

“IT WAS THE
BIGGEST
ERROR
IN MODERN
HISTORY”

As **Niall Ferguson's** new programme on the First World War is due to air, he talks to Rob Attar about why he believes Britain made a terrible mistake in taking up arms a century ago

Accompanies the BBC Two documentary *The Pity of War*



A futile struggle?

British soldiers in the trenches. "The cost of the First World War to Britain was catastrophic," says Niall Ferguson. "It left the British empire in a much weakened state"



“Most of the combatants miscalculated in one way or another. They **all exaggerated the benefits of going to war** and underestimated the costs” >



Answering the call
 Army recruits take the oath in White City, London, December 1914. "Creating an army more or less from scratch was a recipe for disastrous losses," claims Niall Ferguson

What do you see as the main reasons for the outbreak of the First World War?

It has been very tempting to assign blame to one country or another, and Germany has borne the brunt of the responsibility in the historical literature. However, my feeling is that we can't simply replicate the war guilt clause of the Treaty of Versailles.

As historians we need to recognise that there was a crisis of the international system in 1914, in which most of the combatants miscalculated in one way or another. They all exaggerated the benefits of going to war and underestimated the costs. There was something inherently flawed about the international system that encouraged those in power to make a series of blunders.

How important was the killing of Franz Ferdinand in terms of the outbreak of the war?

I think it was the catalyst for an explosion. If one thinks simply in causal chains, then that was the first shot of the First World War. Yet many assassinations happened in the early 20th century – it was an extremely popular way of making a political point if you were an extremist of the right or the left. So one has to

question why other assassinations didn't cause world wars, but this particular one did.

When you pose the question like that then you find yourself trying to explain not only why the Serbian intelligence service covertly sanctioned a terrorist act by an extremist Bosnian Serb group but also why, when the Serbian government refused the pretty reasonable demands of the Austrian government to co-operate with an investigation into the terrorist act, the Russians backed the Serbs while the Germans backed the Austrians. Any answer to this question has to explain why this particular assassination produced not just a war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, but one also involving both Russia and Germany.

Many historians have singled out the German guarantee of military support to Austria-Hungary – the 'blank cheque' – as a decisive moment on the road to war. Do you agree?

In my book *The Pity of War* I make it clear that the Germans made a series of miscalculations about what was in their own strategic interest, and one of those miscalculations was to believe that the

summer of 1914 was the best available moment for a showdown with Russia. This was a mistake because it almost certainly exaggerated Russia's future strength. After all Russia had been in a revolution nine years before [the 1905 revolution which did not bring down the regime but greatly unsettled it] and it was hardly as powerful as the German chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg seems to have thought. Worse still, the Germans also appear to have overestimated the strength of their Austrian ally.

In addition, the Germans miscalculated in thinking that they could wage a war on two fronts, knocking out France in order to focus on Russia, without bringing Britain into the war. The German decision to back the Austrians in their confrontation with the Serbs was therefore based on a series of major strategic errors.

But before we revisit the blame game, it is important to bear in mind that the Austrians were the wronged party in 1914. The heir to their throne had been assassinated and the terrorists had been sponsored by the intelligence service of Serbia. If you change the names and dates and ask yourself how you would react today if, let's say, the American

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vice president, Joe Biden, was assassinated by a terrorist organisation clearly supported by the Iranian government, you see that the German position in 1914 was not entirely unreasonable. Really the Austrians were the ones in the right and those who lined up on the side of Serbia were essentially backing the sponsors of terrorism.

Why do you think Britain decided to join the war?

This is a hotly contested subject. If one looks at what the prime minister, Herbert Asquith and other ministers (including, of course, foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey) said in August 1914, then the answer is Belgium. This was the *casus belli* most often cited. The private deliberations of the government suggest, however, that Britain was doing more than just upholding the 1839 treaty that guaranteed Belgium's neutrality. In the minds of Asquith, Grey and Winston Churchill (then first lord of the Admiralty) Britain could not stand by and watch France defeated if it meant German dominance of the European continent and the Channel ports.

Belgium provided a good legal basis for intervention and one that was also popular because the great British public, especially liberals, quickly appreciated the idea that Britain was standing up for a little country that was being invaded. However, in practice, the strategic calculation about the balance of power in Europe was the more important one.

There was another part to this story, though, that doesn't make it into most history books. The Liberal government on 2 August 1914 realised that if it did not go to war then it would fall from power, because Grey and Churchill would resign and Asquith would have felt obliged to go to the king and admit the government could not be continued. This was not a pleasant prospect for the ministers sitting around the government table.

