



4 August 1914

The lead up to Britain's declaration of war

- At the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain was one of the greatest powers in the world, with one in four people owing allegiance to the British Crown.
- By 1907 Europe was split into two main camps: Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy in one – The Triple Alliance – and France, Russia and Britain in the other – The Triple Entente.
- 28 June 1914, Serbian-backed terrorist, Gavrilo Princip, shot dead Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. With German encouragement, this led to Austria-Hungary's declaration of war against Serbia one month later on 28 July 1914.
- This declaration of war drew in allies and supporters on both sides. Germany supported Austria-Hungary and Russia stood by the Serbs.
- 3 August 1914, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey addresses the House of Commons on Britain's position in the crisis.
- The British government, led by Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, agonised over whether to support France and Russia or to remain neutral but it feared a German domination of Europe would result if France and Russia were beaten. A victorious and hostile Germany would threaten Britain's security and its position in the world.
- Germany's invasion of Belgium, to get to France, tipped the balance as ever since 1839 Britain had guaranteed both Belgium's neutrality and independence.

4 August 1914 Timeline

Note: In August 1914 London, Paris and Brussels were all on the same time while Berlin and Vienna were one hour ahead, and St Petersburg two hours ahead. All times given here are local times.

Midnight – London: In the Personal Column of *The Times*, the advertisement “To all who call themselves English gentlemen – are you drilled and *ready* to defend your country?” appears. On the same page, the Austro-Hungarian Government calls on all reservists in Britain to report without delay to the Consulate-General

6am – Foreign Ministry, Brussels: German Minister in Brussels delivers a note which informs the Belgian government that after their refusal of free passage, Germany would now be obliged to carry out measures for her own security and “if necessary by force of arms.”

- 8.02am – Gemmerich, German-Belgian border:** First German troops cross the frontier and begin the invasion of Belgium. They meet resistance from Belgian gendarmes.
- 9.30am – Foreign Office, London:** Telegram is sent to British Embassy in Berlin where Ambassador Sir Edward Goschen is instructed to tell Germans that Britain was “bound to protest against this violation of a treaty to which Germany is a party... and must request an assurance that the demand made upon Belgium will not be proceeded with, and that her neutrality will be respected by Germany.”
- 11am – Royal Palace, Brussels:** Official news of the German invasion reaches Brussels.
- 12 noon – Royal Palace, Brussels:** King Albert I and his ministers draft an appeal to Britain, France and Russia for “concerted and common” military action against the German invaders. The King adds: “Belgium is happy to declare that she will assume the defence of her fortified places.”
- 2pm – Foreign Office, London:** Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey telegraphs an ultimatum to Berlin, requesting the German government to make assurances that it would respect Belgian neutrality as guaranteed by the 1839 Treaty of London. A reply is requested by 11pm (midnight Berlin time).
- 3pm – British Embassy, Berlin:** The 9.30am telegram from the London Foreign Office arrives at the embassy in Berlin
- 4.20pm – Foreign Office, London:** A telegram giving the official confirmation of the German invasion of Belgium arrives from the British minister in Brussels.
- 6pm – British Embassy, Berlin:** The 2pm telegram from London, giving the ultimatum, arrives in Berlin. After a visit to the foreign ministry, Ambassador Sir Edward Goschen requests a meeting with Reich Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg
- 9pm – Foreign Office, London:** Telegrams warning British diplomatic and consular missions around the world of Britain’s impending declaration of war are sent out.
- 9.05pm – 10 Downing Street, London:** Prime Minister Asquith summons Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, and other senior members of the cabinet for consultation. They are told of an intercepted telegram from Berlin to the German ambassador falsely stating that Britain declared war on Germany at 7pm Berlin time.
- 9.40pm – Foreign Office, London:** Another false report is received that Germany has declared war on Britain. Junior Foreign Office official Lancelot Oliphant is sent to the German Embassy with a hastily typed British declaration of war.
- 10pm – British Embassy, Berlin:** A howling mob outside the embassy start throwing stones at the windows, breaking most of them and forcing Sir Edward Goschen and his staff to seek refuge on the first floor. A formal apology is later personally delivered by foreign minister Gottlieb von Jagow.
- 10.15pm – Foreign Office, London:** Oliphant returns from the German Embassy to find that the report of a German declaration of war was false. A fresh declaration of war is typed up ready to be taken round to Ambassador Prince Karl Lichnowsky.
- 10.45pm – Buckingham Palace, London:** King George V holds a Privy Council to declare war on Germany: “It is a terrible catastrophe but it is not our fault.”
- 11.05pm – German Embassy, London:** Junior Foreign Office official Harold Nicolson arrives in the Foreign Secretary’s Rolls Royce with the new declaration of war and instructions to retrieve the one Oliphant brought earlier.

