



ALLAN MALLINSON

1914
FIGHT THE
GOOD FIGHT
BRITAIN, THE ARMY
& THE COMING OF THE
FIRST WORLD WAR

About the Book

In Sarajevo, on 28 June 1914, the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip fired two deadly shots into the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand's car. The assassination created a diplomatic cat's cradle – statesmen, ambassadors and soldiers manoeuvred within a tangle of ambiguous treaties, ill-defined ententes and inflexible military plans. It was a snarl that pleased the warlike and confounded the peaceable; and for a time it paralysed the uncommitted too, not least Britain.

In just a month, however, the huge conscript armies of Continental Europe were on the march: the Russians into East Prussia and Austrian Galicia, the Germans towards Paris. But in its haste to knock France out of the war before turning to face Russia, Germany invaded Belgium: a nation whose neutrality Britain was obliged to defend under the terms of an uncertain treaty signed seventy-five years earlier in a very different age.

And by the middle of August 1914 the British Expeditionary Force, comprising a hundred thousand regular troops, had arrived in France to fight on the left of the French line. Popular opinion was that this war would be 'over by Christmas', but through the failure of the French high command to comprehend the German military's strength and intentions, 'the Old Contemptibles' of the BEF found themselves standing in the path of an enemy army many times their number, their heroic resistance passed into the annals of war.

In this vivid, compelling and rigorously researched new history, Allan Mallinson, one of Britain's foremost military historians and defence commentators, former soldier and

author of *The Making of the British Army*, examines the century-long path that led to war, and the vital first month of fighting in Belgium and France – a conflict of movement before the stalemate of the trenches – and speculates, tantalizingly, on what might have been had wiser political and military counsels prevailed.

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1914: Fight the Good Fight

Britain, the Army and the Coming of
the First World War

Allan Mallinson

War is the ultimate resource of policy, by which the nation seeks to impose its will on its enemies in defence of its honour, its interests, and its existence.

Field Service Regulations 1909, with amendments 1914

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AUTHOR'S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was one of the last members of the (army) general staff, before it was eviscerated and subsumed within the new (tri-service) defence staff. Indeed, as a young major, 'general staff officer grade II' (GSO2), I worked in the Directorate of Military Operations, in the branch concerned with war in Europe - the branch that plays so central a part in this story. In our ancient safe were documents going back to the time of the most famous, or infamous, of directors, Major-General (later Field Marshal) Henry Wilson, who features equally prominently in this book. I was posted there after a year at the Staff College in Camberley (the college has since moved to Shrivenham and been tri-serviced out of all recognition), where Wilson had been commandant before returning to the War Office in 1910 to make the plans for mobilization, and where I was trained in the same discipline of 'staff writing' as Wilson's own GSO2s: what was, and occasionally still is, called 'minor staff duties', or 'minor SD'. As I delved in the great stash of War Office papers in the National Archives while researching for this book - the briefing notes, minutes, memoranda, lists and letters - it felt at times as if I were reading documents that had only just been filed. Where I have quoted from these, or from other unpublished sources, in what follows, I have not provided individual notes of attribution in every case as this would have imposed a cumbersome weight of annotation on the text. Nor have I included a separate bibliography, for it would have gone on for too many pages - especially the primary documents (and perhaps even more so the secondary, for I

consulted virtually every regimental and corps history) – and in the end would not have added very much, except for a monument to the capacity for making lists. Nor was I inclined, as I did in *The Making of the British Army*, a much broader work, to include a ‘further reading’ list; for how to be usefully selective? I have, however, footnoted specific references to published work in the usual way.

