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978-1-107-04245-2 - The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics,  
and Decision-Making

Edited by Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez

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*Part I*

Overview of debates about the causes  
of the First World War

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## 1 Introduction

Historians, political scientists, and the causes  
of the First World War

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*Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez*

### Overview

It has been 100 years since the Great War, as it was called at the time, scorched the earth and psyches of the West, transforming our lives and world forever. As George Kennan remarked, the First World War was “*the great seminal catastrophe*” of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The war destroyed empires and it led to political and social upheavals across Europe, the emergence of new national states, and a redrawing of the map of the Continent. It set the stage for the rise of Hitler and the Second World War and, indirectly, for the Cold War. It also triggered a significant shift in attitudes toward war, from one in which war was seen as acceptable and natural to one in which war was seen as abhorrent, if not irrational, and to be avoided. In military terms, the First World War also marked a shift away from the limited wars of the mid-nineteenth century to total war with extensive social mobilization. The experiences of the war also produced a substantial body of work in literature and film that continues to shape images of war generations later. The impact of the war was all the greater because it became a political and emotional issue after the inclusion of the war guilt clause in the Versailles Treaty.

Historians have now debated the origins of the First World War for a century. These debates have been motivated in part by the complexity of the processes leading to the war, and by the fact that the war provides some evidence to support a large number of different interpretations. As Paul Kennedy remarked, “the First World War offers so much data that conclusions can be drawn from it to suit any *a priori* hypothesis which contemporary strategists wish to advance.”<sup>2</sup> Those clinging to a version of the

<sup>1</sup> George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, “The First World War and the International Power System,” *International Security*, 9(1) (1984): 7–40, at 37.

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“slide to war” hypothesis have been further motivated by the gap between what they regard as the relatively limited aims of most of the participants, and the enormity of the destruction of the war and of its political and social consequences. Many others have been motivated by the politicized nature of interpretations of the war, affecting conceptions of national identity and having implications for government policies years later.<sup>3</sup>

The First World War has also captured the imagination of international relations (IR) scholars. The war has had a disproportionate impact on the development of numerous theories of international conflict, from theories of balance of power, power transitions, alliances, economic interdependence, and offense–defense, to theories of scapegoating, rigid organizational routines, and misperceptions. It is also a commonly used case to illustrate and test a wide range of theories of international conflict.<sup>4</sup> The First World War remains *the* case to which nearly every IR conflict theorist is drawn.

This should not be surprising. Historiographical debates about the origins of the First World War parallel many theoretical debates that are central to the international relations field: structure and agency; the relative importance of international and domestic sources of causation; the causal role of individual personalities and belief systems; the rationality and coherence of the decision-making process; the dynamics of the security dilemma; the role of international norms and institutions; and the impact of strategic and societal culture, to name a few. The war is also intriguing because it started with a crisis that most observers at the time thought would be managed successfully. Within a few days it spiraled out of control and diffused rapidly from a local war to a continental war, and then to a world war that eventually engulfed all the major states in every region of the globe. Seemingly rational decisions led to irrational outcomes. The processes leading to war were characterized by extraordinary causal complexity involving an intricate interplay of variables from all levels of analysis: structural pressures, dyadic rivalries, social upheaval, insecure regimes, bureaucratic intrigue, long-standing strategic cultures, idiosyncratic leaders, and decision-making under enormous uncertainty.

In addition, the First World War has left an extensive documentary record. After the new Bolshevik government attempted to discredit the tsarist regime by publishing its secret treaties, other governments, determined to demonstrate that they were not to blame for the war and had

<sup>3</sup> The politicization of historiographical debates is emphasized by Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (New York: Longman, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> This raises a potentially serious problem, of course, if a historical case that is influential in the formulation of a theory is then used to test the same theory.

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little to hide, published volumes of documents from their own archives. This has generated a vast literature reflecting different perspectives on a variety of events for all the countries involved, making this by far the most studied interstate war in history. The selective nature of the publication of these documents further politicized early debates about the origins of the war.

