

The Asquith Cabinet and the Decision to send an Expeditionary Force to France in 1914

John W. Young

University of Nottingham

The decision to send the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to France at the outset of the First World War has been much-discussed by historians from the perspective of its long-term military-strategic background.¹ But, so far as the eventual decision to despatch the Force in August 1914 is concerned, limited attention has been paid to the role played by the British Cabinet, the key executive body that had to give political approval to the step. A few historians have highlighted a Cabinet decision, made on 1 August, against sending the BEF abroad and pointed out that the Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith and his two key ministerial allies – Lord Haldane, the Lord Chancellor, and Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary – accepted this. But no-one has so far provided a full explanation of why, in the face of considerable criticism from military experts, diplomats, the Press and opposition politicians, this trio of ministers so readily and consistently stuck to their position against the BEF over the following few days. They did so, even though all three were advocates of the so-called ‘continental

Unless otherwise stated, dates of primary source are 1914. I am grateful to Professor Thomas Otte, of the University of East Anglia, and the anonymous readers of an earlier version of this article for their helpful comments.

¹ Significant discussions include: J.E. Tyler, *The British Army and the Continent, 1904-14* (London: Edward Arnold, 1938); Samuel Williamson, *Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France prepare for war, 1904-14* (London: Ashfield, 1969); Nicholas d’Ombrain, *War Machinery and High Policy: defence administration in peacetime Britain, 1902-14* (Oxford University Press, 1973); William Philpott, ‘The General Staff and the Paradoxes of Continental War’, in *The British General Staff: reform and innovation, 1890-1939* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 95-111; T.G. Otte, “‘The method in which we were schooled by experience’: British strategy and a continental commitment before 1914”, in Keith Neilson and Greg Kennedy, eds., *The British Way in warfare, 1856-1956* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2010); and Hew Strachan, ‘The British Army, its General Staff and the continental commitments, 1904-14’, in Hans Ehlert *et al*, eds., *The Schlieffen Plan* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

commitment': they had been involved for years in planning for the BEF to fight on the left wing of the French army and are generally counted as being pro-war interventionists during the July Crisis. Nor has a full explanation been attempted of the Cabinet's eventual agreement, on 6 August, to approve the despatch of the Force. This was done even though, on 4 August, Britain had declared war on Germany, not because of the *entente cordiale*, but in defence of Belgian neutrality. This article addresses these questions and argues that, far from being some reluctant step forced on the interventionists by their anti-war colleagues, Asquith, Haldane and Grey deliberately decided to delay the despatch of the BEF to France. They did this as a way of preventing a disintegration of the government, while leaving open the possibility that their colleagues would eventually agree to war. At the same time, they also left open the possibility of sending the Force to France should circumstances change and, on 6 August, Asquith won the Cabinet over to military action by downplaying the implications of the military entente with France, while playing up the possibility of assistance to Belgium.

The idea of sending the BEF to France had been discussed for a decade before 1914, becoming more serious during the Agadir (or second Moroccan) crisis in 1911, when the Director of Military Operations, Brigadier-General Henry Wilson, advocated the immediate despatch of all six home-based army divisions to the continent if France and Germany went to war, adding that 'Britain must mobilise at *exactly* the same moment as France.'² On 23 August 1911, key ministers and defence experts meeting in the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), seemed to approve this

² The National Archives (TNA), Kew, CAB4/3/2, memorandum, 15 August 1911.

course.³ But when the plans were discovered by other Cabinet members, it triggered a revolt against cementing a military *entente* France.⁴ A majority of ministers also insisted that they be kept informed of future developments. This did not prevent Henry Wilson continuing talks with French army staff, but only on the understanding these did not commit Britain to fight in any war.⁵ When the next war crisis loomed in 1914 the question of whether the Cabinet would approve the despatch of the BEF was, therefore, uncertain and became more so when a strong anti-war group emerged among ministers who were sceptical about a continental commitment. On 29 July, a leading figure in the group and a long-standing critic of the military entente with France, the Colonial Secretary, Lewis Harcourt, was ‘certain now I can take at least 9 colleagues out with me on resignation’, giving him a slight majority in the nineteen-member Cabinet.⁶

That same day, ministers considered their treaty commitments to Belgium, whose independence and neutrality Britain, alongside the other Great Powers, had guaranteed in 1839. This represented an alternative reason to the French entente for contemplating war with Germany. The importance of Belgium would loom larger over the following week and its importance for helping take Britain into the Great War has been restated in recent years by Isabel Hull, who highlights the legal implications, and Catriona Pennell, who highlights its impact on popular opinion.⁷ But

³ TNA, CAB2/2/2, 114th CID meeting, 23 August 1911; John Gooch, *The Plans of War: the General Staff and British military strategy, c.1900-16* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 290-92; see Keith Wilson, ‘Hankey’s Appendix: some Admiralty manoeuvres during and after the Agadir crisis’, *War in History*, Vol.1, No.1 (1994), 86-7.

⁴ Keith Wilson, *The Policy of the Entente* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 53-55.

⁵ Williamson, *Grand Strategy*, 198-200.

⁶ Bodleian Library, Oxford, Lewis Harcourt papers, Ms.Eng.c.8269, journal [hereinafter Harcourt journal], 29 July.

⁷ Isabel Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: making and breaking international law during the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), chapter 2; Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: popular responses to*

in its 29 July discussion, the Cabinet decided that the question of defending Belgian neutrality was ‘rather one of policy than of legal obligation’, leaving it open whether they would oppose a German invasion of that country. True, they did also agree to the ‘precautionary stage’, which introduced limited defensive preparations throughout the Empire.⁸ But on 1 August, when France mobilised its army, Henry Wilson became critical of the Liberal failure to take more serious military steps. As Roy Prete has emphasised, Wilson had given French military planners the impression that ‘British mobilization would be simultaneous with that of the French and that despatch of the B.E.F. would follow automatically.’⁹ As Wilson himself told Haldane and the Army Council on 5 August, he had partly done this because Asquith had agreed, in early May, ‘that if the UK decided to go to war they would send 5 Div[ision]s.’¹⁰ Thus, those ministers who favoured the ‘continental commitment’, including Asquith, Grey and Haldane, ought also to have felt under considerable pressure on 1 August to mobilise and despatch the BEF.

Rather than the Cabinet changing course, however, 1 August saw the chances of military intervention recede further, because even Asquith (whatever he had said to Wilson), Grey and Haldane appeared solidly to oppose the despatch of the BEF. In the late morning, Asquith, who was also Secretary for War at the time, wrote to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Charles Douglas, to put on record that, ‘the Government has never decided upon and are [sic] in no way committed’ to send the

the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland (Oxford University Press, 2013), 33-35 and 57-60.

⁸ TNA, CAB41/35, Asquith to George V, 30 July.

⁹ Roy Prete, ‘French strategic planning and the deployment of the BEF in France’, *Canadian Journal of History*, Vol.24, No.1 (1989), 46-47.

