

**BEFORE
AND NOW**

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Before and now by Austin Harrison

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Foreword

WHEN we console ourselves with the cry that war "caught us unprepared," we pronounce unquestionably the truth and also a judgment. And that is the excuse for the gathering together of these pre-war echoes; they hang and hand on a thread. At least they show that *The English Review*, in which they appeared, took a correct estimate of European affairs, held an unswerving course, did what it could to dissipate the delusions of insularity in the critical years which immediately preceded the war. Pieced together to-day, they connect a story.

After the Khaki election of the Boer War the inevitable reaction followed, closing the era of Jingoism. The Tariff Reform movement was too obviously a political diversion to succeed in those days, and it led to that ascendancy of Liberalism which swept away the privilege of the House of Lords; which ultimately swept us "unprepared" into the great European struggle, in the vortex of which it in turn was swept away.

If the reaction of Cecil Rhodes was Campbell Bannerman, we must never forget that we owe

perhaps our destiny to the provident act of the statesman who, after the war, conferred self-government upon the Boers, for that essentially English wisdom probably saved the Empire in 1914-15. The South African rebellion, which the Germans had counted upon, did not take place, because the cause of rebellion had been removed. The fact "steadied" Europe. So the man denounced in his time as "traitor" has been proved a creator, and with the recognition of that truth our civilisation received a new spirituality, which has since become the fulcrum of the world's crusade against monarchical militarism.

These impressions bear upon the interim stage which, looking back, we can to-day see tally, without even a question of poetical licence, with the logic of the "absent-minded beggar" of Mr Kipling. The African gamble was discredited. Men had grown suspicious of mere Jingoism which, leading to the secondary symptom of European filibustery in China, was felt generally to be a policy of high explosives. Its place had been taken by King Edward. Almost unnoticed by the public, Britain had re-entered the Continental system of power as the military and political wing of Europe, thereby putting an end to our historical attitude of "isolation." Yet this position was not understood, remained unformulated, was never here or continentally accepted. It seemed to be a condition, though in reality it changed the balance of power by its creation of the two great European groups of

Alliances or armed antagonisms which ultimately clashed in 1914. Again and again the Germans sought to test the reality and potentiality of our adhesion to the rival continental grouping, over Morocco, and on several occasions war was only avoided by the sagacity of France. Yet even so Europe was in doubt, and actually, as we now know, we ourselves were in doubt up to the decision of the most momentous Cabinet Council ever held in this country in the first days of August 1914, thus determining not only the issue of the war but the fate of Europe and of the Anglo-Saxon civilisation.

I think history will decide that the war broke out largely as the result of this uncertainty of attachment. In the years 1900-10 I had many conversations with German politicians, soldiers and journalists, on this point, and always the assumption was that England would at any rate never deviate from her policy of "limited liability" so far as military help was concerned; and always the corollary followed that in no case would America ever interfere in a European war. That was the German root and, eventually determinative, axiom. War would be strictly European, in which belief all German military writers, from Bernhardt onward, concurred. The strange thing is that we in this country were also doubtful.

The Prime Minister raised the veil which shrouds secret diplomacy and the military relationship of nations the other day by referring