After nearly a hundred years, extensive research and debate about the outbreak of the Great War have resolved many questions. New questions have emerged, however, as historians have uncovered new documents and as political scientists have invoked new theories in an attempt to explain the war. Research in each discipline has also broadened its scope in recent years, from a primary focus on the outbreak of the war to heightened interest in the conduct of the war and the processes leading to its termination. The centennial of the war is generating a wave of new research, with new books, articles, and anthologies. What is distinctive about this volume is that it is the only one we know of that attempts to bring historians and international relations theorists together on a topic that has long been a central question in each discipline.

This volume focuses on the causes and immediate expansion of the First World War. It touches upon a number of the analytic themes mentioned above, including structure and agency, international and domestic sources of causation, and the impact of shifting power and preventive logic. It also addresses the questions of whether the primary causes of the war were located in Berlin, or in Vienna and the Balkans, or elsewhere, and the critical, but long-neglected, question of why the war broke out in 1914 but not before. In the process, our contributors highlight the complex nature of causation in the outbreak and spread of war. The volume links historiographical debates about the causes of the First World War to debates in the theoretical literature on international conflict.

We see our niche and contribution to the literature as providing analytic perspectives on a set of critical questions on the war from an interdisciplinary perspective of political scientists and diplomatic historians. Our overarching focus, as reflected in the subtitle of the volume, is on the relationship among, and interplay between, structure, politics, and decision-making. The structure of the system – global, European, and local – embodies long-term causes of the war and creates the incentives and constraints shaping the choices open to decision-makers. That structure evolves over time, and is itself influenced by the strategic interactions of states. The domestic politics of each state help to shape the preferences of the state, the resources available to it, the range of feasible options within international constraints, the internal distributional consequences of various options for both society and bureaucratic organizations, and

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policy-makers' choices among these options. All of this is filtered through the mindsets, perceptions, judgments, and decision-making of key individuals and their closest advisors, which shape the final decisions that determine state policy. Equally important is how these different variables from various levels of analysis interact. How one makes sense of the highly complex interactions of these various factors is a function not only of the sequences of events, but also of the analytic perspectives one brings to the table.

Diplomatic historians and IR scholars have each struggled with the problem of understanding the complexity of the processes leading to the First World War, but each in their own way. The different perspectives, approaches, and methodologies adopted by each discipline only enhance the extent to which they can learn from each other. By facilitating a dialogue among diplomatic historians and political scientists, and building on their different, but complementary, approaches to the study of international relations, we expect to gain new insights about the First World War – both in terms of providing novel answers to some perennial questions, as well as raising fresh questions and perspectives that shed new light on the underlying causes of the war. We also expect that this dialogue will help to sharpen the analytic perspectives that scholars bring to the study of the First World War and of war in general.

Our volume is not intended to summarize well-known events or to provide new narratives of the war as a whole. Our audience is scholars and advanced students, and our aim is to present new scholarly contributions that enhance understanding of the outbreak of the war. The centennial has already produced new narratives that provide new interpretations of the war and new perspectives on old historiographical debates, and much more is on the way.<sup>5</sup> We see no need to duplicate that material. Our volume follows more in the footsteps of Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson, who collected a group of scholars in a conference to focus on a set of specific questions, in their case a group of historians to debate the question of whether the war was improbable.<sup>6</sup> Here, we have brought together both historians and political scientists to focus on a limited number of theoretically based questions relating to the causes of the war. At the broadest level, these questions concern causal factors relating to structure, politics, and decision-making. It is possible, however, to identify a more specific set of questions that serve as central themes running throughout the volume.

<sup>5</sup> See, among others, Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013); Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (eds.), *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914* (New York: Berghahn, 2007).

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One central question, addressed explicitly by some of our contributors and more indirectly by others, is the accuracy of the view that Germany was the key actor in bringing about the war. This view goes back to the Treaty of Versailles, of course, but it has really dominated historiographical debates in the half century since Fritz Fischer published *Griff nach der Weltmacht*.<sup>7</sup> This “German paradigm,” as Samuel Williamson calls it, has been increasingly challenged.<sup>8</sup> Both sides of this debate are represented in this volume. The question of the validity and utility of the German paradigm naturally leads to the question of preventive war, which is a central theme of the German paradigm.<sup>9</sup> This is the argument that Germany’s primary motivation for war was its fear of the rising power of Russia and the consequences of shifting power for Germany’s position in Europe.