¹⁰ Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, Henry Wilson diary [hereinafter Wilson diary], 6 May and 5 August.

BEF to France.¹¹ In the afternoon, following a long Cabinet meeting, Grey confirmed this, telling a dismayed French ambassador, Paul Cambon – who had been urgently pressing him for stronger support over the last few days – that, ‘we could not propose to Parliament at this moment to send an expeditionary military force to the continent.’¹² As word of the decision spread, it could only deepen the dismay already felt among the right-wing Press and Unionist MPs, as well as Henry Wilson, about the likelihood of the Liberal government supporting France. At lunchtime, Wilson, along with Sir Eustace Percy of the Foreign Office’s Western Department, Leo Maxse, editor of the anti-German *National Review*, and two Unionist backbenchers, George Lloyd and Leo Amery, began moves to get Unionist Party leaders to return to London, so as to put pressure on the government to change tack.¹³ Maxse remembered it as ‘the blackest of black Saturdays.’¹⁴ Grey faced strong criticism from within his own department, even from his most senior staff. Sir Eyre Crowe, the Assistant Under-Secretary, in a letter to his wife, asserted that the government had ‘finally decided to run away, and to desert France in her hour of need. The feeling in the Office is such that practically everyone wants to resign rather than see a government of dishonourable cowards. I have myself prevented 5 resignations from going in today.’¹⁵ Sir Arthur Nicolson, the Permanent Under-Secretary, after hearing about Grey’s afternoon interview with Cambon, warned the Foreign Secretary, ‘You will

¹¹ Wilson diary, 1 August; IWM, Document 24336, Asquith to Douglas, 1 August.

¹² G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914 (B.D.): Volume XI* (London: HMSO, 1929), document 426, Grey to Bertie, 1 August.

¹³ Wilson diary, 1 August; John Barnes and David Nicholson, eds., *The Leo Amery Diaries, Volume 1, 1896-1929* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 103-04; and see John W. Young, ‘Conservative leaders, Coalition and Britain’s decision for war in 1914’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol.25, No.2 (2014), 214-39. The Conservatives were more properly known as the Unionist Party at this time.

¹⁴ Leo Maxse, ‘Retrospect and Reminiscence’, *National Review*, August 1918, 745.

¹⁵ Bodleian Library, Crowe papers, MS.Eng.e.3020, Eyre to Clema Crowe, 1 August.

render us a by-word among nations' and continued to press him on the need to send the Expeditionary Force down to 5 August.¹⁶

Yet, despite the criticisms from the Opposition, military experts and diplomats, Grey, alongside Asquith and Haldane, continued to resist pressure to despatch the BEF. During the first four days of August, in navigating the contradictory pressures either to intervene or declare neutrality, the trio seemed adamantly opposed to military involvement in Europe, even as they edged the Cabinet towards a declaration of war on Germany. Thus, on 2 August, the day when a majority of ministers swung in favour of war, Asquith wrote to the Unionist leader, Andrew Bonar Law, 'We are under no obligation... to France or to Russia to render them military or naval help' and that 'no good would be served by the immediate despatch of an expeditionary force.'¹⁷ The following day the Prime Minister, in a face-to-face meeting with Law and other Unionists, declared 'the Government were agreed that neither on military nor on political grounds ought the Expeditionary Force to be sent at once.'¹⁸ On 3 August, too, Grey again told Cambon the BEF could not leave, but made a speech to Parliament that pointed towards war with Germany.¹⁹ Even on 4 August, immediately before Britain declared war, Haldane, who as Secretary of State for War in 1905-12 had done much to create the BEF, told two senior Unionists – the former Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, and ex-Foreign Secretary, Lord Lansdowne – that he opposed its immediate despatch.²⁰

¹⁶ Harold Nicolson, *Sir Arthur Nicolson: First Lord Carnock* (London: Constable, 1930), 418-20; *B.D.*, Vol. XI, document 446, Nicolson to Grey, 2 August (but marked 1 August); TNA, FO800/94, Nicolson to Grey, 4 and 5 August.

¹⁷ Parliamentary Archives, London, Bonar Law papers, BL/34/3, Asquith to Law, 2 August.

¹⁸ Austen Chamberlain, *Down the Years* (London: Cassell, 1935), 103.

¹⁹ *Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1871-1914, 3rd Series, Tome XI* (Paris: Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1936), 754 (Cambon to Viviani, 3 August).

²⁰ British Library, London, Bowood (Lansdowne) papers, 'Note of Conversation', 4 August; Blanche Dugdale, *Arthur James Balfour, Volume II* (London: Hutchinson, undated) 86-87.

Thus, down to 4 August, all three of these leading Liberals consistently adhered to the position they had adopted three days earlier and their reputations paid a price. A former chief whip of the Unionists wrote ‘that the government is determined not to send [the Expeditionary Force] abroad unless positively forced to do so... Haldane again is said to be fighting any course so anti-German as the despatch of troops to France.’²¹ Haldane drew particular criticism because he had been educated partly in Germany. On 5 August, one popular newspaper asked, ‘Is Lord Haldane delaying war preparations?’²² The record of his discussion with Unionist leaders was still being used, years after, to condemn him for being ‘absolutely undecided’ about the dispatch of the BEF. One of the earliest full analyses of the July Crisis, by Luigi Albertini, even concluded ‘that neither Asquith nor Grey was in favour of sending troops.’²³

Yet, despite the apparent weight of evidence, some historians have questioned Albertini’s interpretation. Of Haldane, it has been claimed, ‘he was only expressing the views of the majority in the Cabinet’²⁴ and there is convincing evidence that, personally, he supported the despatch of the BEF from the outset. At a reception on 29 July, one observer ‘was shocked at Haldane’s war talk.’²⁵ On 31 July, he told his friend, the Librarian of the House of Lords, Edmund Gosse, ‘that a European war was now inevitable and... we should hardly keep out of it’, adding, ‘We were on terms of

²¹ John Vincent (ed.), *The Crawford Papers: the journals of David Lindsay* (Manchester: University Press, 1984), 340-41 (diary, 4 August).

²² *Daily Mail*, 5 August.

²³ Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War, 1914-16* (London: Collins, 1960), 37-40; Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914, Volume III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 502.

²⁴ Lord Newton, *Lord Lansdowne* (London: Macmillan, 1929), 441; and see Stephen Koss, *Haldane: scapegoat for Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press), 118.