As always in writing a book there are many people to thank. I do not use researchers, but with *Fight the Good Fight* I discussed my thoughts with three people in particular. In the earliest stages I put my ‘big ideas’ to the late Sir John Keegan, who, bed-ridden even as he was, gave me the greatest encouragement. Professor John Röhl, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Sussex, read the first draft and was unsparingly generous in his critical commentary, even as he was preparing for publication the third volume of his biography of the Kaiser. And my former branch colonel in the Ministry of Defence (and later Director of Infantry), Major-General Ray Pett, read the second draft, as he used to read my briefs and papers before they could be officially circulated at the ‘War Office’, and made many observations and suggestions. I am indebted to the three of them for the depth they have added. I am also particularly grateful to Professor Thomas Otte, Professor of Diplomatic History at the University of East Anglia, whose guidance in the maze of Belgian neutrality (particularly that of the Scheldt) was invaluable. Any mistakes are of course mine. But of mistakes I would plead the opinion of Edward Thomas, killed in France in 1917: ‘Better a thousand errors so long as they are human than a thousand truths lying like broken snail-shells round the anvil of a thrush.’[fn1](#)

I am especially beholden to my wife for her support in what has been a longer and more intensive project than originally envisaged, and to many others who have

contributed directly and indirectly. To General Sir Richard Shirreff, the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (NATO), whose familiarity with the initial clashes in 1914 near his present-day headquarters at Mons in Belgium was a very real inspiration in my early reconnaissances, and to Lady (Sarah-Jane) Shirreff for her hospitality. To Lady (Fiona) Fraser for all manner of help and advice. Likewise to Erica Wagner, former literary editor of *The Times*, and to Rose Wild, the *Times* archivist. To Sir Ivor Roberts, Master of Trinity College, Oxford; Sir John Scarlett, formerly head of the Secret Intelligence Service; Patrick Rock, the Prime Minister's policy adviser; Lord Valentine Cecil, 'Once a Grenadier, always a Grenadier'; and Raymond Asquith, 3rd Earl of Oxford and Asquith, for kindness over a number of details. To Major Maurice French, late of the Royal Fusiliers, for his great generosity in lending me for so long the papers of his uncle, Lieutenant Maurice Dease VC. To the officers commanding regimental headquarters, and curators of military museums too numerous to mention, for their patience in answering questions, giving me access to documents of all kinds, and the loan of diaries, maps and photographs - especially the curators of the Weapons Collection of the Small-Arms School Corps at Warminster, and with particular affection for the smallest (and private) museum of all, the Wagoners' Special Reserve at Sledmere, and to Sir Tatton Sykes and his curator, Sandra Oakins. To the staff of the National Archives at Kew and of the German Historical Institute (London), and especially to the librarians of the Royal United Services Institute (Whitehall), the Prince Consort's Library (Aldershot) and the School of Infantry (Warminster). To Diane Lees, Director-General of the Imperial War Museum (and fellow trustee of the Ogilby Army Museums Trust), and Anthony Richards, the IWM's Head of Documents and Sound.

To my editor at Transworld, Simon Taylor, for striving indefatigably to make the book understandable to those

who have not served on the General Staff; to my copy-editor, Gillian Somerscales, for being so diligent an assayer of the narrative and kindly *arbiter elegantiarum*; to Sheila Lee for her imaginative picture research, Tom Coulson of Encompass Graphics for the clarity of the maps, Phil Lord for his assured design, Auriol Griffith-Jones for her sedulous indexing, Claire Ward and Steve Mulcahey for a most striking cover, and Katrina Whone, managing editor, for pulling it all together.

And ultimately to St Paul (via the Reverend John Monsell) for a glorious title.



[fn1](#) 'History and the Parish', from *The South Country* (1909).

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'
Thomas Hardy, 1915

Preface

In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'

War's annals – those at least of the British Expeditionary Force of August 1914 – have indeed clouded into night. Too often only the trenches stand clearly in the popular mind's eye, as if what preceded them in the First World War (and what followed, in late 1918) were all of a piece.

When the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip fired two deadly shots into the Archduke Franz Ferdinand's car in Sarajevo on 28 June, the result was a diplomatic cat's cradle – statesmen, ambassadors and soldiers manoeuvring in a tangle of ambiguous treaties, ill-defined *ententes* and inflexible military plans, a snarl that pleased the warlike and confounded the peaceable. For a time, too, it paralysed the uncommitted, not least Britain. Never was St Paul more apt than in July 1914 – 'Evil communications corrupt good manners' – for the old 'Concert of Europe', the balance of power conceived at the Congress of Vienna a century earlier, now hardened into two armed camps, conducted its diplomacy by telegram at a slower speed than the armies mobilized by railway.

