

TAKING SIDES

Clashing Views in
World History, Volume 2
SECOND EDITION, EXPANDED

Selected, Edited, and with Introductions by

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Howard Community College

and

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ISSUE 7



Were German Militarism and Diplomacy Responsible for World War I?

YES: V. R. Berghahn, from *Imperial Germany, 1871-1914: Economy, Society, Culture, and Politics* (Berghahn Books, 1994)

NO: Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., from "The Origins of the War," in Hew Strachan, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford University Press, 1998)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: History professor V. R. Berghahn states that, although all of Europe's major powers played a part in the onset of World War I, recent evidence still indicates that Germany's role in the process was the main factor responsible for the conflict.

NO: History professor Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., argues that the factors and conditions that led to the First World War were a shared responsibility and that no one nation can be blamed for its genesis.

One could argue that the First World War was the twentieth century's most cataclysmic event. It was responsible for the destruction of four major empires (Turkish, Russian, Austrian, and German), was tied inexorably to the rise of fascism and communism, and caused more death and carnage than any event up to that time. It also created an age of anxiety and alienation that shook the foundations of the Western artistic, musical, philosophical, and literary worlds. No wonder it has attracted the attention of countless historians, who have scrutinized every aspect in search of lessons that can be derived from it.

The major historical questions to answer are why it occurred and who was responsible for it—a daunting task yet an important one if we are to learn any lessons from the mistakes of the past. Historians have identified four major long-range causes of the war: nationalism, militarism, imperialism, and the alliance system. But these causes only partly answer why in August 1914, after a Serbian nationalist assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary, Europe divided into two armed camps—the Allied Governments (England, France, and Russia, and later, Italy) and the Central Powers.



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Germany, 1871-1914: Economy,
Books, 1994)

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(Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire)—and engaged in a conflict that would involve most European countries and spread to the rest of the world.

Important as these factors are, they fail to include the human factor in the equation. To what extent were the aims and policies of the major powers, which were formulated by individuals acting on behalf of national states, responsible for the war? Is there enough culpability to go around? Or was one nation and its policymakers responsible for the onset of the Great War? Of course, the Treaty of Versailles, which brought an end to the war, answered the question of responsibility. In the now-famous Article 231, Germany and her allies were held accountable for the war and all concomitant damages since the war was imposed on the Allied and Associated Governments "by the aggression of Germany and her Allies." Little or no historical investigation went into making this decision; it was simply a case of winners dictating terms to losers.

The first to write of the war were the diplomats, politicians, and military leaders who tried to distance themselves from responsibility for what they allowed to happen and offered explanations for their actions suited to their country's needs and interests. Historian Sidney Bradshaw Fay was the first to offer an unbiased interpretation of the war's onset. In a monumental two-volume work, *Before Sarajevo: The Origins of the World War and After Sarajevo: The Origins of the World War* (The Macmillan Company, 1928), he states that liability has to be shared by all involved parties. To find Germany and her allies solely responsible for it, "in view of the evidence now available, is historically unsound" (vol. 2, p. 558).

Unfortunately, the influence of Fay's work was minimized by the effects of the worldwide economic depression and the fast-approaching Second World War. The historiography of the First World War was temporarily put on hold. It was reopened after 1945 with some surprising results.

In 1961 German historian Fritz Fischer's *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (W. W. Norton, 1967) ignited the debate. While believing that no nation involved in the war was blameless, Fischer found primary culpability in the expansionist, militarist policies of the German government. The book sparked a national controversy that later moved into the international arena. Thus, two works published more than 30 years apart established the framework of the debate.

Recent historical scholarship seems to balance both sides of the World War I historical pendulum. V. R. Berghahn, working within the framework of Germany's economy, society, culture, and politics from 1871 to 1914, holds Germany primarily responsible for the war. Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., sees the onset of World War I as a condition of joint responsibility.

The Crisis of July 1914 and Conclusions

Ln the afternoon of August 1, 1914, when the German ultimatum to Russia to revoke the Tsarist mobilization order of the previous day had expired, Wilhelm II telephoned [Chief of the General Staff Helmuth von] Moltke, [Reich Chancellor Theobald von] Bethmann Hollweg, [Admiral Alfred von] Tirpitz, and Prussian War Minister Erich von Falkenhayn to come without delay to the Imperial Palace to witness the Kaiser's signing of the German mobilization order that was to activate the Schlieffen Plan and the German invasion of Luxemburg, Belgium, and France. It was a decision that made a world war inevitable.

The meeting took place at 5 p.m. When the monarch had signed the fateful document, he shook Falkenhayn's hand and tears came to both men's eyes. However, the group had barely dispersed when it was unexpectedly recalled. According to the later report of the Prussian War Minister, "a strange telegram had just been received from Ambassador Lichnowsky" in London, announcing that he had been mandated by the British government "to ask whether we would pledge not to enter French territory if England guaranteed France's neutrality in our conflict with Russia." A bitter dispute apparently ensued between Bethmann Hollweg, who wanted to explore this offer, and Moltke, whose only concern by then was not to upset the meticulously prepared timetable for mobilization. The Chief of the General Staff lost the argument for the moment. The Kaiser ordered Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow to draft a reply to Lichnowsky, while Moltke telephoned the Army Command at Trier ordering the Sixteenth Division to stop its advance into Luxemburg. As Falkenhayn recorded the scene, Moltke was by now "a broken man" because to him the Kaiser's decision was yet another proof that the monarch "continued to hope for peace." Moltke was so distraught that Falkenhayn had to comfort him, while the latter did not believe for one moment "that the telegram [would] change anything about the horrendous drama that began at 5 p.m." Lichnowsky's reply arrived shortly before midnight, detailing the British condition that Belgium's border must remain untouched by the Germans. Knowing that German strategic planning made this impossible, Moltke now pressed Wilhelm II to order the occupation of Luxemburg as a first step to the German invasion of Belgium and France. This time he won; World War I had definitely begun.