The question of preventive war in response to shifting power is directly related to the broader theme of the impact of structural change in the international system, which is central to all realist theories of international relations.<sup>10</sup> Because many conceptualizations of preventive war define the concept in terms of perceptions or anticipations of decline in relative power, the question of perceptions of power and of changes in power is another key theme in the volume. This is the focus of T. G. Otte’s chapter on perceptions of Russia by the other Great Powers, but it is addressed by most other contributors as well. Preventive war is just one of many alternative responses to perceptions of relative decline, of course, and which of those policy alternatives is selected is significantly shaped by the political decision-making process within the state in question.

The questions of preventive war, perceptions of power, and the deeply political nature of a state’s strategic response to anticipated decline raises another important question that has received insufficient attention by neither historians nor political scientists. Germany had faced the rising power of France after the latter’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of

<sup>7</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961). English translation, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967). For recent perspectives on the Fischer controversy, see Annika Mombauer, “Special Issue: The Fischer Controversy after 50 Years,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48(2) (2013): 231–417.

<sup>8</sup> Williamson, Chapter 2, this volume.

<sup>9</sup> The German paradigm also includes arguments about the domestic sources of German foreign policy leading to the war. This was a central theme in Fritz Fischer’s second major book, *Krieg der Illusionen: Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1969); translated as *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914*, trans. Marian Jackson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975). See also Volker R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973, 2nd edn. London: Macmillan, 1993); Wolfgang J. Mommsen, “Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914,” *Central European History*, 6(1) (1973): 3–43.

<sup>10</sup> The key text in realist theory is Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

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1870–1871, and the rising power of Russia since Japan’s humiliating defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. The German military had been pressing their political leaders for a preventive war for years in response to these challenges.<sup>11</sup> If preventive logic was as important in bringing about war in 1914 as some scholars argue, why did it not bring about war before then, when crises provided the opportunity for war and when German leaders could have been even more confident of a military victory? Both William Mulligan and Dale Copeland directly address this question in their chapters, but several other scholars engage it as well.

This question of “why 1914 but not before” can be generalized to the many other causal factors invoked to account for the outbreak and immediate spread of the First World War. Many of those hypothesized causal factors have been in place for several years. The polarization of the alliance system, intense strategic rivalries, and aristocratic societal cultures are a few such factors that come to mind. If it is true that many (though perhaps not all) of the same military, diplomatic, political, and cultural conditions hypothesized to cause the First World War were also present in the years leading up to the war, one is forced to ask why those same factors did not lead to war before, especially during the several crises that broke out in 1905, 1908–1909, 1911, and 1912–1913. What was different? Differences in the outcome variable in two or more cases can be explained only by identifying differences in causal variables or their interaction effects. A good explanation for the First World War should explain not only why war occurred in 1914, but why it did not occur before.<sup>12</sup> Such explanations need to be tested historically through comparative case studies.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, fears of the relative decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had led to calls from within the Austrian military for preventive war while the opportunity was still available.

<sup>12</sup> The same question can be raised in response to the occasional argument that the First World War was over-determined. This argument is often driven by the belief that an extraordinarily large number of causal factors played a role in the processes leading to the war. Technically, however, what causal over-determination means is that there are multiple sets of sufficient conditions for a particular outcome, in this case the outbreak of the First World War. The removal of a critical factor from a set of sufficient conditions – which we might think of as one causal path to war – would not undercut the integrity of another causal path, and war would still have occurred. One problem with the over-determination argument is that the factors hypothesized to over-determine war in 1914 had been in place for a number of years. This is an empirical question, of course, but if that was the case the same factors over-determining war in 1914 should have over-determined war during an earlier crisis. On the role of necessary and sufficient conditions in causal explanation, see Gary Goertz and Jack S. Levy, “Causal Explanation, Necessary Conditions, and Case Studies,” in Gary Goertz and Jack S. Levy (eds.), *Explaining War and Peace: Case Studies and Necessary Condition Counterfactuals* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 9–45.