²⁵ John, Viscount Morley, *Memorandum on Resignation* (London: Macmillan, 1928), 8-9.

friendship with the French , which would make it impossible for us to stand aside’ and that ‘he was very keen for promptly sending an expeditionary force to France, if France was invaded.’²⁶ Looking at the Cabinet more broadly, Clive Ponting (one of the few authors of general studies of the July Crisis to offer even a brief comment on the incident) has argued that the ministerial decision of 1 August, against sending the BEF to France, ‘was probably no more than a way of keeping the doubters in line by reassuring them Britain was not committed to a continental war.’²⁷ In this he echoes the interpretation of Cameron Hazlehurst, who postulates that, while the decision was, ‘On the surface... a triumph for the neutralists...’, the pro-war ministers – Asquith, Grey, Haldane and their pro-war ally, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill – were probably playing a ‘devious game’, with ‘every intention of reviving the question as soon as the Germans moved into Belgium, confident that at such a propitious moment the decision could be reversed.’²⁸ There is much to be said for this interpretation, which can now be supported by a greater range of evidence.

Hazlehurst is one of only two of only historians who, hitherto, have addressed the Cabinet decision of 1 August in any real depth. The other is Douglas Newton, who portrays it as a ‘Radical victory’, recognising that, over the following days, Asquith stuck to the agreement against despatching the BEF.²⁹ The idea of a ‘Radical victory’ is supported by the unpublished account by C.P Trevelyan, the only non-Cabinet minister who resigned over war. He recalled that Walter Runciman, President of the Board of Agriculture, ‘got an idea that the great thing was to refuse to send an

²⁶ British Library, Ashley MS.5738, copy of Edmund Gosse, ‘What I saw and heard, July-August 1914’ (16 October 1914), 5-9.

²⁷ Clive Ponting, *Thirteen Days: the countdown to the Great War* (London: Pimlico, 2003), 255.

²⁸ Cameron Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War, July 1914-May 1915* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 86-88.

²⁹ Douglas Newton, *The Darkest Days: the truth behind Britain’s rush to war, 1914* (London: Verso, 2014), 138-39.

expeditionary force onto the Continent, and was very proud at some stage at having secured a decision against it.’ But Trevelyan was vague about when this decision occurred and was evidently unimpressed by it, noting, ‘I could see that something was going very wrong.’³⁰ There are good reasons to believe that, rather than a ‘radical victory’, the decision against sending the BEF was a pre-emptive step by Asquith, Grey and Haldane, who decided upon it at a private meeting immediately before the 1 August Cabinet. An understanding of this still-obscure decision is vital to explaining how the Prime Minister and his closest colleagues hoped to shepherd the Cabinet towards war, while leaving open the possibility of sending the BEF to France. The meeting is not mentioned by Newton and, while Hazlehurst knew it was planned, he questioned whether it had actually taken place, because he found its decision to defer the despatch of the BEF – and this before the Cabinet had even discussed the matter – hard to explain.³¹

It is clear from a letter written by Haldane to his mother that he, Asquith and Grey arranged to meet at 10.30 on 1 August, before the Cabinet, which started at 11 a.m.³² While no record exists of their half-hour discussion and none of them left even the barest mention of it in their memoirs, the subsequent steps taken by those involved suggest that, while short, it took two important decisions, both born of a desperation to prevent a disastrous Cabinet split. Such a split might have prevented Britain from entering the Great War at the outset. This is not to say that Asquith, Grey or Haldane wanted war at this point: rather, they wanted to keep all options open. Thus, later in the day, Asquith declared himself ‘still *not quite* hopeless about peace’, while

³⁰ Robinson Library, Newcastle, Trevelyan papers, CPT59, ‘Personal Record.’

³¹ Hazlehurst, *Politicians*, 90.

³² National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Edward Haldane papers, MS. 5992, Haldane to his mother, 1 August (first letter).

Haldane told his mother, ‘I shall not give up hope till war breaks out. I trust we shall not be dragged in.’³³ In the latest biography of the Foreign Secretary, Thomas Otte concludes that, ‘Until the morning of 1 August, Grey himself had kept open the option of some arrangement with Germany’ and that only the events of that day ‘convinced him that this was no longer possible.’³⁴ Perhaps because of such hopes for peace, one of the decisions taken by the trio that morning was to launch what proved to be an abortive proposal, to secure French and British neutrality in the war, an initiative generally referred to as ‘the misunderstanding.’ This has been analysed elsewhere and need not be explored here, though it is worth highlighting some points about how it originated, since there are parallels to what happened over the BEF.³⁵ Evidence that the decision to pursue a neutrality deal was taken immediately before the 1 August Cabinet meeting comes from a telegram sent to Berlin by the German Ambassador, Count Lichnowsky, at 11.14 a.m., which talks of Grey having a ‘ministerial consultation [Ministerberatung]’ on the subject in the morning – evidently the meeting with Asquith and Haldane – and telling the Ambassador, over the telephone, that the issue would be taken up ‘in today’s Cabinet sitting [in der heutigen Kabinettsitzung].’³⁶

The second decision taken at the 10.30 a.m. Asquith-Haldane-Grey meeting was to avoid the despatch of the BEF, at least for the present. This decision, too, must

³³ Michael and Eleanor Brock eds., *H.H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 140 (Asquith to Stanley, 1 August); Haldane papers, MS. 5992, Haldane to his mother, 1 August (second letter).

³⁴ T.G. Otte, *Statesman of Europe: a life of Sir Edward Grey* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), 529.

³⁵ For two contrasting interpretations of this episode see: K. M. Wilson, ‘Understanding the “Misunderstanding” of 1 August 1914’, *Historical Journal*, Vol.37, No.4 (1994), 885-89; and T.G. Otte, *July Crisis: the world’s descent into war, 1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 473-86.

³⁶ My translations, from Auswärtiges Amt, *Die Deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch 1914, Dritter Band* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1921), document 562 (Lichnowsky to Berlin, 1 August). For a full English translation of this document see: Max Montgelas and Walther Schücking, eds., *Outbreak of the World War: German documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), 444.

have been taken *before* the morning's Cabinet, because Asquith had written his note saying that, 'the Government... [was] in no way committed' to despatch the BEF, so that (as recorded by Henry Wilson) it arrived at the War Office at 11.30 a.m. It can only have been sent off from Downing Street when the Cabinet was barely underway.³⁷ There is no suggestion in the fullest primary source we have on the 1 August Cabinet, the notes taken there by Lewis Harcourt, of a major argument among ministers about the BEF decision itself. (Unfortunately, the only other minister who kept a detailed diary during the crisis, Jack Pease, was absent from this Cabinet meeting.) Nor do letters written by Cabinet ministers that day suggest there was general disagreement on this point.³⁸ Instead, Harcourt's notes begin with Haldane and Grey offering a moderate line to ministers by mentioning a possible neutrality deal with Germany, while making Belgium the likeliest issue for taking a stand: 'L[or]d Chanc[ellor] long essay on situation towards preparations, & tell Lichnowsky feeling about Belgium "deciding factor", but promise our neutrality if Fr[ance] not invaded. Grey not committed to Cambon.' Harcourt's notes are very crisp, frustratingly so when he comes to a point later in the meeting, when there evidently was an exchange about military matters, between Churchill and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George (at that point counted among the anti-war group), possibly after Grey had denied that Britain had obligations to France: 'Grey two alternatives (no obligation). Ll.G. intervenes later (our men on Meuse). Long speech by Winston on tactics. Reply by Ll.Geo.' The reference to 'our men on the Meuse', a

³⁷ Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, Henry Wilson diary, 1 August; IWM, Document 24336, Asquith to Douglas, 1 August.