There had been other crises in the decade before, and the worst that had happened was local war in the Balkans; yet somehow Princip's two shots would propel the German army into neutral Belgium and on towards Paris. Britain had always taken a decidedly semi-detached position on continental affairs, even while desiring the balance of power in Europe; the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, went abroad only once during his nine years in office (and only

then, in April 1912, to accompany the King to Paris). And yet now, for the first time in a hundred years, Britain would send troops across the Channel – albeit with no very clear idea how they should be used. In 1914 there were 100,000 of them; by 1918 there would be over two million.

‘No part of the Great War compares in interest with its opening,’ wrote Churchill in his foreword to Lieutenant (later Major-General) Edward Spears’ remarkable account of his time as a liaison officer with the French army:

The measured, silent drawing together of gigantic forces, the uncertainty of their movements and positions, the number of unknown and unknowable facts made the first collision a drama never surpassed. Nor was there any other period in the War when the general battle was waged on so great a scale, when the slaughter was so swift or the stakes so high. Moreover, in the beginning our faculties of wonder, horror and excitement had not been cauterized and deadened by the furnace fires of years. In fact the War was decided in the first twenty days of fighting, and all that happened afterwards consisted in battles which, however formidable and devastating, were but desperate and vain appeals against the decision of fate.^{fn1}

Fate – the power or principle that predetermines events – seems in the minds of many also to have been the bringer of that war. How but for some malign force could the assassination of an Austrian archduke in a place that few outside the Balkans had heard of, let alone could find on a map, send the Royal Navy to its battle stations and the British army to France? Fate made statesmen and officials purblind, unable to see the consequences of arms races, treaties and threats, so that they sleep-walked (‘Half asleep as they stalked’) into war.^{fn2} A hundred years on, there is still no consensus on *die Kriegsschuldfrage* – the question of war guilt – or even the precise dynamics of the July crisis. Frequently in popular imagination and narrative the outbreak of war is a catastrophic inevitability, connected somehow with mobilization and railway timetables, as if some sorcerer’s apprentice had lost control of his broom, unable to conjure the magic words that would stop its

mindless exertions before unleashing the deluge. In an episode of *The West Wing*, Warner Brothers' fictional portrayal of the US presidency (Episode 88 - 'Twenty-Five'), the Speaker of the House of Representatives solemnly recounts the course of the July crisis to the President's staff as a warning that events have their own momentum. And in the 1974 TV docudrama on the Cuban crisis, *The Missiles of October*, President John F. Kennedy is haunted by his reading of Barbara Tuchman's 1962 Pulitzer-Prize-winning book *The Guns of August*, and the seeming inability of the statesmen of Europe to find the lever that would stop the machinery of mobilization and thereby the First World War - as if there were any such lever that could do so.^{fn3} Yet the pre-war arrangements did not ultimately remove choice; they only made it harder. *Fight the Good Fight* is concerned principally with the *military* choices, and specifically Britain's.

'In fact the War was decided in the first twenty days of fighting.' But where? Although major battles were fought on the Eastern Front, between the Austrians and Russians in Galicia, and between the Germans and Russians in East Prussia, it was in Belgium and northern France that 'the decision of fate' was made. And the British army - the 'British Expeditionary Force' - small though it was, helped make that decision. The 'Schlieffen Plan', bold, cunning and ruthless, painstakingly crafted by the Prussian general staff over a decade and a half in order to gain rapid victory in the west so that German troops could then be switched east to deal with the real enemy, Russia, was wrecked by Belgian *jas* in Napoleonic shakos, by French *poilus* in red trousers - and by British 'Tommies' in khaki peaked caps, the 'Old Contemptibles', the name they adopted with characteristic irony after the Kaiser's supposed mockery of 'Britain's contemptible little army'.

