and Britain in any direct way and it was never intended to do so, as it was simply just an agreement. Grey does note, however, that he believed the French wanted more from Britain than just a friendship or agreement.

⁹² Clark, p. 495.

⁹³ Dominik Geppert; William Mulligen; Andreas Rose. *The Wars Before the Great War: Conflict and International Politics Before the Outbreak of the First World War*. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 12.

⁹⁴ Geppert, Mulligen, and Rose, p. 12.

⁹⁵ “The Franco-British Declaration, 1904.” Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, London, 1911, Vol. CIII, Cmd. 5969.

In regard to Grey's relationship with the French ambassador Paul Cambon, he writes "though he never expressed criticism, I sometimes felt that he was critical. He appreciated my loyalty to the Entente with France in diplomacy, but now and then I felt that he would have liked a little more partisanship."⁹⁶

The Anglo-Russian Entente was signed in 1907, and like its French counterpart, was written as an agreement to protect each power's respective imperial holdings. The agreement states: "and being desirous of avoiding all cause of conflict between their respective interests in the above-mentioned provinces of Persia."⁹⁷ Grey went about making this Entente with Russia to further solidify the agreement with France. During this time Russia and France were allies, meaning that Britain could gain friendship with both through the other.

The entente system would come to mark how the concert system worked in Europe. Grey writes,

There have been in Europe two diplomatic groups, the Triple Alliance, and what came to be called the "Triple Entente," for some years past. The Triple Entente was not an Alliance — it was a diplomatic group. The House will remember that in 1908 there was a crisis, also a Balkan crisis, originating in the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Russian Minister, M. Isvolsky, came to London, or happened to come to London, because his visit was planned before the crisis broke out. I told him definitely then, this being a Balkan crisis, a Balkan affair, I did not consider that public opinion in this country would justify us in promising to give anything more than diplomatic support. More was never asked from us, more was never given, and more was never promised.⁹⁸

These 'diplomatic groups,' come to be the foundation that Grey worked with to revive the Concert system in July of 1914. Grey viewed the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente as two weights on opposite ends of the scale of the balance of power,⁹⁹ as he wrote, "the intention and hope were that

⁹⁶ Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, p. 241.

⁹⁷ "The Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907." Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, London, 1908, Vol CXXV, Cmd. 3750.

⁹⁸ Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, p. 309-310.

⁹⁹ Martel, p. 45.

the Entente and the Triple Alliance might go on side by side and preserve peace by settling diplomatically each difficulty as it arose.¹⁰⁰ However, with two forces of power, the divisiveness would come to outweigh any form of balance.

What essentially weakened the Concert also weakened the Ententes such that Grey's picking of sides while maintaining that he had not picked sides only made the process of mediation more difficult as the position of Britain could be debated. In other words, Grey's indecision created substantial turbulence in an already delicate system. Grey maintained the Entente with France and created an Entente with Russia, both of which were not military alliances, but rather agreements of friendship. While these decisions would ultimately come to contribute to throwing Europe into war, they were quite remarkable in their own right. Part of what made Grey's decision to form an official friendship with Russia and France notable was that in the century prior to the First World War, these nations were in a state of constant tension, meaning that Britain made a turn in policy from past alliances, which indicates changing times.

While the Entente as Clark writes, "produced a baffling ambiguity in British diplomatic signaling,"¹⁰¹ Grey did have a reason for pursuing such a course of action even if it proved to be a misstep. Grey created the Entente with France to protect Britain and its Empire.¹⁰² To strengthen this relationship with France, Grey made an informal alliance with Russia.¹⁰³ In other words, the Entente was a strategic move to protect Britain from the other European Powers. This left Grey in a balancing act where in diplomatic relations, "He had to keep the door open for Germany to

¹⁰⁰ Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, p. 45.

¹⁰¹ Clark, p. 212.

¹⁰² Zara Steiner. *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*. (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1977), p. 124.

¹⁰³ Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, p. 124.

appease the noninterventionists, while at the same time ensuring strong enough threats to Germany so as to not allow France to appear vulnerable.”¹⁰⁴

Of course, while Grey was making the Ententes, he still had to manage the Germans. In regard to Germany Grey wrote, “With Germany I wanted to be as friendly as I could be without sacrificing friendships already made; as I said in the House of Commons at least once, if not oftener, I was willing to make a new friend, wherever it could be done, without losing an old one.”¹⁰⁵ While he tried to keep the door open with Germany so to speak, he had to eventually concede that war was coming and he could no longer afford the “luxury of inaction”¹⁰⁶ when it came to making decisions about how to handle British alliances.

