‘I do think that our relations with Germany have cleared considerably, so there seems no reason why we should not remain on perfectly friendly terms with her and discuss in an amiable manner any questions which may arise between us.’ Sir Arthur Nicolson writes to the Foreign Secretary, April 1912.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By December 1912, tensions were high in Europe. As the Balkan War raged in that troubled peninsula, the great powers attempted to confine the conflict, and prevent any unfortunate misunderstandings from fanning the flames of war. Should they succeed, they could even have a role in developing the eventual peace settlement. Into this charged atmosphere, an ill-timed speech by the German Chancellor emphasising Germany’s prerogative to come to Austria’s defence if she were attacked provoked a new ripple of discontent in Anglo-German relations. Offended by the spectacle of Britain taking offence, Kaiser Wilhelm demanded that his leading generals assemble for a meeting of the War Council.

This gathering has been described as proof of Germany’s plot to launch a world war, but this has been heavily disputed, since there was nothing abnormal about general staffs gathering before 1914, and several key figures, including Bethmann-Hollweg, were absent from it. Yet it does tell us something of the Kaiser’s mindset by this point. He was furious with Ambassador Lichnowsky for his moderating tone towards the British, yet he was even more enraged by London’s stance towards Germany. In his typical style of inserting angry marginal notes on official telegrams, Wilhelm fumed that:

Because England is too cowardly to leave France and Russia in the lurch openly, and too envious of us and hates us, that is why the other powers are not allowed to defend their interests with the sword, because against all reassurances she will proceed against us. A real nation of shopkeepers! And this they call peace politics. Balance of power! The fight to the end between Slavs and Germans finds the Anglo-Saxons on the side of the Slavs and Gauls.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A few days later, the Kaiser gave the Swiss ambassador to Berlin an earful, speaking in an informal but clearly embittered tone:

Lord Haldane, Germany’s alleged friend, had explained to him that England would never allow that Germany would assume a dominant position in Central Europe vis-à-vis her immediate neighbours. Is this not an impertinent remark which would deserve an end to diplomatic relations with England! Is it not outrageous that England, for whose good relationship with us have done so much, perhaps too much, that these Anglo-Saxons, related to us by shared roots, religion, and civilised ambitions, want to lend themselves to being a tool of the Slavs? The Kaiser then said that the creation of a strong Serbian empire, aimed against Austria and Germany, must be prevented. It was the vital condition of both countries not to be encircled by a ring of Slavs. We have renewed the Triple Alliance, so they know in [St] Petersburg how things are fixed. If this question – for us a vital question – cannot be solved by diplomacy then the weapons will decide. The solution can be postponed. The question itself will however arise again in one or two [years] and Turkey will then have to be strengthened again: that was my first policy: it will be necessary to create a state in the Balkans which does not gravitate towards St Petersburg, but towards Vienna.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As was often the case in Berlin though, while the Kaiser was the supreme warlord, he was paradoxically not the sole decider of policy. With the humiliation of the *Daily Telegraph* interview still firmly in the mind, Wilhelm’s flights of fury and passion were well known, and those closest to him had grown accustomed to waiting out this period of seething, before suggesting an alternative course. By the fact that reports of Wilhelm’s rage were still being produced late in December, we can safely assume that the Kaiser took some time to cool off. One way to push through the emotion was to present the above documents in a different light. The Chancellor rationalised Haldane’s words as an unsurprising caution against European aggrandisement. ‘Haldane’s revelation to Lichnowsky,’ Bethmann Hollweg wrote, ‘was not actually that serious. It only revealed what we have known for a long time: that England still advocates the balance of power and that she will therefore support France.’ Bethmann-Hollweg’s colleague echoed these sentiments: ‘I do not attach special importance to the utterances of the [British War] Minister but regard them rather as a well-intentioned attempt to warn us to be cautious.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

But the war council meeting was anything but cautious. The War Council meeting on 8 December was arguably hosted when Wilhelm was at his most wrathful. The sense of haste was evident in that fact that Bethmann Hollweg, Kiderlen Wachter, the Foreign Minister, and even the War Minister were all absent from the meeting. Wilhelm opened the meeting with a striking statement summarising Germany’s strategic imperatives during a future war. With prophetic accuracy, the Kaiser anticipated an array of enemies and allies which was remarkably similar to the war which followed eighteen months later. Admiral Georg von Müller, chief of the Kaiser’s naval cabinet, was one figure who happened to be present, and his diary entry represents one of many accounts, even if official minutes were not taken. According to Müller, Wilhelm declared:

Austria must deal energetically with the foreign Slavs, otherwise she will lose control of the Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. If Russia supports the Serbs, which she evidently does then war would be unavoidable for us too. We could hope, however, to have Bulgaria and Romania and also Albania, and perhaps also Turkey on our side… We have exerted great pressure on the Turks… If these powers join Austria then we shall be free to fight the war with full fury against France. The fleet must naturally prepare itself for the war against England. The possibility mentioned by the Chief of the Admiralty Staff in his last audience of a war with Russia alone cannot now, after Haldane’s statement, be taken into account. Therefore immediate submarine warfare against English troop transports in the Scheldt or by Dunkirk, mine warfare in the Thames. To Tirpitz: speedy build-up of U-boats, etc. Recommendation of a conference of all naval authorities concerned.

The Kaiser was thus convinced that the recent détente with Britain had been for nothing. However accommodating Germany had been, Britain would insert herself into the camp of Germany’s enemies, and she should thus be attacked on multiple fronts without hesitation. The diplomatic coalition Germany was building against the Entente would be leveraged, buffering the eastern front and facilitating a deployment to the west. Admiral von Müller recorded Moltke’s infamous comments. ‘I believe war is unavoidable and the sooner the better,’ Moltke declared, ‘But we ought to do more through the press to prepare the popularity of a war against Russia, as suggested by the Kaiser’s comments.’ Tirpitz requested a year and a half to get the navy ready, but Moltke retorted that the navy would never be ready – the army was ready now, but this advantage would be lost if the Kaiser delayed. ‘This was the end of the conference,’ Admiral von Müller wrote, ‘The result amounted to almost zero.’[[5]](#footnote-5)

Indeed, the curious fact about the infamous war council – where Germany supposedly plotted a premeditated war before its military advantages were lost – is that it did not result in any action. No troops were mobilised, no war plans were implemented, and certainly no wars were declared. Perhaps the most noteworthy strategic consequence was the decision to abandon the plans for war solely against Russia, and a tendency from now onwards to think purely in alliance bloc terms.[[6]](#footnote-6) Moltke’s suggestions that the German public should be prepared for this war through propaganda or other means were also not followed. As Wolfgang Mommsen discerned, the episode was far more inconsequential than its reputation might suggest:

In fact, this so-called War Council…did not lead to a large-scale official campaign to prepare the public for a major European war, either an imminent one, or one to be launched at a later stage; neither was it the starting – point for systematically putting the country onto a war footing. Rather the conference produced no consistent policy decisions at all.

