

‘Every Neutral State within Reach’: exaggerations of German aggression and British entry into the First World War

John W. Young, University of Nottingham

Abstract

Recent decades have seen growing historical interest in the phenomenon of rumours, how they arise, their impact on events and what they reveal about those who circulate them. This has included a number of studies relevant to the outbreak of the First World War, not least, in Great Britain's case, of the so-called ‘spy scare’, which led to thousands of aliens facing police investigation and heightened fear of Germany. The focus of this article is on exaggerations in Britain of German aggression in early August 1914, including rumours that Germany had attacked France without a formal declaration of war, that Berlin delivered an ultimatum to Italy, demanding it enter the conflict, and that the Germans also had invaded such neutral states as Holland and Switzerland. These rumours, it is argued, served a similar purpose to the ‘spy scare’, deepening patriotic feeling and consoling Britons that their government's decision to fight was justified. But the article also shows that exaggerations of German aggression may have impacted on the government decision, that some Cabinet ministers may have believed the stories circulating about Germany and that the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, made his own contribution to the rumour mill.

Article

Recent decades have seen growing historical interest in the phenomenon of rumours, how they arise, their impact on events and what they reveal about those who circulate them.¹ While there has been no detailed study of their role in the July Crisis, Bruce Menning has shown their potential importance, by arguing that Russia's decision to mobilise its armed forces was influenced by false reports that Austria-Hungary had already taken such a step.² One British diplomat even believed that Germany deliberately exploited false rumours of its own mobilisation to induce a violent Russian response.³ In Britain itself, one type of rumour that accompanied the outbreak of war – the 'spy scare', which led to thousands of aliens facing police investigation – is already well known.⁴ Research now suggests that, rather than there being 'war enthusiasm' in 1914, public opinion feared conflict but that, once the war began, anti-German feeling was whipped up by rumours, including the 'spy scare' and reports of atrocities as the German army advanced through Belgium.⁵ Catriona Pennell has analysed a widespread piece of 'false news', circulating in August-September, that Russian troops were shipped across Britain to fight in France. She suggests that this 'secular apparition' served to console Britons as their soldiers went to war; while such stories were factually untrue, they can therefore be used by

¹ For general discussions see; Anjan Ghosh, 'The Role of Rumour in History Writing', *History Compass*, Vol.6, No.5 (2008), 1235-43; David Coast and Jo Fox, 'Rumour and Politics', *History Compass*, Vol.13, No.5 (2015), 222-34.

² Bruce Menning, 'Russian Military Intelligence, 1914: what St. Petersburg perceived and why it mattered', *The Historian*, Vol.77, No.2 (2015), 213-68.

³ West Sussex Record Office, Chichester, Leo Maxse papers, Vol. 469, Rumbold to Maxse, 27 September 1914.

⁴ David French, 'Spy Fever in Britain, 1900-15', *Historical Journal*, Vol.21, No.2 (1978), 355-70; Christopher Andrew, *Defence of the Realm: the authorized history of MI5* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 53-54; Jerome Aan de Wiel, 'German invasion and spy scares in Ireland, 1890s-1914', *Etudes irlandaises*, Vol.37, No.1 (2012), 37-38; Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 98-107.

⁵ See especially Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British society and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), chapters 1 and 2. The atrocities in Belgium were exaggerated in the British press, but massacres undoubtedly occurred: John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: a history of denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

historians to understand popular worries.⁶ The focus of this article is on exaggerations in Britain of German aggression in early August 1914, including rumours that Germany attacked France without a declaration of war, delivered an ultimatum to Italy and invaded such neutral states as Holland and Switzerland. These rumours, it is suggested, served a similar purpose to the ‘spy scare’, deepening patriotic feeling and consoling Britons that the decision to fight was justified. The article also shows that exaggerations of German aggression may have impacted on government decisions.

In analysing the historiography of rumour, David Coast and Jo Fox have written that, while gossip ‘generally concerns information about the personal lives of individuals’ and news ‘generally denotes information that has been confirmed or generally accepted as true’, rumours ‘might circulate on a national or international scale and often relate to collective hopes and fears...’ They add that:

Rumours sate the desire for information... where official confirmation does not or cannot exist. This provides a form of psychological stability in which events appear to be ‘foreseen’ or ‘predictable.’ But we must recognise that these feelings can sit alongside a sense of instability and a deep-seated foreboding.⁷

The way rumours sated a ‘desire for information’ as the First World War began and provided a ‘form of psychological stability’ will be explored below but, first, it is worth emphasising how ‘a deep-seated foreboding’ pre-dated the July Crisis. Before 1914, there were already exaggerated fears of German capabilities. One aspect of this was popular literature about a possible invasion across the North Sea, which included William le Queux’s dull *The Invasion of 1910* (1906) – originally serialised in the Germanophobic *Daily Mail* – and Erskine Childers’ gripping *The Riddle of the Sands*

⁶ Catriona Pennell, ‘Believing the unbelievable: the myth of the Russians “with snow on their boots” in the United Kingdom, 1914’, *Cultural and Social History*, Vol.11, No.1 (2014), 69-87.

⁷ Coast and Fox, ‘Rumour’, 223 and 230.

(1903). Another aspect were baseless reports of Zeppelins flying over the United Kingdom in 1909 and 1912-13.⁸ Stories of invasions and spies, going back many years, helped condition British people to the idea that Germans were likely to launch war – and also perhaps conditioned them to believe the rumours that immediately began to circulate once that war began.⁹

Much of the existing historical research into rumours focuses on their oral transmission, interpreting them as a reflection of popular mentalities and, often, as a way for the disenfranchised or oppressed to bind themselves together against a threatening situation or an oppressive government.¹⁰ In contrast, this article concerns rumours spread in writing by newspapers. True, as fear of war intensified in 1914, some rumours sprang up spontaneously. On 5 August, as news of Britain's declaration of war spread, one London diarist complained of 'Horrid little boys running about the streets reporting war news; terrible battles fought, etc., mostly quite untrue.'¹¹ Soon stories were even given weight because they did *not* appear in the Press: on 8 August, another London diarist claimed, 'People are being sent away from... places on the East Coast. Piers are being blown up; houses & hotels pulled down...'; she then admitted 'a feeling of admiration for the organisation that keeps all movements & proceedings quiet, as it is chiefly from local friends that scraps of information leak

⁸ Brett Holman, 'The Phantom Airship Panic of 1913', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol.55 (2016), 100 and 119. See also: David Clarke, 'Scareships over Britain: the airship wave of 1909', *Fortean Studies*, Vol.6 (1999), 39-63; Holman's 'Constructing the Enemy within: rumours of secret gun platforms and Zeppelin bases in Britain, August-October 1914', *British Journal of Military History*, Vol.3, No.2 (2017), 22-42.

⁹ See I. F. Clarke, *The Great War with Germany: fictions and fantasies of the war to come* (Liverpool University Press, 1997). In parallel, the Germans were conditioned to believe in a Russian menace: Troy Paddock, *Creating the Russian Peril: education, the public sphere and national identity in Imperial Germany* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010).

¹⁰ For example, Steven Hahn, "'Extravagant expectations" of freedom: rumour, political struggle and the Christmas insurrection scare of 1856 in the American South', *Past and Present*, Vol. 157. No. 1 (1997), 122-58; Steve Smith, 'Fear and rumour in the People's Republic of China in the 1950s', *Cultural and Social History*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2008), 269-88; Ghosh, 'Role of Rumour.'

