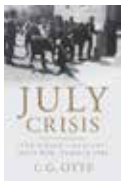


# Reviews

Conservative historian **Lord Lexden** praises complementary accounts of the diplomatic failures that led to war in 1914



## July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914

By TG Otte  
£25



## Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914-1916: The View from Downing Street

Edited by Michael Brock and Eleanor Brock  
£30

A distinguished *Times* journalist wrote recently that “we now have at least one door-stopping book for every poppy on Flanders Field”. It was a pardonable exaggeration. A number of weighty tomes on the events that led to war appeared as the centenary of the outbreak of the conflict in August 1914 approached. There is a danger that a late arrival on the scene – like Thomas Otte’s 530-page door-stopper – might be overlooked, not least because excellent accounts of the war’s origins by Margaret Macmillan and Christopher Clark have rightly attracted widespread attention and praise. They were both strongly commended

during a recent debate in the Lords on the Government’s impressive programme of events to commemorate the centenary.

But it would be a grave mistake to neglect Otte’s quite outstanding book, which is dedicated to the memory of two of his great-grandfathers who fought on opposite sides during the war. This is diplomatic history at its finest, judicious in tone and measured in judgment, if sometimes a little laboured and clumsy in expression. Otte, who is Professor of Diplomatic History at the University of East Anglia, has done what no one else has done: he has studied the published historical works and the surviving official archives of all the great European powers which went to war with each other so catastrophically in August 1914. Serbia, too, which supplied the *casus belli*, has been treated with the same thoroughness.

The range of sources quoted in the text, and listed in the fat footnotes which rise up majestically from the bottom of these pages, is quite astonishing. The story of crisis and tragedy in July 1914, the last month of peace, is told day-by-day as it unfolded in all the centres of European power – Vienna, Paris, Berlin, Saint Petersburg and London – as they interacted disastrously with each



German ambassador to the UK Prince Karl Max Lichnowsky and his wife in London, 1912

other and with the rogue government in Belgrade. The discussions and arguments that took place in each of Europe’s major capitals, and the miscalculations that so frequently arose from them, are laid bare brilliantly. No other book contributes so richly to our understanding of Europe’s sudden and (as Otte shows) unexpected descent from seemingly assured peace and

serene confidence in the future to the shattering horrors of war.

Otte’s central thesis is that “none of the decision-makers of 1914 desired

a continental war... All the ministers and their advisers would have recoiled at what unfolded in August 1914”. War guilt, over which so much ink has been spilt and so much passion expressed, is a concept which should never have been invented. As Otte

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shows, no one sought to foment war; war guilt cannot, therefore, be ascribed to any individuals or country. The Kaiser, in Otte's judgment, "was remarkably unwarlike in the summer of 1914 – as was his cousin, Tsar Nicholas II", but both Germany and Russia manoeuvred diplomatically with clumsiness and stupidity to strengthen their power in European affairs, finally stumbling into war. "Military factors did not dictate the course of events, at

least not until the very end of July."

It was the political and diplomatic incompetence of Europe's emperors, kings and politicians – not militarism or the build-up of armaments – that produced the far from inevitable nightmare into which the continent was plunged. Europe was brought low by little minds. A Bismarck would have found an acceptable diplomatic solution; with the exception of Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, the men of 1914 were simply not up to the task. The causes of the First World War, Otte maintains, "are to be found in the near-collective failure of statecraft by the rulers of Europe".

In France, it was hard even to get a serious discussion going as the ever-worsening July crisis took its muddled course. Until the very end of the month, the whole country was transfixed by a murder trial in which the defendant was the wife of a prominent left-wing politician. She had shot dead the editor of a conservative-leaning newspaper who had published some

embarrassing letters of hers. Remarkably, despite the facts, she was acquitted on 31 July. Only then did France begin to give full attention to the Austro-Hungarian attack on Serbia.

In Britain, the European crisis had moved centre stage only a few days earlier. Until then, everyone had been preoccupied by the prospect of civil war in Ireland. Winston Churchill memorably described the Cabinet's sudden shift of attention: "The parishes of Fermanagh and Tyrone faded back into the mists and squalls of Ireland, and a strange light began immediately, but by perceptive gradations, to fall and grow upon the map of Europe." With the compelling detail that he deploys throughout this book, Otte describes how Sir Edward Grey, almost the only hero of this door-stopper, sought to avert catastrophe: "Until 1 August, he kept open the option of some arrangement with Germany." He worked ceaselessly for a negotiated settlement in close association with the Anglophile German ambassador in London, Prince Lichnowsky, who detested the Kaiser. "Among the key players of the July crisis Grey and Lichnowsky are the two honourable men", Otte concludes.

Their struggle for peace was doomed to failure by the collective folly that gripped all the other European capitals.

The high drama of the last days of peace is caught movingly in Margot Asquith's *Great War Diary*, also published as a late addition to the literature marking the centenary of the outbreak of war. It adds the passion and feeling which Otte's magnificent, calm

scholarship lacks. On 4 August, the Prime Minister's wife visited Lichnowsky and his wife, who had become great personal friends of the Asquiths. "The Prince had large tears rolling down his thin cheeks when I said goodbye... We sat and cried on the green sofa."

There was, of course, much greater tragedy to come, as Margot Asquith records in her sharp, eloquent diary entries. Nearly a year later, she had a conversation with George V's private secretary, Lord Stamfordham, who had lost his only son the previous month. He "said to me, with broken eyes, 'neither you nor I, Mrs Asquith, would mind our only sons dying in a Waterloo, but in this muddled, mismanaged war everyone feels the uselessness of their losses'." That was the terrible consequence of Europe's failure to resolve its July crisis. 🏰

**Lord Lexden** is a Conservative peer and political historian. Other articles and reviews relating to the centenary of the First World War can be found on his website ([www.alistairlexden.org.uk](http://www.alistairlexden.org.uk))



Prime Minister H.H. Asquith in January 1916