³⁸ See, for example, Parliamentary Archives, Samuel papers, A/157/696, Herbert to Beatrice Samuel, 1 August; or Haldane papers, MS. 5992, Haldane's two letters to his mother on 1 August.

river that flows through Belgium and saw heavy fighting at the start of the war, shows military issues were the subject here.³⁹

But, whatever Churchill said, his three colleagues Asquith, Haldane and Grey could have no motive for entering into an argument with anti-war ministers on the military point, for the simple reason that, as just seen, the trio had already, *before the Cabinet met*, initiated the idea of a neutrality bid with Lichnowsky and sent off the message to the War Office that the government was ‘in no way committed’ to sending the BEF. As Hazlehurst realised: it is difficult to understand why the trio acted in such a precipitate way, rather than testing their ideas on the Cabinet first. They left no clue as to their thinking on this point. One possible answer is that they wanted to be able to cite evidence of the seriousness of their intent to ministers, should they be challenged on this. Incidentally, the fact that Churchill was not called to the 10.30 meeting, and so was unfamiliar with the decisions taken there, probably explains why he alone took what Asquith described as a ‘very bellicose’ line when the Cabinet met, which also led to an argument about whether the Royal Navy should be mobilised. A majority at the meeting was against this, confirming that Asquith, Grey and Haldane were right to be cautious about pressing the Cabinet for military action at this time. As it was, despite the tense atmosphere, Asquith felt that ministers ‘parted in a fairly amicable mood.’⁴⁰

The trio’s BEF decision was in line with the Cabinet discussions of November 1911 and could only reassure ministers there had been no departure from what was

³⁹ Harcourt journal, 1 August (marked, ‘Transcribed literally from notes made at Cabinet on back of F.O. telegrams’, so presumably presenting developments in the order they occurred during the meeting).

⁴⁰ Brock and Brock, eds., *Asquith Letters*, 140 (Asquith to Stanley, 1 August).

then agreed. Hazlehurst rightly points out, however, that pro-war ministers left open the possible despatch of the BEF by a careful wording of their statements over the next few days.⁴¹ There is abundant evidence of this, beginning with Grey's initial explanation to Cambon about the decision not to despatch the BEF, on 1 August, when the Foreign Secretary said it applied to 'this moment', implying that future developments could alter the situation, not least 'a violation of the neutrality of Belgium.'⁴² Similarly, on 2 August, the King was told of 'reasons which *at the present juncture* make it impossible... to send our military force out of the country [italics added].'⁴³ That same day Asquith told Bonar Law, 'no good would be served by *the immediate despatch* of an expeditionary force'⁴⁴, while a memorandum prepared by the Prime Minister stated, 'The despatch of the Expeditionary Force to help France *at this moment* is out of the question... [italics added].'⁴⁵ Two days later, Germany's invasion of Belgium became the justification for Britain declaring war, ministers having come round by 2 August to the judgement that, 'a substantial violation of the neutrality of that country would... compel us to take action.'⁴⁶ (Although Harcourt still reckoned, on the morning of the 2 August, that there were '8-10 colleagues who w[ould]d not got to war for Belgium.'⁴⁷) The tactic of delaying the despatch of the BEF proved invaluable in keeping ministers happy, while the march of diplomatic events pushed Britain towards war. This was significant because several ministers, who eventually agreed to war, remained opposed to the despatch of the BEF during this time. Reginald McKenna, the Home Secretary, for one, 'was for war

⁴¹ Hazlehurst, *Politicians*, 89-90.

⁴² *B.D.*, Vol. XI, document 426, Grey to Bertie, 1 August..

⁴³ CAB41/35/23, Lord Crewe to George V, 2 August.

⁴⁴ Bonar Law papers, BL/34/3, Asquith to Law, 2 August.

⁴⁵ Brock and Brock, eds., *Asquith Letters*, 146 (Asquith to Stanley, 2 August).

⁴⁶ CAB41/35/23, Lord Crewe to George V, 2 August.

⁴⁷ Harcourt journal, 2 August.

if Belgian neutrality was violated, but against the dispatch of an expeditionary force'⁴⁸ and Jack Pease, the education minister, believed one argument against resignation was that it could bring more bellicose ministers into office, who 'might urge our troops being sent abroad...'⁴⁹

A potential problem arose on 3 August, when Asquith, Grey and Haldane agreed they must mobilise the Army. But the Prime Minister assured the Cabinet this was 'necessary not for Expeditionary force, but for home safety & defence.' Harcourt passed a note to Asquith, asking, 'You don't contemplate sending an expeditionary force to France?' and received the reply, 'No, certainly not.'⁵⁰ In his speech to Parliament on 3 August, which clearly pointed to British involvement in the war, Grey insisted, 'we have taken no engagement yet with regard to sending an Expeditionary armed force out of the country.'⁵¹ As seen above, the tactic of delaying the BEF also guided Haldane in his talks with Unionist leaders on 4 August. Even Churchill, always the most pro-war of ministers (but perhaps now aware of the tactics being pursued by Asquith, Haldane and Grey), informed the Navy that the 'Expeditionary force will not leave at present and therefore fleet movements with it will not be immediately required.'⁵² Then, on 5 August, Asquith informed the Cabinet, 'he has a War Council this afternoon... to examine use, *if any*, of troops [italics added]', thus still giving the impression that the BEF might not be sent abroad, even as he effectively revealed that the opposite course might now be considered.⁵³

⁴⁸ Edward David, ed., *Inside Asquith's Cabinet: from the diaries of Charles Hobhouse* (London: John Murray, 1977), 179.

⁴⁹ Keith Wilson, 'To the Western Front: British war plans and the military *entente* with France before the first world war,' *British Journal of International Studies*, Vol.3, No.2 (1977), 166.

⁵⁰ Harcourt journal, 3 August.

⁵¹ Hansard, *House of Commons debates*, 5th series, Vol. 65, column 1824.

⁵² Churchill to Jellicoe, 4 August, in Martin Gilbert, ed., *Winston S. Churchill: Companion Volume, Volume III, Part I, 1914-15* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 17.

⁵³ Harcourt journal, 5 August.