The official *History of the Great War* describes the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) as 'incomparably the best trained,

best organised and best equipped British Army that ever went forth to war', [fn4](#) but by midnight on 22 November, the end of the First Battle of Ypres and the close of the qualifying period for the medal known colloquially as the Mons Star, the army that had left England in the middle of August was the proverbial shadow of its former self, recognizable more in form than in substance, like the fast-flowing river which, though remaining the same stream, is not the same water. There were but a handful of officers, and a hundred or so men, left in each of the thousand-strong battalions that had marched out of barracks in Aldershot, Colchester, York, Edinburgh, Dublin and the other home garrisons of the old regular army. Casualties between 5 August and 30 November were 86,237. One in ten of those who had crossed to France in August had been killed.

Need the losses have been so great? Might the BEF have achieved more? Could Germany have been fought beyond just a standstill – to early capitulation indeed?

The BEF was without doubt the best trained, best organized and best equipped British army that had ever gone forth to war, but in truth this was only saying so much, for Britain had always sought to evade a continental commitment and its cost in blood and (especially) treasure. The accolade masked deficiencies both material and moral – grave deficiencies. Ironically, too, the strenuous efforts to reform the army after the *débâcles* of the Boer War had an unintended consequence: they brought the army to an unprecedented pitch of efficiency, but in August 1914 they also brought it to the wrong place, at the wrong time, and trusting in an ally – France – whose own army, in its obsession with the overwhelming moral power of the offensive, had put its trust in the wrong generals and the wrong strategy.

Much has been and continues to be written about the desperate attempts of statesmen and diplomats to find the

right lever to pull after the assassination at Sarajevo. The obsession with this lever has tended to divert attention from Britain's failure to find the right military strategy - fundamentally a political failure, for strategy is first the product of policy. But even analyses of British military strategy too often betray a misunderstanding of how the War Office worked, especially the function of its directors. Nor have they examined, in the light of subsequent events, the alternative strategies for a continental engagement proposed beforehand by men such as the first lord of the Admiralty, the young Winston Churchill, and Douglas Haig, who in 1914 was a relatively junior corps commander in the BEF.

Fight the Good Fight is essentially an Anglocentric perspective of the BEF's first twenty days, and of what came before - specifically, Britain's wishful detachment from the affairs of continental Europe, notwithstanding the implied alliance of the Entente Cordiale. It was a full month after the shooting in Sarajevo before the cabinet properly discussed the situation in Europe; and even once the fighting began, a mood of semi-detachment persisted for weeks. *Fight the Good Fight* is not, however, another book about the causes of the First World War. It explains the grand strategic shift that came about in the century beforehand, which slowly eroded Britain's 'splendid isolation', but only to set the strategic context for the military plans and actions. It describes the army's Edwardian regeneration after its drubbings by the Boers, and recounts the BEF's almost calamitous experience of the first twenty days' fighting, until the 'Old Contemptibles' took up the pick and the spade in the middle of September 1914, when the war began to change from one of movement into the more familiar image of the trenches. There followed the arrival of the 'Terriers', the 'Pals' and, ultimately, the conscripts - and of course the poets; and with them the sense of pity, of futility.

There was no sense of pity or futility in the old BEF, for these men were professionals. Indeed, the Kaiser called them mercenaries – a jibe with which A. E. Housman made ironic play in his ‘Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries’:

These, in the day when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth’s foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead.
Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood, and earth’s foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay.^{fn5}

‘In fact the War was decided in the first twenty days of fighting.’ If so, need there have been the subsequent ‘desperate and vain appeals against the decision of fate’? Could the first twenty days’ fighting have been more immediately decisive, bringing the war to a prompt end – ‘over by Christmas’, as so many believed it would be; or at least by Christmas 1915?

