# BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY AND THE OUTBREAK OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR: A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

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The origins of the First World War, and the foreign policy decisions of nation states to take part in it, continue to be debated between scholars more than 100 years after the war's end. As many historians have assessed, European foreign policy leading up to the War was executed mainly by individual actors based on their perceptions of other states' interests in relation to their own.[1] In international relations a theoretical framework that seeks to explain how perceptions and social interactions determine the meanings of structures, such as alliances, is known as constructivism.[2] The alliance systems of 1914 prove to be a perfect model through which this theory can be studied, as a nation state's participation in an alliance gives a clear indication of who they perceive to be a threat or an ally. Britain is an interesting outlier in the 1914 alliance system, for in the lead-up to the war they remained largely non-committal to formal allegiances but eventually allied with France and Russia when the war began in the summer of 1914.[3] In this paper, I will use constructivist theory to examine the social interactions Britain had with the other great powers — Germany and Russia — leading up to the war to analyze how Britain built a perception of Germany as a threat and Russia as an ally, and develop an understanding as to why Britain entered the war on the side that it did. Analyzing great power relations through a constructivist lens is beneficial as it brings a new approach to previous scholarship that argues Britain joined the war to uphold a balance of power in Europe.[4] By using a constructivist framework, one can analyze how that balance of power was constructed through diplomatic

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[1] Otte, T.G. "A "Formidable Factor in European Politics," Views of Russia in 1914," in *The Outbreak of the First World War, Structure Politics, and Decision-Making*. Edited by Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 87-111.

[2] Reus-Smit, Christian, Duncan Snidal, and Ian Hurd. "Constructivism," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199219322.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199219322-e-17.

[3] Harris, J. Paul. "Great Britain," in *The Origins of The First World War*, edited by Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 268. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511550171.008

[4] Steiner, Zara and Keith Neilson. *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). 269.

interactions between the great powers and how that influenced each nation's interests and reasonings for going to war. I will begin by explaining constructivism and reviewing other scholarly analyses of Britain's entry in the war, and then analyze interactions between Britain, Germany, and Russia to explain how these interactions shaped Britain's identities of each country as well as their own self-identity. This will lead to an assessment of how British perceptions about the identities of their fellow European nations, combined with perceptions about their self-identified role within European power politics influenced the country's decision to enter the war on August 4, 1914.[5]

Constructivism is a fairly new theory to the discipline of international relations as it emerged in the 1980s as a critique to traditional theories such as liberalism and realism.[6] Constructivism argues that the structure of international relations is created through the social interactions that states have with one another.[7] These interactions then influence the state's behaviour, interests, and identity that it accepts and projects onto the international stage.[8] This theoretical framework challenges fundamental concepts of liberalism and realism which argue that interests and notions of power in international relations are fixed through material objects such as military weapons or financial assets.[9] Constructivists believe material possessions can be associated as a threat or an asset based on whether the state that possesses them is considered an ally or an enemy. The most common example presented by Alexander Wendt in 1995 is that North Korea's 5 nuclear weapons are considered a threat to the United States because North Korea is also perceived as a threat, but the United Kingdom's 500 nuclear weapons are not

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[5] Steiner and Neilson, 283.
[6] Reus-Smit, Christian, Duncan Snidal, and Ian Hurd, 2008.
[7] Wendt, Alexander. "Constructing International Politics," *International Security*, 20, no. 1, (1995): 71-72. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539217
[8] Ibid., 71-72.
[9] Ibid., 73.

considered threatening because the United Kingdom is classified as a United States ally.[10]

Constructivism is also not concerned with understanding the realities of whether a state's

behaviour is truly threatening or whether that behaviour is carried out under a premise of self-

defence. But rather, constructivism is concerned with how a state's behaviour is perceived by

other states, and how that in turn constructs the state's self-identity which it can use as a foreign

policy tool to fulfill its interests within international politics. As Cornelia Ulbert explains, nation

states have "role-specific understanding of themselves and the expectations others have of

them."[11] For example, contemporary Canadian defence policy strategies often construct an

identity of Canada as a supporter of global peacebuilding, which helps Canada build interactions

with other countries under shared identities that favour peacebuilding strategies.[12] This act of

"identity formation" allows nation states to engage in social interactions and gain new

information on each other.[13] Based on those interactions, states can shape their interests and

classify other states as either threats or allies to the fulfillment of those interests.[14] While

constructivist theory is usually applied to contemporary issues within international relations, it

can also be a useful framework through which historical debates can be explained, such as the

origins of the First World War and the decisions of specific nation states to take part in it based

on commitments to their perceived allies or defense against their perceived adversaries.

