

Germany's Strategic Misjudgment of World War I: Based on the Impact of Anglo-German Diplomatic Interaction

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Abstract: This article reviews and analyzes the Anglo-German diplomatic activities and interactions of some officials from both Britain and Germany before the First World War. It focuses on specific cases involving figures such as Henry Wilson and Prince Lichnowsky, aiming to explore the factors in the pre-war diplomatic interactions between Britain and Germany that led to Germany's strategic misjudgment and ultimately culminated in the outbreak of the war. Structural realism and the concept of "security dilemma" are employed to examine the intentions and positions of officials and the upper echelons on both sides. This study concludes that the prolonged strategic preparations by Britain and its vigilant attitude towards Germany's aggression demonstrated thorough consideration of the impending war. On the other hand, factors such as the German military's satisfaction with its own development and the filtering of genuine information within its internal diplomatic system intensified the likelihood of war. Additionally, the ambiguous stance displayed by Britain towards the prospect of war also exerted a certain influence. Taking a research perspective centered on the analysis of mutual or internal interactions between the two parties, this article aims to offer novel insights for future investigations into the realm of strategic misjudgment preceding World War I.

Keywords: strategic misjudgment, Anglo-German relationship, structural realism, diplomatic activities

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The academic research on the origins of World War I has been a prominent topic within the field of history. In the past, the war was commonly understood to be caused by the tense relationships and complex diplomatic policies among the allied nations [1]. However, in recent years, scholars have started to reexamine the role of Wilhelm II and German leadership, contending that their strategic miscalculations are one of the key factors leading to the war's outbreak.

Some studies [1,2,3] indicate that, among all misjudgments and biases, the most significant one is Wilhelm II's underestimation of the strength and threats posed by other countries, coupled with an overestimation of Germany's power and position. Additionally, Wilhelm II's belligerence and aggression may also influence his decision, resulting in pursuing risky strategic actions.

1.2. Research Questions and Arguments

Driven by reevaluation of reasons behind the outbreak of the war and Germany's responsibility for World War I, this article will focus on examining the diplomatic correspondences between the British and German governments, aiming to explore which aspects and intentions within these communications led to misunderstandings and potentially contributed to the escalation of the war. Within this relationship, misjudgments of Wilhelm II and high-ranking Germans towards Britain included: interpreting the agreement between the two countries to limit naval expansion as an attempt to contain the German navy; overestimating the economic burden of British colonial and naval development, jumping to a conclusion that Britain's capacity for land warfare was limited; and underestimating Britain's determination to defend Belgium against German invasion in the Schlieffen Plan, assuming that Britain would not enter the war.

After studying relevant historical events, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the strategic misjudgments of Wilhelm II and German leadership: Firstly, Germany failed to define Britain's national interests and did not have a clear understanding of the red lines that could contribute to war between the two nations. Secondly, without a clear picture of comprehensive national strength for both nations and international environment, Germany overrated its power and took overly aggressive political, economic, and military actions.

1.3. Literature Review

Over the past few decades, there has been a continuous stream of research in the academic community exploring Germany's strategic judgments before World War I and interpretations of Anglo-German relations. Interestingly, some scholars have concluded from their analysis of Germany's strategic misjudgments that the decision to initiate the war was made by Germans who were confident and rational after careful evaluation. On the other hand, certain studies in the realm of Anglo-German relations intriguingly suggest that the appeasement of pre-war diplomatic relations between the two countries fostered an optimistic attitude among Germans regarding the prospect of war. The following are explanations from some relevant studies.

Some scholars have pointed out that prior to the war, Germans had a clear understanding that the war would not end in the short term, and their military technological superiority provided them with confidence. In Lieber's research [4], he argues that Germans desired to initiate a war to achieve their goal of dominating the European continent, and they were aware that the impending conflict would almost certainly be long and bloody. They neither misjudged the nature of modern military technology nor recoiled out of fear of Germany's adversaries taking preemptive action. Lieber reminds international relations scholars to reexamine their experiential understanding of this conflict and the theoretical assumptions behind Germany's reasons for war.