The majority of people around the cabinet table did not want war. They did not share Grey's view that France had to be supported. They were desperately hoping that Lloyd George, the chancellor of the exchequer, would oppose intervention. But when they realised that if they didn't act, the government would fall and the Conservatives would get in, they quietly lined up behind Grey, Churchill and Asquith.

Was Britain's intervention in August 1914 crucial to the outcome? Without British involvement, could Germany have defeated France?

I think that Britain's intervention *was* crucial. Although Britain only had seven divisions ready in 1914, its financial resources and huge potential power were also being made available. The knowledge that they had the resources of the British empire on their side was a pretty important source of comfort for the French, who were horribly mauled in the opening six months of the war. Half a million French soldiers were killed, permanently incapacitated or taken prisoner in this time, and under other circumstances it would have been highly likely that French resistance would have crumbled, as it did in 1870 and would again in 1940.

The fact that the French did not collapse in, let's say, 1915 or 1916 surely can be explained by the knowledge that British support would grow in strength and, of course, by 1916 Britain had sufficient manpower in France to mount the Somme offensive and take some of the strain off the French army.

Could Britain have lived with the consequences of defeat for France and Russia?

The most controversial part of my book – and I think it is an argument that will go on until the day I die – was that Britain could indeed have lived with a German victory. What's more, it would have been in Britain's interests to stay out in 1914.

What are the arguments against that? If you think that Germany was a dreadful tyranny ruled by the kaiser and militaristic Junkers [members of Prussia's landed nobility], then a German victory in, say, 1916 would have been as bad as a German victory was in 1939/40. But I don't think that that is plausible and I tried to show in the book that the Germany of 1914 was very different indeed from the Germany of 1939. It was, for example, more democratic than Britain in the franchise to the Reichstag; it was a state with a firmly established rule of law; a state with the biggest socialist party in Europe and so on. It was a very different kind of threat from the Germany of 1939.

The second point that my critics have often made is that Britain could not historically

tolerate a hegemonic power on the European continent. One of the axioms of British foreign policy, they argue, had always been to stop such a dominant power existing – particularly to prevent a single European power controlling not just France and Germany but also Belgium and potentially the Netherlands. In other words it was about the Channel ports and Britain's security.

That argument, which is very seductive, has one massive flaw in it, which is that Britain tolerated exactly that situation happening when Napoleon overran the European continent, and did not immediately send land forces to Europe. It wasn't until the Peninsular War that Britain actually deployed ground forces against Napoleon. So strategically, if Britain had not gone to war in 1914, it would still have had the option to intervene later, just as it had the option to intervene after the Revolutionary Wars had been under way for some time.

This is an important distinction that people often miss. Historically it was very remarkable that Britain intervened as early as it did and especially remarkable that it sent land forces immediately on the outbreak of the war. In fact, doing this was a terrifically expensive thing because, being unprepared for a large-scale land war, Britain had to learn land warfare on the job. Creating an army more or less from scratch and then sending it into combat against the Germans was a recipe for disastrous losses. And if one asks whether this was the best way for Britain to deal with the challenge posed by imperial Germany, my answer is 'no'.

The right way for Britain to proceed was not to rush into a land war but rather to exploit its massive advantages at sea and in financial terms. Even if Germany had defeated France and Russia, it would have had a pretty massive challenge on its hands trying to run the new German-dominated Europe, and would have remained significantly weaker than the British empire in naval and financial terms. Given the resources that Britain had available in 1914, a better strategy would have been to wait and deal with the German challenge later when Britain could respond on its own terms, taking advantage of its much greater naval and financial capability.

What about the moral dimension - did Britain have a duty to get involved in the First World War?

It had a legal obligation under the 1839 treaty to uphold Belgian neutrality, so would have had to renege on that commitment. But guess what? Realism in foreign policy has a long and distinguished tradition, not least in Britain – otherwise the French would never complain about ‘perfidious Albion’. For Britain it would ultimately have been far better to have thought in terms of the national interest rather than in terms of a dated treaty.

The cost, let me emphasise, of the First World War to Britain was catastrophic and it left the British empire at the end of it all in a much weakened state. True, the empire had grown territorially, but its financial position was fundamentally altered. It had accumulated a vast debt, the cost of which really limited Britain’s military capability throughout the interwar period. Then there was the manpower loss – not just all those aristocratic officers but the many, many, many skilled workers who died or were permanently incapacitated in the war.