In the context of Great Britain's entry into the First World War, constructivism can be

used to shed new light on other analyses of why Britain joined the war. As Annika Mombauer

argues, Britain's lack of involvement in formal alliances in the lead-up to the war made them the

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[10] Wendt, 73.
[11] Ulbert, Cornelia. "Social Constructivism," in Th*eories of International Relations*, edited by Siegfried Schieder and Manuela Spindler (London: Routledge, 2014): 253. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315797366
[12] "Strong, Secure, Engaged, Canada's Defence Policy." *Canadian National Defence*, 2017: 12. http://dgpaapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf
[13] Ulbert, 253, 256.
[14] Ibid., 256.

only country with the viable option to remain neutral.[15] Zara Steiner and Keith Nielson argue that Britain's reasoning for joining the European war in 1914 was to preserve a balance of power in Europe and Britain's favourable position in it as a global imperialist power.[16] Douglas Newton argues that British involvement in the war was avoidable as British policy makers made rushed decisions that drove the country into war in 1914.[17] Britain's own justification at the time was to uphold their commitments to their allies. This was outlined in British foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey's speech before Parliament just before the declaration of war, where he argued that if Britain stood neutral and did not come to the aid of their allies, their identity on the international stage would be negatively impacted.[18] In addition to Grey's identity preservation reasoning, involvement in the war was also seen as important for preserving the status quo in European power politics.[19] By using constructivist theory, one can take both external and internal reasonings for going to war and examine how they were socially constructed by decision makers through previous diplomatic interactions.

In the lead-up to World War I several social diplomatic interactions between Germany and Britain helped construct the identity of Germany as an adversary to British interests. These included policies such as Germany's expansionist foreign policy of *Weltpolitik,* and events such as the Anglo-German Naval Race that occurred during the early 1900s,[20] the Agadir Crisis in 1911, and the Haldane Mission in 1912. Through the beginning of the twentieth century Germany and Britain's relationship altered between escalating tensions and détente. In their

[15] Mombauer, Annika. "Sir Edward Grey, Germany, and the Outbreak of the First World War: A Re-Evaluation," *The International History Review,* 38, no. 2 (2016): 303. 10.1080/07075332.2015.1134622.
[16] Steiner and Neilson, 261.
[17] Newton, Douglas. *The Darkest Days: The Truth Behind Britain's Rush to War, 1914*, (London: Verso, 2014).
[18] "Sir Edward Grey's Speech Before Parliament," 3 August 1914. WW1 Document Archive in *Great Britain, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, Fifth Series, Vol. LXV, 1914, columns 1809 – 1834,* (accessed 12 November 2019*).* https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Sir_Edward_Grey%27s_Speech_Before_Parliament
[19] Steiner and Neilson, 263.
[20] Ibid., 51-52.

