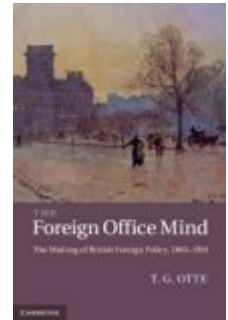


T. G. Otte. *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy, 1865–1914.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xiii, 437 S. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-00650-8.



Reviewed by Eric H. Haas

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

T. G. Otte, a diplomatic historian and senior lecturer at the University of East Anglia, presents a very compelling work with his *The Foreign Office Mind*. In the book, the author examines the British Foreign Office's diplomatic interplay with other European powers, and to a lesser extent the United States, from the Victorian through Edwardian periods of British history. He ends this examination with the commencement of the First World War. The author divides the work into distinct periods to provide the context for the Foreign Office's mission and understanding of the British position in the world.

Otte's underlying thesis argues that individual Foreign Office leaders developed a similar worldview, since Great Britain drew its diplomatic corps members from a similar educational, social, and political background. He further asks whether this similar perspective assisted the Foreign Office, by allowing for mutual understanding across vast distances with limited communication capability, or whether, by creating a system of Group Think, it boxed the British government into

a specific way of thinking leading to the crisis of August 1914. Through meticulous examination of both public archives and previously unexamined personal papers, Otte expands on this area of diplomatic history.

This work mainly focuses on British interactions with the countries directly involved in the First World War (France, Russia, Germany, the Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the United States), though Otte also addresses British colonial interactions as they related to Britain's dealings with the "Great Powers." Central to the British Foreign Office's dealings with these "Great Powers" was the British government's views of its own strength and imperial stability. This internal assessment had an impact on the ways in which the Foreign Office sought to influence the other powers. Otte does excellent work detailing how British interactions with Russia posed such problems to the Foreign Office due to Russia's straddling of Europe and Asia, which the British hoped to influence and dominate. Otte's analysis helps to create a greater understanding of British motiva-

tions during the “Great Game” within Central Asia.

A second area where this work seeks to expand the historical record is through the examination of the Foreign Office’s reform efforts from 1905 through 1906. Otte addresses many of the specific myths of these overarching reforms, especially focusing on whether the reforms were the work of the Primary Undersecretary Charles Hardinge or the result of a longer period of reform that culminated in 1906. This part of *The Foreign Office Mind* is the most engaging for me, as it demonstrates the depth of research conducted by Otte. This section also highlights the progression of the British Foreign Office to a professional and capable bureau within the British government.

However, one of the shortcomings of this work is a lack of focus on senior diplomats’ backgrounds and how their commonalities drove decisions in the Foreign Office. Otte provides little background, in terms of education or familial ties, for many of the senior Foreign Office members, which serves to undermine his underlying thesis. This shortcoming is further highlighted with Otte’s use of the term “Foreign Office mind,” early and often in the work, to refer to the views of the Foreign Office in Whitehall. This term reinforces the idea that Whitehall was a “monolithic mind-set” compared to a “broadly constructed frame of mind” (p. 6). Another area that Otte could have more deeply explored are the British interactions with Belgium, as this alliance greatly influenced the British decision to go to war in 1914.

Overall, *The Foreign Policy Mind* is an excellent source for providing a deep examination of the inner workings of the British diplomatic corps interaction with other European powers leading up to the First World War. Otte’s depth of research fills a significant gap in the historical record linking the mid- to late nineteenth century to the start of the Great War. He clearly demonstrates that the commencement of the conflict and its horrific cost

over the next four years was not inevitable, but rather the result of diplomatic and political maneuvering by European powers for over half a century for dominance on the European continent and in their colonial spheres. Otte rightly concludes that Foreign Office members did not realize the horror that would be unleashed with the start of the First World War, but the nature of their schooling and upbringing produced a culture of noncommitment and deference versus a strong desire to act proactively to preempt crisis.

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