¹¹ Devon Archives, Exeter, 6258M, Violet Clutton diary, 5 August.

out.’¹² Even the well-connected businessman, F.S. Oliver, could make the ridiculous assertion that ‘some hundreds of spies have been shot at Naval and Military depots since the opening of the war, though not a single one of the cases have [sic] been in the papers.’¹³ The journalist Michael MacDonagh found that, by mid-August, there were ‘disquieting stories’ circulating about British ships being sunk and wounded soldiers being transported home secretly. After asking who might spread these, he commented:

It is a mystery; but however preposterous they may be there are people who believe them and pass them on to others equally credulous. The fact that there is nothing in the newspapers about them does not prove them untrue. “Oh, the newspapers!” these people exclaim. “Don’t we know they are muzzled?”

Keen to safeguard his profession, Macdonagh welcomed the establishment of an official Press Bureau, which he hoped could ‘mitigate... censorship of the Press by the giving out of “a steady stream of trustworthy information”.’¹⁴

One of the most persistent rumours, spread both orally and via newspapers, was of a great naval battle. On 4 August, the day Britain declared war, Vera Brittain, about to begin her studies at Oxford, recorded that, ‘All day long rumours kept coming that a naval engagement had been fought off the coast of Yorkshire...’¹⁵ On 5 August, among numerous press reports, the *Pall Mall Gazette* said two German battleships had been sunk, but admitted this was ‘unconfirmed’; the following day another London daily, *The Globe*, included ‘reports of a battle’ in the North Sea,

¹² Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, Documents 10729, ‘Diary of a London Lady (Anonymous)’, 8 August.

¹³ Stephen Gwynn, ed., *The Anvil of War: letters between F.S. Oliver and his brother, 1914-18* (London: Macmillan, 1936), 37-38.

¹⁴ Michael MacDonagh, *In London during the Great War: the diary of a journalist* (London: Eyre and Spottiswode, 1935), 16.

¹⁵ Vera Brittain diary at http://digitalcollections.mcmaster.ca/sites/default/files/pw20c_images/00000284-2.jpg (accessed 14 May 2018).

while adding there was ‘no confirmation.’ Nor were naval personnel necessarily better-informed. A midshipman, sailing off Scotland’s west coast, wrote on 5 August that, ‘We hear rumours of a big engagement in the North Sea, but can obtain no definite details...’¹⁶ Coastal towns were particularly alive to such tales, which persisted for days. On the 6th stories circulated in Aberdeen ‘that a great engagement was in progress’¹⁷ and Virginia Woolf wrote from Northumberland, on 12 August, ‘They say there must be a great battle... but then so they did at Seaford’ (a town on the Sussex coast, which she had recently visited).¹⁸ Uncertainty bred rumour: as Lillie Scales put it, the story of a naval battle, ‘was not true, but everyone feels they do not know what may happen next.’¹⁹ Rumour likely took the form of a sea-battle because of patriotic expectations of a new Trafalgar, hence Lady Annette Matthews’ conclusion: ‘England is really waiting for a great naval battle, on that her hopes and fears are really fixed.’²⁰ In fact, there would be no major naval battle until Jutland in 1916.

The exaggerations of German aggression that are the focus of this article were all spread via newspaper reports, rather than arising spontaneously in the general population. The importance of newspapers for both reflecting and shaping British public opinion is well understood.²¹ It has been said that the ‘First World War was the first media war’ and its advent led to an upsurge in circulation figures for many newspapers, which could spread rumours rapidly, on a national scale. Among Conservative-leaning publications, for example, Lord Northcliffe’s *Daily Mail*, saw

¹⁶ Alexander Scrimgeour, *Scrimgeour’s Scribbling Diary, 1914-16* (London: Conway, 2009), 34.

¹⁷ Derek Tait, *Aberdeen in the Great War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2016), 11-12.

¹⁸ Nigel Nicolson, ed., *The Question of Things Happening: the letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II, 1912-22* (London: Hogarth Press, 1976), 51.

¹⁹ Lillie Scales, *A Home Front Diary, 1914-18* (Stroud: Amberley, 2014), 16.

²⁰ IWM, Documents 17087, Lady Matthews diary, 8 August.

²¹ See especially Nathan Orgill, *Rumors of the Great War: the British press and Anglo-German relations during the July Crisis* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), which does not, however, deal with the rumours covered in this article.

sales rise from under 950,000 to almost 1.5 million as war began,²² while at the quality end of his stable, *The Times* rose from an average 1914 sale of 183,000 to 278,000 on 4 August. Among pro-Liberal newspapers, the *Daily Chronicle* claimed to double its circulation, to 800,000 by June 1915.²³ In contrast, those that adopted an anti-war stance were likely to suffer. Both the main pro-Labour Party dailies faced falling sales: the *Daily Herald* became a weekly in September 1914; the Manchester-based *Daily Citizen* folded in June 1915.²⁴

As one soon-to-be soldier put it at the time, ‘We are entirely dependent at this time on the newspapers for information...’²⁵ and many people rushed to buy several newspapers each day as war began. While the Dean of Tickencote may have admitted, ‘I scarcely see any Newspaper except The Times, but its information may be relied on’, others thirsted for ever-more news.²⁶ This thirst became part of the literature on the war: Richard Aldington’s doomed hero, George Winterbourne, ‘spent the first few days of August wandering about London... buying innumerable editions of newspapers’, while Wyndham Lewis’ *alter ego*, Cantleman, ‘got all the big popular London papers, Mails and Expresses, the loudest shouters of the lot.’²⁷ There is abundant evidence that the literature reflected reality. On 1 August, as Germany and Russia went to war, Rupert Brooke wrote that, ‘Every now and then one goes out and

²² Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 212 and 241-44.

²³ John McEwen, ‘The National Press during the First World War: ownership and circulation’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.17, No.3 (1982), 482, and see this article in general on circulation figures.

²⁴ R.J. Holton, ‘Daily Herald versus Daily Citizen, 1912-15’, *International Review of Social History*, Vol.19, No.3 (1974), 370-74.

²⁵ Charles Horton, *Stretcher Bearer: fighting for life in the trenches* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2013), 26. For anyone unable to afford a newspaper, the only alternative way to obtain ‘official’ news was to look at telegrams put up in local Post Offices. Thus, in Warwickshire, Mabel Ashby and her mother, ‘harnessed a pony every evening, and drove the five miles... to Kineton Post Office to read in its windows the latest telegrams...’: M.K. Ashby, *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 290.

²⁶ George Christian to Lionel Chalmondeley, 7 August, in Mike Webb, *From Downing Street to the Trenches: first-hand accounts from the Great War* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2014), 44.

²⁷ Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London: Penguin, 2013 edn.), 192; Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), 66.

buys an evening paper to find the news. And the news is always a little worse.’²⁸

Constance Peel, writer of cookery books, recalled the ‘rush for newspapers’ that came on 3 August.²⁹ A letter that day by Virginia Woolf shows dependent people were on the Press for reliable news:

We are just (4 p.m.) off to Lewes to get a paper. There were none at breakfast... but the postman brought rumours that 2 of our warships were sunk – however, when we did get papers we found that peace still exists...³⁰

With the outbreak of war, the thirst only intensified. Kate Frye, a London suffragette, commented, ‘The reading of the paper and rushing out for the latest editions has become a vice with me, but I can’t keep away from them.’³¹ She was not alone: on 9 August, Thomas Livingstone, a Glasgow shipping clerk, ‘Went into town forenoon and got a war paper... After tea we all went into town and got another paper.’³² (There was a parallel enthusiasm around Europe: in Paris, André Gide took to buying eight newspapers a day, ‘constantly hoping to know a bit more.’³³)

Newspapers themselves, however, did not necessarily find it easy to obtain reliable information. It was not just that censorship of naval and military operations began on 2 August. That day, Walter H. Page, the American Ambassador, complained to President Woodrow Wilson that, ‘This island is even now practically cut off from the Continent.’³⁴ The journalist H.M. Tomlinson found that, once war began in Europe, ‘the world across the Channel was dumb... The array of tape-machines,

²⁸ Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *The Letters of Rupert Brooke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 603.