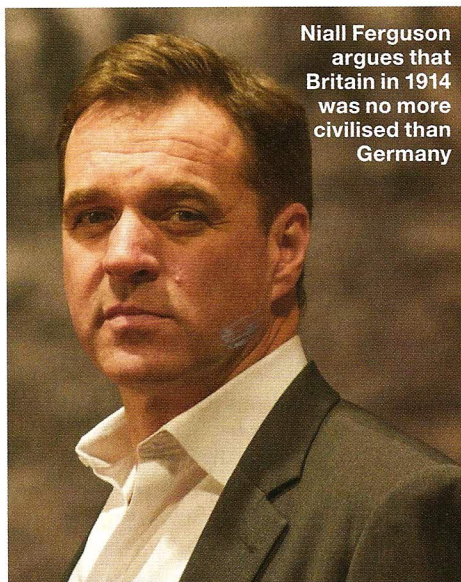
Arguments about honour, of course, resonate today as they resonated in 1914 but you can pay too high a price for upholding that notion of honour, and I think in the end Britain did. Let me put it a different way. If it was the right thing to intervene in 1914 with an immediate deployment of ground forces, why did the government not introduce conscription in the years before the confrontation with Germany? It was absurd to have a commitment to Belgium that could only be honoured with a handful of divisions.

The problem about British policy in 1914 is that it was neither one thing nor another. It was not a credible continental commitment, which would have required conscription and a much larger land army. Nor was it a clearly thought-through maritime strategy to deal with the possibility of a German victory over France and Russia.

The whole point of *The Pity of War* is to say that it was a grave pity that Britain in 1914 had this mixed-up hybrid strategy. If we had clearly chosen a continental commitment with conscription in the years before 1914 we might have avoided the war altogether because we’d have deterred the Germans. But we didn’t deter the Germans, as with only six or seven divisions to deploy against them we didn’t seem to constitute a fatal threat to their war plans.

Should Britain today feel pride for its actions in the First World War, or should it feel shame?

Pride and shame are not feelings that an academic historian wants to arouse in readers



Niall Ferguson argues that Britain in 1914 was no more civilised than Germany

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or television viewers. My aim is to improve our understanding. We need to, of course, feel sympathy for the men like my grandfather who fought in the First World War, because their sufferings were scarcely imaginable. The death toll, which was greater than the Second World War, was the most painful thing that Britain has ever experienced in war. But we should also feel dismay that the leaders, not just of Britain, but of the European states, could have taken decisions that led to such an appalling slaughter.

In the end the war was a bizarre battle between empires within western civilisation – it was a kind of European or western civil war. When you ask yourself what it was for, answers like the creation of a pan-Slav state in the Balkans or the upholding of Belgian neutrality seem ludicrously small compared with the cost in terms of human life and treasure. So I feel a sense of sorrow that 10 million people (more by some estimates) died prematurely and often violently because the statesmen of the European empires gambled on war for really quite low stakes.

My grandfather, who survived the war (albeit having been gassed and shot through the chest), was given a medal that said he’d fought in “the great war for civilisation”.

When you think about that, it’s somewhat absurd because in terms of civilisation the differences between Britain and Germany in 1914 were vanishingly small. To say that it was for civilisation that the great European powers spent four and a quarter years slaughtering young men would almost be comical if it wasn’t so tragic.

So I think we need to look back on this centenary not with pride, not with shame, but with understanding, with sympathy for those who lost their lives or otherwise suffered. Above all, I think we need to look back with a kind of sorrow that such dreadful decision-making could produce such a calamity.

Finally, I really hope we can learn something from this. We’re not going to learn anything if all we do in this centenary is say it was all the fault of the Germans. That represents a complete failure to progress.

To me it’s depressing that books are still being produced churning out this kind of line when so much has been written in the last 100 years to create a much more nuanced account.

The hope I have is that this television film will reignite interest in the book *The Pity of War* and encourage people to realise that we should not think of this as some great victory or dreadful crime, but more as the biggest error in modern history. **IT**

Niall Ferguson is Laurence A Tisch professor of history at Harvard University. He is the author of numerous bestselling books and has presented a number of series on British TV. Niallferguson.com

DISCOVER MORE

BOOK
▶ *The Pity of War* by Niall Ferguson (Penguin, new edition, 2009)

TELEVISION
▶ *The Pity of War* is due to be aired soon on BBC Two. Turn to page 75 for more details on the BBC’s WW1 centenary season



Turn the page to discover what six more historians think of Britain’s decision to go to war in August 1914