analysis, Steiner and Neilson attempt to deconstruct the common myth surrounding a possible war between Germany and Britain.[21] While it was true Germany was attempting to expand its influence on the European continent and the two powers engaged in a naval arms race beginning in the early 1900s, Steiner and Neilson argue their diplomatic relationship in the lead-up to the First World War had been towards détente and "there was nothing concrete to fight about."[22] Additionally, Paul Harris argues that during the 1890s France and Russia were considered the biggest challengers to Britain's economic and naval empire, and under British Prime Minister Lord Robert Cecil Salisbury, an Anglo-German alliance seemed quite possible.[23] But, Harris notes two main interactions helped change that course to forge the idea of Germany as a threat to Britain in the early 1900s. One was Germany's foreign policy of *Weltpolitik* which promoted ideas of territorial expansion and came off as threatening to Britain's global empire.[24] The other was Germany's plan under state secretary of the Imperial Navy Office, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, to build a naval force of battleships that could challenge the British Royal Navy in the North Sea.[25] As Steiner and Neilson argue, Britain viewed their naval supremacy as the key to maintaining the European balance of power, and there were fears among British decision makers that if Germany grew their military strength to become the new continental hegemon, they could use continental ports to surpass Britain's naval supremacy.[26] Germany's naval build-up also assisted in constructing fears of a German invasion of Britain, which generated growing suspicion of Germany among the British public and British politicians.[27]Alongside these military threats, British public opinion began to turn against Germany as Cabinet politicians began to see

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[21] Steiner and Neilson, 44-83.
[22] Ibid., 44.
[23] Harris, 268.
[24] Ibid., 269.
[25] Ibid., 269.
[26] Steiner and Neilson, 63.
[27] Ibid., 61.

Kaiser Wilhelm II's government as unstable and hostile to British interests.[28] The arrival of Sir

Edward Grey as the foreign secretary in 1905 in many ways also exacerbated that opinion, as he

pursued a more hardline anti-German policy than previous foreign secretaries.[29]

Several events and their diplomatic interactions through the start of the 1900s also helped

shaped British perceptions of Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm II as erratic and unstable.

Germany's egregious demands and forceful response to the Agadir Crisis in 1911, for instance,

"transformed British policy" and expanded the idea of Germany as an aggressive force.[30] During

the crisis, French troops were sent to the capital city of Fez under the justification of protecting

European citizens during a revolt against the Sultan of Morocco.[31] In response, German policy

makers, who were skeptical of France's justification for occupation, sent their gunboat *SMS*

*Panther* to the harbour of Agadir.[32] This was perceived by the British Foreign Office as an act

meant to disrupt the entente between Britain and France, and also threatened the previously

agreed upon spheres of colonial influence.[33] Reporting on the incident, *The Times* described the

decision as an "unexpected move on the part of Germany," but was hopeful a diplomatic

decision could be reached.[34] Additionally, French and German newspapers engaged in press wars

that clashed over details in the Agadir Crisis, which brought tensions between the two countries

to the eyes of the public.[35]

The following year, an attempt at rapprochement in British-German relations failed to

reach a consensus, which further constructed an idea of Germany as an adversary to Britain. The

1912 Haldane Mission, saw British secretary for war Lord Haldane travel to Berlin to discuss

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[28] Harris, 269.
[29] Mombauer, 310.
[30] Mulligan, William. *The Origins of the First World War,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 75.
[31] Steiner and Neilson, 75.
[32] Ibid., 75
[33] Ibid., 75.
[34] "The German Announcement," *The Times*. 3 July 1911. *The Times* Digital Archive: 8. https://bit.ly/2DRebSp
[35] Clark, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2012): 235.

détente in British-German political and naval relations, which had become increasingly tense with the naval arms build-up.[36] Britain hoped to end the naval race with Germany through the mission, but Germany's conditions included a guarantee that Britain would declare neutrality in the case of a European war, which was too large a concession for Britain to make.[37] As Christopher Clark argues in his book *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, the proposed agreement would require Britain to "give away something for nothing."[38] The failure of the Haldane Mission along with the actions of Germany during the Agadir Crisis aided in developing an image of Germany as overtly expansionist and unwilling to negotiate, which was perceived as threatening to Britain's position as a global imperialist power. With these previous diplomatic interactions in mind, Germany's ultimatum to Belgium which threatened to violate Belgian neutrality as part of their war plan, solidified the image of Germany as an aggressor to Britain.[39] *The Times* described "The Menace of Germany," in the headline of its reporting on the German invasion of Belgium.[40] This image was also literally constructed in a cartoon for *Punch Magazine* in 1914 with an image of a German officer threatening a Belgian farmer with text underneath reading "Bravo Belgium!"[41] By the time of the ultimatum, British foreign policy under Grey had already classified Germany as a threat to the balance of power on the continent, all Grey needed to do was construct the image to his fellow politicians to decide what the next steps would be.[42]

