

# Pre-war Military Planning (Great Britain)

By [Hew Strachan](#)

## Summary

When Europe went to war in 1914, the continental belligerents had plans for the mobilisation, deployment, and initial campaigns of their armies. Britain was different. It had planned the mobilisation of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), but it did not approve the BEF's deployment plan, which subordinated the BEF's campaign plan to that of France, until after the war began. The British army was optimised for colonial war, not for major European war. The latter was the navy's responsibility, and British maritime thinking – although not a clearly defined plan – encapsulated at least some of major war's dimensions.

## Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 The Royal Navy and its Plans for War](#)
  - [2.1 Naval Staff](#)
  - [2.2 Ship Construction](#)
  - [2.3 Battle](#)
  - [2.4 Blockade](#)
  - [2.5 Planning Confusion](#)
- [3 The Army and its Plans](#)
  - [3.1 The British Expeditionary Force](#)
  - [3.2 Anglo-French Staff Talks](#)
- [4 Conclusion: The July Crisis](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

## Introduction

For many years scholars studied the war plans prepared by the armed forces of Europe as evidence of long-term belligerent intent. If states planned to go to war to fulfil policy objectives, then armies and navies ought to have prepared operational plans to carry out those intentions. By the same token, when the crisis of July 1914 broke, those plans had the capacity to determine the pace and direction of the crisis in its latter stages: “war by railway timetable”, as [A.J.P. Taylor \(1906-1990\)](#) put it.<sup>1</sup>

This approach suffered from three major defects. First, it assumed that states had the governmental machinery to integrate general staffs within their policy-making structures. Most did not as it required the experience of war itself for states to learn how to manage the making of strategy at the civil-military interface. Secondly, it assumed that general staffs focused upwards on the links between operations and their policy effects. In reality, they tended to look downwards to tactics and how their forces would fight. Thirdly, and consequently, the schemes that resulted from these staff exercises were not “war plans”, but campaign plans. As a result, they failed to address the real demands of a fully-fledged [war plan](#): the need for economic mobilisation, alliance coordination, and integration across theatres and fronts and between land and sea.

Collectively, these sorts of criticism have downplayed the role of the general staffs in the coming of the war. The more recent works on the war’s origins have little to say about what sort of war states thought they might be risking in July 1914.<sup>2</sup> This is equally misleading. Europe did not go to war “by railway timetable”, but it had experienced arms races on land and sea, and a wave of popular and professional literature described future war. Moreover, the lack of governmental structures to manage general staffs gave those bodies leeway, which meant that what they did and said had political effect.

[Germany](#) dominates these discussions: a large power in central Europe with exposed land frontiers to east and west, it relied on its army for its security. [Britain](#) was in a very different geographical situation. Its island status made it principally reliant for home defence on its navy. Its proximity to Europe, however, led it to pursue a balance of power strategy, and to seek a continental alliance on which to predicate its conduct of a future war. Finally, its banking, trading, and mercantile power meant its contribution to the war would be increasingly important the longer the war lasted.

## The Royal Navy and its Plans for War

On 3 August 1914, Foreign Secretary Sir [Edward Grey \(1862-1933\)](#) addressed the House of Commons on the probability of war.<sup>3</sup> Britain’s principal service in such an eventuality was the Royal Navy. Grey argued that, as a maritime nation, Britain would not be protected from the war’s effects on global trade, if it remained neutral. However, if it fought, its war-making would be more limited, given its status as an island, than for continental powers. While comprehensible, these expectations had little basis in sustained thought.

### Naval Staff

In 1902, after the South African War, the [government](#) had created a cabinet sub-committee,

the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), to address defence issues. Chaired by the prime minister, it was attended not only by the relevant ministers but also by representatives of the armed services themselves. Its great strength was its capacity to unite political and professional opinion around one table. However, it was an advisory committee only, without executive powers. It focused on the core questions of home and imperial defence, and the relationship between the two. It addressed the possibility of invasion, the capacity of the navy alone to protect against it, and the risks attendant to deploying the bulk of the army overseas, particularly to [India](#).

On 23 August 1911, when the second [Moroccan crisis](#) brought [France](#) and Britain close to war with Germany, the CID met to review its options. The navy proposed amphibious operations in the Baltic, an option rejected by the CID in 1908-1909. Alarmed by the poverty of naval planning, the prime minister appointed [Winston Churchill \(1874-1965\)](#) to be First Lord of the Admiralty with the specific remit to form a naval staff. Set up in January 1912, it never fulfilled its promise. The post of chief of the War Staff, as it was called, was not merged with that of the First Sea Lord, the senior serving officer, and the War Staff was not represented on the Board of Admiralty, the joint civil-naval body which ran the service. As a result, the Royal Navy had no settled war plan in place by 1914, but only individual elements which cumulatively reveal its intentions.