Such a crab-like, cautious approach – even as a major war broke out around him – was typical of his leadership style. As Hazlehurst has written, ‘To most students of Asquith’s premiership, the ability of the prime minister to keep so gifted and divergently-inclined a group in harness is seen as one of his major achievements’; he ‘happily assumed the role of mediator rather than initiator’ and ‘contrived... to appear loyal to all his colleagues...’⁵⁴

In all this, however, Grey may also have deliberately covered up one uncomfortable fact: since November 1912, Britain was committed in writing to discuss military co-operation with France after war broke out. This followed an arrangement, made at the height of the Anglo-German ‘naval race’ of the previous decade, that whereas the Royal Navy would take primary responsibility for tackling Germany in northern waters, France would focus on naval defence in the Mediterranean. The Cabinet had gone along with the relevant exchange of letters because these included a statement that military and naval conversations, ‘should not be regarded as an engagement that commits either government to a contingency that has not yet arisen.’ Significantly, however, the letters also said that, in the event of a threat to the Peace, there would be Anglo-French discussions about whether they ‘should act together... and, if so, what measures they would be prepared to take in common.’ The last sentence of the British letter promised, ‘if these measures involved action, the plans of the General Staffs would at once be taken into consideration, and the Governments would then decide what effect should be given to them.’ This sentence was omitted from the Foreign Secretary’s speech of 3 August, when he read out the rest of the letter. Incredibly, no-one spotted the omission until after the war,

⁵⁴ Cameron Hazlehurst, ‘Asquith as Prime Minister, 1908-16’, *English Historical Review*, Vol.85, No.306 (1970), 506.

when Grey excused himself by speculating that an interruption – and one did occur at this point – could have caused ‘an accidental omission.’ But, since he says he read the letter ‘to make clear to the House that its liberty of decision was not hampered by any engagements entered into previously without its knowledge’, the omission was surely a significant one.⁵⁵

In fact, there were clear signs by 4 August that Asquith, Grey and Haldane knew the despatch of the BEF to be probable. Arriving at the War Office on 3 August, as its ‘acting’ head (it being impossible now for Asquith to continue as both Prime Minister and Secretary for War), Haldane told the generals that, while the Cabinet had yet to decide about the BEF, ‘they must be ready... to send the entire force at once if necessary...’⁵⁶ The following day, during talks at the Treasury, Sir Francis Oppenheimer, gathered from ministers present that, ‘Britain will send a small force to Belgium or France to produce a good moral effect.’ Charles Masterman, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, even predicted, ‘by October 250,000 British soldiers will probably be on the continent.’⁵⁷ Harcourt’s journal reveals that, late on 4 August, several ministers, including Asquith, Grey, Churchill and Lloyd George, gathered in Downing Street and there was, ‘Some discussion about Expeditionary force’ (whose use Harcourt still considered a dangerous step).⁵⁸ According to Haldane, Asquith had already asked him, ‘to summon a War Council, and to select those who should attend.’⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Edward Grey, *Twenty-Five Years, Volume II* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), 16-17; *Commons debates*, Vol.65, column 1813; and see Williamson, *Grand Strategy*, 358.

⁵⁶ Lord Haldane, *An Autobiography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1929), 275-76.

⁵⁷ Bodleian Library, Francis Oppenheimer papers, Box 1, diary, 4 August.

⁵⁸ Harcourt journal, 4 August.

⁵⁹ Haldane, *Autobiography*, 277. But Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command, 1914-18, Volume I* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), 169, says Asquith only called the War Council meeting on the morning of 5 August.

It was significant that Asquith and Haldane called together an *ad hoc* body, the War Council, rather than the CID, which would have included a wider range of ministers and experts. As it was, Haldane was able seems to have selected individuals likely to support the despatch of the BEF to the continent. Despite Asquith's later assertion that, 'all our naval and military experts were present...'⁶⁰, the sole naval expert was the First Sea Lord, Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg, who proved supportive of his political chief, Churchill, and of the embarkation of the BEF. In contrast to this single naval expert, the War Council included no less than twelve serving or retired generals, including Henry Wilson and four senior officers from the BEF. This selection surely reduced the chances that Britain would fight a predominantly naval war. Newton has argued that, during the first few days of August, the Cabinet was given the impression that a primarily naval war was a likely option if Britain were drawn into war, that this was a more acceptable course for some ministers than a land war and helps explain why the Cabinet, despite opposing the despatch of the BEF, decided on 2 August that it was ready to defend France's northern coast from a German naval attack.⁶¹ One cabinet minister who 'would rather have seen our operations restricted to the sea' was Runciman, while Churchill hoped to win over Lloyd George to war by arguing that 'naval war will be cheap.'⁶²

At least one member of the CID who might have argued for a naval war, had he been invited, was Lord Esher. For years, he had had little liking for the plans of the General Staff for a deployment in France, describing them in 1912 as 'grotesque' and

⁶⁰ H.H. Asquith, *The Genesis of the War* (London: Cassell, 1923), 220.

⁶¹ Newton, *Darkest Days*, 139, 182-4.

⁶² British Library, Spender papers, Add.Mss.46386, Runciman to Spender, 4 November 1929; Randolph Churchill, ed., *Winston S. Churchill, Companion Volume II, part 3, 1911-14* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1997 (Churchill note to Lloyd George, undated but 1 August).

‘wild in the extreme.’ He was unhappy, too, when ministers denied that they had compromised British independence through the staff talks to France: ‘Of course, there is no treaty or convention, but how we can get out of the commitments of the General Staff with honour, I cannot understand’, he complained in 1913.⁶³ And on 6 August 1914, he wrote in his journal, ‘I have always thought the strategy of tacking the small British army on to the French was arguable... By the precipitate alignment of our army to that of the French, we forgo the advantages of sea power.’⁶⁴ But, since he was not invited to that day’s War Council, he was unable to give voice to such opinions. Only four ministers were invited to the War Council, and they were ones who were already committed in principle to sending the BEF to the continent: Asquith, Grey, Haldane and Churchill. True, they were all closely involved in war planning but, if that alone had been the criterion for selection, it would have made sense to invite Harcourt who, as Colonial Secretary, was involved in plans to attack German colonies. But he, of course, had earlier been one of the Cabinet’s neutralists, keen to rule out sending the BEF abroad. As it was, he chaired a separate meeting – actually, a sub-committee of the CID – about colonial campaigns on 5 August.⁶⁵

The War Council met at 4 p.m. that day⁶⁶ and Asquith opened by reviewing the current European situation, including unexpectedly strong Belgian resistance to the German invasion. Wilson dismissed this as ‘a lot of platitudes’, but it paved the way for some debate over whether the BEF might be deployed to aid Belgium rather

⁶³ Oliver, Viscount Esher, ed., *Journals and Letters of Reginald, Viscount Esher, Volume 3, 1910-15* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1938), 88 (Esher to Fisher, 20 April 1912) and 122 (Esher to M.V.B., 12 March 1913).

⁶⁴ Esher journal, 6 August 1914, in Oliver, Viscount Esher, ed., *Journals and Letters of Reginald, Viscount Esher, Volume 3, 1910-15* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1938), 175.

⁶⁵ Hankey, *Command, Vol.1*, 168-69.