Despite this though, the war council was significant for other reasons outside of policy, as Mommsen continued:

It revealed that there was an influential faction within the ruling elite which considered a major European war inevitable sooner or later, and seriously contemplated the idea of a preventative war – being, as the General Staff argued, the only viable solution to Imperial Germany's strategic dilemma, caused by the re-emergence of Czarist Russia as a great military power closely allied to France. Furthermore, the last remnants of resistance to a far-reaching increase of the army, which had been under discussion since October 1912, were overcome.[[7]](#footnote-7)

German fears of Russia’s unsurmountable numerical advantages which would come from its continued recovery are often presented as the justification for the declaration of war on 1 August 1914. Germany attacked Russia in 1914, it is claimed, because had she waited until 1916, she would never have stood a chance. This view did exist, but as we will continue to see it could be tempered by the civilian government in Berlin, and by the Kaiser himself, who had cooled off by the new year. He may have been reassured by Moltke’s plans for the army; the renewal of the new army law in the Reichstag could facilitate as much as a doubling of the army’s size. By late December 1912 Moltke had his eye on the next round of increases, which were far more ambitious for 1913, as he explained to Bethmann Hollweg:

France inducts 82 percent of its eligible men into the army; Germany some 52 to 54 percent! If we use our manpower to the same extent as France, with universal service we easily arrive at a raising of the recruit contingent by 150,000 men and of our peacetime strength by 300,000. An increased drawing upon the younger cohorts is nothing less than a social duty. With it we would take the burden off of the older cohorts, in which there are many fathers of families, and postpone their use in the face of the enemy. It would remove the need for a large part of the Landwehr men who are at present assigned to reserve formations to go into the field immediately while thousands of young people stay at home because they are not trained.

Moltke found the German War Ministry opposed to these increases; bringing the army from 600,000 to 900,000 as he proposed would have had drastic effects on German society. Moltke was refrained from increasing the army beyond a sixth of its size, limiting the expansion to 100,000 or so men up to 1916. If France was scraping the barrel, then Moltke was warned of the precarious balance between the military and German society; the larger the army, the more vulnerable it was to social agitation. The sheer significance of the new army law was that it dispensed with much of these societal concerns – the political inclinations of the recruit seemed to matter less when Germany was besieged on all sides. Only by expanding its army could Germany be ready for an attack, or be equipped to launch an attack while its rivals prepared themselves.[[8]](#footnote-8)

However, we should not assume that the Germans were the only ones who tended to think in these terms. This insistence that it would be better to fight now than fight later may be viewed as a major theme of pre-war rhetoric. In late February 1913 Sir Arthur Nicolson wrote to Grey about conversations which the Director of Military Operations, Sir Henry Wilson, had had with his French counterparts. The recorded discussions make for interesting reading, since they suggest that the militaries in each of the powers were becoming anxious about their strategic prospects and were willing to advocate dangerous policies to overcome them. As Nicolson recorded of Wilson’s conversations:

He tells me that the soldiers are of the opinion that it would be far better for France if a conflict were not too long postponed. Their reasons are that if it would come now it would be in consequence of the Balkan difficulties, and therefore they would be able to secure the wholehearted support of Russia. Were a conflict to be postponed and eventually arise over some difficulty between Germany and France alone, they had some doubts, treaty notwithstanding, whether Russia would go wholeheartedly on their side. They impressed upon Wilson that Russia was not exceedingly strong, both in her military organisation and also in her financial condition, and was therefore far less dependent on French support, either in a military or a financial sense. In short, that Russia was now well able to look after herself, and might be inclined to take a line of her own.

Nicolson was assured that General Wilson had only spoken with French military personnel, and that these views did not necessarily reflect those of the French government. The sentiments expressed above do read similarly to those of the war council, but they also suggest a sense of fragility and unpredictability within the Franco-Russian alliance. Much like Berlin felt compelled to support its Austrian ally no matter the consequences, Paris would now be increasingly sensitive to the prospect of their Russian friend turning away from their alliance, having got what she wanted from France. Sir Edward Grey was not convinced by these anecdotes, and he told Nicolson that ‘the French government clearly do not want to be dragged into war over the Balkans,’ and were ‘working to prevent Russia precipitating a conflict over that.’ ‘We on our side,’ Grey concluded, ‘can be no party to France precipitating a conflict for the revanche.’[[9]](#footnote-9)

But the Balkan crisis did represent a turning point, for French and for German military officials. The rapid success of the Balkan League against the Turks shocked German opinion as much as the other powers, and it gave fresh energy to additional military supplements for the new army law. There was also room to deaden some of the alarm bells; the paper number of a nation’s army might say one thing, while the circumstances of that nation could complicate matters, and create opportunities which Germany could exploit. A focus on the political and strategic situation, rather than mere numbers, moved Moltke to give an optimistic reading of the situation should Germany be forced to fight imminently:

For the moment we can face a war with confidence, since Russia is not ready, while France is on the one hand heavily engaged in Morocco and on the other hand menaced by Italy's alignment with Austria and Germany. The military-political situation is therefore a favourable one for us at present. But it can change. In two or three years Russia will have gained strength, France may be unburdened in Africa, and the latent antagonism may be revived between Italy and Austria, which in turn may be challenged by the militarily strengthened Balkan states. Then Germany must be strong enough to rely on its own power, and can therefore not undertake the development of its military strength soon enough.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This assumption of Russian weakness was challenged throughout 1913. Indeed, one could argue that the scales somewhat fell from the eyes of the German military during that year where Russia was concerned. Just as the French worried that their Russian ally had become too powerful, and would likely pursue a policy independent of French interests, so too in Berlin the apprehension increased while St Petersburg confronted Vienna in an expensive mobilisation standoff. The solution, so it seemed, was to accelerate the increases to the German army and to supplement these with additional increases. To do this, Bethmann Hollweg would have to emphasise the sense of impending danger in his speeches to the Reichstag. This may have contradicted what some German officials believed in private, but it was essential political theatre. If they were not filled with alarm at the situation, the Reichstag deputies could not be expected to agree to the increases. In early February 1913 the Chancellor declared to them:

…the political relations of Europe have substantially changed. The Balkan crisis that has held all Europe in tension for months still continues and has created a series of potential conflicts for us and our allies… Whether the German army at its present establishment will suffice to meet all the challenges seems doubtful. A major part of the forces of our Italian ally is for the moment immobilized by its engagement in Tripoli; the Austrian armed forces too are limited in their capability by the extensive military deployment that has become necessary on the southern frontier of the empire.