After many years of dispute among historians about who was responsible for the outbreak of war in August 1914 in which German scholars either blamed the Triple Entente for what had happened or argued that all powers

From V. R. Berghahn, *Imperial Germany, 1871-1914: Economy, Society, Culture, and Politics* (Berghahn Books, 1994). Copyright © 1994 by Volker R. Berghahn. Reprinted by permission of Berghahn Books. Notes omitted.



1914 and Conclusions

When the German ultimatum to Russia to the previous day had expired, Wilhelm II [Helmuth von] Moltke, [Reich Chancellor Admiral Alfred von] Tirpitz, and Prussian Emperor issued without delay to the Imperial Palace a general mobilization order that was to act as a prelude to an invasion of Luxemburg, Belgium, and Poland. World war inevitable.

When the monarch had signed the fateful hand and tears came to both men's eyes. The press dispersed when it was unexpectedly ordered by the Prussian War Minister, "a strange man," Ambassador Lichnowsky in London, ordered by the British government "to ask the Russian Emperor to renounce any claims on French territory if England guaranteed Russia's integrity." A bitter dispute apparently ensued between those who wanted to explore this offer, and those who were not to upset the meticulously prepared Chief of the General Staff lost the argument. The Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow while Moltke telephoned the Army Commission to stop its advance into Luxemburg, Moltke was by now "a broken man" and his resignation was yet another proof that the monarch was so distraught that Falkenhayn had to be appointed to believe for one moment "that the telegrams of the horrendous drama that began at 5 o'clock on July 31 before midnight, detailing the British ultimatum to the Austrians must remain untouched by the Germans. The Russian ultimatum to the Austrians made this impossible, Moltke now issued a general mobilization order of Luxemburg as a first step to the invasion of Poland. This time he won; World War I had

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1914-1918: *Economy, Society, Culture, and Politics*
Volker R. Berghahn. Reprinted by permission of

had simultaneously slithered into the abyss, the ... Fischer controversy [a controversy involving historian Fritz Fischer's theory of the origin of World War I] produced a result that is now widely accepted in the international community of experts on the immediate origins of the war—it was the men gathered at the Imperial Palace in Berlin who pushed Europe over the brink. These men during the week prior to August 1 had, together with the "hawks" in Vienna, deliberately exacerbated the crisis, although they were in the best position to de-escalate and defuse it. There is also a broad consensus that during that crucial week major conflicts occurred between the civilian leadership in Berlin around Bethmann Hollweg, who was still looking for diplomatic ways out of the impasse, and the military leadership around Moltke, who now pushed for a violent settling of accounts with the Triple Entente. In the end Bethmann lost, and his defeat opened the door to the issuing of the German mobilization order on August 1.

In pursuing this course, the German decision-makers knew that the earlier Russian mobilization order did not have the same significance as the German one. Thus the Reich Chancellor informed the Prussian War Minister on July 30, that "although the Russian mobilization has been declared, her mobilization measures cannot be compared with those of the states of Western Europe." He added that St. Petersburg did not "intend to wage war, but has only been forced to take these measures because of Austria" and her mobilization. These insights did not prevent the German leadership from using the Russian moves for their purposes by creating a defensive mood in the German public without which the proposed mobilization of the German armed forces might well have come to grief. The population was in no mood to support an aggressive war. On the contrary, there had been peace demonstrations in various cities when, following the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia on 23 July, suspicions arose that Berlin and Vienna were preparing for a war on the Balkans. The Reich government responded to this threat by calling on several leaders on the right wing of the SPD [Social Democratic Party] executive and confidentially apprising them of Russia's allegedly aggressive intentions. Convinced of the entirely defensive nature of Germany's policy, the leaders of the working-class movement quickly reversed their line: the demonstrations stopped and the socialist press began to write about the Russian danger.

It is against the background of these domestic factors that a remark by Bethmann may be better understood. "I need," the Reich Chancellor is reported to have said to Albert Ballin, the Hamburg shipping magnate, "my declaration of war for reasons of internal politics." What he meant by this is further elucidated by other surviving comments. Thus Admiral von Müller, the Chief of the Naval Cabinet, noted in his diary as early as July 27 that "the tenor of our policy [is] to remain calm to allow Russia to put herself in the wrong, but then not to shrink from war if it [is] inevitable." On the same day, the Reich Chancellor told the Kaiser that "at all events Russia must ruthlessly be put in the wrong." Moltke explained the meaning of this statement to his Austro-Hungarian counterpart, Franz Conrad von Hoetzendorff, on July 30: "War [must] not be declared on Russia, but [we must] wait for Russia to attack." And when a day later this turned out to be the sequence of events,

Müller was full of praise. "The morning papers," he recorded in his diary on August 1, "reprint the speeches made by the Kaiser and the Reich Chancellor to an enthusiastic crowd in front of the Schloss and the Chancellor's palace. Brilliant mood. The government has succeeded very well in making us appear as the attacked."

While there is little doubt about the last days of peace and about who ended them, scholarly debate has continued over the motives of the Kaiser and his advisors. In order to clarify these, we have to move back in time to the beginning of July 1914. Fritz Fischer has argued in his *Griff nach der Weltmacht* and in *War of Illusions* that the Reich government seized the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife at Sarajevo on June 28 as the opportunity to bring about a major war. He asserted that Bethmann, in unison with the military leadership hoped to achieve by force the breakthrough to world power status which German diplomacy had failed to obtain by peaceful means in previous years. However, today most experts would accept another interpretation that was put forward by Konrad Jarausch and others and captured by a chapter heading in Jarausch's biography of Bethmann: "The Illusion of Limited War." In this interpretation, Berlin was originally motivated by more modest objectives than those inferred by Fischer. Worried by the volatile situation on the Balkans and anxious to stabilize the deteriorating position of the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire (Germany's only reliable ally, then under the strong centrifugal pressure of Slav independence movements), Berlin pushed for a strategy of local war in order to help the Habsburgs in the southeast. Initially, Vienna was not even sure whether to exploit, in order to stabilize its position in power politics, the assassination crisis and the sympathies that the death of the heir to the throne had generated internationally. Emperor Franz Joseph and his civilian advisors wanted to wait for the outcome of a government investigation to see how far Serbia was behind the Sarajevo murders before deciding on a possible punitive move against Belgrade. Only the Chief of the General Staff Conrad advocated an immediate strike against the Serbs at this point. Uncertain of Berlin's response, Franz Joseph sent Count Alexander von Hoyos to see the German Kaiser, who then issued his notorious "blank check." With it the Reich government gave its unconditional support to whatever action Vienna would decide to take against Belgrade.