⁶⁶ TNA, CAB42/1/2, Minutes of War Council, 5 August.

than France.⁶⁷ Here it was evident that, while the general principle of sending the BEF abroad might be accepted by most of those at the Council, such detailed questions as its size and concentration area might still be discussed, calling into question the plan that Wilson had devised. Sir John French, designated commander of the BEF, followed Asquith and, among other points, announced ‘he was inclined to consider a landing at Antwerp, with a view to co-operation with the Belgians and Dutch [there being false rumours at this point that the Netherlands, too, had been invaded].’ Wilson’s diary described the Antwerp suggestion as a ‘ridiculous proposal’ and even one of French’s biographers believes it ‘an ample demonstration of his tendency to let attractive concepts obscure the sordid realities of staff-work and logistics.’⁶⁸ But this was not the first time Antwerp had been suggested as a destination for the BEF and, as will become clear below, the idea of direct assistance to Belgium may have been welcome to Asquith when it came to winning Cabinet ministers over to the despatch of the BEF. It is not impossible that Asquith asked French to open the discussion, knowing the General had long advocated independent action by the British army in the Low Countries. Esher had noted, back in 1911, how ‘the Prime Minister has formed a good opinion of Sir John French’ because of the latter’s ‘knowledge of war and his good sense.’⁶⁹

As William Philpott has argued, French’s ideas for deploying the BEF as an independent force near the Channel coast, perhaps in co-operation with the Belgian army, had a sound pedigree in British military thinking: ‘The same strategic principles had motivated British military expeditions to the “cock-pit of Europe” from

⁶⁷ Henry Wilson diary, 5 August.

⁶⁸ Henry Wilson diary, 5 August; Richard Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal: a life of Sir John French* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), 197.

⁶⁹ Esher, ed., *Journals and Letters*, 62 (Esher journal, 4 October 1911).

Elizabethan to Napoleonic times.’ Furthermore, before the war, Asquith had shown an interest in French’s Belgian option.⁷⁰ Then again, Wilson’s plan for despatching the BEF to northern France, also left open the option of a subsequent advance into Belgium (albeit in close co-operation with the French Army, rather than acting as an independent force, which Wilson feared might be isolated and destroyed) and one major – perhaps decisive – weakness in French’s thinking was that, when the Belgian option was studied, at various points between 1904 and 1912, the Belgian government itself was unwilling to discuss military plans for fear of compromising the country’s neutrality.⁷¹

Two other alternatives discussed at the War Council on 5 August were to deploy the BEF as a reserve behind the French army or even (as one leading general, Sir Douglas Haig, considered⁷²) keeping it at home until a more substantial Force was built up, which might then intervene on the continent decisively. But neither of these could have appealed to anyone who was anxious to aid Belgium. At the end of the discussion, there was no consensus about an alternative to Wilson’s plan to fight on the left-wing of the French army, but neither was a definite decision reached to do as he wanted. This was despite the fact that, as Christopher Phillips has shown, the logistical work that lay behind plans to move the BEF to France was immensely complex, based on years of work by both military and civilian experts, with only

⁷⁰ William Philpott, ‘The Strategic Ideas of Sir John French’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1989), 458-78, quote from 475 and see 468 on Asquith’s view.

⁷¹ Marion Draper, “‘Are we Ready?’” Belgium and the *Entente*’s military planning for a war against Germany, 1906-14’, *International History Review*, Vol. 41, No.6 (2019), 1216-34.

⁷² Haldane papers, MS. 5910, Haig to Haldane, 4 August; but see also see Gary Sheffield and John Bourne, eds., *Douglas Haig, War Diaries and Letters, 1914-18* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), 53-4.

limited flexibility if the Force were to be despatched rapidly.⁷³ True, Wilson had allowed for some flexibility: he was open to deploying the BEF either at the French city of Maubeuge (near the Belgian border) or Amiens (further south and arguably a safer position, with British mobilisation now a few days behind that of France). Instead of choosing one of these options, however, the War Council decided to invite a senior French staff officer to London for discussions. This delay also gave Asquith the chance to win over the Cabinet to the principle of sending the BEF to the continent without necessarily revealing it would work closely with the French.

One major problem facing Asquith once war was declared was how to win over the Cabinet to deploying the BEF, after spending days denying this would happen. An obvious danger was that ministers would feel betrayed, concluding they had been drawn into war under false pretences and the Prime Minister himself seemed surprised when, as he told his confidante Venetia Stanley, when the Cabinet of 6 August, ‘decided with much less demur than I expected to sanction the despatch of an Expeditionary force of four divisions.’ When it came to attacks on German colonies, as discussed by Harcourt’s CID sub-committee, ministers seemed positively enthusiastic and Asquith declared, ‘we looked more like a gang of Elizabethan buccaneers than a meek collection of black-coated Liberal Ministers.’⁷⁴ He could now inform the King that ‘at the meeting of the Cabinet this morning the immediate despatch of an Expeditionary force was sanctioned.’⁷⁵

⁷³ Christopher Phillips, *Civilian Specialists at War: British transport experts and the First World War* (London: University of London Press, 2020), chapter 2. See also David Stevenson, ‘War by Timetable: the railway race before 1914’, *Past and Present*, No. 162 (1999), 163-94.

⁷⁴ Brock and Brock, eds., *Asquith Letters*, 158 (Asquith to Stanley, 6 August).

⁷⁵ CAB41/35/26, Asquith to George V, 6 August.

Why the Cabinet accepted military action has never been adequately explored. Even Hazlehurst and Newton, who discuss how, on 1 August, the decision against an early despatch of the BEF was reached, devote only a few lines to the Cabinet of 6 August. But it is possible to identify a number of general factors that influenced the Cabinet, as Newton puts it, to ‘crumple.’⁷⁶ The two most ardent anti-war ministers, Lord Morley, Lord President of the Council, and John Burns, the President of the Board of Trade, had resigned from the government over the decision for war, so that they were no longer able to raise objections. Maurice Hankey, who took the minutes of the War Council, later wrote that the BEF ‘decision was facilitated by Morley’s resignation.’⁷⁷ Furthermore, the trauma of their dual resignation may have deterred further opposition. On 3 August, when it seemed that as many as four ministers might resign over the war, Pease recorded the emotional fallout in dramatic terms: Asquith ‘alluded to personal attachment & his indebtedness to Morley and broke down... [one of the potential resignations, the Attorney-General, Sir John] Simon broke down in saying he would do his utmost outside to secure unity... Grey said he felt some responsibility for the resignations & felt it acutely & broke down.’⁷⁸ Few would relish living through another such occasion.

Some ministers may also have been mentally exhausted after the difficult decision to go to war: Runciman spoke of suffering ‘ten days of anxiety and torturing thought...’⁷⁹, while Harcourt was observed, on 4 August, to be ‘absolutely worn out,

⁷⁶ Hazlehurst, *Politicians*, 121; Newton, *Darkest Days*, 279-80.

