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Britain and the Origins of the First World War

Second Edition

Zara S. Steiner and Keith Neilson

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Preface

WHEN I was asked by Macmillan to prepare a new edition of this book that was first published in 1977, I thought it would be a challenging but not a difficult task as I could not have been more shocked and alarmed as the updated bibliography grew and grew and grew. There were grounds for recasting the entire book but I took the coward's way out and asked Professor Keith Neilson to make the necessary additions and corrections to the original text and to completely rewrite the chapter on Russia, which was the weakest in the original, along the lines of his own superb study published in 1995. I know that he has felt constrained by the structure of the original volume but he has been generous enough not only to have updated and extended the earlier book, a back-breaking labour, but also to have accepted the dangerous responsibilities of co-authorship in a field known for its polemical ferocities.

I believe that the basic thesis of the older work still remains valid and that the extensive research done in the Foreign Office archives and in the major collections of private papers on which it was based provides a documentary structure that has not been shaken by the multitude of sources, both official and private, that have become more recently available. I was fortunate, perhaps, to have worked at a time when the fifty-year rule had been recently changed to thirty years and when private collections were still kept in country houses scattered throughout the country. While it restricted the number of manuscripts that could be consulted, it allowed for a thoroughness of research in the essential papers that the very multitude of today's collections makes difficult. I would like to call the reader's attention to four points. The original volume was written at a time when the Fritz Fischer debate was at its height. I have modified my own views on the subject of German responsibility for the outbreak of the war but still believe that Germany and Austria must carry the major weight of that heavy burden. Secondly, a vast amount of new work has appeared on

British political, social, and economic history in the early twentieth century. In particular, we know far more about party politics and parliamentary influence, naval and military policy, and changes in Britain's world economic position than at the time this book was published. Only some of this rich material has been incorporated in the text. The inter-play between domestic and foreign policy has proved to be more complex and difficult to separate than I once assumed. I still think, however, that British diplomacy was shaped more by external events than by internal conflicts and that the options available to Sir Edward Grey were correspondingly limited by Britain's global position on the eve of the war. Thirdly, the revised book might well have included a separate chapter on the British Empire and the imperial context of British diplomacy. It would have covered among other topics, Edwardian pessimism about the future of the empire, dominion and colonial defence problems, the interaction between imperial and foreign policy and Grey's attempt to keep imperial matters separate from European ones. We have preferred to develop these themes, somewhat expanded, within the existing chapters and in the final conclusion. In terms of the origins of the war, they are two sides of the same coin. Finally, recent publications have broadened and deepened our knowledge of the climate of opinion in the pre-war decade. I would have liked to greatly expand the chapter that addresses this vital dimension to studies of war origins. What I have written about this topic and the 'unspoken assumptions' of the pre-war generation points in the right direction but is only an introduction to one of the richest veins in current historical enquiry.

Professor Neilson and I hope that this revised edition will be *useful* book for readers. This was our purpose in adding yet another volume to the ever-growing list of works on this subject. For of books on the origins of the First World War, there will be no end.

ZARA STEINER

Acknowledgements

THE revision of this book has been made necessary by the multitude of publications that have appeared on the origins of the First World War, or the Great War as many historians would prefer to call it, and on British domestic and foreign policy in the early 20th century. Both the volume and range of coverage is extraordinary and the subject continues to provoke a steady stream of new research and interpretations despite the elapse of time. Our debts to these authors and to the contributors to the many conferences that we have each attended are only partly acknowledged in the footnotes and bibliography of this new volume. My own special apologies must be given to my husband who had thought that he would never again have to carry G. P. Gooch and H. Temperley (ed.) *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914* back and forth from the library. We both have failed again to fulfill the hopes of our respective spouses that, at long last, we might finally produce a best seller but instead only a book that is intended to provide additional insights into the perennial question of why Britain entered the war in 1914.

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