²⁹ C.S. Peel, *How We Lived Then, 1914-18* (London: John Lane, 1929), 13-15.

³⁰ Nicolson, ed., *Woolf, Vol. II*, 50.

³¹ Elizabeth Crawford, ed., *Kate Frye’s Diary*, 6 August, at <https://womanandhersphere.com/2014/08/06/kate-fryes-diary-war-6-august-1914/> (accessed 11 May 2018).

³² Thomas Livingstone, *Tommy’s War: a First World War diary* (London: Harper, 2008), 44.

³³ André Gide, *Journals, 1889-1949* (London: Penguin, 1967), 214-15.

³⁴ Arthur Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume 30, May-September 1914* (Princeton University Press, 1979), 331.

which till then had never ceased to chatter... were severed from the world without.’³⁵ The *Daily Mail* warned its readers on 2 August that ‘censorship all over the continent is exceedingly strict’, so that ‘We print all news under reserve.’ But it was intensely frustrating to be cut off from ready sources of information at such a dramatic, worrying time. Arthur Linfoot, an avid newspaper reader, complained that word from the battle front was ‘scarce & uncertain’³⁶ while even those in the armed forces could feel isolated: one sailor, freshly arrived at Scapa Flow, noted that, ‘In the Fleet the general attitude was a longing for more news and annoyance at being so cut off from the world.’³⁷ As one astute observer, the author George Sturt commented, while ‘everybody allows that it is quite right’ to censor military information, it was simultaneously the case that ‘this secrecy is likely... to breed alarm.’³⁸

In such a situation, with so much demand for information, newspapers might decide to publish some claims while openly acknowledging them to be rumour. For example, the *Daily Telegraph* of 3 August included the ‘sinister rumour’ that the Austrian emperor, Franz Joseph, had been assassinated. True, there is evidence that editors tried to verify those stories. Geoffrey Robinson, editor of *The Times*, recorded on 6 August, ‘These are strenuous days in a newspaper office, for the wildest rumours become current about midnight... Last night, for instance, it was reported... that a railway bridge had been blown up by German spies at Guildford.’ So convincing was this story that Robinson sent two reporters to investigate, but it ‘turned out to be a complete mare’s nest...’³⁹ Guildford was close enough to allow such verification, but events across the Channel were more difficult to confirm. Then again, British

³⁵ H.M. Tomlinson, *All Our Yesterday's* (London: Heinemann, 1930), 269.

³⁶ Arthur Linfoot diary, 13 August 1914, at <https://www.arthurlinfoot.org.uk> (accessed 11 May 2018).

³⁷ Stephen King-Hall, *A North Sea Diary, 1914-18* (London: Newnes, undated), 39.

³⁸ Diary, 14 August, in E.D. Mackerness, ed., *The Journals of George Sturt, 1890-1927* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 700.

³⁹ John Wrench, *Geoffrey Dawson and our Times* (London: Hutchinson, 1955), 107.

newspapers found it easy enough to recognise the likely baselessness of rumours from Germany. On 4 August, the *Daily Telegraph* included a column headed ‘Wild Stories’, which outlined some ‘obviously invented’ reports from Germany about supposed French actions, including an aerial bombardment of Nuremburg and an attempt to blow up one of the Rhine bridges.⁴⁰ At a popular level, too, there is evidence of a form of patriotism about Press reporting: Ada Reece, a doctor’s wife living in London, considered, ‘Our newspapers are moderate in their reports...’, whereas ‘the German people are falsely informed by their newspapers...’⁴¹

Yet, in the opening days of the war, false reporting about German behaviour became widespread in the British Press. It began with a reference in *The Times* of 2 August, to France being assailed ‘without a declaration of war’, a claim that seems to have been widely believed, possibly because *The Times*, while surpassed by several dailies in terms of circulation figures, commanded widespread respect even after it was bought by Northcliffe. That same day, evidently aware of the report, Georgina Lee noted ‘our shock of surprised excitement on reading that Germany had invaded French territory without even declaring war...’⁴² On the 3rd, Vera Brittain wrote that ‘yesterday the Germans attacked France without declaring war.’⁴³ By then, other newspapers had taken up the assertion originally made in *The Times*: on 3 August, *The Globe* was one that informed its readers that Germany ‘has invaded France at two points without any formal declaration of war,’ while the *Pall Mall Gazette* reasoned that, ‘The neutrality of England, after the invasion of France and Luxembourg before any declaration of war, would be a terrible blow to civilisation.’ Maria Gyte, the wife

⁴⁰ On rumours circulating in Germany see T.G. Otte, *July Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 487.

⁴¹ Brotherton Library, Leeds, Liddle Collection, DF109, Ada Reece diary, 2 August, 8 August.

⁴² Roynan, ed., *Home Fires*, 4. See also IWM, Documents 758, Frank Alderson diary, 2 August, and Documents 10729, ‘London Lady’, 2 August.

⁴³ Vera Brittain, *Chronicle of Youth: war diary, 1913-17* (London: Gollancz, 1981), 84.

of a Derbyshire innkeeper, recorded on 4 August that Germany ‘invades France before war is declared’, adding that ‘England has fought for peace but it is feared she will have to fight as Germany is proving very aggressive.’⁴⁴

In fact, despite all the confident claims that Germany had invaded France before a formal declaration of war (which was eventually delivered in the early evening of 3 August), none was true. A German officer on a cross-border reconnaissance into France was killed that day, as was a French corporal; but, rather than this being a full-scale invasion, it was a case of small German patrols eagerly pushing over the border to collect intelligence, before they launched any large-scale operations. Yet, *The Times* of 2 August made clear that it got the story ‘that Germany has invaded France without declaration of war’ from no less a figure than the French Ambassador, Paul Cambon. This is plausible: on 2 August, the Foreign Office received complaints from both the French and German embassies that the other country had already sent troops across the border.⁴⁵ There was competition between the two rivals to blame the other for opening hostilities, not least in the hope of winning British sympathy. French journalists also put pressure on their British counterparts to join in the war.⁴⁶ True, on 3 August, *The Times* – which had begun to advocate British intervention in the war as early as 27 July – admitted any cross-border incidents might only involve ‘reconnoitring parties’, but this was only carried under the dramatic and misleading title ‘France Invaded.’

The false claims about France, were quickly followed by equally inaccurate reports of German attacks on two neutral states, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Probably, the actual German invasions of Belgium and Luxembourg, two other

⁴⁴ Gerald Phizackerley, ed., *The Diaries of Maria Gyte, 1913-20* (Cromford: Scarthin Books, 1999), 25.

⁴⁵ G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley (eds.), *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914* (B.D.), Volume IX, *The Outbreak of the War* (1926), Docs. 471 and 473.

