Sleepwalking into war

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An extraordinary Cabinet meeting at Pembroke Lodge

Whilst cataloguing the expanding archive in the Hearsum collection at Pembroke Lodge, volunteers were astonished to discover that, incredible as it may sound, Britain's decision to invade the Crimea was taken by Cabinet ministers who were mostly fast asleep.

On the warm summer evening of 28 June 1854, the government ministers of Prime Minister Lord Aberdeen were hosted by minister without portfolio Lord John Russell at his family home in Richmond Park. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the Minister of War's proposed despatch ordering the invasion of the Crimea. It was a very strongly worded order which effectively declared war on Russia, a serious and controversial step that might have been expected to provoke strong objections, or at least lively debate.

But according to the eminent contemporary historian AW Kinglake, the debate never happened. In his book *The Invasion of the Crimea,* published nine years after the Pembroke Lodge meeting, Kinglake reveals: "The Duke of Newcastle [Minister of War] took the despatch to Richmond, for there was to be a meeting of the members of the Cabinet at Pembroke Lodge, and he intended to make this the occasion for submitting the proposed instructions to the judgement of his colleagues. It was evening – a summer evening – and all the members of the Cabinet were present when the Duke took out the draft of his proposed despatch and began to read it. There then occurred an incident, very trifling in itself, but yet so momentous in its consequences that, if it had happened in old times, it would have been attributed to the direct intervention of the immortal gods."

"In these days, perhaps, the physiologist will speak of the condition into which the human brain is naturally brought after anxious labours, and the analytical chemist may regret that he had not the opportunity of testing the food of which the Ministers had partaken, with a view to detect the presence of some narcotic poison."

No one, Kinglake writes, could accuse Lord Aberdeen's ministers of being "careless and torpid... However, it is very certain that, before the reading of the paper had long continued, all the members of the Cabinet, except a small minority, were overcome with sleep." Despite efforts to arouse ministers' attention, "even those who had remained awake were in a quiet, assenting frame of mind... The despatch, though it bristled with sentences tending to provoke objection, received from the Cabinet the kind of approval which is often awarded to an unobjectionable sermon. Not a letter of it was altered."

Were Britain's rulers not just dozy but drugged with opium? The historian Norry Hughes thinks they might have been: "The use of opium as both a medical and recreational drug was rife throughout the land," Hughes writes in his 2009 book 'A Voice from the Ranks of the Scots Guards'. This was the time of the Opium Wars and "the Cabinet would have been well aware of the smoking of opium, and the taking of the drug would probably have been prevalent even among members of the government. So there was no harm, nor nothing untoward, in a relaxing smoke of opium while waiting for the Duke of Newcastle to arrive and indeed would have been considered as normal. However, perhaps the Duke had been too late and the opium smoked too long?"

Kinglake himself notes in an appendix analysing the incident that the "assenting disposition of those who remained awake (for they were anxious, careful, laborious men) is harder to account for than the condition of those who were in a complete state of rest" and suggests that dinner may have been to blame, or rather "a narcotic substance having been taken by some mischance would account for a torpor which affected all."

George Macdonald Fraser's 'Flashman' novels, although fictional, were assiduously researched and in a footnote from *Flashman at the Charge* referring to the meeting, Fraser quotes Kinglake as a source and observes: "The Cabinet did meet at Pembroke Lodge...and agreed on important orders to be sent to Lord Raglan for the invasion of the Crimea. 'Agreed' may be too strong a word, since most of the Cabinet were asleep during the meeting and were not fully aware of what orders were being sent; they woke up once, when someone knocked over a chair, and dozed off again.

Kinglake...was too tactful or charitable to mention the obvious conclusion, which is that they had had too much to drink."

Whatever the cause of their somnolence, the historical fact is that ministers, seated comfortably in the Soane room - the pretty room where today we take tea while admiring the view - approved without a word of dissent a document that prompted an immediate rush to war.

The consequences were enormous. Lord Raglan, field commander of the forces in the Crimea, was aghast at the order, which severely restricted his room for manoeuvre. Fearing he would be replaced if he did not comply, he wrote to the Duke of Newcastle on 19 July 1854 that he "submitted to act with soldierly readiness under instructions which he looked upon as imperative or at all events violently cogent," as Kinglake puts it. It was the worst possible moment to go to war: Britain's forces were desperately ill-prepared, the Russians were in retreat and might have been forced to negotiate, cholera was rife throughout the army and winter was approaching.

Britain was victorious, but at a terrible cost. The Pembroke Lodge incident serves to highlight the gravity of a declaration of war but shows how casual and accident-prone such an action can be.

Cartoon entitled "God Defend the Right", from the satirical magazine Punch, or the London Charivari, *1854, now held in The Hearsum Collection. It shows Lord John Russell standing on a Crimean battlefield in the character of Richard the Lionheart whilst a Russian Military leader looks on. This is the triumphant depiction offered to the British public, as yet unaware of the now infamous Cabinet meeting at Pembroke Lodge.*