As I try to show, if there had been a firmer political grasp on British military strategy in the decade before 1914, and greater vision at the War Office, the answer is – ‘yes’, just possibly. At the very least, the Western Front need not have looked as it did in the years that followed. This is not mere hindsight, as the counsels of Winston Churchill, the youngest member of the cabinet, and Douglas Haig, the most junior of the generals summoned to the ‘war council’ on 5 August that fateful year, show all too clearly. Had those counsels been taken, the whole course of the war – its length, its cost, its outcome – might have been radically different. And what a different century might then have followed.

As it was, the BEF ‘took their wages and are dead’. *Fight the Good Fight* explains how and why.

[fn1](#) Edward Spears, *Liaison 1914* (London, 1930). In August 1914 Churchill had been first lord of the Admiralty; in 1916 he commanded a battalion on the Western Front; he was subsequently minister of munitions; in 1919 he became secretary of state for war and for air, in 1921 secretary of state for the colonies, and from 1926 to 1929, chancellor of the exchequer. In 1940, as prime minister, he would appoint Spears his personal representative to the French PM.

[fn2](#) See, for example, the Cambridge historian Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012). Churchill wrote to his wife on 28 July of Europe's being in 'a kind of dull cataleptic trance'.

[fn3](#) Barbara Tuchman (1912–89) was an American journalist and historian, a lecturer at Harvard and the US Navy War College. Kennedy had a high regard for *The Guns of August*, published in Britain with the title *August 1914*, which he sent to senior officers and Washington staff. It still has a powerful resonance, in the US especially: in August 2006 Richard Holbrooke, former ambassador to the UN (and later President Obama's special representative to Pakistan and Afghanistan), wrote a cautionary article in the *Washington Post* on the escalatory situation in Iraq and Lebanon under the headline 'The Guns of August'.

[fn4](#) Brigadier-General J. E. Edmonds, *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents*, 29 vols (London, 1923–49), vol. 1. This massive work, usually known (and cited hereafter) simply as the *Official History*, was written as a technical history for military staff by the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence.

[fn5](#) First published in *The Times*, 31 October 1917, with a commemorative article on the BEF at Ypres. Two days earlier, in a speech during Parliament's 'Vote of Thanks to the Forces', the then prime minister, David Lloyd George, said of the BEF: 'The old Army is the Army that gathered the spears of the Prussian legions into its breast, and in perishing saved Europe. No sacrifice in the history of the world has had greater results, and those seven [*sic*] divisions have a unique position in history and in the annals of the British Army.'

The lamps are going out all over Europe;
we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.

Sir Edward Grey, August 1914

Chapter One

THE LAMPS BEGIN TO FLICKER

The lights were barely up to the job. Gladstone had had electricity put in at 10 Downing Street during his fourth and final administration, twenty years before, but the three brass chandeliers in the Cabinet Room were not meant to illuminate the meetings of great men. As a rule ministers met in the full light of day, which flooded through the big sash windows on two sides of the house in which history had been made for nearly two centuries. Now, just after nine o'clock on Tuesday, 4 August 1914, in the last evening of the hundred years' peace (peace, at least, between Britain and her continental neighbours), the place was dim, even dingy, adding to the atmosphere of impending doom. All day there had been telegrams and rumours, but no word from the German embassy in Carlton House Terrace just across The Mall, and nothing since mid-afternoon from the British ambassador in Berlin; nor anything from the new foreign section of the Secret Service Bureau (in time, the Secret Intelligence Service - MI6) and its agents in the Low Countries. The previous day Germany had declared war on France and German troops had invaded Belgium, whose neutrality Britain felt obliged to defend by a treaty of 1839. The ambassador in Berlin had been instructed to inform the Kaiser's government that unless an assurance was received by midnight that the German army would halt its advance, Britain would 'feel bound to take all steps in [her] power to uphold the neutrality of Belgium'. Now, as the hour approached for the expiry of the ultimatum, the prime

minister, 'H.H.' (Herbert Henry) Asquith, called his principal secretaries of state together. But what was there to do other than wait?