## Ship Construction

In 1904-1905, the British adopted the *Dreadnought*, a revolutionary battleship, armed with ten 12-inch guns and capable of 21 knots. In 1914 the latest [Dreadnought](#), the *Queen Elizabeth*, mounted 15-inch guns, burnt oil, not coal, and could reach 25 knots.<sup>4</sup> Over the decade 1905-1914 rivalry in battleship construction fed [naval arms races](#) in the Mediterranean and especially in the North Sea. The First Sea Lord from 1904 to 1909, Sir [Jackie Fisher \(1841-1920\)](#), responded to the German threat, manifested in the first Moroccan crisis of 1905, by progressively concentrating Britain's major units in home waters and developing bases for them on the east coast, facing the harbours of the German navy, and at Scapa Flow in Orkney. In the public mind, the Royal Navy was being optimised for a battle in the North Sea, especially after the Anglo-French naval agreement of 1912 left the French responsible for the Mediterranean and the British the North Sea and the Channel. It was this undertaking to which the French ambassador to London, [Paul Cambon \(1843-1924\)](#), referred in July 1914 and which influenced Grey's speech on 3 August 1914.<sup>5</sup>

However, Britain was also a global maritime power, and its long-term rivals elsewhere in the world were not the Germans, but France and [Russia](#), its allies in 1914. Fisher therefore planned a development of the Dreadnought, the battle-cruiser, for oceanic [warfare](#). An all-big

gun ship (from 1909, the battle-cruisers had 13.5-inch guns), its first version could achieve speeds of 25 knots and its successors 27 knots. It exploited speed and manoeuvrability to engage better armoured ships at long range (around 20,000 yards). As battle-cruisers replaced Dreadnoughts, Fisher planned to remove capital ships from the closed waters around Britain and to use [submarines](#) and mines in the North Sea and for coastal defence.

## Battle

The Dreadnought suggested that the Royal Navy was focused on battle and would achieve its strategic purpose by tactical effect. The Royal Navy would guarantee its dominance if it destroyed the German navy in the North Sea in a victory redolent of [Horatio Nelson \(1758-1805\)](#) victory at Trafalgar in 1805. [Japan's](#) destruction of the Russian Baltic fleet at Tsushima in 1905 confirmed that the age of the decisive sea battle was not over, and the popularity of [Alfred Thayer Mahan \(1840-1914\)](#) *The influence of seapower on history* (1890) sustained the theme.<sup>6</sup>

This expectation was challenged by [Julian Corbett \(1854-1922\)](#), the naval historian. He lectured on the War Course (originally established in 1900) at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, and in 1904 secured Fisher's backing.<sup>7</sup> From 1906 Corbett offered a course on strategy, and he embodied his ideas in 1911 in *Some principles of maritime strategy*. Corbett (like Mahan) was more geopolitical and political in his focus than material or tactical. He argued that Britain's geographical position could enable it to take a limited part in an unlimited war, as Grey was to suggest in 1914. He also questioned the value of battle at sea. Britain's commitment to the so-called two power standard (to be as strong as the next two naval powers combined plus 10 percent in 1908) gave it a margin of naval superiority without battle and which it could exercise defensively. Battle would only risk a dominance which it would hold without fighting.

## Blockade

Corbett's thinking did not eliminate all offensive options. He argued that, as men live on land, the effects of maritime warfare need to be felt there. Economic warfare or [blockade](#) would create [food](#) shortages and so bring the war directly to the enemy's population, with potentially corrosive consequences for democratic societies.

The Royal Navy's awareness of Britain's own vulnerability had sensitised it to the value of economic warfare. After the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, British agriculture no longer enjoyed protection. With the agricultural depression of the 1870s, the United Kingdom became increasingly reliant on imported food, especially grain. Britain's need to defend its

own sea lanes provided part of the case for the battle-cruiser. However, this argument did not just go one way. As Germany industrialised, and its population both grew and moved to towns, it lost self-sufficiency. By 1906 Germany imported 20 percent of its annual grain consumption. The trade division of the Naval Intelligence Department, which acted as a de facto naval staff, realised that Germany was also becoming vulnerable to blockade.

