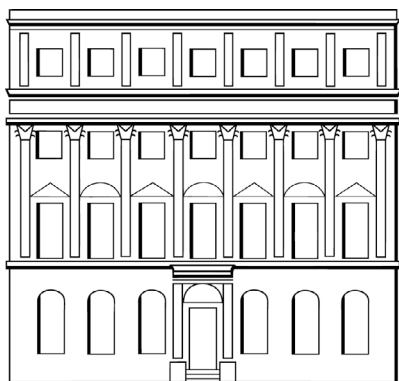


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Annual Lectures



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THE 1996 ANNUAL LECTURE

The Crisis of the
Anglo-German Antagonism
1916-17

by

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It may seem tactless and inappropriate, in addressing an Institute that exists to promote Anglo-German friendship and has in the twenty years of its existence done so much to perpetuate it, to select an aspect of Anglo-German antagonism as the subject of my lecture. But for a historian, especially a military historian, that antagonism has been an existential and undeniable fact; one that dominated the history of Europe and indeed the world for half a century, and which, by broadening two European wars into global conflicts, changed the fate of the entire world. At least two generations in our respective countries were brought up to believe that this antagonism was ineluctable. Regrettably that belief has apparently survived in Britain among people who ought to know better. But in fairness it must be said that I have found it in Germany as well, and it would be surprising if I had not. The sufferings that our two nations reciprocally inflicted on one another during those two wars is not easily to be forgotten.

I have chosen to focus on what I have termed 'the years of crisis' in the Anglo-German antagonism, very largely because this last summer we have been celebrating the eightieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme – an event that probably looms larger in British historical consciousness than it does in German or even French. But the events of 1916-17, the Somme included, were of particular significance in the relationship between our two countries, for reasons that I shall try to explain.

'The Anglo-German Antagonism' has been so magisterially treated by Paul Kennedy in his work of that title that I need say little about it in general.¹ Like all great international rivalries, it was rooted both in power-political

¹ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London, 1980).

rivalry and in ideological enmity. For Britain, at the turn of the century, the issue was comparatively simple. Her traditional rivals, France and Russia, were still active in Africa and Central Asia, the regions where Britain was consolidating and extending her imperial power, but the threat that they offered to British interests was rapidly becoming overshadowed by the dynamism with which the new German Reich was developing its commercial and industrial interests; by the ambitious if ill-defined aspirations to world power that were being voiced by official and unofficial German publicists; and above all by the threat that the new German Navy offered to the British 'command of the seas' on which the survival of the British Empire so precariously depended. All this was compounded, in British eyes, by the authoritarian nature of German society, by the unabashed militarism of the German ruling classes, and by the expressed contempt for liberal and democratic values, even among German intellectuals, that was becoming generally if inaccurately known as 'Prussianism'.

This combination of industrial rivalry, global ambition, and archaic militaristic values, so appropriately embodied in the figure of Kaiser Wilhelm II – a pantomime demon if ever there was one – was something that even the most pacific of Englishmen found it difficult to overlook. Nevertheless it took the best part of a decade for Britain to turn away from the imperial concerns that had preoccupied her during the preceding century and confront the reality of a rivalry with a European power that was certainly her equal and might well prove her superior. By 1914, with a great deal of help from clumsy German diplomacy, that transformation was complete. The old enemies had been enlisted as allies, and the British once again faced a single, formidable adversary as they had in the days of Napoleon. When in 1905 they cel-

celebrated the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar, the Royal Navy had little doubt as to who their next antagonist was going to be.

When war with Germany did break out in 1914, most Englishmen believed that it would be, as in the days of Napoleon, a conflict between an elephant and a whale. As in the days of Napoleon Britain would rely on her Navy as her principal weapon both for defence and for offence; to ward off invasion and to impose a crippling blockade on her enemy. As in the days of Napoleon, she looked to her continental allies to contain and destroy the offensive power of her opponent's armies. The strategic purpose of her own army, small if not entirely 'contemptible', and only very recently equipped and trained for continental warfare, remained uncertain until the very outbreak of war. Only then was the decision taken to attach it in a very subordinate role to the left flank of a French Army whose war plans had taken little account of its presence. The role of the British Expeditionary Force in 1914 was in fact political and moral rather than strategic: neither its allies, nor its adversaries expected its presence on the battlefield to make much difference to the course of the campaign and it played no part in the calculations of the German General Staff.