The easy-going Asquith, sixty-one years old and white-haired but distractedly in love with a girl less than half his age - Venetia Stanley, to whom he wrote daily, sometimes several times, and even during cabinet meetings - for once looked grave. His foreign secretary and fellow Balliol classicist, Sir Edward Grey, tall but stooping, looking pallid, worn-out and a good deal older than his fifty-two years, had the air of a defeated man. The lord chancellor and caretaker-minister at the War Office,^{fn1} the 58-year-old Edinburgh- and Göttingen-educated philosopher, barrister and bachelor Richard Burdon (Viscount) Haldane, looked more than usually ponderous.

Only the chancellor of the exchequer, David Lloyd George, perhaps because he had not previously been one of the inner council, seemed undaunted: a handsome figure, not yet of the famous white locks (his hair merely curled over his collar in a slightly raffish way), the same age as Grey but with the vigour of a man half his years, he looked as bluff as the foreign secretary looked broken. A large crowd had gathered in Downing Street, and cheered each minister as he arrived.

One of the inner council who was not yet there to add spark to the lifeless gathering was the first lord of the Admiralty, the youngest member of the cabinet and the only one with first-hand military experience: the 39-year-old Winston Churchill.^{fn2} He was still at his desk in Admiralty House the other side of Horse Guards Parade, sending signals to the far side of the world. The previous Thursday he had wired the commander-in-chief (C-in-C) Mediterranean, warning that war 'now seems probable', that it looked as if Italy would not throw her lot in with Germany, and that the British fleet should be prepared to help the

French navy to convoy troops from North Africa. That very morning the C-in-C, Admiral Sir Berkeley Milne, had replied '*Indomitable, Indefatigable* shadowing *Goeben* and *Breslau* [all battle-cruisers] 37° 44 North 7° 56 East', and at 5.30 in the afternoon Churchill had signalled to all ships: 'The war telegram will be issued at midnight authorizing you to commence hostilities against Germany, but in view of our ultimatum they may decide to open fire at any moment. You must be ready for this.'

Churchill himself was ready; he had been for a week and more. Others of the cabinet were still unwilling or unable to contemplate what was about to happen, as if there might yet be some deliverance even as the sand in the glass ran out.

At length came the home secretary, Reginald McKenna, tall, trim, a champion Cambridge oarsman, whom Churchill had supplanted at the Admiralty three years earlier. He had with him a piece of paper:

Time: 9.5 p.m.

Date: Aug. 4th, 1914.

The following message has been intercepted by the W.O. Censor:-

To German Ambassador from Berlin.

English Ambassador has just demanded his passport shortly after seven o'clock declaring war.

(Signed) Jagow

Asquith read it and passed it to the others. Gottlieb von Jagow was the German foreign minister: could there be any doubt of its authenticity or its meaning? But there was as yet no word from Sir Edward Goschen, the 'English' ambassador in Berlin. Why had he 'declared war' five hours early? There were still two hours before the ultimatum expired at midnight Central Europe Time, 11 p.m. in London; was the telegram - which was not in cipher - a trick? Did the Germans intend some *coup* against British ships, or even a landing somewhere? Should the telegram be treated as the

commencement of hostilities? Asquith and his ministers were quite at a loss. Alert the fleet and the coastal defences, they decided.^{fn3}

The first lord would need no urging. The Grand Fleet had been practising its mobilization^{fn4} procedures when the pistol had been fired in Sarajevo, and at the end of the royal review at Portland a month later, on 28 July, instead of standing them down, Churchill, with some daring, had ordered the dreadnoughts and cruisers to steam 'at high speed, and without lights' through the Straits of Dover into the North Sea and onwards to their battle station, the lonely Orkney anchorage of Scapa Flow. But for the rest, the PM and his gathered few resolved to wait until eleven. There was just a chance, however remote, that a message might yet arrive from Berlin; and then something might be arranged to forestall the clash of nations that for a decade had haunted the capitals of Europe, yet somehow had hitherto been avoided by, in Lloyd George's words, 'goodwill and wise counsel'.