In an imperial proclamation published shortly thereafter, alarm bells were once again turned up to the maximum. ‘As a result of the events that are unfolding in the Balkans,’ it read, ‘the relationship of power in Europe has been altered.’[[11]](#footnote-11) In a closed committee session of the Reichstag, the German minister for war outlined his surprise at Russia’s recovery and growing power. If the Franco-Russian alliance coopted the support of Belgium, Serbia, and Bulgaria, then the allied preponderance of forces would come close to 1.5 million men. This superiority, clarified in such stark terms, could only encourage a panicked Reichstag to approve whatever increases the government requested. As Moltke recognised, the power of propaganda could ensure Germany was equal to the challenge.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Germany, France, Russia and Austria were each, in their own way, agitating against their rivals; they advocated stark increases to their armies, and justified these acts in propaganda campaigns designed to stoke patriotic sentiments and foster a sense of alarm. Yet despite calls for preventative war and the heavy emphasis on the importance placed on the immediate future, it must be underlined that during the Balkan Wars, restraint was the order of the day. Grey established London as the basis for this cautious policy, hosting the ambassadors’ conference, and this conference may be seen as the final victory of the old Concert diplomacy. Notwithstanding the heavy pressures weighted against peace, the crisis at Scutari passed with Austro-Russian moderation. When the Montenegrins evacuated Albania, a multi-power force occupied Scutari, and the Balkan League was urged to the peace table. The Treaty of London on 30 May ended the First Balkan War, and the eruption of the Second Balkan War a month later did not rupture the Concert. Perhaps, peace was more durable than contemporaries liked to admit – not that they could afford to admit it in public. Were they to do so, after all, how could they explain the need for the increased armaments which only seemed to raise the temperature?[[13]](#footnote-13)

Behind the scenes, figures like Moltke were considering the state of affairs in far more cynical, realistic terms than before. To Moltke, a clear plan for fighting in the west was essential if Germany was to offer any security to its allies, particularly Austria. Both Germany and France had considered the status of Belgium in these plans, and each weighed the pros and cons of occupying the country to aid their military objectives. The French, concerned that a violation of Belgium would draw Britain’s ire, gave up this idea, but to the Germans, the precariousness of the situation necessitated a Belgian occupation, however fateful the consequences. In a memorandum of January 1913, thus, Moltke gauged the dangers posed by a violation of Belgium were outweighed by the strategic imperatives, even if all in Berlin were not in agreement. His memo read:

The great difficulties which are connected with a march through Belgium must not be overlooked. It is not pleasant to begin the war with the violation of the territory of a neutral neighbouring state. However, where the existence of our state is at stake, all considerations for others must take second place. It would be very desirable if we would come to an agreement with Belgium to the extent that Belgium either joins us, in which case all desired territorial gains in the West could be assured to her, or that she at least refrains from any hostile activities against our troops. In this case Germany would guarantee the Belgian state all its full territorial integrity. We neither want to annex Belgian territory, nor to wage war against Belgium at all, we merely require the country as an area for deployment. However, right from the start I consider it to be out of the question that our diplomacy will succeed in arranging such an agreement with Belgium, rather we will have to reckon with the fact that Belgium would consider a German advance through her territory as casus belli and would immediately place herself on the side of our opponents.

As we will see, these attempts to persuade Belgium to allow German troops military access through its territory came to naught when it mattered most. Yet, if we assumed Moltke was thinking too narrowly about the consequences of this attack on neutral Belgium, it may surprise us to learn that the chief of the German general staff was under absolutely no illusions about the impact of the attack upon British public opinion. Moltke’s memo continued:

A violation of Belgian neutrality will also turn England into our opponent. It is for England a question of life and death to prevent Germany from establishing herself on the side of the Channel opposite her and thus gain the opportunity for further naval strengthening, turning her into a danger for the island Empire which would permanently tie up all of England’s strength and would make her unable to maintain her world domination. For Germany it would be well worth considering if it were not worth doing without the march through Belgium for the prize of English neutrality were it not for the fact that England left no doubt that she would actively participate in the war on the side of our opponents, whether we marched through Belgium or not.

Was Moltke correct? Was there truly no point in respecting Belgian neutrality, since Britain was guaranteed to intervene either way? In fact this view of Belgium must be seen as a critical miscalculation on Moltke’s part. He also misunderstood British imperatives. While it would be dangerous to allow a power to establish itself opposite the Channel, the British government, press and public would be far more animated by the moral outrage of an attack on a neutral country which Britain, Germany and other great powers had agreed to respect in an international treaty. Indeed, the attack on Belgium arguably saved Grey’s policy, and ensured British involvement in the war. Contrary to Moltke’s impressions, Britain was not tied to France in a de facto alliance; the very vagueness of the Entente compelled ambassador Paul Cambon, Poincare and others to press for a clarification of its terms. Yet as we have seen, despite authorising secret military discussions and delineating joint zones for their fleets, an Anglo-French alliance was only confirmed by Britain’s entry into the war, which was itself only made possible by the attack on Belgium. For those pondering the questions of ‘what if,’ you may be distressed to learn that Moltke ruled out any alternative to the modified Schlieffen plan entirely:

I would consider it extraordinarily dangerous if, prompted by vague assurances from England, we would do without our only chance which enables us to have a quick deployment against France. We would impose on ourselves the difficulty of a frontal attack on the strong French…front and would have no guarantee that England would not intervene at a given moment after all. Given England’s political attitude, following her close connection with the Franco-Russian alliance, it cannot be expected that she will be on our side and we therefore have no certainty vis-à-vis her. Only England’s active participation in the Triple Alliance would give this certainty. England considers Germany to be stronger than France. She fears a defeat of the latter and German hegemony and, true to her politics which are aimed at preserving the European balance of power, she will do everything to hinder Germany’s expansion of power. Therefore, we will have to count England towards the number of our opponents.[[14]](#footnote-14)

This estimation of German strategic options comes to mind when the Kaiser requested just such an alteration in Moltke’s plans in the final moments of peace. Based on mistaken impressions of British commitments, Wilhelm erroneously believed Britain would stand aside if France was not attacked. The indelicate way the Germans attempted to formalise this situation cost them dearly, but Moltke had clearly anticipated it well before the decision came.

With this indictment of British intentions from the German chief of staff, we might wonder, was the Anglo-German détente dead? If Moltke was willing to consider Britain as Germany’s enemy, how could Anglo-German diplomacy possible hope to repair relations sufficiently so that these estimations changed? Could they be changed, or was Britain guaranteed to be Germany’s enemy by virtue of her defence of Belgian neutrality? We might wish to scream at Moltke for developing such uncompromising plans as these, which allowed for no adjustment to the political situation, and proceeded according to the rigid Schlieffen plan. This was far from his only error.