Beyond Grey’s indecision, there were issues with the Ententes when he attempted to reform the Concert of Europe from the beginning. To start, of the four Powers, Britain, France, Italy, and Germany, it was likely that only Germany would have the interests of Austria-Hungary in mind, meaning that whatever settlement was made would not be accepted by the Austro-Hungarian government and war would not be avoided.¹⁰⁷ To add to this, Russia was not a part of the mediation. This is critical as Russia was Serbia’s Great Power ally, meaning that if Grey and Concert wanted any meaningful resolution from the mediation, they would need the cooperation of Serbia, and thereby Russia.¹⁰⁸

Russia was likely excluded from the four-power mediation for a few reasons. First, while both Russia and Germany were the Great Power allies of the countries involved, Russia was far more involved in the sense that they began preparing for war before Germany did. While the

¹⁰⁴ Clark, p. 214.

¹⁰⁵ Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁶ Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁷ Clark, p. 495.

¹⁰⁸ Clark, p. 495.

Ultimatum was issued on July 23rd, Russia had previously declared its support for Serbia and began a partial mobilization of the military by July 25th. French ambassador to Russia Maurice Paléologue writes on July 25th, 1914 in his memoirs “At seven o'clock this evening I went to the Warsaw station... There was a great bustle on the platforms. The trains were packed with officers and men. This looked like mobilization. We rapidly exchanged impressions and came to the same conclusion: ‘It's war this time.’”¹⁰⁹ His suspicions were confirmed when he returned to the embassy. The Tsar ordered partial mobilization in Kiev, Odessa, Kazan, and Moscow.¹¹⁰ By the time Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28th, Russia fully began mobilization by July 30th. This priming for war through military means would make Russia an interested power and therefore disqualified from the four-power mediation.



Image 9: Maurice Paléologue, French Ambassador to Russia, 1914-1917.

Complicating matters, once the Russian army had begun mobilization, they could not halt the process without placing the nation at risk of being defenseless if attacked. Russian Foreign

¹⁰⁹ *Last French Ambassador to the Russian Court: An Ambassador's Memoirs.*

¹¹⁰ *Last French Ambassador to the Russian Court: An Ambassador's Memoirs.*

Minister Sergey Sazonov tells Paléologue on July 29th, “it's technically impossible for us to demobilize without dislocating our entire military organization. It is a point the soundness of which your General Staff itself could not deny.”¹¹¹ Thus once the Tsar had ordered mobilization there was no way for Russia to safely stop such action, making it appear that they had chosen war over diplomacy.

Along with military mobilization, France realized that Russia was ready for war and that they were not the strongest power in the Franco-Russian alliance, since Russia had the strength to go on the path to war on its own.¹¹² To add to this, the Russian public was very much against Germany, as Paléologue notes, “Throughout Russia public feeling is becoming exasperated. Sazonov is trying hard and is still successful in restraining the press. But he is obliged to give the journalists a sop... and has had to tell them, ‘If you want, go for Austria, but be moderate towards Germany.’”¹¹³ Lastly, even France was hesitant to restrain Russia, as Grey expressed, we “must do all we could to encourage patience in St. Petersburg.”¹¹⁴

Another reason why Russia could have been left out of the four-power mediation is that Russia had differing ideas about how to go about mediation than Grey did. For one, Russia pushed for a formal, military alliance, such as the one that the Triple Alliance had formed.¹¹⁵ The Tsar wanted Britain to formally align with Russia and France so that “Unless Germany has lost her reason altogether, she will never dare to attack Russia, France and England combined.”¹¹⁶ In other words, the Tsar believed the way to prevent war was to create a show of power so that Germany would not pursue an aggressive policy. Finally, Russia had a different mediation proposal than

¹¹¹ *Last French Ambassador to the Russian Court: An Ambassador's Memoirs.*

¹¹² Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 136.

¹¹³ *Last French Ambassador to the Russian Court: An Ambassador's Memoirs.*

¹¹⁴ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 497.