11.20pm – 10 Downing Street, London: First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, reports to the Prime Minister and Cabinet colleagues that a wireless message had been sent to all Royal Navy warships announcing that Britain was now at war with Germany: “War, Germany, act.”

11.30pm – 10 Downing Street, London: David Lloyd George leaves the Prime Minister’s residence: “...I felt like a man standing on a planet that had been suddenly wrenched from its orbit by a demoniac hand and that was spinning wildly into the unknown.”

12 midnight – Buckingham Palace, London: King George V retires to bed after writing up his diary for the night: “Please God it may soon be over...”

12 midnight – Post Office’s Central Telegraph Office, London: The last direct cable message to Berlin for the next four years is sent. It reads “G.N.” (“Good Night.”

Key Dates – Ultimatums and Declarations of War

- 23 July, Austro-Hungarian ultimatum sent to Serbia
- 28 July, Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia
- 31 July, German ultimatum sent to Russia
- 1 August, Germany declares war on Russia
- 2 August, German ultimatum sent to Belgium demanding unhindered passage through Belgian territory for troops
- 3 August, Belgium rejects German ultimatum
- 3 August, Germany declares war on France
- 4 August, Britain declares war on Germany
- 23 August, Japan declares war on Germany

Quotes

‘There are always clouds in the international sky.’

- David Lloyd George, British Chancellor of the Exchequer, 17 July 1914

‘We’d been playing a series of rugby football games and as a final game of the session the Germans had challenged the rest and this was to be followed by dinner at the German Club. We were all seated around the table, mixed up obviously, there was a German here and next to him there was an Englishman and next to him there was a German and next to him there was a Frenchman and so on, and so on, and we were starting the rugby football dinner, and it was very like other rugby football dinners have been from time immemorial. A bang at the door, and a runner from the French Embassy with the extraordinary news of outbreak of war... None of the chaps here had ever seen a declaration of war before, we didn’t know what we ought to do, whether we ought to seize a knife off the table and plunge it into the next chap or what! But after a little bit of discussion we decided that as far as we were concerned the war was going to start tomorrow and it wasn’t going to start tonight, and the party proceeded and that was that.’

- Charles James Chabot, residing in Bangkok, Siam, (present day Thailand) in August 1914
(Catalogue number 8)

‘I remember so well that the one and only hotel at Rottingdean they had a waiter or somebody who was a German. And when the news came through by telephone to say that war had been declared against Germany, I can see him now rushing out into the road there and wringing his hands and in his guttural English saying, ‘It is madness!’ He was really shocked.’

- 14 year old Arthur Hector Tevendale, after having spent the Bank Holiday of 3 August 1914 in East Sussex (Catalogue number 770)

'We didn't know until the last moment whether or not England would come in, but we were not surprised when we heard this news.

And we took it up very, very cheerfully, because after all if you are a commissioned officer in the forces you don't want to drill all the time and learn, you want to show what you've learnt. On the other hand we fully realised that the size of the German fleet was practically nothing in comparison with the almighty British fleet.'

- German naval officer Lieutenant Commander Dehn (Catalogue number 4075)

'I remember we was on manoeuvres at Krugersdorp and I was walking down the road in the cool of the evening, relaxing, when a motor driver came along all grim and dirty with sand, 'Can you direct me to brigade headquarters? England's at war with Germany'. Well I told him where to go, but the fact that England was at war with Germany didn't convey a thing because 7,000 miles away meant that we shouldn't become involved.'

- Private A.K. Maydwell, serving with the Royal West Surrey Regiment at Krugersdorp, Union of South Africa, in August 1914. He would later fight on the Western Front. (Catalogue number 4177)