⁴⁶ Reginald Pound and Geoffrey Harmsworth, *Northcliffe* (London: Cassell, 1959), 462.

neutral states, primed expectations of similar aggression elsewhere, especially given that, when Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August, the *casus belli* was officially stated to be the violation of Belgian neutrality. The importance of Belgium in Britain's decision to declare war on Germany has been much debated and needs no repetition here⁴⁷, but it is worth dwelling on the case of Luxembourg. The Grand Duchy was invaded before Belgium but, because there was no legal obligation on London to defend it, Luxembourg does not really feature in existing accounts of the British decision to fight. Nonetheless, the invasion did serve to prepare the British for further aggression elsewhere and was, for some, a shocking event itself. On 1 August, R.D. Blumenfeld, the long-serving editor of the *Daily Express*, noted how Germany 'had marched into Luxembourg, thus violating her treaty engagements. If this country does not stand up for Right and Honour she will be for ever damned.'⁴⁸ Other newspapers took a similar view, with the editorial in *The Standard* of 3 August commenting that Germany had 'spurned her engagements' to Luxembourg. Such opinions were echoed in diaries. Georgina Lee, who spent the Bank Holiday weekend near Glastonbury, recalled that some had sensed Anglo-German relations were improving but, 'Now that the German Army is invading Luxembourg, these illusions are fast vanishing.'⁴⁹ Even the anti-war Kate Courtney feared that the invasion of Luxembourg was 'Fatal, or nearly so, to our neutrality, if true, when it is hanging in the balance. Couldn't sleep for thinking of it.'⁵⁰ Some politicians were also concerned. When Arthur Ponsonby, chair of the anti-war Liberal Foreign Affairs Group saw Lewis Harcourt, the Colonial Secretary, on 2 August, he reported that

⁴⁷ For a reassertion of its importance see, Isabel Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: making and breaking international law during the Great War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), chapter 2.

⁴⁸ R.D. Blumenfeld, *R.D.B's Diary* (London: Heinemann, 1930), 247.

⁴⁹ Gavin Roynon, ed., *Home Fires Burning: the Great War diaries of Georgina Lee* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2006), 3.

⁵⁰ Kate Courtney, *Extracts from a Diary during the War* (privately published, 1927), 7.

many MPs were upset by Germany's attack on the Grand Duchy.⁵¹ There is even evidence that Luxembourg played a part in shifting Cabinet opinion towards war: when the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, and another pro-war minister, Winston Churchill, saw Geoffrey Robinson after the Cabinet meetings of 2 August, they were 'both obviously relieved & cheered by its result, which had been clarified by the German invasion of Luxembourg.'⁵²

The invasions of Luxembourg and Belgium made it easy to expect a similar move against the nearby Netherlands. The feminist author Olive Schreiner, who returned from Germany to Britain on 3 August, having travelled through the Netherlands, told a friend, 'they are expecting the Prussians there tomorrow, to take The Hague & the ports.'⁵³ A statement by the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, on 4 August, that Germany had 'solemnly pledged' to respect Dutch neutrality, ought to have given pause to such expectations.⁵⁴ But, over the following days, not only were there continuing fears that Germany might invade the Netherlands, there were rumours she had actually done so. One of the first reports, based on news from Brussels, was in the *Morning Post* of 4 August, claiming that Germans had attacked Limburg. There was a similar report in the same newspaper two days later, this time with Telburg as the German target. On 5 August, Beatrice Webb, asking 'what is the ultimate issue before the civilized world', concluded that, 'To the Englishman of today it seems the survival of France, Belgium and Holland.'⁵⁵ That day, brief reports of an invasion were widespread in the British Press: Birmingham's *Evening Despatch*

⁵¹ Bodleian Library, Oxford, Lewis Harcourt papers, Ms.Eng.c.8269, Political Journal, 2 August.

⁵² Bodleian Library, Geoffrey Dawson [formerly Robinson] papers, Mss. Dawson 64, 'Note of some critical Sundays, July-August 1914'

⁵³ National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown, Schreiner to Havelock Ellis, 3 August, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription at <https://www.oliveschreiner.org/vre?view=collections&colid=40&letterid=14> (accessed 14 June 2018).

⁵⁴ Hansard, *House of Commons debates, Fifth Series, Volume 65*, columns 1926-27.

⁵⁵ Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, eds., *The Diary of Beatrice Webb, Volume Three, 1905-24* (London: Virago, 1984), 213.

announced on its front page, 'Dutch territory violated', the *Pall Mall Gazette* had 'Holland Invaded', while London's main evening newspaper, the *Evening Standard*, claimed that German cavalry were approaching the border 'to invade Holland.' Two days later, based on reports from Paris, the same newspaper claimed that Dutch neutrality had been violated, with the comment that:

As for the Belgian and Dutch armies, they count for little in German eyes, or indeed Germany may be attacking them as a bait to lure France on to the battlefields of Flanders, where, up until now, the deciding fate of Europe has always been settled.

Even the left-wing *Daily Citizen* caught up with the story on 6 August, with the headline, 'Dutch troops resisting invasion of Holland,' while the *Manchester Guardian*, which had initially been opposed to war, carried an analysis of the military situation on 10 August, warning that, given the size of the German army and 'the relatively narrow passage through which they must force a way' towards France, 'they may at the last moment choose a route northwards... and violate Dutch territory.' As late as 12 August, the *Evening Standard* was still assuring its readers that 'should it be necessary' the Dutch 'will oppose the invaders.' The belief that, even if it had not been invaded, the Netherlands was prepared to defend itself, was asserted in many newspapers. The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, printed a denial on 4 August that it had been invaded, but still included a report on 'Holland's Defences' two days later, pointing out that much of the country could be flooded to prevent a large-scale invasion. Similarly, Northcliffe's *Daily Mail*, pronouncedly anti-German since long before the war, printed a Reuters report on 4 August that Germany would respect Dutch neutrality, but ran a story by its special correspondent from Amsterdam the following day (page 6), that Holland stood ready to defend itself by 'opening the

dykes and sluices’, so that ‘towns, thus guarded, would require at least three months to capture.’ There was further coverage of Dutch war preparations on 7 August. The public certainly seem to have seen the fate of Belgium and Holland as closely linked: Sir Horace Plunkett, the Irish agricultural reformer, noted on 5 August that ‘both Belgium & Holland are mobilised & ready to resist the infringement of their neutrality.’⁵⁶

Aside from Holland, the focus of the most confident assertions about a German invasion that never actually took place, was Switzerland. On 3 August, the *Daily Telegraph* – Conservative-leaning, but unenthusiastic about war – included the headline ‘German troops in Switzerland: Bale station seized’ and the following day an editorial, entitled ‘Violated Treaties’, made much of this report in creating the image of an aggressive Germany:

There seem to be no limits to the mad haste with which Germany pursues her intemperate course. On Sunday we learnt... that the independence of Luxembourg had been ruthlessly set aside. Next it became the turn of Belgium... It is not enough that Germany should have invaded France, without any formal declaration of war... She is not even content with an irruption into Switzerland, where, as our Paris Correspondent told us yesterday, she has calmly taken possession of the Swiss station at Bale... the German Government... proclaim to the whole world that they set at naught all covenants, undertakings, and treaties, which stand in the way of their military programme...