For Germany there was no single adversary to simplify war planning. England may have been increasingly identified as the chief obstacle to her achievement of world power, but not all Germans wanted to achieve world power. The sheer intensity of the propaganda of those who did aim at it, in the *Alldeutscher Verband* and the *Flottenverein*, indicated the degree of apathy or resistance they had to overcome. But no one in Germany loved England very much, except perhaps a few aristocrats who aped the fashion of the English ruling classes and had their children educated by English governesses, and there

were many who had good reason to dislike her intensely. For the business and industrial classes she was a rival who might well use her naval power to constrain if not destroy German competition. For the farmers and landowners in the south and east she embodied all the vices of the modern world, the liberalism and socialism and internationalism that in their own country, so they believed, were beginning to sap traditional German virtues.

As for German intellectuals, many of them saw England as the real obstacle to Germany playing the role on the world stage to which she was entitled by her power and destined by her history. She might be old, failing and decadent, but she remained cunning and unscrupulous. In an age impregnated with the concepts of Social Darwinism, it was natural enough to believe that only through struggle could new organisms, social and political as well as biological, prove their fitness to survive, and in a country impregnated by Wagnerian mythology it was equally natural to visualize that struggle being waged by the good German Sword. But what was interesting about that mythology, if often overlooked at that time, was its gloomy prediction that these struggles between aspiring heroes and failing gods tended to end in disaster for everyone.

However, although England might be seen by many in Germany as the ultimate adversary, there were other enemies much nearer home. Those who in 1914 posed an immediate threat to the fatherland were still, as they had been in the days of the elder von Moltke, Russia and France, and the problem of dealing with this nutcracker threat had preoccupied the German General Staff ever since 1871. For the General Staff the minuscule military power of England was, as I have said, irrelevant: they assumed that once Germany had defeated her continental allies, England would have to come to terms. The respon-

sibility for deterring, if not defeating England lay with the German Navy. However, the cost of maintaining an army capable of defeating both Russia and France in short order proved to be so great that it ruined Tirpitz's hopes of building a fleet capable of engaging the Royal Navy on anything like equal terms; and if his *Risikoflotte* failed to deter Britain from entering the war, there was little he could do to challenge her command of the seas and so preserve Germany from a blockade that would be far more dangerous to an industrialized and urbanized nation than it had ever been to the agrarian France of Napoleon. Before 1914 the potentialities of the submarine were still barely understood. In any case, any role that the German Navy might play in a forthcoming war had barely been considered by the German General Staff. Like their great mentor, Clausewitz, they ignored the maritime and economic dimension of war almost entirely. They were not oblivious to the problems they would face if the war were to be prolonged, but the obvious solution was to ensure that it was not. Hence the huge gamble of the Schlieffen Plan, which promised a *Schlacht ohne morgen*, a battle without a tomorrow.

As we all know, the Schlieffen Plan failed and left a very long tomorrow. To that failure the British Army was able to make a far greater contribution than anyone on the Continent, and few people even in England, had ever expected. The unforeseen scope of the German swing through Belgium meant that the British Expeditionary Force found itself, not on the periphery of the main action as had been generally expected, but at one of its critical points. The First Battle of Ypres in November 1914 established the British Army, in the eyes of its adversaries, its allies, and most important its own people, as a serious continental force; one capable of taking on and holding, perhaps even defeating, the German Army on equal terms.