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[36] Mombauer., 312.
[37] Clark, 312.
[38] Ibid., 319.
[39] Steiner and Neilson, 253.
[40] "The Menace of Germany," *Times,* 4 August 1914: 4. *The Times* Digital Archive, (accessed 5 December 2019). https://bit.ly/33YhtxT
[41] Townsend, Fredrick Henry. "NO THOROUGHFARE," *Punch Magazine*. August 1914, (accessed 2 December 2019). https://www.warmuseum.ca/collections/artifact/1025608/
[42] Harris, 293.

In regard to Germany's perception of Britain, Germany knew Britain was not involved in formal allegiances and hoped for British neutrality in the event of a European war. For example, a document from March 23, 1914 highlights how German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg speculated that in the event of a European war "England would probably initially remain neutral" unless France was attacked.[43] Germany's ally Austria-Hungary also monitored Britain's relationship with Russia and hoped that Britain would remain neutral in the case that conflict erupted in the Balkans from the Serbian ultimatum, which outlined Austria-Hungary's demands for Serbia after the assassination of Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand.[44] It appears that through its adversaries' hopeful perceptions of British neutrality, Britain succeeded in its attempts to construct its identity as a neutral power broker on the international stage. Overall, by looking at British-German relations through a constructivist lens, it is evident that several instances of tense interactions and failed attempts at negotiation helped construct an image of Germany as an adversarial force to British interests in international politics.

While social interactions in the lead-up to World War I led towards the construction of Germany as a British enemy, social interactions between Russia and Britain during the same time period helped construct Russia as a useful British ally. These interactions included the Anglo-Russian Entente in 1907, the Agadir Crisis in 1911, and increased sentiment among British politicians that Russia would be a strategic ally to maintain the continental balance of power, especially in comparison to Germany. While the Britain and Russia eventually became allies, relations between the two countries leading up to solidification of the Triple Entente with

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[43] "(76) Carl von Weizsäcker's Notes," 23 March 1914, in chapter 4 of *The Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents*, by Annika Mombauer. (New York: Manchester University Press, 2013): 119-120.
[44] Otte, 106.

the Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907 were characterized more in terms of competition. [45] From the late 1800s to the early 1900s, the two great powers of Europe frequently clashed over territories in Central Asia and failed to reach consensus outlining their expansionist ambitions. [46] However, as Steiner and Neilson argue, the turning point in Anglo-Russian relations came after Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, whereby international perceptions of Russia's power status were diminished. [47] Britain took that opportunity to solidify their spheres of influence in Central Asia, which proved to be a risky move in the case that Russia was able to recover and restart territorial disputes. [48] The loss in the Russo-Japanese war also launched Russia into domestic political chaos and forced them to take on a defensive foreign policy strategy, so they were more willing to negotiate. [49]

In many ways the Russo-Japanese war provided the platform for the two powers to interact on a less competitive basis and create the Anglo-Russian Entente in 1907. [50] Through this treaty, the two great powers solidified their imperial interests in Central Asia by agreeing to maintain peace in Persia through separating the country into spheres of influence. [51] Russia also gave up its interests in Tibet and agreed to stay out of internal Afghan politics while Britain agreed to not annex Afghanistan. [52] This treaty also represented the completion of the Triple Entente from both state's prior allegiances with France. [53] Through the entente, Russia and Britain aimed to curb German expansionist aspirations in Central Asia. [54] But, as Russia started to

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[45] "Anglo-Russian Entente – 1907," *The Avalon Project by Yale Law School*. 2008, (accessed November 10, 2019). https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/angrusen.asp
[46] Steiner and Neilson, 86-88
[47] Ibid., 89.
[48] Otte, 89.
[49] Steiner, 89.
[50] Ibid., 90.
[51] "Anglo-Russian Entente – 1907," 2008.
[52] Mulligan, 61.
[53] Steiner and Neilson, 90.
[54] Mulligan, 61.