Regional newspapers which, on 4 August, copied the *Telegraph’s* lead and – usually lacking their own, direct access to international news via a foreign correspondent –

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http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/diaries_of_sir_horace_curzon_plunkett/1914_diary_of_sir_horace_curzon_plunkett.pdf (accessed 12 July 2018), 5 August entry.

reported a possible German invasion of Switzerland, included the Birmingham *Evening Despatch* and the *Yorkshire Post*. On 5 August, the front page of the *Evening News*, London's biggest-selling evening newspaper, on 5 August posed the question, 'Swiss and Dutch Neutrality Violated?' Some were less sensational and readier to await reliable news. The *Manchester Guardian* of 6 August revealed the truth behind claims of an invasion: a German cavalry unit had been driven over the Swiss border following a local defeat by the French and the Swiss had then 'disarmed the intruders.' Yet even into September there were reports that Germany had originally planned to invade Switzerland, in order to by-pass the French fortress-city of Belfort, and that the move was only foiled by Switzerland's prompt mobilisation.⁵⁷

Rather different to the false claims about the Netherlands and Switzerland, were widespread reports that Berlin had menaced Italy, whose position was complicated by it having been, since the 1880s, an ally of Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Italian government believed that the terms of the alliance did not oblige it to enter the war in 1914 and therefore declared neutrality. But London's *Evening Standard* briefly reported on 6 August, that Berlin had threatened Italy with war if it did not stand alongside its Triple Alliance partners. Other organs, including its sister-paper, *The Standard*, and *The Globe*, carried similar reports, as did the *Daily Telegraph* and Britain's best-selling evening newspaper, the *Evening News*, whose editorial also referred to the report and asked, 'Has Germany gone mad?' Even the usually-cautious *Manchester Guardian* repeated the tale. The rumour was quickly squashed: on 7 August, the *Evening Standard* reported Germany's denial of any ultimatum to Italy, while the *Manchester Guardian* included a similar denial from the Italian embassy. Yet, the *Guardian* of 10 August still repeated a Reuter's report that

⁵⁷ For example, 'Invasion of Switzerland', *Thames Star*, 19 September.

Rome was under pressure from Germany and Austria-Hungary: 'Italy must join them, they say, or... they will hold themselves free to declare war...' Meanwhile, a number of diarists and memoirists echoed these concerns. The Lord Chamberlain recorded, on 6 August, 'A rumour exists that Germany has sent an ultimatum to Italy to join her or be an enemy... Another rumour is that Germany violated neutrality of Holland.'⁵⁸

Maurice Baring, soon to join the Royal Flying Corps, recalled: 'A rumour was about, which proved to be untrue, that Germany had declared war on Italy. A man in the City said to me, "It would be very curious if Germany had to fight the whole world and won..."'⁵⁹

Some British newspapers were more cautious than others in reporting rumours. Given its anti-German reputation, the *Daily Mail* was surprisingly reluctant to mention any invasion of Switzerland and reported, on 5 August, only that Germany had made a 'vain appeal to Italy' for aid. The *Financial Times*, whose coverage of non-business news was far more limited than other dailies, was generally quite scrupulous in its reports. Thus, on 7 August, it included a headline, 'Incursion into Switzerland', but minimised the significance of this development by making it clear that a German cavalry patrol had been chased there by the French and was then interned. The same day, the headline 'Reported Ultimatum to Italy' was sub-titled 'news unconfirmed.' Then again, the previous day, the paper had been unable to resist exaggerated reports of a 'German Defeat' at the Belgian fortress of Liege, adding that 'the Germans have been triumphantly repulsed' Many newspapers carried similar reports about Liege and it is evident they served to boost public morale. In Derbyshire, Maria Gyte noted on 7 August that, 'according to the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* the Germans are suffering reverses. The brave Belgians are repulsing them

⁵⁸ Viscount Sandhurst, *From Day to Day, 1914-15* (London: Edward Arnold, 1928), 3-4.

⁵⁹ Maurice Baring, *Flying Corps Headquarters, 1914-18* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1985), 8-9; also IWM, Documents 11355, Frederick Robinson diary, 6 August.

finely.’⁶⁰ Keziah Makins, of Kensington, and her grandson, ten-year-old Roger, separately spoke of the German ‘repulse.’⁶¹ Even when it became apparent that the German advance had merely been briefly disrupted, the wishful thinking continued, with one armchair strategist stating, on 21 August, ‘Brussels is taken by the heathen Germans. The allies have some little game on, I think. Looks like a trap for Germany.’⁶²

The fact is that exaggerations of German aggression were repeated by newspapers of all shades of political opinion, even though the Liberal-leaning Press tended to oppose war until the moment it was declared. It has already been seen that the Liberal *Manchester Guardian*, while cautious about reporting a supposed invasion of Switzerland, repeated rumours of Berlin threatening Italy and speculated that it might invade the Netherlands. The other main Liberal newspaper at the ‘quality end of the market was the *Westminster Gazette*, often viewed as the newspaper closest to the government, thanks to the friendship between its editor, J. A. Spender and Sir Edward Grey.⁶³ But, despite its political moderation and links to officialdom, it stated on 3 August that Germany ‘appears [to] have invaded France at three points’, it repeated a report on 5 August that ‘the Germans... have violated Dutch territory at Telburg’ and, the following day, it noted the story of a German ultimatum to Italy (though it went on to admit, in an editorial comment, ‘we find that difficult to believe...’).

Coast and Fox have pointed out that, in the past, leading individuals ‘appear to have spread false reports deliberately for political purposes’, that ‘governments have often attempted to monitor or suppress them’ and that, therefore, ‘the question of who

⁶⁰ Phizackerley, ed., *Gyte*, 46.

⁶¹ Bodleian Library, MS. Sherfield 52, Keziah Makins diary, 8 August, and 255, Roger Makins diary, 6 August.

⁶² Livingstone, *Tommy’s War*, 46.

⁶³ Orgill, *Rumors*, 42.

started a rumour remains important...'⁶⁴ To what extent, then, may exaggerations of German aggression in 1914 have been manipulated from behind the scenes, perhaps by pro-war elements in government? In some cases, this possibility can be ruled out. The *Evening News* of 5 August, *The Standard* and *Morning Post* of 6 August all stated that the source of the rumour about a German ultimatum to Italy was an Exchange Telegraph Company telegram from Paris. This was evidently a simple case of mis-reporting, though it should also be borne in mind that French sources had an interest in stirring up anti-German feeling at this point. As seen above, on 2 August, *The Times* had stated that its report 'that Germany has invaded France without declaration of war' was based on the word of the French ambassador.

The first rumours of the war can hardly have been considered pieces of British propaganda, because an office to foster this did not yet exist. Official control of the news was being established, but in a confused state in these opening days. In late July, newspaper editors had been asked not to refer to naval or military activity without asking the Admiralty or War Office; the *Daily Express*' editor noted, on 29 July, 'we are not printing the movements of Army and Navy units.'⁶⁵ The diary of one naval captain suggests that orders on this subject were treated very seriously:

'A censor is established to examine all direct letters before dispatch. The strictest rules are enforced, which does not allow the name or crest of the ship to appear, and any matter referring to even the smallest incident or measure taken by the fleet is refused. Postmen, stewards, messmen and Picket-boat's crews are severely warned against gossiping...'⁶⁶

The Liberal *Daily Chronicle* warned its readers, on 4 August, that the newspaper must now reconcile its 'duty... to give news' with 'a patriotic duty as well. It must give no

⁶⁴ Coast and Fox, 'Rumour', 227 and 231.

⁶⁵ Blumenfeld, *Diary*, 246.