It seems Moltke did not take Britain’s contribution particularly seriously. Kiderlen, the Foreign Minister, died of a stroke in late December 1912, and his replacement was Gottlieb von Jagow, another advocate of Anglo-German cooperation. Jagow ‘warned Moltke seriously about the violation of Belgian neutrality which, to my mind, was bound to bring England against us into the equation.’ After a few moments of contemplation, Jagow recorded Moltke saying ‘Well, I think if need be we would be able to deal with those 150,000 Englishmen too.’[[15]](#footnote-15) Had he based his plan on the changeable political situation, rather than on an uncompromising calculus of German military imperatives, Moltke may have fared better in 1914. Remarkably, however, these underlying plans did not substantively interfere with the ongoing Anglo-German détente, even if the signs were not universally favourable that it would continue. Lichnowsky would later reflect that the resolution of the Scutari crisis in October 1913 and the end of the Ambassadors’ Conference in London did not represent the end of Anglo-German cooperation:

The Anglo-German co-operation during these conferences provided the basis for the understanding we sought, and I worked to consolidate it from then on. Through our common activity the British Government gained confidence in our desire for peace, and so the anxiety over our intentions gradually abated and a readiness was shown to accommodate our wishes in other areas also.[[16]](#footnote-16)

What were these other areas? Two of the more high-profile examples come to mind – the cooperation over the Berlin to Baghdad railway, and the division of the Portuguese colonial empire into British and German spheres. The first may be briefly summarised; the Berlin to Baghdad railway line was accepted as a German interest, and spheres of influence within the Ottoman Empire were devised. Germany’s interests would be recognised in Mesopotamia and in any region the railway passed through. Germany in return accepted British interests in the Persian Gulf, and committed not to infringe upon them. These agreement smoothed over political complications which the long-running railway project faced. In the Portuguese Empire discussions, the implications were more significant. In anticipation of its collapse, particularly in Angola, Anglo-German negotiations had proceeded since 1898 to divide these territories between them. Lichnowsky arranged a treaty to accommodate new developments, which granted Angola and Mozambique to Germany, with the rest falling to Britain. Unfortunately for the German ambassador though, each of these approaches were halted at the final stage by the eruption of war. Yet no one could claim that Lichnowsky did not try.[[17]](#footnote-17)

R. J. Crampton argued that British critics of the détente had much to complain of. Although sharing concern for the dangers of a wider war ensuing from the Balkans, whenever Germany welcomed British intervention, unilateral actions by Berlin’s allies undermined Britain’s diplomatic initiatives. First, there was the Austrian ultimatum to the Serbs in early October 1913, followed by the Austro-Italian venture against the Greeks later in that month. Eyre Crowe, assistant undersecretary at the Foreign Office and a recalcitrant opponent of a German rapprochement, voiced his suspicions in October 1913: ‘I am not altogether convinced that the Germans are playing quite straight in this Albanian question. They constantly assure us that they do not approve what Austria does but in fact they have at every stage supported her vigorously.’[[18]](#footnote-18) The impression that Germany favoured her Austrian and Italian allies over the interests of Britain was a recurring one in London, and it became more acute as Germany’s control over its allies appeared to slip. In fact, Berlin was anxious that it had not done enough to keep Austria on side. ‘In Germany they have no comprehension of the interests of our Empire or its ten million Germans. All they can think about [in Berlin] is Dreadnoughts,’ the Austrian Foreign Minister, Count Berchtold complained.[[19]](#footnote-19)

But if Berlin was thinking about dreadnoughts, they could not convert these thoughts into action. Since the Haldane mission failed to establish new rules about the naval race, Anglo-German diplomacy effectively skirted around the issue entirely. The race continued in the background, yet the overtures did not cease altogether. Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, advocated what he referred to as a ‘naval holiday’ in 1913, essentially a freeze on naval construction. Yet Berlin repeatedly rejected this idea, and Britain took the hint. No negotiations over the naval race were suggested once Haldane returned home to London. As Eyre Crowe remarked in early 1913:

…one of the main reasons why Anglo-German relations are now much more cordial – I do not overlook the obvious other reasons – is that we have entirely ceased to discuss the question of a limitation of armaments. I feel equally certain that any resumption of that discussion will have the inevitable effect of making relations worse again.[[20]](#footnote-20)

There was no formal agreement between the two powers, yet the naval race receded from the forefront of their relationship while diplomacy worked in the Balkans. This distraction was arguably a boon for the détente, and German concerns for its army suggested that Bethmann Hollweg could leverage the army increases against those of the navy. Tirpitz, the architect of the naval policy and its firmest advocate, lost much of the Kaiser’s favour throughout 1913. The costs of such an enormous army and navy were finally cutting into Germany’s economy. Ships were now more expensive, and the returns were far smaller than the initial steps of the race. A ratio of 16:10 in capital ships was tacitly accepted by Germany; here was the acknowledgement that they never could surpass Britain’s shipbuilding capabilities. By 1913, indeed, Britain enjoyed a supremacy of 42 capital ships – including dreadnoughts and battle cruisers – against Germany’s 26. The race was over, and it was not even close. With this loss Tirpitz’ entire scheme for combatting Britain at sea ceased to be realistic. Originally conceived as a strategy of risk, which would protect German commercial security and coerce Britain into making useful concessions, by 1913 the race had done little more than rack up the economic burdens and poison relations. ‘The situation is collapsing over the navy,’ Tirpitz lamented by May 1914, ‘We cannot build the vessels any more that we have planned.’[[21]](#footnote-21)

By the dawn of 1914, the Anglo-German détente was arguably still in place, yet external events had passed the arrangement by. The Balkans was now transformed, presenting a new league of emboldened nation-states determined to preserve and expand upon their victories. The Anglo-French Entente had produced tangible fruit, both from the experience of solidarity during crises like Morocco in 1911, and from secret arrangements between the armies and navies of the two powers, which separated the seas into different zones among them. Russia had also proceeded with its recovery, and the appearance of Russian troops on Austria’s border during the first few months of the Balkan War testified to the fact that the Central Powers could no longer ignore St Petersburg in their calculations. The German navy had not broken free from its constraints, and would be even more restricted now that the money to pay for its eye-watering expenses was drying up.

Under these circumstances, we might have expected the new year to mirror events of the previous year. There might be another crisis in the Balkans, but surely Berlin and London could dust off their old shining example of cooperation to fix the problems together? As Sir Edward Grey wrote on 24 June 1914:

Herr von Bethmann Hollweg had instructed Prince Lichnowsky to tell me that he hoped that if new developments or emergencies arose in the Balkans they would be discussed as frankly between Germany and ourselves as the difficulties that arose during the last Balkan crisis, and that we should be able to keep in close touch.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Yet, German strategic imperatives had changed more than those in London may have realised. Her inconsistent support of Vienna engendered a sense of mutual bitterness. Berlin was impatient with Austrian efforts to improve its military situation, and Vienna interpreted recent German interventions in its Balkan diplomacy – particularly towards Greece, Bulgaria and Romania – as counterproductive and even damaging. Germany did not fully grasp the threat Austria perceived in Serbia until the crisis in the summer. The Balkan theatre still seemed to them like a region ripe for intrigue and advantage.[[23]](#footnote-23) The underperformance of the Triple Alliance compelled Berlin to offer the blank cheque in early July, on the expectation that the crisis would proceed similarly to that of October 1913, with one seismic difference. This time, Serbia would be smashed, but there was no reason to anticipate Russian intervention when the Tsar had personally seen to it that Serbia and Montenegro backed down over an Albanian port nine months before.

Of course, the situation by summer 1914 was very different for Russia as well. The legacy of its public climbdowns – including 1909 and the Scutari crisis of 1913 – engendered a sense of defeat and timidity which St Petersburg also sought to extinguish. We might argue that both Austria and Russia both had something to prove by summer 1914. Having been denied any substantial success in previous crises, these two powers demonstrated their willingness to push matters to new extremes to make up perceptions of past weakness. This was a deadly combination, and one which Berlin failed to fully appreciate. It did not reckon on the psychological impact of the assassination on an already besieged Austria, and even when the war against Serbia was telegraphed, the Germans failed to appreciate that the same concerns of prestige and status would also animate the Tsar when he refused to allow Serbia to be crushed.