<sup>13</sup> On the methodology of comparative case studies, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge,

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If one challenges the German paradigm, then one must address what role the other states played. What were the causal factors driving the decision-making of other states: their goals, motivations, external and internal constraints, leadership, key domestic actors and their respective preferences, and the nature of their political decision-making processes. Indeed, one reaction to the Fischer controversy was the belief that the historiography on the war had become too preoccupied with Germany and that a more balanced comparative perspective was needed. The same kind of intensive analysis that Fischer applied to Germany ought to be applied to the other European Great Powers. More attention also needs to be given not only to state foreign policies, but also to strategic interactions between them, and to signaling and bargaining between states. For these purposes, some international relations models might be useful.

It is these and related questions that guide the contributions to this volume: the role and interplay of structure and agency; the continued viability of the German paradigm as a primary explanatory model; the role of other states; the role of fears of decline, shifts in power, and preventive logic in Germany and elsewhere; and the question of why 1914 and not before or later. Although the studies will address other questions, the substantive contribution of the volume centers on these interrelated questions. Each of these tells us something about the relationship between structure, politics, and decision-making in the processes leading to war in 1914, and in international relations more generally.

### **An interdisciplinary approach**

The most distinctive thing about this collection of essays on the outbreak of the First World War is its interdisciplinary orientation. The volume brings together diplomatic historians and international relations scholars with a common interest in the origins of the war.<sup>14</sup> Historically oriented political scientists have been reading the work of diplomatic historians on the war for years, and historians are increasingly reading political science research on the war, but more direct engagements are relatively rare. One early example of such interdisciplinary engagement on the First World War goes back to the 1970s, with the “1914 project” of Robert

MA: MIT Press, 2005). For a good example of the application of the methodology, see Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> In their discussions of the outbreak of the First World War and of other wars, historians usually use the language of the “origins” of the war. This is reflected in the titles of countless books. Political scientists usually speak in terms of the “causes” of war. Anthropologists use the term origins to refer to the advent of war at the dawn of human civilization.

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North and his colleagues. That project analyzed both the impact of changing international structures in the processes leading to the war, and the role of decision-making factors such as misperceptions.<sup>15</sup> North's 1914 project and the related work of Ole Holsti attracted the attention of diplomatic historians, who were often quite critical, especially of the attempt at quantification.<sup>16</sup>

An interdisciplinary approach is valuable because each party brings different theoretical and methodological perspectives to the table. In the case of diplomatic history and international relations theory, the conventional wisdom is that diplomatic historians are primarily interested in explaining fairly well-defined events or historical episodes, while international relations scholars are primarily interested in refining concepts and developing and testing theoretical generalizations.<sup>17</sup> This does not imply that historians are atheoretical, only that they use theory in different ways. Among other things, historians are often less explicit than are political scientists about the theoretical preconceptions underlying their historical analysis and the meanings of some of the concepts they use. Political scientists are trained to lay out their analytic assumptions, and develop and justify their theoretical propositions before they even think about applying their theory to a particular historical case.

These differences in the research objectives of historians and political scientists lead to other important differences. Given their generalizing objectives, political scientists often aim for parsimonious explanations that can be applied to other cases. The goal of providing complete explanations of individual historical cases leads historians to more complex explanations involving a larger number of variables. Political scientists argue that the more complex an explanation for a war, the less likely it is that all its nuances will be applicable to other cases, making it more difficult to generalize. Their emphasis on parsimony, however, means that they are less likely to provide complete explanations of individual cases.

<sup>15</sup> Nazli Choucri and Robert North, *Nations in Conflict: National Growth and International Violence* (San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman, 1975); Ole R. Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Arthur N. Gilbert and Paul Gordon Lauren, "Crisis Management: An Assessment and a Critique," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24(4) (1980): 641–644, and the reply by Ole R. Holsti, "Historians, Social Scientists, and Crisis Management: An Alternative View," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24(4) (1980), 665–682.

<sup>17</sup> Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, "Introduction: Negotiating International History and Politics," in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.), *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 1–36; see also Jack S. Levy, "Explaining Events and Developing Theories: History, Political Science, and the Analysis of International Relations," in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.), *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 39–84.