In subsequent articles co-authored by Snyder and Lieber, Snyder provides further analysis of Germany's strategic assessments. They argue that Germany's decisions were not distorted by misunderstandings of offensive advantages or other biases [4]. On the contrary, German leaders had a clear understanding of the realities of their strategic environment: the balance of power, the trends of power, and the realities of modern warfare. The Germans firmly believed that the prospects of attaining European hegemony were worth the risk of undertaking a prolonged and costly war. Using more straightforward language, some scholars suggest that Germans' willingness to engage in war stemmed from an admiration for offensive action. For instance, Evera highlighted that the pre-war European cult of offensive strategies was one of the main factors leading to the war, exacerbating various dangers [5]. His research also cites several historians who accuse this glorification of intensifying the war crisis.

Of course, considering the complexity of research on Germany's strategic misjudgments, it is important not to solely focus on Germany's perspective. The Anglo-German relationship, as a significant diplomatic interaction in pre-war Europe, also deserves attention. Going back to the 1930s, with two decades since the outbreak of World War I and another major war on the horizon, the academic community approached the relationship between these two powers with concern. Willis [6] pointed out succinctly that the strategic security measures taken by Germany and Britain before World War I were starkly different, with the former being aggressive and the latter more defensive in nature. Throughout history, these two great powers have had instances of friendly cooperation or maintained neutrality in each other's controversial moves. Moreover, they share similar racial backgrounds, and their ruling dynasties are interconnected. However, all of these factors became irrelevant. The rise of Germany led to a new cycle of confrontation that rekindled fear and mutual suspicion between the two sides.

In the 1980s, Lynn-Jones presented a new explanation in his article: that war partly originated from the British-German *détente* between 1911 and 1914 [7]. The relationship between Britain and Germany improved during this period, which ultimately contributed to the outbreak of the war. In Britain, the *détente* created a misguided belief that the July 1914 crisis could be resolved through Anglo-German cooperation. British leaders were reluctant to appear provocative to Germany and, therefore, failed to take early measures to deter Germany's actions that led to the war. This *détente* also fueled Germany's false hope that Britain would maintain neutrality in a European continental war, thereby encouraging Germany to pursue policies fraught with the risks of conflict.

Based on the aforementioned research, it is evident that over the past century, new arguments and analyses have continuously emerged regarding Germany's strategic misjudgment before World War I and the impact of Anglo-German relations on the initiation of the war. As Pfaltzgraff points out, the World War I served as a catalyst and impetus for the creation of "international political science." [8] These studies not only serve the purpose of avoiding the recurrence of historical disasters but also provide additional sources and context for critical and analytical thinking on international issues. This is also the direction in which this paper aims to further contribute. Building upon previous relevant research, it seeks to delve deeper into the diplomatic correspondence between Germany and Britain, investigating the sources of Germany's confidence in initiating the war and exploring the factors within Anglo-German relations that catalyzed the crisis.

2. Strategic Misjudgment in the Theoretical Framework

Structural Realism posits that the behavior of sovereign states is driven by a logic of self-interest [9] and this implies that nations pursue their own interests and prioritize them above the interests of other countries. This drive for survival constitutes the primary factor determining their behavior, while also ensuring the development of offensive military capabilities to counter foreign interference and enhance relative power. Given the inability of states to ascertain the future intentions of other states, mutual distrust pervades their interactions. Consequently, states are compelled to remain vigilant against the relative loss of power, as it could potentially pose a threat to their survival [10].