What did Wilhelm II and his advisors expect to be the consequences of such an action? Was it merely the pretext for starting a major war? Or did Berlin hope that the conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia would remain limited? The trouble with answering this question is that we do not possess a first-hand account of the Kaiser's "blank check" meeting with Hoyos and of the monarch's words and assumptions on that occasion. Jarausch and others have developed the view that Bethmann persuaded Wilhelm II and the German military to adopt a limited war strategy which later turned out to be illusory. They have based their argument to a considerable extent on the diaries of Kurt Riezler, Bethmann's private secretary, who was in close contact with his superior during the crucial July days. As he recorded on July 11, it was the Reich Chancellor's plan to obtain "a quick fait accompli" in the Balkans. Thereafter he proposed to

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make "friendly overtures toward the Entente Powers" in the hope that in this way "the shock" to the international system could be absorbed. Two days earlier Bethmann had expressed the view that "in case of warlike complications between Austria and Serbia, he and Jagow believed that it would be possible to localize the conflagration." But according to Riezler the Reich Chancellor also realized that "an action against Serbia [could] result in a world war." To this extent, his strategy was a "leap into the dark" which he nevertheless considered it as his "gravest duty" to take in light of the desperate situation of the two Central European monarchies.

A localization of the conflict since the risks of a major war seemed remote—this is how Bethmann Hollweg appears to have approached the post-Sarajevo situation. It was only in subsequent weeks, when Vienna took much longer than anticipated to mobilize against Serbia—and above all when it became clear that the other great powers and Russia in particular would not condone a humiliation of Belgrade—that the Reich Chancellor and his advisors became quite frantic and unsure of their ability to manage the unfolding conflict. In its panic, the German Foreign Ministry proposed all sorts of hope- lessly unrealistic moves and otherwise tried to cling to its original design. Thus on 16 July, Bethmann wrote to Count Siegfried von Roedern that "in case of an Austro-Serbian conflict the main question is to isolate this dispute." On the following day the Saxon chargé d'affaires to Berlin was informed that "one expects a localization of the conflict since England is absolutely peace- able and France as well as Russia likewise do not feel inclined toward war." On 18 July, Jagow reiterated that "we wish to localize [a] potential conflict between Austria and Serbia." And another three days later the Reich Chancel- lor instructed his ambassadors in St. Petersburg, Paris, and London that "we urgently desire a localization of the conflict; any intervention by another power will, in view of the divergent alliance commitments, lead to incalcula- ble consequences."

The problem with Bethmann's limited war concept was that by this time it had become more doubtful than ever that it could be sustained. Another problem is that Jarausch's main source, the Riezler diaries, have come under a cloud since the Berlin historian Bernd Söseman discovered that, for the July days, they were written on different paper and attached to the diary as a loose- leaf collection. This has led Söseman to believe that Riezler "reworked" his original notes after World War I. Without going into the details of these charges and the defense and explanations that Karl Dietrich Erdmann, the edi- tor of the diaries, has provided, their doubtful authenticity would seem to preclude continued reliance on this source unless other documents from early July corroborate the localization hypothesis. This would seem to indicate at the same time that the strategy was not just discussed and adopted in the Beth- mann Circle, but by the entire German leadership, including the Kaiser and the military. Several such sources have survived. Thus on July 5, the Kaiser's adjutant general, Count Hans von Plessen, entered in his diary that he had been ordered to come to the New Palace at Potsdam in the late afternoon of that day to be told about the Hoyos mission and Francis Joseph's letter to Wil- helm II. Falkenhayn, Bethmann, and the Chief of the Military Cabinet Moritz

von Lyncker were also present. According to Plessen, the view predominated that "the sooner the Austrians move against Serbia the better and that the Russians—though Serbia's friends—would not come in. H.M.'s departure on his Norwegian cruise is supposed to go ahead undisturbed."

Falkenhayn's report about the same meeting to Moltke, who was on vacation, had a similar tone. Neither of the two letters which the Kaiser had received from Vienna, both of which painted "a very gloomy picture of the general situation of a Dual Monarchy as a result of Pan-Slav agitations," spoke "of the need for war"; "rather both expound 'energetic' political action such as conclusion of a treaty with Bulgaria, for which they would like to be certain of the support of the German Reich." Falkenhayn added that Bethmann "appears to have as little faith as I do that the Austrian government is really in earnest, even though the language is undeniably more resolute than in the past." Consequently he expected it to be "a long time before the treaty with Bulgaria is concluded." Moltke's "stay at Spa will therefore scarcely need to be curtailed," although Falkenhayn thought it "advisable to inform you of the gravity of the situation so that anything untoward which could, after all, occur at any time, should not find you wholly unprepared."

Another account of the "blank check" meeting on July 5 comes from Captain Albert Hopman of the Reich Navy Office. On the following day he reported to Tirpitz, who was vacationing in Switzerland, that Admiral Eduard von Capelle, Tirpitz's deputy, was "ordered this morning to go to the New Palace at Potsdam" where Wilhelm II briefed him on the previous day's events. Again the Kaiser said that he had backed Vienna in its demand "for the most far-reaching satisfaction" and, should this not be granted, for military action against Serbia. Hopman's report continued: "H.M. does not consider an intervention by Russia to back up Serbia likely, because the Tsar would not wish to support the regicides and because Russia is at the moment totally unprepared militarily and financially. The same applied to France, especially with respect to finance. H.M. did not mention Britain." Accordingly, he had "let Emperor Franz Joseph know that he could rely on him." The Kaiser believed "that the situation would clear up again after a week owing to Serbia's backing down, but he nevertheless considers it necessary to be prepared for a different outcome." With this in mind, Wilhelm II had "had a word yesterday with the Reich Chancellor, the Chief of the General Staff, the War Minister, and the Deputy Chief of the Admiralty Staff" although "measures which are likely to arouse political attention or to cause special expenditures are to be avoided for the time being." Hopman concluded by saying that "H.M., who, as Excellency von Capelle says, made a perfectly calm, determined impression on him, has left for Kiel this morning to go aboard his yacht for his Scandinavian cruise." That Moltke, clearly a key player in any German planning, had also correctly understood the message that he had received from Berlin and approved of the localization strategy is evidenced by his comment: "Austria must beat the Serbs and then make peace quickly, demanding an Austro-Serbian alliance as the sole condition. Just as Prussia did with Austria in 1866."