Nevertheless the British were still minor actors on the Western Front, and for the best part of a year the British government hoped that they might remain so. For one thing, the outlook of most British decision-makers – that of many military leaders as well as naval and civil – remained maritime and imperial. They still hoped that naval power might give flexibility to British strategy as it had in the past, and resented being shackled to the chariot-wheels of a stronger continental ally. The effective dictator of British military policy, Herbert Lord Kitchener, was an imperial soldier who had spent his entire career in the Near East and saw that region as a natural theatre for the deployment of the military power of a British Empire that drew much of its strength from East of Suez. Further, the old Regular British Army had been almost destroyed at Ypres, and it would take at least two years for their volunteer successors to be adequately trained and equipped to take their places in the line against the German Army.²

Finally, a substantial proportion of the British Cabinet still hoped that Britain might confine herself to her traditional role of holding the seas and acting as paymaster of her continental allies, rather than involving herself in the crippling extra expense of sustaining a continental army that could only weaken the British economy and deepen her dependence on the United States.

For all these reasons the British commitment to the Western Front remained limited for a full year after the

² David French, in *British Strategy and War Aims* (London, 1986) has further suggested that Kitchener intended to hold back committing his forces until 1917, when his continental allies would be exhausted and Britain could therefore dictate peace terms. It is an interesting thesis, but since Kitchener notoriously committed few of his ideas to paper, French has found some difficulty in documenting it.

beginning of the war, and the major adversaries of the German Army continued to be the Russians and the French. It was only the failure of the Dardanelles campaign, the exhaustion of the Russians and the appeals of a French ally who had already lost over a million casualties, that ultimately compelled the British government, in the autumn of 1915, reluctantly to accept that their main effort would have to be made on the continent of Europe; that their new armies would have to be committed to battle there in 1916; and that those armies would have to be sustained by the introduction of compulsory military service, at whatever cost to the British economy.

Meanwhile the German armies had enjoyed an almost unbroken succession of victories; more than enough to convince both the High Command and the German people that the failure of the Schlieffen Plan was a temporary setback rather than a strategic disaster. It is true that those victories had to compensate the German people for growing hardships at home; hardships due as much to the failure of their government to make adequate provision for economic warfare as to the pressure of the British blockade. But 1915 had also seen Germany enjoying victories at sea of a quite unexpected kind. The development of the submarine made it possible for the German Navy to conduct a successful *guerre de course* that the Royal Navy, for all its superiority in capital ships, seemed quite unable to prevent. It was true that submarines could realize their full potential only if they ignored the rules of cruiser warfare laid down by a more humane generation in a different technological era, and as in the days of Napoleon there existed powerful neutrals who should not, if possible, be offended. But for the first time Germany found herself in possession of a weapon with which she could attack Britain directly and which, if used with sufficient ruthlessness, might even defeat her. And with the elimi-

nation of Russian and the gradual exhaustion of French military strength, it became increasingly clear in Berlin that the war would not be won until British power had been broken.

So by 1916 the whole shape of the war was changing. France and Russia had not yet been defeated; far from it. At Verdun the French, though at terrible cost, were to inflict on the German army its first serious defeat, and on the Eastern Front Brusilov was to gain over the Austrian armies perhaps the most spectacular victory of the entire war. But with these victories Britain's continental allies had shot their bolts; the Russians for good, the French, once Nivelle's offensive of April 1917 had failed, for very nearly two years. With their allies falling away, Britain and Germany were now emerging as the sole adversaries, and their antagonism was crystallized into a terrible duel.

But that duel assumed a paradoxical and quite unforeseen form. As in that fought by Hamlet, the adversaries had exchanged weapons. Germany, the great land power, was now threatening England through her newly found sea power; not by the activities of her High Seas Fleet, whose direct challenge to the Royal Navy had been decisively if expensively repelled at Jutland, but by the increasingly effective blockade imposed by her submarines. On the other hand Britain, the great sea power, had become a land power on a scale unprecedented in her history, and created a huge continental force to confront the all-conquering German armies. Ultimately her armies were to total some eighty divisions. On 1 July 1916 twenty-five of them, consisting almost entirely of volunteers, were committed to battle in a direct attack on the German defences north of the Somme. Under-trained, inexperienced, commanded by officers most of whom had held their rank only for a few months, these young enthusiasts suffered 60,000 casualties during the first twenty-four

hours, nearly 20,000 of them dead. They fought on until November, gaining six miles of territory and losing a total of 400,000 men. The Germans, for their part, lost something over 600,000. Neither army – and perhaps neither people – ever fully recovered.