Germany did not have a clear understanding of Britain's intentions prior to the war. The recent decades of *détente* before the war and the blurred definition of British national interests led Germans to optimistically assess the British inclination to maintain neutrality. Little did they know that Germany's military buildup and aggressive expansionist policies had already alerted Britain to its precarious "security dilemma". Robert Jervis, in his article, discusses the concept of the security dilemma, which refers to a situation where one country's efforts to increase its security (such as military capabilities) lead other countries to feel less secure [11]. As more states intend to employ their expanding military forces for offensive purposes, Jervis illustrates this phenomenon with the example of pre-World War I Germany and Britain: Many of the actions during this period were driven

by technology and beliefs, amplifying the security dilemma [11]. Germany's strategic admiration for aggression and the self-assuredness of its leadership in naval development led Germans to underestimate Britain's determination to protect its own interests and support its allies. In fact, since 1909, Britain's outlook on the relative strength of Germany and France in the event of war was far from optimistic. There were even military bureaucrats proposing plans for the deployment of British expeditionary forces to France [12]. These measures can be seen as indications that the British anticipated Germany's increasing mobilization capabilities would surpass those of Britain's allies as the war progressed.

In the subsequent analysis section, this article will discuss the areas in which Britain remained attentive and discerned Germany's threatening intentions, as well as the phenomenon of strategic intent analysis concerning Britain within Germany's diplomatic system being overlooked by the leadership. Undoubtedly, these events and behaviors in the pre-war Anglo-German relationship laid the groundwork for Germany's strategic decision-making mistakes.

3. The Contrasting Strategies of Two Countries

The first point that needs to be stated is that there is no shortage of voices within the UK calling for preemptive measures against Germany. These opinions stem from concerns among certain "elites" about the military capabilities of the UK and its allies on the European continent in the event of a war outbreak. To explore the historical context of the UK's vigilance towards Germany, the case of Henry Wilson will be employed as an illustrative example. Back to 1911 when Henry Wilson, the Director of Military Operations at the British War Office, expressed his personal views on Britain's military policy in a letter to Cabinet Ministers. He placed immense emphasis on the significance of Belgium and highlighted the great advantages that an alliance between Britain, France, and Belgium could bring in terms of bolstering the continental defense line for Britain and France, as well as containing the German military forces. As for the war between Germany and Britain, he concludes, "is as certain as anything human can be" [12].

It is worth mentioning that considerations of the "security dilemma" may also contribute to the growing voices of vigilance towards Germany. For instance, from the perspective of defensive realists, the "security dilemma" becomes more pronounced in situations where offensive actions hold significant advantages. The presence of mutual distrust among nations can exacerbate their inclination to take preemptive actions [11]. This explains why countries like the UK, which seek security, often find themselves caught in conflicts. In the security dilemma, the lack of trust in the intentions of other nations consistently drives them to employ various means to maximize their own security [13]. This concern is further amplified, especially when British officials visit and assess the military capabilities of different European countries prior to a potential conflict. Taking Henry Wilson's visit in 1911 as a perspective, he had finished his visit to the European continent earlier that year, which included meetings with high-ranking German military and political officials, traversing through Belgium, and issuing warnings to French leaders. His observations and experiences in Europe served as crucial foundations for his strategic planning. Despite facing mockery and criticism within the British military establishment regarding Wilson's military plans [12], he persisted that Germany's mobilization capabilities would surpass those of France within 17 days of the war's commencement. Even in subsequent internal meetings, he managed to persuade the Cabinet to abandon the original naval blockade plan and instead dispatch an expeditionary force to collaborate with France in the war effort [14]. Although some scholars in later years have suggested that he exaggerated Germany's military capabilities, in the 1980s, Edward Bennett argued that Wilson's estimates were not significantly off the mark [15]. While Wilson's perspective represented only one individual within the British strategic decision-making apparatus and did not speak for everyone, his case signifies that the British were attentive to Germany's actions. The fact that the leadership, to some extent, embraced

new plans and modified existing policies due to concerns over the German threat is notable. Unfortunately, until the outbreak of the war in 1914, the British leadership had not provided a detailed plan for the expeditionary force [14]. However, this does not diminish the determination of the British to protect their own interests and it shows that Germany's desire for British neutrality from the outset was unrealistic.