In this toxic mix of mistrust, wounded pride and naivety, the Anglo-German détente could do little. Yet the enthusiast in search of signs that war was not inevitable would have been greeted with bountiful evidence in the months before the war. ‘Since I have been at the Foreign Office,’ Sir Arthur Nicolson remarked in May 1914, ‘I have not seen such calm waters.’ ‘Grey thinks the German government are in a peaceful mood and that they are very anxious to be on good terms with England, a mood he wishes to encourage,’ Sir Francis Bertie wrote from Paris on 25 June. ‘We are on good terms with Germany and we wish to avoid a revival of friction with her,’ Grey wrote on 7 July. Four dreadnoughts were to sail to Kiel for the ongoing ceremonies in the newly opened canal there, and nobody protested their journey. It was ironic that these ships – the symbol of Anglo-German antagonism – could sail peacefully to a newly built military installation of their erstwhile foe without a peep from the usual suspects. Perhaps it signified that the relationship truly had changed?[[24]](#footnote-24)

In fact, in the view of Sean Lynn-Jones, the détente may have made war more likely between the two powers, because rather than rush urgently for the resolution of immediate difficulties, a mood of complacency set into the relationship, based on assumptions of past success at the peace table.[[25]](#footnote-25) Yet one could also argue that Anglo-German relations never truly surpassed the limitations of the powers involved. Britain could never accept Germany’s unlimited naval building program without protesting, which was one major pressure point. But Germany never sought the détente for the sake of it; it was also predicated on the hope, verging sometimes on a belief, that by neutralising Britain with a friendly formula, Germany could have a freer hand in a war with the Franco-Russian Entente. These key conceptual problems at the heart of the détente can be summarised with two simple facts; Britain could never entirely abandon the Entente, and Germany would never give up its navy without political concessions.

It would be reductionist to suggest that Anglo-German relations were bound to sour, and that the détente was doomed to fail in the July Crisis. As the powers increased their armaments, and instability racked the Balkans, the détente did prove a useful tool of peace-making. British talks with the Germans certainly discomforted the French, to the extent that incredibly significant strategic concessions compromising British freedom of action were provided to her. These Anglo-French developments proved more consequential in 1914 than Grey or his peers may have expected. If Berlin had been aware of them, it may have dispelled once and for all the fatal impression that Britain would remain neutral in a European war, despite all evidence to the contrary. Had events transpired differently in 1914, we may have been able to describe a détente which progressed all the way to an Entente. Contemporaries were also of the belief that time would heal all Anglo-German wounds; in May 1913 the German Foreign Minister Jagow believed it would take ten years, to which Wilhelm replied that Germany could not wait that long.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Time was also of the essence in London, but for a very different reason. We have by now heard several references to the Home Rule crisis in Ireland, and it is time I turned my entirely objective eye to this issue. Like the Caillaux affair and debates over the Three Year Law in France, the Irish question dominated British headlines up to the final moments of peace, and was even perceived by Berlin as a counterweight against fears of British intervention in the July Crisis. So, what was this Home Rule crisis, and why did it consume the attentions of the British government, to the point that a civil war was even anticipated? We will not be delving too deeply into this subject, since we can revisit it in a supplementary episode later, but we can at least provide the necessary background so you know why Ireland had become such an urgent issue.

We should go back to the beginning – of the nineteenth century at least. Since 1801, Ireland had been ruled directly from Westminster. The closure of the Dublin Parliament had been the collective punishment forced upon Ireland for the 1798 rebellion. The Irish were untrustworthy, and too dangerous to be granted a Parliament of their own; they must seek representation in London instead. This was difficult, since until 1829, Catholics could neither vote nor seek election to Westminster. With Catholic Emancipation, more Catholics were admitted as MPs, but Ireland was never Britain’s priority. This was tragically clear when the Famine of the 1840s ravaged the country beyond recognition, with one million dead and a further million emigrating. Such a dramatic fall in Ireland’s population should have compelled London to take notice and implement drastic measures, yet the depopulation continued, and the misery was only survivable through escape to the new world. The impact should not be understated; Ireland’s population surpassed eight million by 1840. At the time of writing in 2024, the population of Ireland north and south just about reaches seven million; the demographic scars left by the Famine are thus still visible.

Britain’s nonchalant, and in the view of some historians, genocidal approach to the disaster was emblematic of how London had always treated its neighbour. It is perhaps not surprising that in a parliament tasked with running the largest empire in history, Irish affairs should be sidelined; it was still part of the Home Islands, and supposedly blessed with membership of this noble fraternity of English, Scots, and Welsh, but by the turn of the twentieth century Irish people were among the poorest of the west, and Dublin endured higher infant mortality rates and worse slums than its counterparts. The Famine meant that there were fewer Irish to cause trouble, but the trouble did not cease. A doomed revolt in the painful year of 1848, and further incidents in the 1860s, suggested that Ireland would never sit down and behave like a loyal subject. But if the Irish situation embarrassed British statesmen, only a select few tried to materially improve the lot of these Irish subjects. One of these was William Gladstone, becoming Prime Minister for the third time in 1885, whose mission was to pacify Ireland; this mission revolved around the question of Home Rule.

Home Rule meant the reconvening of Ireland’s parliament, freeing up Westminster from incessant Irish debates or the concerns of Irish MPs, who absorbed political oxygen well out of proportion to their influence. The Irish Parliamentary Party, led by enigmatic figures like Charles Stewart Parnell, pressed consistently for Home Rule, to the point that it is often referred to as the Home Rule Party. Ejecting these tiresome rabble-rousers to their own parliament would provide breathing space, while also satisfying nationalist calls for greater representation. What was not to like? Unfortunately for Irish history, by the 1880s the question of Home Rule had taken on emotional and imperial undertones which undermined the practical benefits. Within Gladstone’s Liberal Party, a wide gulf of opinion existed over what to do about Ireland. A strong strand of opinion maintained that Home Rule would undermine the representation of Protestant Unionists from Ulster and elsewhere, who would be overwhelmed by the majority nationalist opinion in any Dublin parliament. Would this devolution not also create distance between London and Dublin, paving the way for independence? Weighing these concerns, Gladstone’s party opposed his quest to pass Home Rule, and when Gladstone pushed the matter, his Liberal Party fractured into two blocs. One remained with him, the other recast itself as the Liberal Unionist Party.