But that was only the beginning. A year later, by the summer of 1917, the Russian Army had disintegrated, the French had mutinied and were capable at best of passive defence, and although the United States had now entered the war there was no prospect of direct American help for at least another year. The British were now entirely on their own, and submarine warfare had brought them within measurable distance of defeat. Nevertheless that summer, with a battle-weary army no longer composed of enthusiastic volunteers, they renewed the attack in Flanders in an offensive insisted upon by their High Command but about which the political leadership had gravest doubts. Between August and November they sustained a further 275,000 casualties, and the German Army, in spite of the skill and courage with which they conducted their defence, came off little better. So between July 1916 and November 1917 German and British soldiers engaged in mutual slaughter on one of the most terrible battlefields in the history of mankind; while the economic damage that each country was inflicting on the other through their reciprocal blockade can barely be computed.

When the two most powerful and industrialized states in Europe confronted one another, a struggle on such a scale was only to be expected. On the Western Front the huge increase in defensive fire-power had rendered impossible the campaigns of manoeuvre and the decisive battles, the *Vernichtungsschlachten*, to which all armies had confidently looked forward before 1914. By 1916 the High

Command on both sides were beginning to realize that under modern conditions of battle their object could only be to use their artillery so as to inflict higher losses on the enemy than they suffered themselves; ultimately, higher than his society was prepared to accept. The opposing army was simply the medium through which they would bleed the enemy people to death. This was the thinking that lay behind both von Falkenhayn's attack at Verdun, and the plans of the principal British Army Commander on the Somme, Sir Henry Rawlinson; even if his commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, still hankered after a breakthrough where his cavalry could repeat their triumphs of the Boer War. So once the initial assaults on the Somme failed, the strategic object of the British Army became, not to take ground, but to 'kill Bosches'. Intelligence officers gleefully tracked the increasing youth and unfitness of prisoners of war as the manpower resources of the enemy became gradually exhausted.

British official historians were later to claim the Somme as a victory because by their calculations more Germans had been killed than British and French. To reduce the criteria of military success to this kind of body-count is a *reductio ad absurdum*; but it is undeniable that the massive deployment on the battlefield, not so much of British manpower, but of the British industrial power embodied in the unprecedented fire-support provided by British artillery, not only inflicted on the German defenders sufferings that equalled if they did not surpass those of Verdun, but forced the German High Command to accept that they were now engaged in a more terrible kind of war, a *Materialschlacht*, for which the entire resources of their community had to be mobilized on a massive scale, as the British had already mobilized their own. And worse: the German government for the first time found itself faced with domestic pressures to make peace on terms far

different from those that their military leadership, and their powerful political supporters, considered that the victorious achievements of German arms deserved. But although the German home front was beginning to crack apart under the strain of another wartime winter and food-strikes were becoming common in the larger German cities, the continuing triumphs of German armies made it inconceivable to the German High Command that peace should be made on any terms that did not reflect a German victory, both on the Eastern and the Western Fronts; and with the fall of von Falkenhayn and the establishment of a Supreme Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff, the military leadership could effectively dictate policy to the civil power.

In Britain, by the end of 1916, a few voices were beginning to be raised in favour of negotiated peace, but they commanded little public support. In spite of growing civilian hardships and losses suffered during the four-month struggle on the Somme, in spite of industrial unrest in the north and the disappointing achievements of the Royal Navy, a coalition government under David Lloyd George took power in December 1916, pledged not to the making of peace but to a more effective conduct of the war; and to a settlement that aimed, not at a restoration of the *status quo ante bellum*, but at 'the destruction of Prussianism'; effectively, a transformation of German society that could be secured by nothing short of unconditional surrender. Neither side was sufficiently victorious to dictate its terms, and neither had yet suffered enough to be prepared to compromise. As for the United States, although at the end of 1916 the probability of her entering the war seemed as remote as ever, her material and moral support of the western Allies appeared irreversible. The war had to go on.