⁶⁶ IWM, Documents 758, Frank Alderson diary, 1 August.

news which would convey information of advantage to the adversary...’ But on 6 August, Geoffrey Robinson, editor of *The Times*, complained that, ‘The censorship is working rather crudely and we are being asked to stop the most blameless messages.’⁶⁷

That day the War Office Press Bureau was set up, headed by F.E. Smith, a Conservative M.P.⁶⁸ Lord Riddell, owner of the *News of the World*, Britain’s best-selling Sunday newspaper, was at a meeting on 7 August that found a home for the new organisation ‘with a scratch staff in a disused, rat-infested building in Whitehall.’⁶⁹ Meanwhile, concern was expressed in the House of Lords, on 7 August, about the spread of rumours via the Press. The Earl of Selborne, speaking for the Opposition, remarked that, ‘It needs little imagination to realise what the effect may be in a few days’ or in few weeks’ time of the words “Awful slaughter” resounding through the streets in the early hours of the morning.’ For the government, Lord Crewe, the Lord Privy Seal, commented that, ‘These are certainly not times at which we desire to encourage any kind of fictitious excitement. There is quite enough that is serious, without any fictitious addition.’⁷⁰ On 12 August, a Defence of the Realm Act took effect, clause 14 of which included a ban on publishing information likely to be ‘useful to the enemy.’⁷¹ It has been said that ‘the value of the Press as a medium for official propaganda was not appreciated at the start of the war because of the preoccupation with censorship’; thus, newspapers were starved of news and this

⁶⁷ Wrench, *Dawson*, 107.

⁶⁸ On its creation see Michael Sanders and Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), 19-23. The Conservatives were officially known as Unionists at this point in time.

⁶⁹ Lord Riddell, *Lord Riddell’s War Diary* (London: Ivor Nicholson, 1933), 10.

⁷⁰ Hansard, *House of Lords debates, Fifth Series, Volume 17*, column 469.

⁷¹ *London Gazette, Supplement*, 13 August 1914.

contributed to the ‘publication of dubious accounts.’⁷² A ‘War Propaganda Bureau’ was only established in September.⁷³

Nonetheless, even before the creation of a propaganda machine, it is possible that some individuals in government fostered exaggerations of German aggression. The government was genuinely concerned about the fate of neutral states. Sir Francis Bertie, the Ambassador to France, recorded in his diary on 7 August that, ‘Sweden is in a difficult position... I don’t think that Norway will throw in her lot with Germany. Poor Denmark is at her mercy. What will Holland do?’⁷⁴ Ministers were also aware of the publicity value of avoiding any British infringements of neutrality. The previous year, Grey had told Churchill, ‘I assured the Belgian Minister the other day that we should never be the first to violate the neutrality of Belgium or any other country.’⁷⁵ Lewis Harcourt made a note of a Downing Street meeting on 4 August, attended by Grey, Asquith and others, during which Churchill, in pursuing his naval ambitions, wanted ‘to block Amsterdam & mouth of Rhine, [but] Asq. Grey & I insisted we wd. not violate neutrality of Holland. Our defence of small nationalities our greatest asset. We insisted on this.’⁷⁶ Grey, however, showed some concern about the reliability of the neutrals: on 2 August, he notified the Belgian, Dutch and Norwegian governments that, ‘if pressure is applied to them by Germany to induce them to depart from neutrality, His Majesty’s Government expect that they will resist by any means in their power...’⁷⁷

⁷² Sanders and Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 23-24.

⁷³ M.L. Sanders, ‘Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War,’ *Historical Journal*, Vol.XVIII, No.1 (1975), 119.

⁷⁴ Lady Algernon Lennox, ed., *The Diary of Lord Bertie, 1914-18, Volume 1* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924), 13.

⁷⁵ *B.D., Volume X, The Last Years of Peace* (London: Stationery Office, 1938), doc. 472, Grey to Churchill, 11 April 1913.

⁷⁶ Harcourt Political Journal, Note on Meeting, 4 August.

⁷⁷ *B.D., Volume IX, Doc. 580, Grey to Villiers, 2 August 1914.*

A little-remarked feature of Grey's famous speech to the House of Commons, on 3 August 1914, justifying British involvement in the War, suggests that he genuinely feared Germany might invade several neutral states. He declared that, if the neutrality and independence of Belgium were compromised, 'the independence of Holland will follow' and he then asked Members of Parliament, 'from the point of view of British interests to consider what might be at stake', if France 'becomes subordinate to the will and power of one greater than herself... and if Belgium fell under the same dominating influence, and then Holland, and then Denmark...'⁷⁸ Here, in an otherwise measured speech, for which he was widely praised, the Foreign Secretary exaggerated German actions, for there never was an invasion of Holland or of Denmark. Neither was this an isolated remark, spoken in the heat of debate: on 4 August, Grey also told the American Ambassador, 'it will not end with Belgium. Next will come Holland and, after Holland, Denmark.' Indeed, on this occasion he went further, declaring, 'This very morning the Swedish Minister informed me that Germany had made overtures to Sweden to come in on Germany's side. The whole plan is thus clear. This one great military power means to annex Belgium, Holland, and the Scandinavian states and to subjugate France.'⁷⁹

Grey may not have intended his statement about Holland and Denmark to stir up anti-German feeling, but his Commons speech clearly impacted on the public. It was widely reported in the Press the following day, many carrying the whole speech *verbatim*.⁸⁰ One diarist, who read it closely, repeated his warning that, if Germany 'absorbed Belgium, Holland and Denmark might go next, & the danger to England

⁷⁸ Hansard, *House of Commons debates, Fifth Series, Volume LXV*, columns 1822-23.

⁷⁹ Burton Hendrick, *The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page, Vol. 1* (New York: Doubleday, 1922), 314.

⁸⁰ For example, *Manchester Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Morning Post*.

was incalculable.’⁸¹ Already, for *The Times* of 3 August – published before Grey spoke – Germany had become capable of almost any aggression:

‘She is resolved to crush France, and to trample on the rights of those who happen to stand in her way. Yesterday it was Luxembourg. To-day it may be Belgium or Holland, or she may treat us as she has treated our French friends, and assail us without a declaration of war.’

On 4 August, in the wake of Grey’s statement and perhaps influenced by it, the same newspaper’s editorial page was even more alarmist, claiming that, ‘Did we stand back, did we hesitate, did we desert Belgium, Holland would soon share her fate, and after Holland, Denmark.’ Anti-war newspapers were more sceptical. The *Daily News*, one of the most popular pro-Liberal dailies, noted on 5 August that Grey had drawn ‘a picture of all the neutral states of Northern Europe being absorbed by Germany’, but retorted, ‘we see no possibility of its ever representing the facts...’ One important point about Grey’s speech is that, while rumours may subsequently have circulated an invasion of the Netherlands, the evidence from newspapers and diaries suggests that no rumours were spread at a popular level about an invasion of Denmark, which he had also suggested to be possible. Then again, there were those who, like *The Times*, felt free to speculate about what might happen if Germany were not stopped. A case-in-point was the *Belfast News-Letter* which, on 5 August, argued that Britain was fighting ‘to prevent the annihilation of the small and stubbornly-independent European nationalities. If we lose Belgium, Holland, Denmark and Switzerland will be swept into the German Empire.’

Grey’s exaggerations of German intentions also helped to mobilise the Empire behind Britain, in favour of war. This can clearly be seen from the example of

⁸¹ IWM, Documents 10729, ‘London Lady’, 3 August.

