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## Book Review: 'The Hidden Perspective' by David Owen

British and French military officers were already making secret war plans in 1906.

*Entente Cordiale*



A postcard from the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition in London. *ROGER VIOLLET/GETTY IMAGES*

By **ANDREW ROBERTS**

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**The centenary** of the outbreak of World War I has spawned a number of books that examine the reasons why the assassination of an Austrian archduke by a Serb in Bosnia should have, within six weeks, led to people marching to their doom from places as far afield as Glasgow, Nice, Hamburg and Nizhny Novgorod. In particular, why did Britain, hitherto the great balancer of power in Europe, get so immediately involved in the conflict when Britain had stayed neutral in 1870-71 even as the Germans besieged Paris?

Recent books like Margaret Macmillan's "The War That Ended Peace" and Christopher Clark's "The Sleepwalkers" have covered the August 1914 cataclysm seemingly from every possible angle: dynastic, political, diplomatic, military and strategic. Yet David Owen, a former British foreign secretary, believes they have underestimated the vital role played by the British and French general staffs and the secret conversations between them that had been taking place for a full eight years before the war broke out.

These Anglo-French staff talks, Mr. Owen contends, effectively left Britain with no choice but to enter the war and destroyed Britain's earlier deterrent role, which had kept the peace in Europe ever since the Franco-Prussian War. The decision to fight Germany was therefore not primarily made by the British cabinet or Parliament but by an unelected cabal of military chiefs known as the Committee of Imperial Defence, and the committee had arrived at its positions many years before that fateful Sunday morning in Sarajevo. The British cabinet was not even told of the Anglo-French staff talks until 1911, five years after they had begun.

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**THE HIDDEN PERSPECTIVE**

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*By David Owen*

*Haus, 271 pages, \$29.95*

British foreign policy from the 1880s to the first decade of the 20th century has been accurately characterized as one of "splendid Isolation." The Royal Navy—which by a law of 1888 had to be bigger than the next two largest navies in the world combined—allowed Britain and its vast empire the luxury of avoiding direct

involvement in continental squabbles, although successive governments subscribed to the policy of not allowing any one power to become too powerful. By 1906, however, it seemed clear to the military chiefs of the Committee of Imperial Defence that imperial Germany, led by the psychologically disturbed Wilhelm II, was threatening to overturn the balance of power in Europe and that Germany's principal future victim, France, had to be supported, at least covertly.

The architect of splendid isolation, British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, had died three years before. It was thus a small group of his successors who agreed to secret exploratory talks with the French about how a British expeditionary force might come to France's rescue in the event of a German invasion. These conversations form the kernel of Mr. Owen's well-researched, well-written and thought-provoking book, which does indeed force us to reappraise the causes of the Great War, or at least Britain's decision to get involved in it.

Mr. Owen quite rightly concentrates on a few key events that took place roughly a decade before the fighting began, including the negotiation of Britain's Entente Cordiale with France in 1904; the creation of the Committee of Imperial Defence during the same year; the Kaiser's provocatively anti-French visit to Morocco in 1905; and the start of the Anglo-French military conversations in early 1906. Mr. Owen's villain is Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, whom he credits with overturning a pro-German feeling in the Foreign Office and replacing it with something approaching Teutonophobia.

“Grey never understood that a continental land battle would drag Britain into a protracted war with deaths and casualties beyond imagining,” Mr. Owen writes. This is true, though if anyone in decision-making roles in 1914—even the most expansionist Germans—had an inkling of the way the war would progress, they would have all shrunk back from the brink, horrified.

It was on Jan. 15, 1906, that Grey and the secretary for war, Richard Haldane, authorized the planning staff from the Committee of Imperial Defence to start detailed talks with the French military. “British diplomacy suddenly acquired a continental rigidity that had been absent for many decades,” Mr. Owen argues. The conversations were detailed enough to cover railway timetables and the guarding of naval cordite. Mr. Owen believes that they encouraged the French not to concentrate on increasing their armed forces as much as they ought to have done. “Britain should have waited to see whether the French were ready to build up their forces in northern France,” Mr. Owen states, “before taking detailed steps for the deployment of a British Expeditionary Force to France.”

The problem with this argument, of course, is that if Britain had waited for the French, its own decision to act might have come too late. In any case, Anglo-French plans were so far advanced by 1914 that the British government could hardly have failed to declare war, even if the Germans hadn’t made the decision easier by flagrantly violating Belgian independence, which Britain had guaranteed by treaty back in 1839.

One attractive feature of “The Hidden Perspective” is Mr. Owen’s insightful interpolation of his own experiences as foreign secretary in the late 1970s, roughly seven decades after Grey occupied the same grand office overlooking St. James’s Park. It was while standing in that office on the evening of Aug. 3, 1914, watching the gaslights being lighted in the street below, that Grey told a companion that “the lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.” Mr. Owen allows that Grey was right about that.

—Mr. Roberts’s “Napoleon: A Life” will be published by Viking in November.