If, in the face of this evidence, we accept that Berlin adopted a limited war strategy at the beginning of July which turned out later on to have been badly

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"check" meeting on July 5 comes from the Navy Office. On the following day he was in Switzerland, that Admiral Eduard von Döberl informed this morning to go to the New Palace in Vienna on the previous day's events. He informed Vienna in its demand "for the most part this not be granted, for military action is not to be renewed: "H.M. does not consider an interlocking, because the Tsar would not wish to see Russia is at the moment totally unprepared to be applied to France, especially with respect to the Balkans." Accordingly, he had "let Emperor know on him." The Kaiser believed "that the week owing to Serbia's backing down, it is necessary to be prepared for a different outcome. The Kaiser had "had a word yesterday with the General Staff, the War Minister, and the Emperor, although "measures which are likely to be avoided by special expenditures are to be avoided by saying that "H.M., who, as Excellency, is calm, determined impression on him to go aboard his yacht for his Scandinavian tour. The Kaiser's earlier in any German planning, had also that he had received from Berlin and is evidenced by his comment: "Austria will ease quickly, demanding an Austro-Serbian peace as Prussia did with Austria in 1866." The Kaiser accepted that Berlin adopted a limited war which turned out later on to have been badly

miscalculated, the next question to be answered is: Why did the Kaiser and his advisors fall for "the illusion of limited war"? To understand this and the pressures on them to take action, we must consider the deep pessimism by which they had become affected and which also pervades the Riezler diaries.

In his account of the origins of World War I, James Joll, after a comprehensive survey of various interpretations, ultimately identified "the mood of 1914" as the crucial factor behind Europe's descent into catastrophe. Although he admits that this mood can "only be assessed approximately and impressionistically" and that it "differed from country to country or from class to class," he nevertheless comes to the conclusion that "at each level there was a willingness to risk or to accept war as a solution to a whole range of problems, political, social, international, to say nothing of war as apparently the only way of resisting a direct physical threat." In his view, it is therefore "in an investigation of the mentalities of the rulers of Europe and their subjects that the explanation of the causes of the war will ultimately lie." There is much substance in this perspective on the origins of the war, but it may require further sociological differentiation with regard to the supposedly pervasive pessimistic sense that a cataclysm was inevitable. As in other countries, there were also many groups in German society that were not affected by the gloomsters and, indeed, had hopes and expectations of a better future. They adhered to the view that things could be transformed and improved. After all, over the past two decades the country had seen a period of unprecedented growth and prosperity. German technology, science, and education, as well as the welfare and health care systems, were studied and copied in other parts of the world. There was a vibrant cultural life at all levels, and even large parts of the working-class movement, notwithstanding the hardships and inequalities to which it was exposed, shared a sense of achievement that spurred many of its members to do even better. As the urbanization, industrialization, and secularization of society unfolded, German society, according to the optimists, had become more diverse, modern, colorful, complex, and sophisticated.

However, these attitudes were not universally held. There were other groups that had meanwhile been overcome by a growing feeling that the *Kaiserreich* was on a slippery downhill slope. Some intellectuals, as we have seen, spoke of the fragmentation and disintegration of the well-ordered bourgeois world of the nineteenth century. Their artistic productions reflected a deep cultural pessimism, a mood that was distinctly postmodern. Some of them even went so far as to view war as the only way of the malaise into which modern civilization was said to have maneuvered itself. Only a "bath of steel," they believed, would produce the necessary and comprehensive rejuvenation. If these views had been those of no more than a few fringe groups, their diagnoses of decadence and decline would have remained of little significance. The point is that they were shared, albeit with different arguments, by influential elite groups who were active in the realm of politics. The latter may have had no more than an inkling of the artistic discourse that was pushing beyond modernism, but they, too, assumed that things were on the verge of collapse, especially in the sphere of politics. Here nothing seemed to be working anymore.

The sense of crisis in the final years was most tangible in the field of foreign policy. The monarch and his civilian and military advisors along with many others felt encircled by the Triple Entente. Over the years and certainly after the conclusion of the Franco-British Entente Cordiale in 1904 and the Anglo-Russian accord of 1907 they had convinced themselves that Britain, France, and Russia were bent on throttling the two Central Powers. While the Anglo-German naval arms race had gone into reverse due to Tirpitz's inability to sustain it financially, the military competition on land reached new heights in 1913 after the ratification of massive army bills in Germany, France, and Russia.

However, by then tensions on the European continent were fueled by more than political and military rivalries. [I]n the early 1890s Germany finally abandoned Bismarck's attempts to separate traditional diplomacy from commercial policy. Reich Chancellor Caprivi had aligned the two before Bülow expanded the use of trade as an instrument of German foreign policy following the Tsarist defeat in the Far East at the hands of the Japanese in 1904 and the subsequent revolution of 1905. By 1913 a dramatic change of fortunes had taken place. Russian agriculture had been hit hard by Bülow's protectionism after 1902, and now it looked as if St. Petersburg was about to turn the tables on Berlin. As the correspondent of *Kölnische Zeitung* reported from Russia on March 2, 1914, by the fall of 1917 the country's economic difficulties would be overcome, thanks in no small degree to further French loans. With Germany's commercial treaties coming up for renewal in 1916, the Tsar was expected to do to the Reich what Bülow had done to the Romanov Empire in earlier years. Accordingly an article published in April 1914 in *Deutscher Ausenhandel* warned that "it hardly requires any mention that in view of the high-grade political tension between the two countries any conflict in the field of commercial policy implies a serious test of peace."