Australia, where reporting came a few days after events unfolded in Europe. *The Daily Advertiser*, of 5 August, reported Grey's assertion that Germany might subordinate Holland and Denmark, as well as Belgium. On 7 August, an editorial in the Adelaide-based *Southern Cross*, praising Grey's speech, expanded on it by warning that Britain was 'bound to intervene if Belgian neutrality is infringed, and any attempt by Germany to seize Holland or Denmark would also be a strong provocation to war.' Other rumours from Britain found their way into the Australian Press. While many newspapers reported German assurances that Dutch neutrality would be respected⁸², the *Darling Downs Gazette* stated, on 5 August, that 'part of Holland is in a state of war with Germany.' The Perth *Daily News*, while avoiding any claim that Germany had invaded the country, assured its readers on 5 August, in a headline, that 'plucky Holland will drown her country rather than submit to Germany.' On 8 August, the *Western Australian* included a lengthy article on Dutch determination to resist any German attack. As early as 5 August there were headlines that claimed 'Germany invades Belgium and Switzerland'⁸³ and, over the following days, various Australian newspapers continued to report that Switzerland had been attacked, some adding that this was 'another treaty broken.'⁸⁴ Australian reporting seems to have been mere repetition of rumours circulating in London: the *National Advocate* of 5 August expressly stated that its report of a German invasion of Switzerland was based on a story from London's *Daily Telegraph*. Indeed, rumours that found their way into British newspapers were repeated in many other countries, such as the United States of America. On 4 August the *Washington Herald* proclaimed, 'German army blots out borders, heavy forces entering Belgium, Holland,

⁸² For example, *Queensland Times*, 7 August, *Wagga Wagga Express* and *Maitland Weekly Mercury*, 8 August

⁸³ For example, *The Murchison Times and Day Dawn Gazette*, 5 August.

⁸⁴ *Geraldton Guardian*, 6 August; *Ballarat Star*, 7 August; *Colac Herald*, 7 August; *Ararat Advertiser*, 8 August.

Switzerland and France’, while the next day’s *New York Times* confidently reported, on its front page, that Germany had invaded Switzerland.

There are also disturbing signs that Grey’s exaggerations may have stirred up anti-Germanism within the Cabinet. Harcourt, in his detailed journal of ministerial discussions, wrote on 3 August, ‘Sweden joins Germany in the War if we come in with France’, later adding ‘Norway to declare which side she takes (? ultimatum from Germany).’ At the next Cabinet, he recorded, ‘Germany said to have sent an ultimatum to Sweden & may do so to Norway.’ While he does not name Grey as the source for these statements, they naturally fell within the Foreign Secretary’s sphere and Grey ought to have countered them if he believed them untrue.⁸⁵ On 4 August, another Cabinet minister, Jack Pease, when justifying his support for war in a letter to his brother-in-law, wrote that, ‘the very independence of Belgium, Holland, Denmark, and other smaller states [were] liable to be sacrificed...’⁸⁶ The clearest evidence that ministers may have been influenced by exaggerations of the German threat to neutral states comes from letters written by the local government minister, Herbert Samuel. On 2 August he told his wife, ‘that German troops crossed into France via Luxembourg, and into Switzerland.’ Then, the following day he wrote, ‘The Germans have invaded Belgium and the King has appealed for our help. It is said they have also invaded Holland and Switzerland – every neutral state within reach. Our participation in the war is now inevitable.’⁸⁷ That a Cabinet minister could justify war on the basis of rumours about a pre-emptive invasion of France and attacks on the Netherlands and Switzerland, shows that the decision for British involvement rested on exaggerated fears, alongside rational arguments, with a suggestion that Grey did

⁸⁵ Harcourt, Political Journal, 3 and 4 August.

⁸⁶ Nuffield College, Oxford, Lord Gainford papers, Box 35, Pease to Hodgkin, 4 August.

⁸⁷ Parliamentary Archives, London, Herbert Samuel Papers, A/157/697-698, Herbert to Beatrice Samuel, 2-3 August.

not correct such misunderstandings, perhaps because – after trying to preserve the peace through most of the crisis – he was now keen to unite ministers behind war.

There are other indications that, in a fast-moving situation, British decision-making was affected by rumour, as opposed to accurate information, in early August. The best-known case of a rumour leading to hasty action concerns the belief, that arose on 4 August, that Germany had declared war on Britain. Reuters, the London-based news agency published this story at 11.45 pm, timing the supposed German declaration at 7 p.m., but had to correct this shortly afterwards. Reuters were blamed for mis-reporting, but their source was actually the British Foreign Office. The Foreign Office, in turn, had based its information on intelligence from the Admiralty, where German shipping signals had simply been misinterpreted.⁸⁸ Reuters were unfortunate that they published this piece of ‘fake news’ before it could be corrected. The Foreign Office was more fortunate in that, while they originally sent a message to the German Ambassador, accusing his country of ‘having declared war on Great Britain’ and enclosing his passports, they were able to retrieve this: Harold Nicolson, son of the Permanent Under-Secretary, was hastily despatched to the German embassy to recover the communication.⁸⁹ Another example of false reports affecting decision-making came at the War Council, of key ministers and military chiefs on 5 August, which discussed the possibility that Holland had been invaded. This may have encouraged Sir John French to press for the British Expeditionary Force to be sent to Antwerp in Belgium, rather than northern France (where existing plans intended it should be sent). But, ‘The Foreign Office view was that the alleged

⁸⁸ Donald Read, *The Power of News: the history of Reuters* (Second edition: Oxford University Press, 1999), 140.

⁸⁹ Harold Nicolson, *Sir Arthur Nicolson: First Lord Carnock* (London: Constable, 1930), 425-26.

violation of Dutch territory was highly improbable...’ and French’s idea was abandoned.⁹⁰

There is one account that suggests the intriguing possibility that rumours of multiple German infringements of neutrality came from its own embassy in London. G.H. Mair, of the *Manchester Guardian*’s London office wrote to his editor, around the evening of 3 August, that German ultimatums had ‘been issued not only to Belgium but to Norway and Sweden and Denmark. I have this directly from one who talked with the Ambassador.’⁹¹ On the face of it, the claim may seem implausible, but the Ambassador, Count Max Lichnowsky, was deeply critical of his own government’s conduct during the July crisis, later commenting that by the end of July 1914, the ‘impression grew stronger and stronger that we wanted war under all circumstances.’⁹² When Margot Asquith, wife of the Prime Minister, visited the the Lichnowskys on 2 August, the Prince declared Kaiser Wilhelm to be ‘ill-informed. impulsive, mad! – never listening or believing one word I say...’⁹³ Lichnowsky’s mental state shocked American Ambassador Walter H. Page, who saw him on 5 August: ‘I feared he might literally go mad. He is of the anti-war party and he had done his best and utterly failed... The poor man had not slept for several nights.’⁹⁴ In such an emotional state, the Count may well have exaggerated his own government’s aggressiveness.

About a week into the war, the rumours of further German attacks on neutral states faded away. The shape of the conflict, with Germany’s thrust across Belgium

⁹⁰ The National Archives, Kew, CAB17/102B CID, Historical Section, ‘Report on the Opening of the War’, 1 November 1914.

⁹¹ Trevor Wilson (ed.), *The Political Diaries of C.P. Scott, 1911-28* (London: Collins, 1970), 95 [letter of 3-4 August].

⁹² Prince Lichnowsky, *Heading for the Abyss: reminiscences* (London: Constable, 1928), 75.

⁹³ Michael and Eleanor Brock, eds., *Margot Asquith’s Great War Diary, 1914-16* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.