¹¹⁵ *Last French Ambassador to the Russian Court: An Ambassador's Memoirs.*

¹¹⁶ *Last French Ambassador to the Russian Court: An Ambassador's Memoirs.*

Grey, such that Britain, Russia, and France would work together in Vienna. Grey was adamantly against such a course of action as it would cause friction with Germany.¹¹⁷

Looking at a final reason why Russia may have been excluded from the mediation, Germany had taken a place of great concern in Grey's eyes, and it was more important to maintain the relationship with Germany than with Russia. Grey recognized that Germany had recently found itself in a weakened military position which meant that any increase in militarization from Russia could start a catastrophic arms race, which is something that had to be avoided for mediation to work.¹¹⁸ To add, after the Ultimatum was issued, Grey realized that Russia could not be settled while Germany came with the promise of keeping Austria-Hungary at bay.¹¹⁹ In other words, there was a chance to calm down one half of the conflict through a Great Power, Germany calming Austria-Hungary, while the option of calming Russia was seemingly slipping away as only another Great Power could calm them, something that was appearing less likely to happen.

Grey also looked to include Germany so that he could gauge how likely they were to choose war. The four-power mediation required each nation to hold off on militarizing (something that Russia had already begun), which would give Grey and the other diplomats a chance to see if Germany would cooperate and attempt to avert war. Further, German cooperation had helped maintain European peace before, as Germany and Britain were able to work together to bring a stop to the rising tensions in the Balkans in both 1912 and 1913.¹²⁰ Thus Grey needed to have Germany included in the four-power mediation to see if the Germans would cooperate and if they would, what chance there was to prevent war.

¹¹⁷ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 501.

¹¹⁸ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 499.

¹¹⁹ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 504-505.

¹²⁰ Otte, *The July Crisis*, p. 95.

A second key contributor to the Concert's failure was that the European Powers did not take it seriously. By the end of July, the new attempt at the Concert of Europe was deemed a "court of arbitration" whereby critics noted that mediation was not the real goal but rather it was to assign blame and decrease tensions.¹²¹ To compound this issue, Germany not only did not believe in the effectiveness of the Concert, but it used the Concert as a means to an end. Germany realized that they would not be able to start a war unless it was evidently clear that war was the only choice, so the Germans agreed to the mediation proposed by Grey.¹²² The issue was that when the Germans were supposed to instruct Austria-Hungary to join mediation, they did not advise them to do so.¹²³ Rather, Germany's only interest in agreeing to such a course of action was to uphold their diplomatic relations with Britain so as to avoid the creation of a formal alliance between Britain, Russia, and France.¹²⁴ In other words, countries not only did not see the value in the Concert, but they also were not actually attempting to make the mediation work.

A final issue that caused the Concert to fail during the July Crisis was that Grey and the Concert did not recognize the power of Austria-Hungary in turning the tide of international affairs, even though they had weakened the Concert system in the years prior by negating the decisions of the Concert in 1913. In other words, "It may well be that Grey underestimated the crucial role played by Austria in maintaining the status quo where the European peace could be most easily shattered."¹²⁵ The situation became dire once the Ultimatum was issued, as the European Powers did not realize such a move would be made and that Austria-Hungary making such a move would have the consequences of total war.¹²⁶ Thus, the Concert failed in navigating the July Crisis and

¹²¹ Martel, p. 248.

¹²² Martel, p. 255.

¹²³ Martel, p. 256.

¹²⁴ Martel, p. 256.

¹²⁵ Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, p. 115.

¹²⁶ Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, p. 113.

the Ultimatum because of ill-conceived mediation, opinion of the Concert and its effectiveness, and underestimating the role of Austria-Hungary in bringing the European Continent into war.

Sir Edward Grey and the League of Nations

Once Germany declared war on Russia on August 1st, 1914 and the destruction had begun, Grey and the other diplomats were left to attempt to manage a state of war as each nation subsequently joined in. The July Crisis spun out quickly and as Otte writes, “The speed with which international affairs had spiraled out of control in July had been bewildering, and Grey was not alone in being left reeling.”¹²⁷ The Foreign Office switched gears to focus on handling Britain at war rather than attempting to keep her out. But by the end of 1916, Britain was leaning toward the creation of a War Cabinet and Grey subsequently lost his role as Foreign Secretary. He mostly stayed out of politics following his resignation, however, he persistently spoke in favor of the creation of the League of Nations.

