



## *Rumors of the Great War: The British Press and Anglo-German Relations during the July Crisis* by Nathan N. Orgill.

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The July Crisis continues to generate new research and fresh perspectives. In *Rumors of the Great War*, historian Nathan Orgill (Georgia Gwinnett College) examines British newspapers' coverage of the July crisis, the efforts of German and Austro-Hungarian diplomats to influence the press, and the effects of newspaper debates on high political calculation in Berlin and London. Besides hundreds of articles and editorials, Orgill draws on a range of archival sources, notably the papers of editors and files in the German Foreign Office archives, to provide a nuanced and sophisticated account of the importance of the press in the July crisis.

In recent years, historians, most notably Dominik Geppert, have shown the reciprocal effects of newspapers and diplomacy in shaping Anglo-German relations.<sup>1</sup> However, analysis of the July crisis has concentrated on the small group of political and military leaders who took the key decisions that led to European war. Orgill challenges the idea that these leaders were largely insulated from the pressures of public opinion (itself a contested category at the time, as he notes). Public opinion not only constrained political decision-making; it also shaped policy options, particularly in Britain, where it was unthinkable that the Liberal government could go to war without strong parliamentary and public backing.

The author also demonstrates that German diplomats tried to influence editorial coverage in the British press throughout the crisis. Indeed, he argues, that press coverage bolstered confidence in Berlin that Britain would stay out of the war. Wilhelm von Stumm, who had served as first secretary in the German embassy in London between 1906 and 1908, was a key official in the Foreign Office in Berlin in 1914. His knowledge of British politics carried particular authority, contesting the warnings from Prince Lichnowsky, the German ambassador to London, that the Liberal government would likely intervene. From 22 July on, the German embassy sent detailed assessments of the press to Berlin. Orgill argues that the

entirely positive reportage of German intentions and statecraft in the last week of July—as well as the far more negative reception accorded to Russia—would have a significant rolling effect on German decision-making. The more pessimistic reports of Lichnowsky, his subordinates, and other official sources in the major European capitals about Britain's attitude were largely neutralized in the minds of the statesmen in Berlin. (120)

Yet by early August, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg and German Foreign Office officials were confused by the shifting, sometimes contradictory editorials in important papers like the *Westminster Gazette*, whose editor, J.A. Spender, was close to Grey. By 1 August there was a “superficial hope” (191) in Berlin that Britain might stay out of the European war.

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1. Dominik Geppert, *Pressekriege: Öffentlichkeit und Diplomatie in den deutsch-britischen Beziehungen (1896–1912)* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2007).

Orgill follows the works of historians who have argued that party politics shaped British foreign policy moves.<sup>2</sup> His analysis of the newspaper coverage reveals no consensus on Fleet Street about British policy during the July crisis. Editors and journalists were effectively “foreign policy actors in their own right” (10). Liberal and radical papers expressed concern about the catastrophic impact of European war and feared that Russia would emerge as the dominant European power should Britain enter on the side of France and Russia. Conservative papers, too, initially favored Austria-Hungary and condemned the alleged complicity of the Serbian state in Franz Ferdinand’s assassination. However, as Vienna and Berlin followed a more aggressive strategy, particularly after the Austro-Hungarian government presented its ultimatum to Serbia on 23 July, conservative newspaper editors such as W.T. Steed argued that Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, should make clear Britain’s support of France and Russia and the long-standing principle of upholding the balance of power in Europe.

Grey, however, was foreign secretary in a Liberal government. He was also isolated within the cabinet. Only H.H. Asquith, the Prime Minister, and Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, agreed with Grey’s inclination to support France. The German invasion of Belgium played a critical role in British entry to the war, not because it shifted Grey’s thinking—he was always inclined to support intervention on the side of France—but because it altered domestic political conditions in Britain and prompted Liberal newspapers to change tack. In his speech to the House of Commons on 3 August, Grey set out various arguments, notably the threat to British security posed by the German invasion of Belgium and the attack on France. His speech convinced the remaining Liberal newspapers, which had favored neutrality, of the “compelling case for war” (194). Where Douglas Newton’s study, *Darkest Days*, stresses the high political battle within the cabinet over the decision for intervention, Orgill suggests that the press was the critical site of political debate in determining British policy.

Nathan Orgill has made an important contribution to our understanding of the July crisis. In particular, his analysis of the reciprocal effects of press debate in London and diplomatic calculation in Berlin through newspaper accounts, diplomatic archives, and the personal papers of journalists provides a model for other scholars working on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy.

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2. Viz. Keith Wilson, *The Policy of the Entente: Essays on the Determinants of British Foreign Policy, 1904–1914* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1985); Douglas Newton, *The Darkest Days: The Truth behind Britain’s Rush to War, 1914* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014); Andreas Rose, *Between Empire and Continent: British Foreign Policy before the First World War* (NY: Berghahn, 2017).