But no message came. As the hour approached, conversation in the Cabinet Room ceased, eyes glancing anxiously instead between clock and door. Then the deep notes of Big Ben broke the solemn silence: 'Doom!', 'Doom!', 'Doom!' - to the last stroke, as Lloyd George remembered it. Soon after, the telephones began ringing.

In Government House, Aldershot, the Victorian villa that was the residence of the general officer commanding-in-chief (GOC-in-C) Aldershot Command, Lieutenant-General Sir Douglas Haig, it rang just before midnight. On the line was the headquarters duty officer, Captain John Harding-Newman.^{fn5} The War Office had just wired, he told Haig: 'War has broken out with Germany,' and the GOC-in-C, who would command one of the two corps of the Expeditionary Force (later the *British Expeditionary Force* - BEF), was

required at a 'war council' at 10 Downing Street the following afternoon.

Haig was entirely composed, relieved almost, now that a decision had come. That it was war came as no surprise at all: he, like many another senior officer, had seen the German army at its annual manoeuvres and was in no doubt of its restless, aggressive strength.^{fn6} In any case, the War Office, anticipating the worst, had already ordered general mobilization: the telegram consisting of the single word 'Mobilize' and signed 'Troopers', the code name for the secretary of state for war, had arrived at Aldershot at 5.30 p.m., and Aldershot Command had in turn sent out its own telegrams to its subordinate headquarters. 'Everything had been so well thought out and foreseen,' wrote Haig in his diary, 'that I, as C-in-C Aldershot, was never called upon for a decision.' He promptly went to bed.^{fn7}

At about the same time, a young Foreign Office official, Harold Nicolson (who had married Vita Sackville-West the year before), home on leave from the embassy in Constantinople, rang long on the bell at the side entrance of the German embassy, on the steps leading from The Mall to the Duke of York's Column in Waterloo Place. Eventually a surly footman opened the door and said that the ambassador had already gone to bed and was not to be disturbed.^{fn8}

'You must tell the butler immediately that I must see His Excellency with an urgent message,' demanded Nicolson. This message was a substitute declaration of war. Shortly before ten o'clock a news agency had reported that Germany had declared war on Great Britain, and so the Foreign Office had torn up the preparatory draft referring to the expiry of the ultimatum and composed a new declaration, which was taken to the embassy after eleven o'clock by Lancelot Oliphant, a junior clerk in the Eastern Department. Soon afterwards it had been realized that the

report was false, so a third declaration, reverting to the original wording, was drawn up. Nicolson, whose father was the permanent secretary at the Foreign Office, was sent to retrieve the version that Oliphant had taken and deliver instead one that made clear that a state of war existed because the ultimatum had expired without any response having been received from Berlin.

At length the butler appeared and led Nicolson up to the private apartments, where the ambassador, Karl Max Fürst (Prince) von Lichnowsky, lay on a brass bed in his pyjamas. Nicolson told him there had been a slight error in the document sent previously and he had come to substitute for it the correct version. Prince Lichnowsky pointed to the table, where an envelope was lying unattended: 'You will find it there,' he said, as if in a daze. It seemed he had not read it, but guessed its significance since the passports of the embassy staff were enclosed. Nicolson had been told to get a receipt, so he took the blotting pad, pen and ink-bottle across to the bed. While the ambassador was signing, shouting came from The Mall, and then singing – the 'Marseillaise' – as crowds streamed back from Buckingham Palace. Earlier in the day they had broken the embassy windows.

Lichnowsky took no notice. Without a word, having signed the receipt he turned out the pink lamp beside the bed – but then, perhaps feeling that he had been uncivil, turned it on again. 'Give my best regards to your father,' he said, sadly, with the pronounced 'r' and short 'a' of the accent of Silesia, his birthplace: 'I shall not in all probability see him before my departure.'^{[fn9](#)}

The next morning, 5 August, Douglas Haig motored to London and called on Field Marshal Sir John French at the Metropole Hotel off Trafalgar Square, where the senior staff of the BEF headquarters were gathering.^{[fn10](#)} If things went as expected, French, his old friend and supporter, would be