Nearing the end of the war, in 1918, Grey published a pamphlet, titled *The League of Nations*, where he advocated for its creation so as to prevent another war. He detailed why the world earnestly needed a League of Nations as

There is more at stake in this war than the existence of individual States or Empires, or the fate of a Continent; the whole of modern civilization is at stake, and whether it will perish and be submerged, as has happened to previous civilizations of older types, or whether it will live and progress, depends upon whether the nations engaged in this war, and even those that are onlookers, learn the lessons that the experience of the war may teach them.¹²⁸

He noted that while in the past a body to maintain peace had not been possible but two new conditions now made it possible. First, the United States and President Wilson were now on the world stage, which was something new that could allow for a body to be created to maintain

¹²⁷ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 545.

¹²⁸ Edward Grey. *The League of Nations*. Pamphlet. London: W.H. Smith & Son, 1918. p. 4.

peace.¹²⁹ Second, the war itself provided a means to change the dynamics of diplomacy, as Grey writes,

“Nothing but experience convinced individuals that law was better than anarchy to settle the relations between themselves. And the sanction that maintains law is the application of force with the support of the great majority of individuals behind it. Is it possible that the experience of this war will produce a settled opinion of the same sort to regulate the relations of States with each other and safeguard the world from war, which is in fact anarchy?”¹³⁰

At the end of his pamphlet, Grey argues that “The establishment and maintenance of a League of Nations, such as President Wilson has advocated, is more important and essential to a secure peace than any of the actual terms of peace that may conclude the war: it will transcend them all.”¹³¹

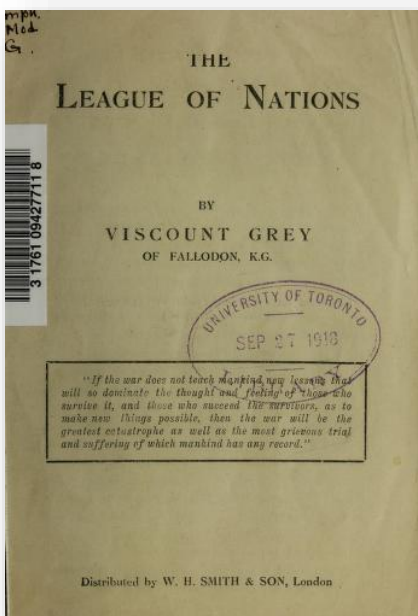


Image 10: The League of Nations pamphlet written by Sir Edward Grey in 1918.

While the League of Nations would eventually come to fail, at the time Grey believed that its creation was absolutely critical to prevent another war. Beyond its failure, “The League of

¹²⁹ Grey, *The League of Nations*. p. 6.

¹³⁰ Grey, *The League of Nations*. p. 12.

¹³¹ Grey, *The League of Nations*. p. 14-15.

Nations did represent something very important: both a recognition of the changes that had already taken place in international relations and a bet placed on the future.”¹³² While Grey pushed for its establishment, others in Britain were not set on it. As Winston Churchill said, the League of Nations is “no substitute for the British fleet.”¹³³ However, in speaking to President Wilson, Grey “urged upon his visitor the necessity of the United States joining some post-war international security system through a league of nations that would replace the Old Concert of Europe to ensure a worldwide peace.”¹³⁴ Grey sought to create something new at the end of the War so as to avoid another failure of the Concert system, and thus risk a second war.

Grey worked to create a body that would not fail in the way the Concert had in 1914. One of his primary concerns when deliberating how to go about this was how to deal with Germany at this point. In the year before the war, Grey had harbored hopes of creating a sort of alliance with Germany,¹³⁵ but this quickly became unsuitable as the July Crisis spun out from the Ultimatum to the eventual declarations of war. But Grey realized that now in 1918, even before the war had ended that Germany would need to be a part of a peacekeeping body and have a desire to actually maintain peace. On this idea he wrote, “Isn't the German mentality a depressing thing?... When one is out of office & out of London it is so uncomfortable to hate anybody & one longs more than ever for peace, but I do not see how there is to be peace with the people who still run Germany.”¹³⁶

Beyond Germany, there were two other conditions that Grey cited as being necessary for a League of Nations to be successful. The first was that the Governments of each state must embrace the idea of a peacekeeping body and the second is that they must be willing to relinquish some

¹³² Macmillan, *Paris 1914*, p. 84.

¹³³ Macmillan, *Paris 1914*, p. 93.

¹³⁴ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 576-577.