To be legal, according to the 1856 Declaration of Paris, a blockade had to be “effective”, in other words “maintained by a force sufficient really to prevent access to the coast of the enemy”. The problem for the Royal Navy was that coastal [artillery](#), plus the newer technologies of mines, submarines, and torpedoes, all made a “close” blockade dangerous for capital ships. If British maritime dominance were eroded by its own use of economic warfare, it would be self-defeating. From 1904 onward, the navy developed ideas for a “distant” blockade to obviate these dangers but, as it pulled the blockading line back from the German coast, the numbers of ships required and the demands of maintaining them at sea increased to unrealistic levels. By 1913 the War Staff had concluded that the solution lay in Britain’s own geographical position athwart the routes from the North Sea to the Atlantic between Orkney and [Norway](#) and in the English Channel. It planned to mount a distant blockade by closing them.

This was not the only legal conundrum Britain’s naval war plans confronted. In 1909 the Declaration of London sought to extend the rights of neutral powers in the event of war by narrowing the definition of contraband and lengthening the list of goods which could be freely traded in war.<sup>8</sup> If Britain itself were [neutral](#), the Declaration of London would work to its commercial advantage; if it were belligerent, the declaration would – in Corbett’s own view – remove its principal weapon in war. The House of Lords refused to ratify the terms, so preserving the possibility of a blockade with a wide definition of contraband.

## Planning Confusion

By 1909, when Fisher retired as First Sea Lord, Britain had floated and resourced a number of maritime options for major war, ranging from the purely tactical and operational to the economic and legal. They had not been moulded into something coherent enough to call a war plan. For some, blockade was not an end in itself but a means to provoke the German navy into battle. For others, battle was a means rather than an end, in this case to tighten the blockade. Even more uncertain than the relationship between battle and blockade was what economic warfare itself meant.

In 1909 the trade division of the Naval Intelligence Division was dismantled. Fisher’s successor, Sir [Arthur Wilson \(1842-1921\)](#), shared others’ doubts about whether blockade

could work given Germany's capacity to import via its neutral neighbours in Scandinavia, the Low Countries, and [Switzerland](#). The Declaration of London raised the question as to what Britain could legitimately stop. Food was contraband if it was to be supplied to the army but not if it was for civilian consumption. Munitions of war were contraband, but little specific thought had been given to how to target them.

Britain's allies, France and Russia, set great store by the Royal Navy's use of economic war, but expected its impact to be much quicker than the promise of a long war contained in stopping the import of food. Their vision of economic war predicted chaos on the stock exchanges, the collapse of capitalism, and revolution. In *Planning Armageddon*, Nicholas Lambert has extracted this strand of blockade thinking to argue, selectively, that the navy had a coherent plan for a quick victory from which the British government resiled almost the moment the war broke out.

It did not. The nearest Britain came to a naval war plan in 1914 was the work of Captain [Maurice Hankey \(1877-1963\)](#) of the Royal Marines, who had moved via the Naval Intelligence Division to become secretary of the CID. From 1910 Hankey sought to impose order on these disparate ideas by preparing a War Book, setting out the legal and financial measures required of government departments to put economic warfare in place, stop German trade, and blockade the neutral ports serving Germany.<sup>9</sup> First produced in 1912, it was revised annually, and was put into effect in August 1914. Hankey expected blockade to presage a long war, and he did not see it as the path to a quick victory or as an alternative to amphibious operations and the despatch of the army overseas.

## The Army and its Plans

If the navy was a weapon intended for use against a European opponent, and an instrument of deterrence, the army was optimised to secure the British [Empire](#). A regular, professional, and long-service force, its structure was very different from that of its European peers. In Europe, armies were conscripted and tripled in size on mobilisation to become mass armies of almost 3 million men. The total strength of the British army on 1 August 1914 was 735,000 men. Barely a third of them, fewer than 248,000, were regulars, of whom almost half were then serving overseas, predominantly in India, and so were not immediately available. The balance was made up of various types of reserve, but only 145,000 were in the army reserve, ex-regulars who were liable for immediate call-up in the event of war. On 3 August Grey suggested that the army's role in war would be to protect the colonies.

Britain was slow to create a general staff, the body which in other armies devoted its energies to planning. Liberals objected that, if it existed, a general staff would look for a

European war. They were right: when it was created in 1904-6, it set about reviewing its options in the event of major war. The army may have done its fighting in the colonies, but intellectually it matched itself against the French and the Germans, studying continental conflicts to learn lessons. However, the question remains: when, if ever, did the momentum of this planning begin to affect policy?