revive economically and militarily from the Russo-Japanese war, a challenge was presented to

the alliance. As Steiner and Neilson argue, a stronger Russia meant the British had a helpful ally

to maintain the balance of power in Europe and curb Germany's imperialist ambitions, but it also

meant Russia relied on Britain less for a stable alliance and could potentially find more

favourable alliances elsewhere, such as in Germany.[55] The test to the British and Russian

relationship, as well as the loyalty of the Entente came during the Agadir Crisis, whereby Russia

and Britain came to France's defense of their decision to send troops to the city of Fez.[56] This

interaction solidified the alliance and further allowed Anglo-Russian relations to stray from

competition and towards friendship. As an example, an article published in *The Times* on January

1, 1914 presents a positive report of British-Russian relations describing "a year of cooperation"

between the two countries and highlighting increasing economic, cultural and diplomatic

exchanges.[57]

Despite these social interactions constructing an atmosphere of détente with Russia,

Britain's alliance with the autocratic Tsarist regime was met with mixed reviews by some

politicians. For example, William Tyrrell, who was Sir Edward Grey's private secretary,

expressed distrust for the autocratic regime, arguing the "cynical selfishness" of Russia's policies

posed a threat to the policies of the entente.[58] But, others such as Sir Arthur Nicolson, who

worked with Grey in the British Foreign Office, argued that building closer diplomatic ties with

Russia would be beneficial for keeping peace in Europe.[59] Grey himself worked to construct an

identity of Russia as an ally to Britain. Grey knew that British policies with Russia would affect

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[55] Steiner and Neilson, 98.
[56] Ibid., 96.
[57]"Great Britain And Russia." *Times*, January 1, 1914: 8. *The Times Digital Archive*, (accessed 12 November 2019). http://tinyurl.gale.com/tinyurl/CFbwQ2.
[58] Otte, 91-92.
[59] Otte, 90.

policies and the alliance with France, which he was determined to keep cordial.[60] With a rising

Germany who was interested in expanding its global influence by acquiring a colonial empire,[61]

a British-Russia alliance represented the status quo in maintaining the European balance of

power.[62] In his speech to parliament on August 3, 1914, right before Britain declared war on

Germany, Grey makes reference to the British and French treaty as well as the Belgian treaty to

evoke feelings of duty that Britain must come to the defence of their allies. In his speech he says:

"if, in a crisis like this, we run away … from those obligations of honour and interest as regards

the Belgian treaty, I doubt whether, whatever material force we might have at the end, it would

be of very much value in face of the respect that we should have lost."[63] While British

obligations towards Russia are not mentioned in Grey's speech, his construction of Russia as an

ally secured Britain's national identity as a protector of the European political system in which

Britain had monopolized power in industrial, economic and military capacities.[64] As Steiner and

Neilson argue, Germany's actions and interactions with Britain showed they were uninterested in

maintaining that status quo.[65] With Germany rising and acting to challenge Britain's strengths,

by aligning with Russia the British could avoid committing to a formal alliance while also

working to maintain the status quo in the European balance of power.[66]

 While constructivism provides a theoretical framework to explain how the social aspects

of diplomacy allowed Britain to shape perceived identities of their allies and enemies, it can also

explain how Britain used these perceptions to construct its own identity as a neutral "power

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[60] Ibid., 94.
[61] Steiner and Neilson, 73.
[62] Ibid., 99.
[63] "Sir Edward Grey's Speech Before Parliament," 3 August 1914.
[64] Steiner and Neilson, 258.
[65] Ibid., 263.
[66] Ibid., 99.

broker" in the international system during the lead-up to the First World War.[67] This constructed

identity was often accepted in other countries such as Austria-Hungary[68] and within sectors of

the British public itself, who argued that Britain should remain neutral in the case of a European

war.[69] As Mombauer argues, it was widely perceived that Britain was the only country that could

have stayed neutral in the case of a European war as they were not tied to an alliance system, nor

were they directly involved in the regional conflicts in the Balkans that sparked tensions for the