What, in the eyes of Germany's leadership, made the specter of a Russo-German trade war around 1916 so terrifying was that this was also the time when the French and Russian rearmament programs would be completed. Not surprisingly, this realization added the powerful Army leadership to the ranks of German pessimists. Given the precarious strategic position of the two Central European monarchies, the thought that the Tsarist army was to reach its greatest strength in 1916 triggered bouts of depression, especially in Moltke, the Chief of the General Staff, and Conrad, his Austro-Hungarian counterpart. By March 1914 the latter's worries had become so great that he wondered aloud to the head of his Operations Department, Colonel Joseph Metzger, "if one should wait until France and Russia [are] prepared to invade us jointly or if it [is] more desirable to settle the inevitable conflict at an earlier date. Moreover, the Slav question [is] becoming more and more difficult and dangerous for us."

A few weeks later Conrad met with Moltke at Karlsbad, where they shared their general sense of despair and confirmed each other in the view that time was running out. Moltke added that "to wait any longer [means] a diminishing of our chances; [for] as far as manpower is concerned, one cannot enter into a competition with Russia." Back in Berlin, Moltke spoke to

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the Balkans, the European continent was fueled by the arms race. In the early 1890s Germany finally achieved a balance of international diplomatic relations from comports with the two before Bülow's German foreign policy followed the lead of the Japanese in 1904 and the dramatic change of fortunes had been marked by Bülow's protectionism. The situation was about to turn the tables with the Russian Revolution reported from Russia on the economic difficulties would deter French loans. With German renewal in 1916, the Tsar was bound to the Romanov Empire in April 1914 in Deutscher Ausbruch, a mention that in view of the situation in the countries any conflict in the East would be of peace."

It made the specter of a Russo-German war as that this was also the time when the arms race would be completed. Not only the Army leadership to the ranks but the strategic position of the two Central Powers. The Tsarist army was to reach its peak of repression, especially in Moltke, the Austro-Hungarian counterpart. The situation was so great that he wondered if it would be, Colonel Joseph Metzger, "if we were prepared to invade us jointly or if we would be in conflict at an earlier date. More and more difficult and dangerous

Moltke at Karlsbad, where they were informed each other in the view of the situation "to wait any longer [means] a loss of power is concerned, one cannot wait any longer in Berlin, Moltke spoke to

Jagow about his meeting at Karlsbad, with the latter recording that the Chief of the General Staff was "seriously worried" about "the prospects of the future." Russia would have "completed her armaments in two or three years' time," and "the military superiority of our enemies would be so great then that he did not know how we might cope with them." Accordingly Moltke felt that "there was no alternative to waging a preventive war in order to defeat the enemy as long as we could still more or less pass the test." He left it to Jagow "to gear our policy to an early unleashing of war." That Russia had become something of an obsession not just for the generals, but also for the civilian leadership, can be gauged from a remark by Bethmann, as he cast his eyes across his estate northeast of Berlin. It would not be worth it, he is reported to have said, to plant trees there when in a few years' time the Russians would be coming anyway.

However serious Germany's international situation may have been, the Reich Chancellor and his colleagues were no less aware of the simultaneous difficulties on the domestic front. Surveying the state of the Prusso-German political system in early 1914, it was impossible to avoid the impression that it was out of joint. The Kaiser's prestige was rapidly evaporating.... The government was unable to forge lasting alliances and compromises with the parties of the Right and the center—the only political forces that a monarchical Reich Chancellor could contemplate as potential partners for the passage of legislation. Meanwhile the "revolutionary" Social Democrats were on the rise and had become the largest party in the Reichstag. The next statutory elections were to be held in 1916/17 and no one knew how large the leftist parties would then become. Faced with these problems and fearful of a repetition of the 1913 tax compromise between the parties of the center and the SPD, Bethmann had virtually given up governing. The state machinery was kept going by executive decrees that did not require legislative approval. At the same time the debt crisis continued. Worse, since 1910 there had been massive strike movements, first against the Prussian three-class voting system and later for better wages and working conditions. While the integration of minorities ran into growing trouble, reflecting problems of alienation among larger sections of the population who felt left behind and were now looking for convenient scapegoats, the working class became increasingly critical of the monarchy's incapacity to reform itself. Even parts of the women's movement had begun to refuse the place they had been assigned in the traditional order. So the situation appeared to be one of increasing polarization, and the major compromises that were needed to resolve accumulating problems at home and abroad were nowhere in sight. Even increased police repression and censorship was no longer viable.

Even if it is argued, with the benefit of hindsight, that all this did not in effect amount to a serious crisis, in the minds of many loyal monarchists and their leaders it certainly had begun to look like one. Perceptions are important here because they shaped the determination for future action and compelled those who held the levers of power to act "before it was too late." With the possibilities of compromise seemingly exhausted and the Kaiser and his advisors running out of options that were not checkmated by other political

forces, there was merely one arena left in which they still had unrestricted freedom of action. It is also the arena where the broad structural picture that has been offered in previous chapters links up with the more finely textured analysis put forward in the present one. [T]he Reich Constitution gave the monarch and his advisors the exclusive right to decide whether the country would go to war or stay at peace. It was this prerogative that was now to be used in the expectation that a war would result in a restabilization of Germany's and Austria-Hungary's international and domestic situation. The question was, what kind of war would achieve this objective? From all we know and have said about the early response to the assassinations of Sarajevo, this was not the moment to unleash a world war with its incalculable risks. The conservatives in Berlin and Vienna were not that extremist. They expected that war would lead to a major breakthrough in the Balkans and would stabilize the Austria-Hungarian Empire against Serb nationalism. If Moltke's above-mentioned reference to Prussia's victory over Austria in 1866 is any guide, memories of that war may indeed have played a role in German calculations. After all, the Prusso-Austrian had been a limited war in Central Europe, and it had the added benefit of solving the stalemate in Prussian domestic politics, in the wake of the constitutional conflict. Bismarck's "splendid" victory not only produced, after a snap election, a conservative majority in the Prussian Diet that enabled him to overcome the legislative deadlock that had existed since 1862, but it also "proved" that such "shocks" to the international system could be absorbed without further crisis.