From 1886 onwards, this bloc of anti-Home Rule, pro-Unionist, and anti-Gladstone opinion caused trouble for their former leader. Liberal Unionists frequently supported or entered coalition with the Conservatives. By 1913, the relationship between the two parties was such that the Conservatives merged with the Liberal Unionists.[[27]](#footnote-27) It is this event which granted the party its full name, as the Conservative and Unionist party. The remaining Liberals, meanwhile, which entered government in 1905, kept the Home Rule idea on the books for now. Gladstone’s tribulations over Ireland had shown that there was little point in proposing Home Rule in any case, since the House of Lords would simply block whatever bill the Commons might write. Yet, from 1911, a set of pivotal political reforms were introduced in Britain, which removed the Lords’ ability to indefinitely veto legislation from the Commons. Henceforth, the Lords could only delay a bill, it could not block it altogether. This seemed like the right moment to try pass Home Rule again in 1912. The Lords blocked its passage three times, but by the summer of 1914, the Lords could no longer legally block the Home Rule bill, meaning that Ireland seemed destined to finally acquire this concession by autumn of 1914.

Yet, although this political progress might suggest consensus, the very opposite was the case. The Conservatives in Westminster remained opposed to Home Rule,[[28]](#footnote-28) but division was a common theme, as the question also affected the growing Labour Parties in Britain and in Ireland.[[29]](#footnote-29) Much more worrying than this peaceful opposition was the increase in violence within Ireland. In fact, Ireland seemed to have divided into two distinct factions – one, pro-Home Rule and nationalist, the other, resolutely anti-Home Rule and unionist. This created a painful dilemma in London. A politician in favour of Home Rule could be accused of throwing loyal Protestants under the bus, while a politician opposed to it now could be accused of denying Irish political currents and threatening the peace. And the peace was certainly under threat. As commitments to resist Home Rule were signed in blood, as guns were smuggled into the country, and irregulars marched in the streets, there was a strong possibility that civil war might follow any failure to agree a compromise.

There was no reason to think the civil war would be confined to Ireland alone; some British officers and admirals declared they would never fight Unionists. Some MPs even proclaimed their determination to fight alongside Unionists, and senior Conservative officials feared splitting their own party over the issue.[[30]](#footnote-30) The inherent Conservativism of the British political establishment, and the latent sympathy towards Unionists, while tending to portray Irish nationalists as primitive, ungrateful, or dangerous, meant that Home Rule would be an uphill struggle. For many decades, British rule from Dublin Castle had epitomised the sectarian and societal divide; London may have wanted a loyal Irish province, but they treated native Catholics as inherently disloyal, and preferred to employ Protestants in the Irish civil service. This created a glass ceiling where Irish Catholics could never truly rule the country for themselves, engendering understandable bitterness and exacerbating more extreme nationalist positions which maintained that only a fully independent Ireland would sufficiently represent Irish people.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The injustice of the situation must have rankled Irish contemporaries, but this injustice also extended to the military preparations made by both sides. It was noted that guns for Unionists were smuggled under the nose of British ships, while nationalists had to use more covert means to get arms for themselves. Conservatives were bound to sympathise with the Unionists, and the Liberals would feel compelled to defend the constitutional authority of the Commons, the Home Rule bill included, but would they fight for Irish nationalists? Were the Irish doomed to fight a bloody war all by themselves, having been let down by Westminster? This was hardly the image Britain liked to project.

It is difficult to overstate just how precarious the Irish situation was by summer 1914. But if it kept statesmen awake at night, the British press fed off the growing crisis, fanning a sense of panic and deep anxiety for the future of Ireland, let alone the political establishment. Questions were floated for which no answers existed. How could a Liberal government deal with an outbreak of violence in Ireland; would it arrest Unionists? If it aided them, would the entirety of Ireland revolt against such injustice, and the violation of promises made to them? The only solution was to prevent violence breaking out at all, but to achieve this, the government had to bring both sides to the table, where some compromise could be hashed out. One such compromise considered the heavy disposition of Unionist and Protestant citizens in the north of Ireland, the province of Ulster. This was itself a legacy of the Ulster Plantations, where English and Scottish colonisation removed forever the Gaelic heritage of the region. We obviously do not have time to get into this, but its consequences reverberated all the way up to the eve of war.

By 1914, this controversial past amounted to a heavy concentration of Protestant Unionists around Ulster, where much of Ireland’s heavy industry resided – including its famous Harland and Wolfe shipyards, which had constructed the Titanic. But could a Dublin parliament survive if its authority over a quarter of the island were removed? Was this not too bitter a pill for nationalists to swallow? It was far from certain that the Unionists would accept this partition settlement either, since Unionists did live in the south, in Anglicised Dublin suburbs – would they be abandoned? Unionist media organs pressed their case against Home Rule, and Unionist politicians leveraged their political contacts to increase the pressure on the government.[[32]](#footnote-32) One imagines the government tearing its hair out over these intractable questions and positions, and although I find it very hard to feel sorry for them, it should be reiterated that it was this Irish crisis, and certainly not the quietly unfolding crisis in Europe, that truly occupied their attention. They consequently had little attention to spare for European matters, and certainly did not feel confident offering unconditional support to any Entente ventures which might lead to war – could Ireland be relied upon in such dire circumstances? Would her irreconcilable malcontents not stab London in the back while she fought such a war?

As we will see, right up to the final moments of peace, British statesmen and the press were consumed by the possible consequences of the Irish situation. More importantly, foreign observers, particularly in the Central Powers, included Ireland in their calculations when gauging the likelihood of British intervention. It was certainly comforting for Vienna and Berlin to write Britain off as hopelessly distracted and constrained by its Irish problem; it was also gratifying that Berlin, with its Polish issues, and Vienna, with its morass of nationalist problems, were not the only powers to grapple with such unsolvable questions. Indeed, the Germans in particular had engaged with the widespread Irish diaspora in the United States, where many exiled nationalists and republicans lived. Here they published materials and spread the message of Irish independence, placing them on the radar of Indian nationalists on the other side of the globe. This Irish-Indian connection, fascinating on its own, provided even greater urgency for the resolution of Home Rule. Otherwise, Britain’s rivals would seize on these undercurrents of discontent to land a potentially fatal blow to the Empire.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Yet it may be said that the British government failed utterly to quell the flames of civil war. Efforts made towards a compromise, such as that partition solution alluded to earlier, still seemed like the best solution. But agreements over the precise borders of this northern Irish province proved yet another stumbling block. So serious was the situation that in mid-July 1914, the main parties concerned with the Irish question gathered in Buckingham Palace for a conference. Yet even with the King in close proximity, the parties could not find common ground, and the conference dissolved without success on 24 July 1914. The failure of this initiative sowed additional seeds of panic. All it would take was a spark to light the match of civil war, and the Irish wound which Britain had cauterised at such great expense in the early nineteenth century would be reopened.