⁷⁷ Hankey, *Command*, 1, 173-4; and see Williamson, *Grand Strategy*, 366.

⁷⁸ K.M. Wilson (ed.), ‘The Cabinet Diary of J.A. Pease, 24 July-5 August 1914’, *Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, Vol. XIX, No.3 (1983), 10.

⁷⁹ Robinson Library, Newcastle, Walter Runciman papers, WR135, Runciman to Trevelyan, 4 August.

and looked like death.’⁸⁰ The German invasion of Belgium on 4 August may also have made ministers more open to military intervention: the defence of this small country, whose neutrality was so brutally breached by Germany in defiance of the 1839 guarantee, and whose position on the English Channel had long been deemed essential to British security, had a major role in motivating the British people to support war.⁸¹ On 4 August itself, Pease, a Quaker who had hitherto been sceptical about war, declared that, ‘to repudiate our undertaking to preserve Belgium’s neutrality would be dishonourable and discreditable’, while another Cabinet minister, Herbert Samuel, told his wife on 5 August, ‘In view of Germany’s action in Belgium we are all quite united.’⁸² As will become apparent below, when winning over ministers to the despatch of the BEF, Asquith exploited the desire to aid Belgium.

A more general explanation for the Cabinet’s acquiescence in embarking the BEF for France is suggested by psychological research, specifically the concept of a ‘Rubicon effect.’ This occurs in a crisis when decision-makers shift from a ‘deliberative’ mind-set, when they consider different options, to an ‘implemental’ one when, having ‘crossed the Rubicon’, they execute their eventual decision, often ignoring difficulties that they had previously identified in it.⁸³ This could explain why Harcourt, previously a leading neutralist, accepted the decision for war and became one of the keenest of Asquith’s ‘buccaneers.’⁸⁴ Charles Hobhouse, the Postmaster-General, hints at the switch to an ‘implemental’ mode in his diary, recording that,

⁸⁰ R.R. James, *Memoirs of a Conservative: J.C.C. Davidson’s papers* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 20.

⁸¹ Again, see Pennell, *Kingdom United*, 33-35.

⁸² Gainford papers, Box 35, Pease to Hodgkin, 4 August; Samuel papers, A/157/701, Herbert to Beatrice Samuel, 5 August.

⁸³ Dominic Johnson and Dominic Tierney, ‘The Rubicon Theory of War’, *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2011), 7-40.

⁸⁴ Harcourt journal, 6 August.

after 3 August, the Cabinet moved to discussing ‘questions of detail, financial or military, or social, and the measures decided to be taken were handed over to Committees for management.’⁸⁵ The War Council might easily have been seen as just another of these committees, whose decisions called for practical execution rather than political debate. Pease noted that, at the 5 August Cabinet meeting, ‘We were very businesslike. Agreed to a lot of matters without discussion’⁸⁶ and, attending his first Cabinet on 7 August, the new First Commissioner of Works, Lord Emmott, recorded that, ‘There were no very important decisions to take.’⁸⁷

But, while emotional and psychological factors might go some way to explaining why Asquith found it so surprisingly easy to win over the Cabinet to the BEF’s embarkation, he can hardly have predicted their likely effect and, given his long experience as Prime Minister, presumably had hard arguments at hand to win his colleagues over. It has been suggested the 6 August Cabinet was influenced by the presence of Lord Kitchener, who had attended the War Council and was appointed Secretary for War at this time. This is probably based on the misleading suggestion in Churchill’s memoirs that this was Kitchener’s first Cabinet.⁸⁸ But, in fact, he was only sworn in as Secretary of War at a lunchtime on 6 August⁸⁹ and attended his first Cabinet the following day.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, two first-hand accounts of the 6 August Cabinet confirm his influence, even though he was absent from the meeting. They also draw out the manipulative way in which Asquith exploited the War Council’s

⁸⁵ David, ed., *Hobhouse Diaries*, 180-81.

⁸⁶ Wilson, ed., ‘Pease Diary’, 11.

⁸⁷ Nuffield College, Oxford, Mss. Emmott 1/2, diary, 11 August.

⁸⁸ Newton, *Darkest Days*, 280; Roy Prete, *Strategy and Command: the Anglo-French coalition on the Western Front, 1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 83; Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911-18, Vol. 1* (London: Odhams, 1938), 189.

⁸⁹ Almeric Fitzroy, *Memoirs, Volume II* (London: Hutchinson, 1925), 561.

⁹⁰ Harcourt journal, 7 August; Nuffield College, Oxford, Lord Gainford (Pease) papers, Box 33, diary, 7 August.

discussion of the previous day, first, by emphasising the opinions of such a respected military mind as Kitchener and, second, by exploiting Sir John French's ideas for acting independently of the French army, with a possible advance into Belgium.

One contemporary account, only available to researchers since 2008, is Harcourt's journal, which records the Cabinet discussion as follows:

War Council yesterday: military position: Belgian situation not as was expected in War plans. If our force sent Sir J. French thinks our objective should be Antwerp. War Council practically unanimous our force sh[oul]d continue within reach of the sea viz. not to go to Alsace Lorraine. Kitchener will not sanction sending more than 4 divisions at present...⁹¹

This directly contradicts Lloyd George's claim, in his memoirs, that French's suggestion of a BEF deployment to Antwerp – an option that Lloyd George later claimed could have disrupted the German advance into France – 'was withheld from the Cabinet...'⁹² The diary entry also confirms it was Kitchener who played a key role in suggesting the despatch of only four divisions (rather than the five or six that were also discussed by the War Council). The mention of Alsace-Lorraine sounds absurd, since no expert would have suggested sending the BEF there, but simply by ruling it out and mentioning the possibility of an advance to Antwerp, Asquith would likely have made the despatch of the BEF sound more palatable to ministers, who could be expected to favour direct assistance to Belgium, rather than a deployment well inside

⁹¹ Harcourt journal, 6 August.

⁹² Lloyd George, *War Memoirs, Vol. 1* (London: Odhams, 1938), 50-51.

France. At a popular level, too, there were expectations the British army would go to Belgium.⁹³

Asquith's strategy emerges more forcefully from the second contemporary account, in Jack Pease's diary:

The P.M. then told us that at the conference of big experts... the previous day, they all urged all expeditionary force should be landed & kept on our right hand of naval force – not at left of French force necessary – they would not be wiped out, if they could always return to the sea even in event of French being overwhelmed. But Kitchener wanted only 4 Divisions sent instead of 6. – It would harass & delay German right – It was acquiesced, that this force might go as soon as possible via Calais or Boulogne. Churchill could promise & arrange for safe convoy of transport...⁹⁴

This reinforces the point that Kitchener's preference for sending four divisions differed from some others at the War Council, who might have sent more. It again suggests the Cabinet acquiesced in despatching the BEF with little or no discussion and exposes Asquith's tactic – echoing Sir John French – that the British army should operate near the coast, from where it could be withdrawn if the French army were defeated. In a letter to his wife, Pease stated, more starkly, that the four-division BEF was 'not to penetrate into France, but to be *a right-wing of our fleet on the Belgian sea-board* [italics added].'⁹⁵

⁹³ For example: James Munson, ed., *Echoes of the Great War: the diary of the reverend Andrew Clark* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 5; Devon Archives, Exeter, 3830M/F9, Dorothy Holman diary, 8 August.