The lack of effectiveness in the interaction between Germany's strategic decision-makers and its diplomatic apparatus is also an important point should be mentioned. The senior decision-makers often exhibit a sense of complacency regarding Germany's power and tend to overlook reports that caution against the actions of the United Kingdom. Of particular significance here is the German military's arrogance, which may be attributed to the widespread admiration for offensive actions embraced by many European military strategists in the latter half of the 19th century. This mindset leads them to disregard the advantages of the defender and the obstacles that aggressors may face, particularly considering that many high-ranking German military leaders before the war advocated for the superiority of offense over defense and considered offense as the highest principle of military operations [5]. Taking the interaction between the pre-war German ambassador to the UK and senior German officials as an example. In 1912, the highly anticipated Prince Lichnowsky assumed the position of German ambassador to Britain. He not only enjoyed the trust of the German Kaiser but also maintained good relations with British leaderships [16]. After experiencing a series of diplomatic challenges in Britain, Lichnowsky mentioned in his reports to Germany that naval competition should not hinder diplomatic agreements between Britain and Germany [16]. Furthermore, Lichnowsky expressed concerns that if Austria-Hungary were to attack Serbia and Germany were to launch an offensive against France, this series of military actions would inevitably lead to a war between Britain and Germany [16]. However, these warnings did not capture Berlin's attention. On the contrary, German leaders, while acknowledging Britain's tradition and principles of supporting France, did not believe that the British would unequivocally align themselves with France after the outbreak of a continental war [1]. Admiral Tirpitz, who had held meetings with Henry Wilson as mentioned earlier, further argued that the British had no intention of engaging in a decisive battle with Germany's rapidly expanding fleet. These perspectives were soon relayed to Lichnowsky, and in their correspondence, the prince was reminded that France's commitment to Britain held little value [7]. Even on the day when Austria-Hungary issued the ultimatum to Serbia, there were officials who assured the German Kaiser that the British would not join the war. They attempted to obtain a commitment from the British to maintain their neutrality by indicating that if the British did not engage in a full-scale war, Germany would not violate French territory [16].

It is evident that some German officials did realize that the actions of the British would not unfold as expected by the German strategic decision-makers. However, the confidence of the German military and the optimistic outlook of the diplomatic system regarding British neutrality prevented these insights from effectively influencing the formulation of decisions. Of course, Germany's unilateral stance can only explain part of the issue, as the vague attitude of the British Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, in making a firm commitment against Germany before the war also contributed to the escalating tensions [17]. This includes the Cabinet, represented by Grey, being overly focused on the Ulster Crisis and overlooking the urgency of Austria-Hungary's warning to Serbia [18]. Additionally, on the issue of Belgian neutrality, Grey was authorized to inform the French and German ambassadors that Britain had not yet decided under what conditions it would join or withdraw from the conflict [19]. These ambiguous attitudes to some extent represented certain indecisiveness in British decision-making, which influenced Germany's judgment.

4. Conclusion

The diplomatic interactions between Britain and Germany before World War I were exceedingly complex. Some of their actions prior to the outbreak of war blurred their mutual stances, making the situation ambiguous. However, overall, the eruption of this war was inevitable. As deduced from the preceding analysis, there have always been voices within Britain advocating for a resolute resistance against Germany's aggression. On the other hand, Germany's military confidence and the obstruction of diplomatic channels by some bellicose officials contributed to the outbreak of the war. While figures like Henry Wilson could only represent a fraction of the officials on both sides, there is no doubt that their strategies and actions substantially influenced the top echelons of their respective nations. It is important to note that this study has chosen to focus on the personal experiences and opinions of certain officials from both sides. Although their historical impact is undeniable, further corroborating the aforementioned viewpoints with more representatives or national actions sharing similar stances would strengthen the argument. Additionally, this approach may open up new perspectives and directions for future research on how the diplomatic interactions between Britain and Germany gradually led to the path of war.

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