And so the Kaiser and his advisors encouraged Vienna to launch a limited war in the Balkans. Their expectations that the war would remain limited turned out to be completely wrong. The Kaiser and his entourage, who under the Reich Constitution at that brief moment held the fate of millions in their hands, were not prepared to beat a retreat and to avoid a world war. The consequences of that total war and the turmoil it caused in all spheres of life were enormous. The world had been turned upside down.

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Samuel R. Williamson, Jr.

The Origins of the War

Sarajevo

Košutnjak Park, Belgrade, mid-May 1914: Gavrilo Princip fires his revolver at an oak tree, training for his part in the plot. Those practice rounds were the first shots of what would become the First World War. Princip, a Bosnian Serb student, wanted to murder Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg throne, when the latter visited the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. Princip had become involved with a Serbian terrorist group—the Black Hand. Directed by the head of Serbian military intelligence, Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević (nicknamed Apis, 'the Bull'), the Black Hand advocated violence in the creation of a Greater Serbia. For Princip and Apis, this meant ending Austria-Hungary's rule over Bosnia-Herzegovina through any means possible.

Princip proved an apt pupil. If his co-conspirators flinched or failed on Sunday, 28 June 1914, he did not. Thanks to confusion in the archduke's entourage after an initial bomb attack, the young Bosnian Serb discovered the official touring car stopped within 6 feet of his location. Princip fired two quick shots. Within minutes the archduke and his wife Sophie were dead in Sarajevo.

Exactly one month later, on 28 July, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. What began as the third Balkan war would, within a week, become the First World War. Why did the murders unleash first a local and then a wider war? What were the longer-term, the mid-range, and the tactical issues that brought Europe into conflict? What follows is a summary of current historical thinking about the July crisis, while also suggesting some different perspectives on the much studied origins of the First World War....

Vienna's Response to the Assassination

The Serbian terrorist plot had succeeded. But that very success also threatened [Serbian Prime Minister Nikolai] Pašić's civilian government. Already at odds with Apis and his Black Hand associates, Pašić now found himself compromised by his own earlier failure to investigate allegations about the secret society. In early June 1914, the minister had heard vague rumours of an assassination plot. He even sought to make inquiries, only to have Apis stonewall him about details. Whether Belgrade actually sought to alert Vienna about the plot remains uncertain. In any event, once the murders occurred, the premier could not admit his prior knowledge nor allow any Austro-Hungarian action

From Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., "The Origins of the War," in Hew Strachan, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford University Press, 1998). Copyright © 1998 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

that might unravel the details of the conspiracy. Not only would any compromise threaten his political position, it could lead Apis and his army associates to attempt a coup or worse.

After 28 June Pašić tried, without much success, to moderate the Serbian press's glee over the archduke's death. He also sought to appear conciliatory and gracious towards Vienna. But he knew that the Habsburg authorities believed that Princip had ties to Belgrade. He only hoped that the Habsburg investigators could not make a direct, incontrovertible connection to Apis and others.

Pašić resolved early, moreover, that he would not allow any Habsburg infringement of Serbian sovereignty or any commission that would implicate him or the military authorities. If he made any concession, his political opponents would attack and he might expose himself and the other civilian ministers to unacceptable personal risks. Thus Serbia's policy throughout the July crisis would be apparently conciliatory, deftly evasive, and ultimately intractable. It did not require, as the inter-war historians believed, the Russian government to stiffen the Serbian position. Once confronted with the fact of Sarajevo, the Serbian leadership charted its own course, one which guaranteed a definitive confrontation with Vienna.

The deaths of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie stunned the Habsburg leadership. While there were only modest public shows of sympathy, limited by the court's calculation to play down the funeral, all of the senior leaders wanted some action against Belgrade. None doubted that Serbia bore responsibility for the attacks. The 84-year-old emperor, Franz Joseph, returned hurriedly to Vienna from his hunting lodge at Bad Ischl. Over the next six days to 4 July 1914, all of the Habsburg leaders met in pairs and threes to discuss the monarchy's reaction to the deaths and to assess the extensive political unrest in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the wake of the assassinations. Nor could the discussions ignore the earlier tensions of 1912 and 1913 when the monarchy had three times nearly gone to war with Serbia and/or Montenegro. Each time militant diplomacy had prevailed and each time Russia had accepted the outcome.

The most aggressive of the Habsburg leaders, indeed the single individual probably most responsible for the war in 1914, was General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, chief of the Austro-Hungarian general staff. In the previous crises he had called for war against Serbia more than fifty times. He constantly lamented that the monarchy had not attacked Serbia in 1908 when the odds would have been far better. In the July crisis Conrad would argue vehemently and repeatedly that the time for a final reckoning had come. His cries for war in 1912 and 1913 had been checked by Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the foreign minister, Leopold Berchtold. Now, with the archduke gone and Berchtold converted to a policy of action, all of the civilian leaders, except the Hungarian prime minister István Tisza, wanted to resolve the Serbian issue. To retain international credibility the monarchy had to show that there were limits beyond which the south Slav movement could not go without repercussions.

The Habsburg resolve intensified with reports from Sarajevo that indicated that the trail of conspiracy did indeed lead back to at least one minor Serbian official in Belgrade. While the evidence in 1914 never constituted a

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ess, to moderate the Serbian demand to appear conciliatory at the Habsburg authorities. They had only hoped that the Habsburgs might be able to establish a credible connection to Apis and

ould not allow any Habsburg concession that would implicate the emperor, his political opposition, and the other civilian ministers. The Habsburg policy throughout the July crisis was, and ultimately intractable. Believed, the Russian government confronted with the fact of the course, one which guaranteed

unned the Habsburg leadership of sympathy, limited by the wishes of the senior leaders who wanted Serbia to bore responsibility for the assassination. The emperor, returned hurriedly to Vienna over the next six days to 4 July. The emperor and his advisers met three times to discuss the monarch's response to the political unrest in Bosnia. Nor could the discussions be held. The monarchy had three times over the next six days to 4 July. Each time militant diplomats vetoed the outcome.