Great War.[70] This perception of Britain as a potential neutral and unattached power, gave the

nation's decision makers the flexibility to craft the country's self-identity when deciding whether

or not to enter the war and how to justify that decision. From this flexible position, Britain was

able to create its identity as a loyal upholder of a previous treaty obligation to Belgium as a

justification for entering the war.[71] By analyzing British foreign policymaking through

constructivist theory, one can develop a better understanding to how perceptions and identities of

other countries as an ally or threat made war a viable policy option for Britain and many others

in the summer of 1914. But, to develop a complete understanding of how this identity was

constructed and why, it is also necessary to analyze the structure of Britain's government and the

individual decision makers. It was these individuals who took the social interactions with the

other great powers into account and determined which identity and interests would be beneficial

to Britain achieving its goals through participation in an inter-European war.

Analyzing the structure of the domestic government is important to understand the

environment where British decision makers crafted Britain's role in the international system. As

a constitutional monarchy, the British monarch would give the prime minister the power to form

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[67] Otte, 93.
[68] Ibid., 93.
[69] Newton, 166.
[70] Mombauer, 303.
[71] Steiner and Neilson, 252.

a parliamentary government to make most political decisions.[72] This form of power-sharing government forced Members of Parliament to deliberate and convince their members to come to a consensus on policy decisions, and the declaration of war was no exception. As William Mulligan argues, the expansion of the public sphere meant assessing public opinion was increasingly important, and while public opinion did little to shape the policy decisions around going to war, it solidified the idea that in order to sell war to the public as a favourable option, it had to be perceived as defensive.[73] British foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey utilized the power of public opinion to help convince the British Cabinet to declare war by constructing an identity of Britain as the loyal protector of their allegiance to France and Belgium from the German aggressor — an identity that public opinion was in favour of.[74] While Britain was constructing this identity internally, on the international stage Britain had constructed itself as a potential neutral power, largely by staying out of formal alliance systems.[75] This constructed identity in many ways allowed Britain to be flexible with releasing its decisions on whether it would participate in the war to other powers, even if politicians at the time argued that engaging in war was a "dire necessity" to defend Europe against German aggression and show loyalty to British allies.[76]

Although this constructivist international relations approach analyzes Britain's foreign policy perceptions and decisions within the entire international system, individual actors were also crucial in developing perceptions to influence the country's decision-making process. Therefore, it is necessary to understand who the key individuals making the decisions were. British ambassador to Russia, George Buchanan and British ambassador to Germany, Sir

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[72] Harris, 274.
[73] Mulligan, 178.
[74] Harris, 269.
[75] Ibid., 268.
[76] Newton, 298-299.

William Edward Goschen all shaped perceptions of Great Britain's interests and identity through

their foreign policy interactions with the other great powers. In British diplomacy, ambassadors

were crucial figures who provided information on their assigned nation's strengths and

weaknesses and officially stood as representatives for the prestige of Great Britain abroad.[77]

Ambassadors Goschen and Buchanan provided British politicians with critical information about

Germany and Russia, including each country's decisions and perceptions of Great Britain's

interests. For instance, Goschen delivered the "scrap of paper" to Germany explaining Britain's

terms to get involved militarily if Germany violated Belgian neutrality.[78] Buchanan examined

Russia's revitalization period after the Russo-Japanese war and argued that Britain should

examine Russia's expansionist ideas and not completely buy into their assertions that they

wanted to maintain peace, which helped shape Britain's constructed identity of Russia as a

strategic power to ally with but also to be careful of.[79] While he was not an ambassador,

Haldane's interactions with Germany during the Haldane Mission in 1912 arguably solidified an

impasse in Anglo-German relations when Britain and Germany failed to reach an agreement on a

limitation of naval armaments.[80]

However, as many historians have argued, the most significant figure in British foreign

policy at the time was Sir Edward Grey who was the British foreign secretary from 1905 to

1916.[81] British Prime Minister David Lloyd George dedicates a whole chapter in the first volume

of his *War Memoirs* to deconstructing and explaining Grey's involvement in the policy decisions

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[77] Neilson, Keith. "'Only a d…d Marionette'? The Influence of Ambassadors on British Foreign Policy, 1904–1914." in *Diplomacy and World Power: Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890–1951*, edited by Michael L. Dockrill and Brian J. C. McKercher, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 56–57. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511560934

[78] Mombauer, Annika. "(419) 4 August: Goschen's account of his final meeting with Bethmann Hollweg: The infamous "scrap of paper" conversation," in *The Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents.* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2013): 574-578.