Britain was more than capable of aggravating this wound all by itself; on 26 July British soldiers fired on a crowd in Dublin, at a place called Bachelor’s Walk. Four people were killed and forty were wounded. Irish anger at this atrocity – caused, so London claimed, by the recent gunrunning which had successfully evaded British authorities – was simmering dangerously close to the boil. German officials in Dublin and London were reporting on a paralysis, an Irish disease of indecision which would prevent Britain from getting involved. Yet, in a surprise move, Unionist leaders managed to persuade the Prime Minister to delay Home Rule until the July Crisis had passed. The unfolding crisis on the continent had moved into focus, and the interconnected nature of events suggested that events in Serbia might now bail Britain out.[[34]](#footnote-34) Winston Churchill provided a fascinating, if self-indulgent account, of how Ireland faded from view once the immediacy of the European situation was brought to bear. He recalled the scene on the 24 July:

The discussion had reached its inconclusive end, and the Cabinet was about to separate, when the quiet grave tones of Sir Edward Grey’s voice were heard reading a document which had just been brought to him from the Foreign Office. It was the Austrian note to Serbia. He had been reading or speaking for several minutes before I could disengage my mind from the tedious and bewildering debate which had just closed. We were all very tired, but gradually as the phrases and sentences followed one another, impressions of a wholly different character began to form in my mind. This note was clearly an ultimatum, but it was an ultimatum such as had never been penned in modern times. As the reading proceeded it seemed absolutely impossible that any state in the world could accept it, or that any acceptance, however abject, would satisfy the aggressor. The parishes of Fermanagh and Tyrone faded back into the mists and squalls of Ireland, and a strange light began immediately, but by perceptible gradations, to fall and grow upon the map of Europe.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Not even Churchill could have anticipated that the Irish question would be answered by a world war. It was not the answer anyone could have expected in late July 1914, when *civil* war appeared inevitable. Yet, Home Rule was delayed by the new crisis. Irish nationalists, much to the relief of London and the surprise of others, did enlist and serve in the British army with great distinction and bravery. Rushing to the defence of Belgium – a small, Catholic nation unjustly attacked by a larger predominantly Protestant power – was not a hard sell. Thus the German decision to accept the consequences of invading Belgium incurs yet more strikes against it; perhaps if Belgium had been left alone, the enthusiasm of Irish volunteers to fight the Germans might not have materialised. More intriguing were the political bargains undertaken behind the scenes; John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, a key negotiator in the discussions, and a determined advocate for Irish self-rule, accepted this bargain. The expectation was that by demonstrating their loyalty and dedication, Irishmen would be rewarded with Home Rule after the war.[[36]](#footnote-36)

No one, of course, could anticipate *when* the war would end, or the transformations which would accompany it. One of these was the eruption of the 1916 Rising, an event which destroyed the Anglo-Irish political settlement, and placed physical force republicanism at the forefront of Irish politics. When the British military governor of Dublin executed the ringleaders, Ireland was supercharged with a new spirit of radicalism and defiant nationalism. Henceforth, Irish citizens would not accept Home Rule; they wanted complete independence from Britain, an elected head of state, and no partition. Such positions were incompatible with those of Britain, and the Anglo-Irish relationship entered a new death spiral when the war ended, and no sign of Home Rule was then forthcoming. An independence war and civil war followed, but Ireland ended its decade of conflict in 1923 still, ironically, within the Empire, but with a proto-Home Rule arrangement which only ceased upon the declaration of a republic in 1949.

In contrast to their paralysis in Ireland, the British were tenacious in their efforts to reach an accord with the great powers; the potential of a true Anglo-German détente continued to appeal. This time, Sir William Tyrell, Grey’s private secretary, would represent Britain, and he would meet with Gottlieb von Jagow, the German Foreign Minister. Jagow was enthusiastic about the prospect of meeting Grey’s distinguished aid; Tyrell had met with Jagow before when the latter had been German ambassador to Rome.[[37]](#footnote-37) Grey believed there was no reason why improved Anglo-German relations should jeopardise the Entente with France because…

…he would continue the intimate conventions and consultations with France and to a lesser degree with Russia and consult with Germany so far as it might be expedient so as to be the connecting link between Germany and the Triple Entente and a restraint on the hastiness of Austria and Italy.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Tyrell was at this time enjoying something of a rise to prominence. We may recall Sir Arthur Nicolson, undersecretary at the Foreign Office, whose pro-French and anti-German position was twinned with a poor relationship with Sir Edward Grey. Nicolson, of Ulster Unionist stock, clashed badly with Grey’s Liberal government over their position on Home Rule. Nicolson was also a generation older than Grey, perhaps more set in his ways, so he was never able to forge the kind of warm friendship with the Foreign Secretary enjoyed by previous undersecretaries. ‘Nicolson’s position seems to me quite impossible,’ remarked one contemporary in March 1914, ‘For some reason or other - because he talks too much Ulster and his wife still more – he has absolutely lost Grey's confidence, and he does not conceal the fact that he is sick of it all.’ By 1914, Nicolson’s influence – as much as his patience – was on the wane. Tyrell stepped into the growing hole Nicolson left, and made himself indispensable to Grey as a servant and friend.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In his previous work as a junior Foreign Office clerk, Tyrell had embraced the anti-German mood of the time. By 1913, however, Tyrell had come to appreciate German diplomatic cooperation in the Balkans, and to believe in a further understanding between London and Berlin. Grey’s private secretary had also become more critical of Russia, as he explained to a *Times* correspondent, he was 'convinced... that we are relieved, at least for a good time to come, from the German menace and can therefore take up a somewhat firmer line with Russia without compromising the Entente.’ It was not Germany, in Tyrell’s view, but the ‘cynical selfishness’ of Russian policy in central Asia and the Far East which was a greater danger to the policy of the ententes, and, ‘to save the Entente he holds that Russia must be brought to her bearings.’[[40]](#footnote-40)

Russia’s recovery and her more active policy during the Balkan Wars suggested that assumptions of Russian weakness may have been obsolete. For Tyrell there was another cause for concern; the 1907 convention between Britain and Russia had been intended to anticipate and resolve disagreements in key areas, above all in Persia, and the buffer states which bordered their Asian possessions. By 1911 however, Russia was becoming more demanding in its Persian policy, and Tyrell believed it was vital that Britain ‘make them [the Russians] realize that in Europe they are in as much need of our cooperation as we, in Asia, are in need of theirs in regard to India.’[[41]](#footnote-41) To some extent, this was Nicolson’s view of Russia as well. The undersecretary had been integral to the 1907 convention, but his perspective tended to emphasise the danger Russia posed to British security, rather than the value she currently offered to British interests. As Nicolson explained to Britain’s Austrian ambassador in March 1914, his fear was that

…if we do not try to tighten up the ties with Russia she may become weary of us and throw us overboard. I do not mean to say that Russia would necessarily become really hostile to us... She could, without being hostile…cause immeasurable damage to our prestige and seriously shake our political position in India and the adjoining countries. This to me is such a nightmare that I would at almost any cost keep Russia's friendship... As matters at present stand, with the exceedingly loose ties which bind us to France and Russia, we always run the risk of being severed by some unexpected event.[[42]](#footnote-42)