For the German High Command, the continuation of the war meant the introduction of unrestricted submarine warfare, for which not only the naval but the military leadership, with growing public support, had been clamouring for at least a year. If this meant accepting the inevitability of the United States entering the war on the side of her enemies, so be it. It was a decision that has rightly been condemned by subsequent generations as a disastrous example of military hubris, comparable to the Schlieffen Plan itself; of *Staatskunst*, in Gerhard Ritter's phrase, yielding to *Kriegshandwerk*, statesmanship being overridden by mechanical military calculations. There was the hubris of the Naval Staff itself, with their misleadingly precise calculations of the number of weeks that it would take to bring about the collapse of the British economy without any reckoning of the counter-measures that might throw those calculations out; and there was the hubris of the High Command, which discounted the contribution, moral as well as material, that the enormous power of the United States would make, once it was committed, to the Allied cause. It was as much its inability to understand the realities of *Weltpolitik* as its *weltpolitische* ambitions that was to bring the Wilhelmine Reich to destruction.

It was many months before the German government realized that their gamble had failed. U-Boat sinkings did indeed rise to the heights predicted by the Naval Staff, and although it was evident by the end of the summer that Britain would not be starved into submission and that her counter-measures were proving effective, everywhere else German arms were triumphant. The French armies were decisively defeated in April, the Russians annihilated in October, the Italians crushed in November, and the British in Flanders held to a bloody draw. When the newly-constituted Supreme Allied War Council met in Paris that winter it was in a mood of deep apprehension. The

Russians had collapsed beyond hope of recovery. The Allied armies in the west appeared incapable of further offensive action until 1919 at the very earliest, whereas the Germans, at last free to concentrate all their forces on a single front, could be expected to mount an overwhelming attack the following spring. Even worse, so far as the British were concerned, the collapse of the Russians left the way clear for Germany and her Turkish allies to penetrate into central Asia and to fulfil the worst nightmares of imperial politicians by seizing the so-called 'Heartland' of the continent and descending in force upon India. Never had Germany appeared so powerful and so threatening.

Yet never, in the eyes of her rulers, had Germany appeared so near to collapse. A fourth wartime winter had reduced the people of her cities to despair, and the example of the Bolshevik Revolution seemed likely to prove infectious. But the High Command believed the situation to be even worse than it was. Not for another year would the German people be anything like ripe for revolution, or the German army for mutiny. Even then, if Ludendorff had not lost his nerve and asked for an armistice, they might have hung on through another winter. Hitler was to learn a lesson from all this: given resolute leadership, there was almost no limit to what the German people were prepared to endure; and if in addition they could exploit the vast hinterland placed at their disposal by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, would they ever need to worry about blockade again?

But these were the dreams for another war. As it was, once the United States was committed to the war and began to feed her armies into the Western Front, all hope of German victory disappeared. At best, the fears and weakness of the Allies might be exploited by the still formidable power of the German Army to obtain 'reason-

able' peace terms; terms, that is, that would enable Germany to keep her conquests in the East and so be in a better position next time round. Hence Ludendorff's final *Friedenstoß*, the hammer blows directed against the Western Front between March and July 1918, directed at breaking not so much the Allied armies, as the Allied will to continue the war.