⁹⁴ Gainford papers, Box 33, diary, 6 August.

⁹⁵ Gainford papers, Box 189, Pease to Wife, 7 August.

Nothing in either Harcourt's or Pease's diary supports the claim by some historians that the Cabinet reduced the size of the BEF to four divisions because of 'an invasion scare that brewed up overnight.'⁹⁶ There is some doubt, however, about how far the Cabinet went beyond approving the despatch of the BEF in principle and limited future decisions about the Force, by making decisions about its size and concentration area. Asquith himself said the Cabinet sanctioned 'the despatch of an Expeditionary force of four divisions'⁹⁷ and Kitchener later claimed the meeting decided to concentrate at Amiens rather than Maubeuge, as if this could not be altered.⁹⁸ But the official record shows that, when Asquith opened the second War Council, at 5 p.m. on the 6th, he reported only that 'the Cabinet had decided to-day in principle to despatch the Expeditionary Force', then added, 'It remained to be decided of what force it should consist and where it should concentrate,' so that a good degree of leeway must have remained with the War Council. A letter from the Prime Minister to the King also suggests the two meetings had different emphases: 'at the meeting of the Cabinet this morning the immediate despatch of an Expeditionary force was sanctioned... At a subsequent meeting of the War Council... it was arranged that the Expeditionary force should consist in the first instance of Four Divisions...'⁹⁹

The second War Council lasted barely an hour.¹⁰⁰ While leaving the question of the concentration area of the BEF open, this meeting agreed that the 'first instalment' of the BEF should be of four divisions and empowered Grey to inform the Belgian government, a force of 'over 100,000 men would be embarked as soon as

⁹⁶ George Cassar, *The Tragedy of Sir John French* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), 84-85.

⁹⁷ Brock and Brock, eds., *Asquith Letters*, 158 (Asquith to Stanley, 6 August).

⁹⁸ Henry Wilson diary, 12 August.

⁹⁹ CAB41/35/26, Asquith to George V, 6 August.

¹⁰⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 7 August.

possible, acting in concert with the French Army for the defence of Belgium.’ This last point would, of course, have served to reassure Cabinet ministers, should any of them have seen the minutes of the meeting, that assistance to Belgium was still a priority.¹⁰¹ The concentration area of the BEF was not settled for several days and by a narrow group of decision-makers. France’s former military attaché in London, Colonel Victor Huguet, came to London on 12 August, where he, Wilson and Sir John French spent three hours persuading Kitchener that a concentration around Maubeuge was the best course, after which Kitchener and French had little trouble in persuading Asquith, with Wilson – still quite unable to grasp how the Prime Minister had manipulated the situation – accusing the last of ‘not knowing anything about it.’¹⁰²

By then, of course, the Prime Minister had achieved what he may have planned on 1 August. Back then, perhaps, he still hoped to keep Britain at peace, but he also wanted to leave options open, while holding his ministry together and these he had achieved: despite its previous deep divisions, the Cabinet had remained open to the possibility of going to war and eventually even agreed to the despatch of the BEF. As William Philpott argues, ‘The concentration of the BEF on the French left-wing was less the realisation of eight years of careful planning by the General Staff, than the surrender of independent military initiative by Great Britain.’¹⁰³ In a sense the decision to send the BEF to France marked the apotheosis of the *entente cordiale*, which by mid-August mattered far more than the security of Belgium, even though Belgian neutrality was supposedly the decisive justification for Britain going to war. Then again, Asquith, Haldane and Grey, as well as Churchill, may always have been

¹⁰¹ TNA, CAB42/1/3, Minutes of War Council, 6 August.

¹⁰² Henry Wilson diary, 12 August; Prete, ‘Strategic Planning’, 57-61.

¹⁰³ William Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914-18* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1996), 12.

happy to go to war alongside France, irrespective of the Belgian issue. Despite the impression given to ministers on 6 August, that the BEF might adopt an independent role near the Belgian coast, it took up a position on the left of the French army and was soon in retreat, away from the Belgian border and towards the River Marne, alongside its *entente* ally.

Once the decision was taken to despatch the BEF, it was easy for Unionist critics, like Balfour, to argue that the decision ‘might with advantage have been taken earlier.’¹⁰⁴ But there had been good reasons for delay. If Asquith, Haldane and Grey – all strong supporters of the *entente* – had pressed for a more rapid deployment it could have broken up the Cabinet and, perhaps, seriously delayed entry into the war at France’s side. Asquith was a past master at holding his team together and, even in the face of a great power conflagration, his cautious touch did not desert him. Lord Esher was one of the few outsiders to understand the tactics of Asquith, Grey and Haldane, writing on 4 August that, ‘Up to the present it has been decided that no expeditionary force shall leave this country; if any other decision had been arrived at, it is almost certain that Harcourt, and other members of the Government *would* have resigned. Circumstances, however... may alter the point of view of these ministers.’¹⁰⁵ Whatever attempts are made to denigrate the Liberals for dithering over the war, since coming into power in 1905 they had reformed the army in a way Unionist governments had repeatedly failed to do, with Haldane particularly responsible for creating the BEF, preparing for a continental commitment and, on 5-6 August 1914, with Asquith’s approval, packing the War Councils with individuals likely to agree to a military deployment in France. As Keith Wilson has argued, even if the defence of

¹⁰⁴ British Library, Balfour papers, Add.Mss.49836, Balfour to Lady Elcho, 7 August.

¹⁰⁵ Churchill Archive Centre, Lord Esher papers, ESHR2/13, journal, 4 August.

Belgian neutrality was the declared reason for Britain going to war, diplomatic realities had long since pointed to close military co-operation with France, rather than Belgium, which more than once had rejected British approaches for joint planning.¹⁰⁶ Once the Council made its initial decisions of 5 August, it opened the way for Asquith to pressurise Cabinet ministers into despatching the BEF, partly because a majority of ministers had been won over to war by Germany's trampling on Belgian neutrality and there was a short window in which he could plausibly hint at independent British military action near the Belgian coast. The result was that the key executive body in British government, which had repeatedly been told before 4 August that the BEF would *not* be sent abroad, decided only two days later, with little apparent reflection, that it must do so.

¹⁰⁶ Keith Wilson, 'The War Office, Churchill and the Belgian option, August-December 1911', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, Vol.50, No.121 (1977), 218-28.