## The British Expeditionary Force

The Liberal government which came into office in December 1905 sought to reduce defence expenditure: Fisher's rationalisation of the fleet's distribution was designed to meet that objective as was the work of the Secretary of War, [Richard Burdon Haldane \(1856-1928\)](#), to create a [British Expeditionary Force](#) (BEF). The core challenge was a long-standing one: the defence of India against a Russian invasion via Afghanistan or in response to domestic insurrection (the mutiny of the Indian army in 1857 still cast a long shadow), given lesser but numerous commitments elsewhere.

In reality the threat to India, if it existed, receded even further after the Anglo-Russian entente in 1907. However, it remained powerful enough for India's government to veto any plans to form [expeditionary forces](#) from the Indian army for service in Europe. The BEF itself was designed for imperial defence, not European war, and was thought more likely to fight Russia than Germany. A force of six divisions, neither its structure nor its size matched the standards for continental war. It had no corps headquarters (the all-arms higher command in European armies), having to create them from scratch in 1914. It was short of heavy artillery. When it went to France in 1914 it initially took only four of its six divisions and so mustered less than 100,000 men.

Nor did it have much of a reserve, although almost half of its strength on mobilisation was made up of time-expired regulars who were recalled from civilian life. From 1902, the National Service League lobbied for the introduction of conscription, but only for home defence.<sup>10</sup> When Haldane reshaped the part-time auxiliary forces as the Territorial Force in 1908, it was optimised for the same role, to secure Britain if and when the BEF went overseas. By July 1914 it had failed to recruit to its establishment of 300,000, and only five complete units had made themselves available for service outside Britain.

## Anglo-French Staff Talks

The 1904 Anglo-French entente resolved outstanding colonial issues more than it set out to create a common front to face Germany. In 1905 Germany put pressure on this understanding by engineering a crisis over French intervention in Morocco, but rather than fracture the entente hardened and acquired a European focus. In the winter of 1905-1906

Britain and France initiated staff talks which continued until May 1906. Although Grey fully supported them, he insisted they must not compromise British neutrality.

For Haldane in his memoirs, and for the first generation of historians, this was the moment when a continental commitment was forged and British military planning began to prioritise fighting alongside France against Germany. Major General [James Grierson \(1859-1914\)](#), the Director of Military Operations (DMO) on the general staff and a former defence attaché in Germany, wrote a memorandum in January 1906 which considered such a war to be possible. However, he also reviewed six other options, including war with Russia and war in the colonies. It required the appointment as DMO of [Henry Wilson \(1864-1922\)](#), a Francophile with good personal contacts to the French army, in August 1910 for the staff talks of 1905-1906 to be given substance and continuity. Wilson conveniently calculated that the BEF's six divisions would swing the balance in a Franco-German conflict. He set about planning their transport to France and their deployment on the French army's left flank, facing the frontier with neutral [Belgium](#). At the CID meeting on 23 August 1911, its members were impressed by the clarity of the army's presentation in comparison with that of the navy.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, more recent scholars, principally [John Gooch](#) and Edward Spiers, have selected 1910 as the point when the British army began planning for war against Germany and optimising the BEF for that task. In recognising the force of their argument, however, two points need to be stressed. First, the army as a whole was not restructured for European warfare as a result: its doctrine, institutions and size still reflected, in varying degrees, an army facing the imminent possibility of war in the colonies, a danger appreciated even by potential "continentalists". Secondly, the general staff's thinking had not yet determined the contours of British policy, which still rested primarily on the navy.

## Conclusion: The July Crisis

The first steps to mobilise for war were taken by the Royal Navy. On 26 July 1914, the First Sea Lord prevented the dispersal of the fleet after exercises that month, so keeping reservists at their stations. He did so without cabinet approval but also without deepening the political crisis. On 29 July he mobilised the fleet but [Alfred von Tirpitz \(1849-1930\)](#) decided that British actions were a bluff, and the German Admiralty Staff agreed. The Anglo-German naval arms race did not precipitate the First World War.

The army lagged behind the navy. Henry Wilson had planned on its mobilising at the same time as France, so that the BEF could be deployed simultaneously with the French army. It did neither. On 29 July its units received notice of the "precautionary period" before war, but



it did not mobilise until after Britain's ultimatum to Germany had expired on 5 August. On the same day a war council convened to decide where the BEF was to go. Much to Wilson's frustration, it revived an option first adumbrated in 1905, that it should go to Belgium, with Antwerp as its base, so that it could operate independently of the French and outside the German army's flank as it swung through Belgium. The idea was quashed by the navy which could not operate so far north and would not risk either it or the BEF being bottled up in the river Scheldt. The war council therefore agreed that the BEF should go to France. It was a portentous decision but "the continental commitment" as understood by the general staff only became British policy after the war's outbreak.