⁹⁴ Hendrick, *Page, Vol. 1*, 306.

into France and continuing bids for Italian support from both sides, became clearer and the focus of rumours shifted to German atrocities in Belgium and providential tales about the British army (notably the miraculous appearance of the ‘Angel of Mons’). But, in the meantime, exaggerations of German aggression had affected, not just a general public hungry for news, even of a ‘fake’ variety, but journalists, politicians, even government ministers. This reflected a collective sense, both of foreboding as the war began about the ruthlessness of the enemy and the necessity of resisting them. Adrian Gregory has made the important point that, for the British, ‘The decision to support the war was about more than the violation of Belgian neutrality: it was about acceptable behaviour in the international sphere; about the maintenance of an idea of proper and lawful behaviour among nations.’⁹⁵ Tales of German attacks on Switzerland and the Netherlands, claims that France was attacked without a declaration of war and Grey’s hints that Denmark might become a victim of aggression all served a similar purpose, suggesting that Germany ignored international norms, broke contracts at will and had almost limitless ambition.

It has been said that, ‘Truth is the first casualty of war.’ Philip Snowden, the Labour MP who first recorded the now-famous saying, accounted for it with the argument that, in order ‘to secure and maintain national unity in support of the war, every means are taken by the Governments to suppress criticism...’⁹⁶ Actually, in the case of British rumours in August 1914, there was no deliberate government campaign. A propaganda agency did not yet exist, even Cabinet ministers and military experts might be taken in by some reports, and those rumours whose origins can be traced seem to have been based on exaggerations of real pieces of evidence – an over-eager German soldier crossing the French border, a German patrol being pursued into

⁹⁵ Gregory, *Great War*, 36-37.

⁹⁶ Philip Snowden, ‘Introduction’ to E.D. Morel, *Truth and the War* (London: National Labour Press, 1916), vii.

Switzerland. Certainly, Grey was guilty of dangerous over-speculation when he suggested Berlin might even have Denmark in its sights, but the Press and public did not actually take up the idea of an attack on Denmark. None of this is to say, however, that rumours were without an effect. Far from it. For those who already believed in German aggression, the rumours can only have confirmed their beliefs. Georgina Lee already wrote on 30 July of ‘Germany, lusting for War’ and believed that, if Britain fought, ‘we shall have been dragged in through loyalty to our friends abroad.’ On 5 August, she asserted that, ‘there is not one of us in the country who is not thankful at heart that the great fight is to take place at last.’⁹⁷ For those who were more sceptical about the need to fight, Germany’s invasion of neutral states helped swing them to intervention. For example, *The Standard*, one of the lower-circulation national dailies, declared in its editorial of 1 August, ‘It would be a deplorable feature if France and Great Britain should be dragged into a struggle in which neither has the smallest direct interest...’ But, three days later, referring to the invasions of Luxembourg and Belgium, it argued that Britain ‘has very seriously to consider whether she can safely enter on a precarious neutrality which, to judge by Germany’s actions thus far, would be terminated the moment it became her interest to fight us.’

The idea that Germany was willing to betray international commitments with impunity, not only infringing Belgian neutrality, but Luxembourg’s too and then – who knows? – that of the Netherlands and Switzerland, had special impact on Britain, whose sense of honour was closely bound up in the notion that contracts must be fulfilled. This was unsurprising given the country’s reliance on foreign trade. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lloyd George, told an audience in September that Britain went to war because, ‘in the first place, we are bound in an honourable

⁹⁷ Roynon, ed., *Home Fires*, 1-2 and 5.

obligation to defend the independence' of Belgium, adding, 'The man who declines to discharge his debt because his creditor is too poor to enforce it is a blackguard.' He developed this line of thought by arguing that international trade was based upon the 'honour of commercial men' and asserted, 'Treaties are the currency of international statesmanship', which Germany had debased when it treated Belgian neutrality as 'a scrap of paper.'⁹⁸ The idea that Germany's greatest crime in 1914 was to infringe the neutrality of small states was a resilient one: in 2013, one British newspaper still recommended that its readers should 'study the Schlieffen Plan and learn that Germany had been plotting its conquest of Europe and invasion of neutral countries like Holland and Belgium for years.'⁹⁹

The most important source of exaggerations of German aggression in 1914 was the Press. Vera Brittain may have written, on 2 August, 'it was not so much what was in the papers that caused excitement as the rumours that were spreading about all day'¹⁰⁰ and Viscount Sandhurst felt, on 5 August, 'Rumours of every kind fly about, as is natural, but secrets appear to be well kept and the Press is behaving with patriotic reticence.'¹⁰¹ Yet, the volume of claims in the newspapers, on all sides of the spectrum – Liberal, Conservative and Labour; national dailies, the local Press, London evening papers – shows a general desire to meet the public thirst for intelligence by printing the latest stories to emerge from the informational fog that engulfed the continent. It was not that newspapers were unable to recognise misleading information (especially if it came from Germany), or were unwilling to suppress unhelpful information (they conformed with early government censorship

⁹⁸ David Lloyd George, *Honour and Dishonour: a speech at the Queen's Hall, London, Sept. 19* (London: Methuen, 1914), 2 and 4.

⁹⁹ Robert Hardman, 'Why we SHOULD upset the Germans – by reminding them of their Great War atrocities', *Mail Online*, 14 January 2013.

¹⁰⁰ Brittain, *Chronicle*, 84.

¹⁰¹ Sandhurst, *Day to Day*, 2.

requirements readily enough), but they were quite happy to report supposed German misdemeanours, even highlighting these in headlines, when a careful reading of the ensuing column often revealed scantily few details of what had supposedly occurred.

Having said that, it should be conceded that anti-war figures were quite capable of generating their own preposterous claims: in mid-August, Olive Schreiner claimed that ‘some military people’ told her that Britain had already sent troops to France and Belgium *before* war was declared.¹⁰² But the main point is that, after 4 August, the anti-war camp rapidly shrank into irrelevancy and that many may have been won to a pro-war stance by a belief that Germany was indeed ready to attack ‘every neutral state within reach’, not just Luxembourg and Belgium. On 4 August, Vera Brittain already believed Germany ‘has broken treaty after treaty & disregarded every honourable tie with other nations.’¹⁰³ Kate Frye noted, a few days later, ‘Germany seems ruthlessly violating every treaty that was made and will soon end by not having a single friend in Europe or the world.’¹⁰⁴ Reflecting more broadly, Ada Reece wrote that, ‘At the beginning of the war we felt that after living so long in peace it would be difficult to have that healthy hatred for one’s enemies which would enable one to exult in victory. But the accounts of German savagery and treachery which come from all quarters will soon change that feeling.’¹⁰⁵ At a time of deep international crisis, rumours circulated by the Press on a national scale, alongside more accurate reporting of events in Luxembourg and Belgium, helped create a consensus around the twin ideas that Germany was a menace to international law – a

¹⁰² University of Cape Town Archives, Olive to William Schreiner, 18 August 1914, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription at <https://www.oliveschreiner.org/vre?view=collections&colid=106&letterid=48> (accessed 14 June 2018).

¹⁰³ Brittain, *Chronicle*, 87.

¹⁰⁴ <https://womanandhersphere.com/2014/08/06/kate-fryes-diary-war-6-august-1914/> (accessed 11 May 2018).

¹⁰⁵ Reece diary, 8 August.

moral cause that could unite Liberals and Conservatives – and that, as a corollary, Britain was right to fight.