[79] Otte, 92.

[80] Clark, 318-319.

[81] Ibid., 200.

leading up to the war. While Lloyd George admits that Grey "played the leading part,"[82] in the pre-war foreign policy making, he also criticizes Grey's actions for being overly hesitant and unsure, arguing that "he was pursuing his avowed policy of waiting for public opinion to decide his direction for him."[83] Lloyd George also argues that Grey could have been more assertive with Germany in making clear Britain's commitments to defending Belgium against invasion with full aggression in order to avoid war.[84] Mombauer on the other hand, argues that many scholars place too many assumptions of agency and power on Grey to act as a mediator who could have stopped an impending international war at a time when perceptions that favoured war as a foreign policy option were commonplace.[85] She argues that Grey was acting within the constraints of the parliamentary British structures and the division about whether to go to war in Cabinet, as well as reacting to the actions of other European nations and fellow diplomats.[86] As Mombauer puts it, "[Grey] was in no position to prevent a war that was seen in Vienna and Berlin as a last chance to break the Entente apart or to achieve a quick victory against Serbia, France and Russia."[87] Regardless of what Grey's level of agency was in altering the course of the war, since he was the main foreign policy decision maker in Britain his perceptions on Germany and Russia accounted for the main perceptions behind the construction of the two great powers into 'enemy' and 'ally.' Overall, those perceptions and interactions were driving factors in constructing Britain's identity for itself. Britain's choice to align with France and Russia to counter German aggression may relate back to national interests of wanting to preserve the

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[82] Lloyd George, David. *War Memories of David Lloyd George*. (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1933-34). https://ia800501.us.archive.org/18/items/warmemoirsvolume035284mbp/warmemoirsvolume035284mbp.pdf
[83] Lloyd George, 58.
[84] Ibid., 58.
[85] Mombauer, Annika, 2016, 301-325.
[86] Ibid., 308, 320.
[87] Mombauer, 320.

balance of power in Europe and their favourable role within it.[88] But overall, those interests were constructed through the social interactions Britain had with other countries in the balance of power, which is important to study in order to develop an understanding of how Britain justified and pushed forward its decision to go to war.

Overall, by using constructivism to analyze Britain's foreign policy interactions with the two great powers we can begin to understand how Britain used these alliances to shape its own historiography before war became imminent. This constructivist framework also highlights how British interests were not necessarily fixed in material structures, such as economic and military power, but were shaped by social interactions and perceptions. These perceptions caused policy makers to believe that Britain's position in the world system was threatened in order to justify their participation in the war. As Douglas Newton states, the idea that war was a "dire necessity" was constructed to fit Britain's desire to be perceived as a measured and calculated actor who only became involved in the war to defend their allies.[89] Through perceptions of each country's interests, British diplomats chose to construct Russia as an ally and Germany as an enemy, which further shaped the British narrative of the events in the lead-up to war. Russia's pre-mobilization in July 1914 was not perceived as a threat or a reason for Britain to contemplate joining the war effort because of Russia's perceived ally status.[90] But, Germany's ultimatum to Belgium to not oppose German troops invading their territory as part of Germany's war plan[91] was considered a threat because Germany was the constructed enemy in the eyes of British decision makers. If we accept that Britain's entry into the First World War was mainly due to a desire to maintain their place in the European balance of power, it is also important to understand how and why they

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[88] Newton, 299.
[89] Newton, 298-299.
[90] Clark, 506.
[91] Ibid., 549-550.

chose to ally with the established Russia over the rising Germany as their fellow power. This can

be accomplished not just by analyzing established realities, but also by analyzing the perceptions

of power, strength and legitimacy within the social interactions of diplomacy in 1914.

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