But by now Britain was no longer Germany's sole, or even her major adversary. France had brilliantly recovered and regained, under Foch, her status as senior partner in the alliance. Even the 'British' armies now consisted largely of Canadians and Australians who were emerging as independent actors on the world scene. The new armies preparing to attack in 1919, with all the advantages of air and armoured support, were largely equipped by the United States, and American armies were to play a substantial part in the unexpected victories of autumn 1918. Britain's moment of dominance in the alliance had passed. It was to be Foch who dictated the terms of the armistice in November 1918. It was the rivalry between the idealism of Wilson and the *Realpolitik* of Clemenceau that dominated the Paris Peace Conference and determined the terms of the subsequent treaties. Britain was content to reap her reward with the destruction of the High Seas Fleet, the seizure of Germany's overseas colonies (largely to the benefit of her own Dominions) and the enlargement of her Empire in the Middle East. The reshaping of Europe itself she left largely to a bitter, resentful, but fatally weakened France.

After Versailles, the Anglo-German confrontation relaxed. Antagonism certainly remained, but other elements were entering into it. Britain no longer saw Germany as the principal threat to her status as a world power: for the Royal Navy, the main rivals were now the United States,

who could be squared, and the Japanese, who could not. The exaggerated hatred of wartime provoked its own reaction. Liberals, following the lead of Maynard Keynes, lamented the ill-treatment of Germany at Versailles and condemned the revanchism of France. Conservatives saw in Germany the best bulwark against Bolshevism and observed with approval the rise there of a populist right-wing party to fulfil this role. The powerful lobby of ex-servicemen emerged from the war with a respect for their old enemies bordering sometimes on affection, and there was in general a popular determination never to become involved in comparable conflict again. In working for 'appeasement', Neville Chamberlain and his predecessors were doing no more than was expected of them by their electorates.

It was a mood that Hitler was cleverly to exploit. His own respect for England as an adversary and readiness to come to terms with her may have been exaggerated by some historians, but he certainly did not want to provoke a conflict before he was ready for it; and that would not be before he had consolidated his continental base by the subjugation of France and the destruction of the Soviet Union. So friendly links with England were encouraged and nothing was done to stir up the old *Englandhaß*. The embers remained; Britain's role in the post-war blockade was not forgotten, and was exploited by the publicists concerned with rebutting the accusations of Germany's sole 'war guilt'. But in so far as the Nazis depicted England as an adversary at all, it was only as one element in the great Judeo-Bolshevist conspiracy that threatened the Third Reich, and not as a very significant element at that. Even when, totally unexpectedly, Germany once again confronted England as her sole adversary in the summer of 1940, Hitler did not concentrate all his forces on defeating her. Once the British had rebuffed his offers of peace,

he reduced the war-effort against her to the minimum necessary to prevent her doing any damage, and began preparing for war against his preferred adversary, the Soviet Union.

That is why I see in those latter years of the First World War the climax, or the crisis, of the Anglo-German antagonism. It is hard not to look back on them with mixed feelings. They were terrible years; terrible not only for the immediate sufferings our peoples inflicted on one another, civilians as well as soldiers, but because of the longer-term destruction inflicted on our societies. It was in those years that Britain became a debtor nation, exhausting her overseas assets and perhaps exhausting the will and capacity of her people – especially her ruling classes – to remain a world power at all. The sufferings of the German people were not only to precipitate a revolution and an even more ferocious counter-revolution, but to destroy social cohesion, pauperize the middle-classes, create a nihilistic philosophy among intellectuals, and in general provide a seed-bed in which National Socialism was to flourish.

But in looking back on those years, our compassion for the sufferings that our peoples inflicted on each other can only be mixed with admiration at the stoicism and courage with which they endured them. Writers and artists have recorded the nightmare of the Western Front, unforgettably and almost unbearably. The hardships of civilians were less dramatic but perhaps in the long run more decisive. For the British those sacrifices were at least partially redeemed by victory; in Germany they were intensified by defeat. Tragically, it was that redemption and that intensification which made it possible for our two peoples to fight each other yet again, a bare generation later.

Now, at the end of our bloody century, it would be the ultimate tragedy if that antagonism did not end in total reconciliation; a reconciliation not of exhaustion but of true mutual understanding and, where appropriate, forgiveness. In that reconciliation, historians such as ourselves must play a leading part.

*I am the enemy you killed my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried, but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now ...³*

³ Wilfred Owen, *Strange Meeting* (1918).