This had begun to sound as if Britain preserved the Russian connection out of fear, but Tyrell did not believe Russia should be viewed in this manner. The 1907 convention was up for renewal in 1915, and Tyrell maintained that it should not be deepened into any tighter political arrangement. Tyrell schemed to replace some of the diplomatic old guard, and to ensure that some of the more anti-German figures – like Nicolson – did not acquire promotions to important embassies in Paris, Berlin or Vienna. In this he was only partially successful, but Tyrell managed to increase his personal influence when he was sent to the United States in autumn 1913. Tyrell’s mission there was to resolve some outstanding issues in Anglo-American relations and to cut a long story short, he emerged from this effort with an enhanced reputation as a fixer and friend to everybody. Interestingly, Tyrell elected to return to London on a German steamer, rather than a British one.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Tyrell used well-placed intermediaries in Germany to prepare for a secret rendezvous with Jagow. Through April and May, an unassuming estate near the German-Dutch border was selected as the location for their meeting. Grey was apologetic that he could not leave London, since he was so preoccupied with the ongoing Home Rule crisis. Tyrell was in fact quite worn out by Grey’s heavy reliance on him. The burdens placed on such a fixer had become too great; the Tyrell family’s usual summer holiday in Potsdam was cancelled as Tyrell went on sick leave in early July. By the time he returned to his post on 20 July, Jagow advised Tyrell that owing to the difficulties emanating out of Sarajevo, it was better to postpone the trip for now.[[44]](#footnote-44) Of course, the meeting never happened, and must remain one of many ‘what ifs’ of the pre-war period. As Thomas Otte made clear in this study of Tyrell’s planned mission, this was not an indication that everything in the realm of diplomacy was about to change. It could not be guaranteed that Tyrell’s mission would succeed where Haldane’s mission had failed. But it does suggest that Grey was not as resolutely pro-Entente as is often believed. It suggests that the situation was in flux to a certain extent, largely due to the recovery of Russia and the renewed clashes with Britain in Asia. As Otte concluded on Tyrell’s mission:

[Grey] and his closest aide were searching for new policy options. And that, after all, is what all sensible foreign policy is about. As the abortive plans for a clandestine meeting illustrate, Jagow and the German chancellor viewed matters in a similar light. This further underlines the authentic potentiality of détente on the international politics of the last two years before 1914. The dysfunctional nature of the imperial regime, the inability of the civilian leadership to retain control over events in July 1914, and, once the crisis was upon them, their preference for subterfuge over straight dealing meant that hopes of an Anglo-German rapprochement remained abortive.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Perhaps the Anglo-German détente really did require ten years to have a tangible effect; or perhaps it only needed a single year, and would have become more significant if Anglo-Russian negotiations over the renewal of the 1907 convention in 1915 went badly. We will never know, but what we do know, considering all we’ve covered so far, is that the First World War was not inevitable. Britain and Germany were not on a guaranteed collision course which they were powerless to prevent. The London-Berlin relationship arguably contained the least points of friction of all the pre-war axes. Particularly once the naval race entered its anticlimactic final phase, and buoyed by the memory of cooperation during the Balkan Wars, it is little wonder that when Franz Ferdinand was killed, the assumption in London was that the two powers could resolve this crisis as they had before. In Germany this assumption went even further; that domestic distractions and recent displays of cooperation meant Britain was unlikely to get involved at all. Perhaps such assumptions lulled the powers into a false sense of security, or even complacency, but these past experiences of Anglo-German relations informed decision-making. Considering what it had achieved, this partnership should have been sufficient to contain yet another Balkan crisis; instead, events in Sarajevo were to illustrate the true limits of this vaunted détente.

1. 15 April 1912, Sir Arthur Nicolson to Sir Edward Goschen in Gooch and Temperley eds *British Documents on the Origins of the War,* vol. VI, p. 747. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cited in 3 December 1912, Lichnowsky’s report from London in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 85, footnote 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 10 Dec 1912, Claparede’s report about a conversation with Wilhelm II in *Ibid*, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 20 Dec 1912, Bethmann-Hollweg to Eisendecher in *Ibid*, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See 8 December 1912, Admiral von Müller’s diary in *Ibid*, pp. 85-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Clark provides additional analysis on the war council, see *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, pp. 194-197. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, ‘Kaiser Wilhelm II and German Politics,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25, 2/3 (May - Jun., 1990), 289-316; 307-308. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe,* pp. 185-186. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 24 February 1913, Nicolson to Grey in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Quoted in David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe,* p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mulligan, *Origins*, pp. 82-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. January 1913, Moltke’s memorandum in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 92-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. January/February 1913, Jagow in conversation with Moltke in *Ibid*, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Quoted in R. J. Crampton, ‘The Balkans as a Factor in German Foreign Policy, 1912-1914,’ *Slavonic and East European Review*, 55, 3 (Jul., 1977), 370-390; 382. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Willis, ‘Prince Lichnowsky's Mission to London,’ 295-298. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Quoted in *Ibid*, 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid*, 385. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Sean M. Lynn-Jones, ‘Détente and Deterrence: Anglo-German Relations, 1911-1914,’ 133-134. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Michael Epkenhans, ‘Was a Peaceful Outcome Thinkable? The Naval Race Before 1914,’ in *Improbable War?* pp. 125-127. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Quoted in R. J. Crampton, ‘The Balkans as a Factor in German Foreign Policy, 1912-1914,’ 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid*, 385-388. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Lynn-Jones, ‘Détente and Deterrence: Anglo-German Relations, 1911-1914,’ 135-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid*, 138-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 25 May 1913, Lord Stamfordham’s notes of a conversation with Jagow in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Thomas William Heyck, ‘Home Rule, Radicalism, and the Liberal Party, 1886-1895,’ *Journal of British Studie*s, 13, 2 (May, 1974), 66-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Richard Murphy, Faction in the Conservative Party and the Home Rule Crisis, 1912-14,’ *History*, 71, 232 (June 1986), 222-234. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Emmet O’Connor, ‘Taking its natural place: Labour and the third Home Rule crisis, 1912-14,’ *Saothar*, 37 (2012), 31-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Thomas C. Kennedy, ‘Troubled Tories: Dissent and Confusion concerning the Party’s Ulster Policy, 1910–1914,’ *Journal of British Studies*, 46, 3 (July 2007), 570-593. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Fergus Campbell, ‘Who Ruled Ireland? The Irish Administration, 1879-1914,’ *Historical Journal*, 50, 3 (Sep., 2007), 623-644. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Michael Foy, ‘Ulster Unionist Propaganda against Home Rule 1912-14,’ *History Ireland*, 4, 1 (Spring, 1996), 49-53 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Jérôme aan de Wiel, ‘1914: What will the British do? The Irish Home Rule Crisis in the July Crisis,’ *International History Review*, 37, 4 (August 2015), 657-681. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Jérôme aan de Wiel, ‘The 'Irish factor' in the outbreak of war in 1914,’ *History Ireland*, 19, 4 (July/August 2011), 32-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Churchill, *World Crisis*, pp. 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. David Fitzpatrick, ‘The Logic of Collective Sacrifice: Ireland and the British Army, 1914-1918,’ *Historical Journal*, 38, 4 (Dec., 1995), 1017-1030. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Thomas Otte, ‘Détente 1914: Sir William Tyrrell's Secret Mission To Germany,’ *Historical Journal*, 56, 1 (MARCH 2013), 175-204; 180-181. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Ibid*, 185-186. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Ibid*, 187-188. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Ibid*, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Ibid*, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Ibid*, 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Ibid*, 197-199. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Ibid*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Ibid*, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)