¹³⁵ Barnes, p. 191-192.

¹³⁶ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 629.

sovereignty and autonomy to fulfill new obligations that would maintain peace.¹³⁷ In practice, Grey became entangled in two separate peace leagues that had been established: the League of Free Nations Association and the League of Nations Society. The League of Nations Society had inquired about Grey being their president, however, he refused as he advocated for a single body to be in charge of maintaining peace, as he said on the matter it is “unreasonable to have two Societies’ and he would not consent to heading either, [but] if they united again & became one Society & then wished me to become President I might do so.”¹³⁸ Despite turning down a position as president, Grey did become a researcher for the League of Free Nations.¹³⁹ In sum, while Grey was unsuccessful in preventing the outbreak of the First World War, he then went on to dedicate his time to the creation of a League of Nations so as to prevent such a war in the future.

Conclusion

In describing why the Continent was now in the throes of war, Grey in a speech on August 3rd, 1914 explained,

In the present crisis, it has not been possible to secure the peace of Europe; because there has been little time, and there has been a disposition at any rate in some quarters on which I will not dwell to force things rapidly to an issue, at any rate, to the risk of peace, and, as we now know, the result of that is that the policy of peace, as far as the Great Powers generally are concerned, is in danger.¹⁴⁰

While Grey cites a lack of time causing the Great Powers to fail at negotiation, there were many other factors. For one, the attempted revival of a system from the previous century, the Concert of Europe, proved to not be enough. The damaged Concert from the previous Balkan crisis in 1912 and 1913 was simply not in a position of sufficient strength to prevent a collapse of diplomatic relations from tensions in the Balkan region again. The Ultimatum rocked the European continent

¹³⁷ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 630-631.

¹³⁸ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 631-632.

¹³⁹ Otte, *Statesman of Europe*, p. 631-632.

¹⁴⁰ Loreburn and Grey, p. 324.

and left the Great Powers attempting to apply the solution of the Concert to a crisis it was not equipped to handle.

Beyond the Ultimatum, Grey's indecision in the creation of the Entente system resulted in confusing diplomatic relations that eventually left Britain aligned with Russia and France in facing the Triple Alliance in the late summer of 1914. To add to the confusion, Germany was less than forthright with Grey and other Powers, such that there really was no chance of de-escalating the Austro-Hungarian government because Germany was not attempting to do so or truthfully helping other Powers to do so. Further, the ill-fated decision to exclude Russia from the four-power mediation was a disaster in itself, as Russian cooperation was absolutely required if there was to be any negotiating between Serbia and Austria-Hungary.

Even though Grey could not prevent the First World War, toward the end of it he worked to create a system that could prevent another such war. While the League of Nations would never truly come to be, Grey saw this idealized system as a way to handle future crises through diplomatic means. He recognized the growing role of the United States in the world and sought to follow President Wilson into a future of cooperation. He also recognized that states would have to allow for cooperation by giving up some of their sovereignty and accepting some "inconvenient obligation."¹⁴¹ Most importantly, Grey understood that without this diplomatic group, any peace that comes from the conclusion of the War will not be maintainable.¹⁴²

It seems clear that preventing the First World War required far more than the Concert or its diplomats were capable of doing. While things could have been delayed there were systematic flaws in the way diplomatic relations were conducted in Europe. But perhaps if the world had heeded the ideas of Sir Edward Grey on the League of Nations and followed the guidance of one

¹⁴¹ Grey, *The League of Nations*, p. 9.

¹⁴² Grey, *The League of Nations*, p. 14-15.

of the premier diplomats who tried to prevent war, the Second World War could have been prevented. If there had been an established diplomatic forum such as the League of Nations to negotiate and manage various crises, the eventually catastrophic policy of appeasement may not have been the only option in preventing Adolf Hitler's reign of terror across Europe. While we will never know if the Second World War could have been prevented, or at least prevented in some aspect, it is not inconceivable that a group such as the League of Nations could have stopped the world from meeting this second brush of destruction.

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Image 2: *The Right Honourable: The Viscount Grey of Fallodon. Edward Grey, 1st Viscount Grey of Fallodon.* Wikipedia, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Grey,_1st_Viscount_Grey_of_Falldon.

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Image 5: Austrian Ultimatum (FO 371/2158 f1). ‘The Most Formidable Document.’ *The National Archives*, 2014. <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/formidable-document/>.

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