Indeed, indeed the single individual who was General Franz Conrad von Hotzendorf, chief of the general staff. In the previous years he had argued fifty times. He constantly argued that the odds against Austria in 1908 when the odds against her had come. His cries for war were not heard. Franz Ferdinand and the archduke were gone and Berchtold was the only leader, except the Hungarian leaders, to remain on the Serbian issue. To retain the emperor's position, how that there were limits to what could be done without repercussions. Reports from Sarajevo that indicated a possibility of a return back to at least one minor incident in 1914 never constituted a

'smoking gun', the officials correctly surmised that the Serbian government must have tolerated and possibly assisted in the planning of the deed. Given this evidence, the Habsburg leaders soon focused on three options: a severe diplomatic humiliation of Serbia; quick, decisive military action against Serbia; or a diplomatic ultimatum that, if rejected, would be followed by military action. Pressed by Conrad and the military leadership, by 3 July even Franz Joseph had agreed on the need for stern action, including the possibility of war. Only one leader resisted a military solution: István Tisza. Yet his consent was absolutely required for any military action. Tisza preferred the diplomatic option and wanted assurances of German support before the government made a final decision. His resistance to any quick military action effectively foreclosed that option, leaving either the diplomatic one or the diplomatic/military combination. Not surprisingly, those anxious for military action shifted to the latter alternative.

The Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, Berchtold, made the next move on 4 July, sending his belligerent subordinate Alexander Hoyos to Berlin to seek a pledge of German support. Armed with a personal letter from Franz Joseph to Wilhelm II and a long memorandum on the need for resolute action against Serbia, Hoyos got a cordial reception. The Germans fully understood Vienna's intentions: the Habsburg leadership wanted a military reckoning with Belgrade. The German leadership (for reasons to be explored later) agreed to the Habsburg request, fully realizing that it might mean a general war with Russia as Serbia's protector.

With assurances of German support, the leaders in Vienna met on 7 July to formulate their plan. General Conrad gave confident assessments of military success and the civilian ministers attempted to persuade Tisza to accept a belligerent approach. At the same time the preliminary diplomatic manoeuvres were planned. Finally on 13-14 July Hungarian Prime Minister Tisza accepted strong action and possible war with Serbia. He did so largely because of new fears that a possible Serbian-Romanian alignment would threaten Magyar over-lordship of the 3 million Romanians living in Transylvania. Drafts of the ultimatum, meanwhile, were prepared in Vienna. Deception tactics to lull the rest of Europe were arranged and some military leaves were cancelled.

But there remained a major problem: when to deliver the ultimatum? The long-scheduled French state visit to Russia of President Raymond Poincaré and Premier René Viviani from 20 July to 23 July thoroughly complicated the delivery of the ultimatum. Berchtold, understandably, did not want to hand over the demands while the French leaders were still in St Petersburg. Yet to avoid that possibility meant a further delay until late afternoon, 23 July. At that point the forty-eight-hour ultimatum, with its demands that clearly could not be met, would be delivered in Belgrade.

Germany's decision of 5-6 July to assure full support to Vienna ranks among the most discussed issues in modern European history. A strong, belligerent German response came as no surprise. After all, Wilhelm II and Franz Ferdinand had just visited each other, were close ideologically, and had since 1900 developed a strong personal friendship. Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, moreover, believed that Berlin must show Vienna that Germany sup-

ported its most loyal ally. Far more controversial is whether the civilian leaders in Berlin, pressured by the German military, viewed the Sarajevo murders as a 'heaven-sent' opportunity to launch a preventive war against Russia. This interpretation points to increasing German apprehension about a Russian military colossus, allegedly to achieve peak strength in 1917. And Russo-German military relations were in early 1914 certainly at their worst in decades. Nor did Kaiser Wilhelm II's military advisers urge any modicum of restraint on Vienna, unlike previous Balkans episodes. An increasingly competitive European military environment now spilled over into the July crisis.

However explained, the German leadership reached a rare degree of consensus: it would support Vienna in a showdown with Serbia. Thus the German kaiser and chancellor gave formal assurances (the so-called 'blank cheque') to Vienna. From that moment, Austria-Hungary proceeded to exploit this decision and to march toward war with Serbia. Berlin would find itself—for better or worse—at the mercy of its reliable ally as the next stages of the crisis unfolded.

The Austrian Ultimatum to Serbia

For two weeks and more Berlin waited, first for the Habsburg leadership to make its final decisions and then for their implementation. During this time the German kaiser sailed in the North Sea and the German military and naval high command, confident of their own arrangements, took leaves at various German spas. Bethmann Hollweg, meanwhile, fretted over the lengthy delays in Vienna. He also began to fear the consequences of the 'calculated risk' and his 'leap into the dark' for German foreign policy. But his moody retrospection brought no changes in his determination to back Vienna; he only wished the Habsburg monarchy would act soon and decisively.

By Monday 20 July, Europe buzzed with rumours of a pending Habsburg *démarche* in Belgrade. While the Irish Question continued to dominate British political concerns and the French public focused on the Caillaux murder trial, Vienna moved to act against Belgrade. Remarkably, no Triple Entente power directly challenged Berchtold before 23 July, and the foreign minister for his part remained inconspicuous. Then, as instructed, at 6 p.m. on 23 July Wladimir Giesl, the Habsburg minister in Belgrade, delivered the ultimatum to the Serbian foreign ministry. Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, would immediately brand it as 'the most formidable document ever addressed by one State to another that was independent'.

With its forty-eight-hour deadline, the ultimatum demanded a series of Serbian concessions and a commission to investigate the plot. Pašić, away from Belgrade on an election campaign tour, returned to draft the response. This reply conceded some points but was wholly unyielding on Vienna's key demand, which would have allowed the Austrians to discover Pašić's and his government's general complicity in the murders.

