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Douglas J. Newton, *The Darkest Days: The Truth behind Britain's Rush to War, 1914*. New York: Verso, 2014. Pp. xxix, 386. ISBN 978-1-78168-350-7.

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The centenary of the outbreak of the Great War has seen the publication of a host of titles that re-examine the subject from a dazzling array of new perspectives. It is reassuring to see among them worthy high political histories like *The Darkest Days*. Historian Douglas Newton¹ focuses on the Radical objections to the decision for war in a deeply divided Liberal Cabinet over the ten days leading up to 4 August 1914. He also identifies and discusses alternative paths not taken by the British government.

This straightforward and well written chronological narrative highlights Cabinet Radicals like John Morley, John Burns, John Simon, and Lewis Harcourt, as well as such lesser lights as Arthur Ponsonby and Charles Trevelyan. The chief villains of the piece, who, in Newton's estimation, misled the nation into abandoning the sensible, time-tested Liberal policy of neutrality in favor of backing the Entente system, are Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith, his Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, and the First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, abetted by "fanatical supporters of the Entente" in the Foreign Office, the War Office, the Unionist party, and allied press lords (126).

The book begins by exposing the "Myth of an Irresistible War," laying out the case for British neutrality in the quarrel between Austria-Hungary and Russia over Serbia. It is worth remembering the lingering British suspicions that, despite the 1907 Entente, autocratic Russia posed a greater danger to European civilization and the British Empire than Wilhelmine Germany. Liberals in the neutral United States, too, opposed supporting the Allied cause until the Russian Revolution of 1917 swept away the Romanovs.

Newton then turns to a day-by-day account of the actions and reactions of Grey, Asquith, and the Radicals, beginning on 23 July 1914, when the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum was delivered to Serbia. He criticizes British policy positions, from Grey's "keep them guessing" diplomatic maneuvers to Asquith's failure to curb Winston Churchill's aggressive tendencies in mobilizing the fleet and keeping it intact during and after the July crisis.

In surveying the usual explanations for Britain's entry into the war, Newton particularly stresses the naval plans laid with France and misguided support of the Entente system. He discounts or downplays, for example, imperial tensions and the British commitment to maintaining the balance of power in Europe and not allowing one power to control all the channel ports. In this analysis, Grey, "under pressure [by his conniving Foreign Office minions and others] to show solidarity with the Entente" did little to restrain France and Russia. But precisely what might he have done had he been so inclined? Newton unrealistically charges that a "Cabinet clique"—essentially, Asquith, Grey, and Churchill—sabotaged a "democratic decision for war" (300). However, in all of modern British history, most such decisions have been made by a small group of powerful politicians who twisted the facts to suit their purposes.

Newton notes Churchill's repeated evasions of Cabinet scrutiny in pursuing his bellicose course at the Admiralty and speculates that the First Sea Lord wished to force the dispatch of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to the Continent (54). In army circles, Newton contends that Gen. Sir Henry Wilson's sinister "pogrom," too, was meant to ensure British intervention. This is to take Wilson's word choice a bit too seriously, given his penchant for black humor. Here and elsewhere, Newton's prose sometimes veers into the lurid—"chilling portents," "Midnight conclaves," Grey in the Commons (3 August 1914), gazing out at a "raked theater of needy vanity" (216).

1. Formerly of the University of Western Sydney, he is the author *British Labour, European Socialism and the Struggle for Peace, 1889-1914* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1985) and *British Policy and the Weimar Republic, 1918-1919* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1997).

Like the Radicals in 1914, Newton dismisses the significance of the 1839 “guarantee” of Belgian neutrality (which did not in fact stipulate the use of force) signed by Britain, France, and Prussia. When it suited their needs, both the Radicals and the Asquith clique invoked the ghost of William Gladstone, who secured just such guarantees from the belligerents at the time of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), in which Britain took no part. Newton correctly argues that the die was cast in 1914 not by the Germans invading Belgium, but two days earlier when the British committed ships to protect the French coast pursuant to plans made after the Agadir Crisis (1911). Germany’s offensive in Belgium, he writes, represented merely a timely cover for Britain’s implementation of secret assurances that might otherwise have required more vigorous and open discussion in the House of Commons. These are hardly new revelations, but the author’s emphasis on the Radical perspective sets his analysis apart. It also makes it surprising that he does not more emphatically condemn Morley and other Cabinet members for failing to stop the “Rush to War” engineered by Grey and Asquith.

Much of the book traces the Radical reactions to the machinations of Asquith and Grey in the crisis. But it is entirely understandable that a Prime Minister would manipulate his colleagues and put the best possible face on events to save his Cabinet from resignations that might bring down the government at such a perilous time, both domestically and internationally.

Given his political focus, Newton might have written more about the domestic political background and the fact that the outbreak of war rescued the Asquith government from the consequences of its earlier actions. Facing a witch’s brew of Irish, Unionist, women’s, and labor revolts, Asquith chose to change the subject. Nor does Newton say much about the short war “illusion” of the time. No one on any side knew what was coming in 1914. A hundred years on, it is easy to fault policymakers who took the decisions they thought best in a crisis not of their own making. Churchill, for example, was, in his typically pugnacious way, doing his job as he saw fit, seeking to protect both the Royal Navy and British imperial interests. Waiting for Germany to move first (as Newton suggests he should have) would have been out of character and unwise in any event. David Lloyd George, who loomed so large later in the war, is a peripheral and slippery character here, one whose allegiances shifted with the winds of political expediency. But, like many British figures who had been to Germany, particularly since the Agadir Crisis, Lloyd George had seen the Germans’ palpable hatred for England.

Newton also glosses over the real fear and suspicion of Germany that had grown up in Britain owing to decades-long economic and naval rivalries (which the *Times* and the *Daily Mail*² exploited to sell newspapers). And he gives too much weight to Asquith’s “wait and see” policy. A year after replacing him and establishing the War Cabinet system, Lloyd George commented that the last decision his predecessor made had been in favor of war. Some will dislike the counterfactuals Newton uses in his conclusion to castigate what he calls the “dire necessity” school of historians who applaud Britain’s entry into the war as both honorable and necessary to safeguard its interests. In attacking these straw men, he ignores many more current and nuanced analyses of the war’s causes.

Although books that claim to reveal “The Truth” in their titles should make readers wary, *The Darkest Days* usefully recalls the deep rifts in the last Liberal government and in Britain at large on the brink of the Great War, as well as other, better courses of action that, sadly, went unchosen. As a work “meant to unsettle” (1), it will challenge those who have hitherto accepted the simple and reassuring tale of irresistible forces and British unanimity in 1914.

2. Both owned by Lord Northcliffe. Cf. Adrian Bingham, “Monitoring the Popular Press: An Historical Perspective,” *History & Policy* (2 May 2005): “The virulence of the *Daily Mail*’s anti-German sentiment before 1914 led to the liberal paper *The Star* claiming that ‘next to the Kaiser, Lord Northcliffe has done more than any living man to bring about the war.’”