

Stumbling to the brink

by A. J. P. TAYLOR

BRITAIN AND THE ORIGINS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR by Zara Steiner (Macmillan £7.95 and £3.50)

THOUGH the First World War is now 60 years away, it still provides fertile ground for historical debate. Until recently we thought we had more or less settled its causes: the outbreak of war was a muddle, a mistake, and that is all there was to it.

Then came Fritz Fischer and his followers, announcing that the war was deliberately planned by the rulers of Germany, either to establish their domination of Europe or to quell social discontent at home. But what about the other European Powers? Were they innocent victims of German aggression? Or did they, too, plan to remodel Europe in line with their ambitions?

Zara Steiner is the first English historian to consider the origins of the First World War in the post-Fischer age. She is well qualified to do so. She is an outstanding authority on the workings of the Foreign Office; she has an unrivalled command of the sources and she has a gift for clear exposition. Her verdict is apparently clear. Sir Edward Grey was a wise, pacific statesman, determined to maintain the independence of France but equally anxious to conciliate Germany and win her for peaceful co-operation. There was no British design for an aggressive war against Germany and forces outside the Foreign Office and the Government did not shape Grey's policy. As Steiner writes, 'Grey made the final choice and until August 1914 was the master of his own ship.'

On closer examination this verdict seems less certain. Grey's mind pivoted on the Balance of Power. French independence, he believed, was essential for British security and this independence was menaced by Germany. Now where did he get this idea

from? Surely from the anti-German experts in the Foreign Office, such as Truman got the Cold War from the anti-Soviet experts of the State Department in 1948. As so often, German aggression was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once others assumed it, the Germans duly responded in character.

The Balance of Power changed, I think, not because the Germans planned to change it but because changes followed inevitably from the increasing economic strength of Germany and the relative decline of the French. Indeed it could be plausibly argued that in the long term the Balance of Power was more threatened by Russia than by Germany and some projectors already foresaw a coalition of the three Western Powers against the coming Russian giant. Grey had in fact formed a picture or perhaps accepted one thrust upon him by his advisers. He may have been the master of his ship but his sailing orders were laid down by others.

There were other factors which Steiner considers in the later part of her book. The two service departments had long planned deliberately for war against Germany just as the German high command planned for war against the Triple Entente. By 1914 the Admiralty perhaps thought that they had re-established

British naval supremacy without a war. The War Office however had devised the dispatch of an expeditionary force to France and had given commitments to the French that were binding in all but name.

It is possible that Grey did not grasp the consequences of the preparations made by the War Office. In August 1914 he was genuinely surprised that his declaration of war on Germany was at once followed by the departure of the British expeditionary force to France. Presumably he imagined that a mere declaration of war would be effective of itself. As he complacently told the House of Commons on 3 August, 'If engaged in war we shall suffer but little more than we shall suffer if we stand aside.' Far from Grey being all powerful, Sir Henry Wilson, the Director of Military Operations, was more powerful than Grey.

Steiner devotes much attention to the radical wing of the Liberal Party and its attempts to check Grey's foreign policy. The critics were vocal, ingenious and deeply sincere. But in Grey they were faced with a brick wall despite his conciliatory appearance. In his own mind he never shifted from the Balance of Power. As he could not emphasise this argument too blatantly he fell back on evasion and even direct lies. Most Govern-

ments, I suppose, cheat their own supporters more than they mislead the Opposition. None has done so more persistently than the Liberal Government of Asquith and Grey. Certainly they did so from the highest motives but they cheated all the same.

Towards the end Steiner seems to recognise this. She writes:—

For the most part, Grey responded to external events. This is not to deny that he and his colleagues were part of a broader political, bureaucratic and military framework which restricted the number of options when the moment for decision came. Or that their decisions were based on erroneous assumptions about the nature of war, its effects and costs.

This is not a very glowing testimonial to the rulers of a great country. Indeed it is very close to Lloyd George's verdict, 'We all muddled into war.'

Whatever Grey's aim it was not achieved. To quote Steiner again, 'Germany was beaten but Britain had clearly lost her "free hand" in fact if not in theory.' Not satisfied with this conclusion she shifts her ground on the last page:—

It may well be that, for reasons which the historian can only dimly perceive, Europe was deeply ready for war. . . . It may be that some profound boredom with the long years of peace and with the tedium of industrial life led men to volunteer for France and to find in that Hell a final confirmation of manhood.

As she says, it may be so. At any rate her brilliant exposition provides many ideas to argue over and some to agree with.

Sunk without trace

THERE WAS once a British writer so celebrated in America that when he

by PAUL