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## Notes

1. Taylor, A.J.P.: *War by timetable: How the First World War began*. London 1969; see also Stevenson, David: *War by timetable? The railway race before 1914*, in: *Past and Present* 162 (February 1999), pp. 163-94. [↑](#)
2. For example, Clark, Christopher: *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe went to war in 1914*. London 2012; and MacMillan, Margaret: *The war that ended peace. How Europe abandoned peace for the First World War*, London 2013. [↑](#)
3. *Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 5th series, vol. LXV, 1914, columns 1809-34*. [↑](#)
4. The classic work on Fisher's naval revolution, Marder, Arthur: *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. The Royal Navy in the Fisher era, 5 vols.*, London 1961-70, has been substantially and controversially revised by Sumida, Jon Tetsuro: *In defence of naval supremacy. Finance, technology and British naval policy, 1999-1914*, Boston 1989 and Lambert, Nicholas: *Sir John Fisher's naval revolution*, Columbia, South Carolina 1999. Blyth, Robert J. / Lambert, Andrew / Rüger, Jan (eds.): *The Dreadnought and the Edwardian age*, Farnham 2011 provides recent perspectives. [↑](#)
5. Otte, T.G.: *July Crisis. The world's descent into war, summer 1914*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 483-4, 491; Clark, *The Sleepwalkers* 2012, pp. 537-41; Strachen, Hew: *The First World War. vol 1, To Arms*, Oxford 2001, p. 93. [↑](#)
6. Recent studies of Mahan include Sumida, Jon Tetsuro: *Inventing grand strategy and teaching command. The classic works of Alfred Thayer Mahan reconsidered*, Washington DC 1997 and Ségéric, Jean-José: *L'amiral Mahan et la puissance impériale américaine*, Rennes 2010. [↑](#)
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8. Coogan, John W.: *The end of neutrality. The United States, Britain and Maritime Rights 1899-1914*, Ithaca 1981. ↑
  9. French, David: *British Economic and Strategic Planning 1905-1915*, London 1982; for naval planning specifically see Cobb, Stephen: *Preparing for Blockade 1885-1914. Naval Contingency for Economic Warfare*, Farnham 2013; Seligmann, Matthew S.: *The Royal Navy and the German threat 1901-1914. Admiralty Plans to protect British Trade in a War against Germany*, Oxford 2012. ↑
  10. On the Royal Navy’s plans for home defence, see Morgan-Owen, David: *The fear of invasion: strategy, politics and British war planning, 1880-1914*, Oxford 2017. ↑
  11. Williamson, Jr., Samuel R.: *The politics of Grand Strategy. Britain and France prepare for War, 1904-1914*, Cambridge 1969, pp. 167-204; see also Wilson, Keith: *Hankey’s Appendix. Some Admiralty Manoeuvres during and after the Agadir Crisis*, in: *War in History* 1 (1994), pp. 81-97. ↑

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## External Links

- [Cornish, Paul: \*\*The Naval Race Between Britain And Germany Before The First World War, 5 January 2018 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Article\)\*\*](#)
- [Morgan-Owen, David: \*\*British Grand Strategy in 1914, 13 July 2015 \(King's College London\) \(Article\)\*\*](#)
- [Morgan-Owen, David: \*\*Planning for War in the North Sea 1912-1914, 6 November 2015 \(King's College London\) \(Article\)\*\*](#)
- [Statement by Sir Edward Grey \(UK Parliament\) \(Database\)](#)

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### Regional Section(s)

[Western Europe](#) > [Great Britain and Ireland](#) > [Great Britain](#)

### Thematic Section(s)

[Pre-war](#)

### Subjects

[Politics, law](#) > [Institutions](#) > [Governments](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [July crisis](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Colonialism, imperialism](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Combatants](#) > [Artillery](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Command and control](#) > [Civil-military relations](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Command and control](#) > [Command structures](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Military infrastructure](#) > [Transport, logistics and infrastructure](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Military planning and recruitment](#) > [Mobilisation, military](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Military planning and recruitment](#) > [Strategies, military](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Warfare, naval](#) > [Blockades](#)

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