News of the Habsburg ultimatum struck Europe with as much force as the Sarajevo murders. If the public did not immediately recognize the dangers to the peace, the European diplomats (and their military and naval associates)

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did. The most significant, immediate, and dangerous response came not from the Germans, but from the Russians. Upon learning of the ultimatum, Foreign Minister Serge Sazonov declared war inevitable. His actions thereafter did much to ensure a general European war.

At a meeting of the Council of State on 24 July, even before the Serbians responded, Sazonov and others pressed for strong Russian support for Serbia. Fearful of losing Russian leadership of the pan-Slavic movement, he urged resolute behaviour. His senior military leaders backed this view, even though Russia's military reforms were still incomplete. The recently concluded French state visit had given the Russians new confidence that Paris would support Russia if war came.

At Sazonov's urgings, the Council agreed, with the tsar approving the next day, to initiate various military measures preparing for partial or full mobilization. The Council agreed further to partial mobilization as a possible deterrent to stop Austria-Hungary from attacking the Serbs. These Russian military measures were among the very first of the entire July crisis; their impact would be profound. The measures were not only extensive, they abuted German as well as Austrian territory. Not surprisingly, the Russian actions would be interpreted by German military intelligence as tantamount to some form of mobilization. No other actions in the crisis, beyond Vienna's resolute determination for war, were so provocative or disturbing as Russia's preliminary steps of enhanced border security and the recall of certain troops.

Elsewhere, Sir Edward Grey sought desperately to repeat his 1912 role as peacemaker in the Balkans. He failed. He could not get Vienna to extend the forty-eight-hour deadline. Thus at 6 p.m. on 25 July, Giesl glanced at the Serbian reply, deemed it insufficient, broke diplomatic relations, and left immediately for nearby Habsburg territory. The crisis had escalated to a new, more dangerous level.

Grey did not, however, desist in his efforts for peace. He now tried to initiate a set of four-power discussions to ease the mounting crisis. Yet he could never get St Petersburg or Berlin to accept the same proposal for some type of mediation or diplomatic discussions. A partial reason for his failure came from Berlin's two continuing assumptions: that Britain might ultimately stand aside and that Russia would eventually be deterred by Germany's strong, unequivocal support of Vienna.

Each of Grey's international efforts, ironically, alarmed Berchtold. He now became determined to press for a declaration of war, thus thwarting any intervention in the local conflict. In fact, the Habsburg foreign minister had trouble getting General Conrad's reluctant agreement to a declaration of war on Tuesday 28 July. This declaration, followed by some desultory gunfire between Serbian and Austro-Hungarian troops that night, would thoroughly inflame the situation. The Serbs naturally magnified the gunfire incident into a larger Austrian attack. This in turn meant that the Russians would use the casual shooting to justify still stronger support for Serbia and to initiate still more far-reaching military measures of their own.

By 28 July every European state had taken some military and/or naval precautions. The French recalled some frontier troops, the Germans did the

same, and the Austro-Hungarians began their mobilization against the Serbs. In Britain, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, secured cabinet approval to keep the British fleet intact after it had completed manoeuvres. Then on the night of 29 July he ordered the naval vessels to proceed through the English Channel to their North Sea battle stations. It could be argued that thanks to Churchill Britain became the first power prepared to protect its vital interests in a European war.

Grey still searched for a solution. But his efforts were severely hampered by the continuing impact of the Irish Question and the deep divisions within the cabinet over any policy that appeared to align Britain too closely with France. Throughout the last week of July, Grey tried repeatedly to gain cabinet consent to threaten Germany with British intervention. The radicals in the cabinet refused. They wanted no British participation in a continental war.

Grey now turned his attention to the possible fate of Belgium and Britain's venerable treaty commitments to protect Belgian neutrality. As he did so, the German diplomats committed a massive blunder by attempting to win British neutrality with an assurance that Belgium and France would revert to the status quo ante after a war. Not only did Grey brusquely reject this crude bribery, he turned it back against Berlin. On 31 July, with cabinet approval, Grey asked Paris and Berlin to guarantee Belgium's status. France did so at once; the Germans did not. Grey had scored an important moral and tactical victory.

In St Petersburg, meanwhile, decisions were taken, rescinded, then taken again that assured that the peace would not be kept. By 28 July Sazonov had concluded that a partial mobilization against Austria-Hungary would never deter Vienna. Indeed his own generals argued that a partial step would complicate a general mobilization. Sazonov therefore got the generals' support for full mobilization. He then won the tsar's approval only to see Nicholas II hesitate after receiving a message from his cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm II. The co-called 'Willy-Nicky' telegrams came to nothing, however. On 30 July the tsar ordered general mobilization, with a clear recognition that Germany would probably respond and that a German attack would be aimed at Russia's French ally.

The Russian general mobilization resolved a number of problems for the German high command. First, it meant that no negotiations, including the proposal for an Austrian 'Halt in Belgrade', would come to anything. Second, it allowed Berlin to declare a 'defensive war' of protection against an aggressive Russia, a tactic that immeasurably aided Bethmann Hollweg's efforts to achieve domestic consensus. And, third, it meant that the chancellor could no longer resist General Helmuth von Moltke's demands for German mobilization and the implementation of German war plans. Alone of the great powers, mobilization for Germany equalled war; Bethmann Hollweg realized this. Yet once the German mobilization began, the chancellor lost effective control of the situation.

At 7 p.m. on Saturday, 1 August 1914, Germany declared war on Russia. The next day German forces invaded Luxembourg. Later that night Germany demanded that Belgium allow German troops to march through the neutral

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state on their way to France. The Belgian cabinet met and concluded that it would resist the German attack.

In France general mobilization began. But the French government, ever anxious to secure British intervention, kept French forces 6 miles away from the French border. In London Paul Cambon, the French ambassador, impo- r- tuned the British government to uphold the unwritten moral and military obligations of the Anglo-French *entente*. Still, even on Saturday 1 August, the British cabinet refused to agree to any commitment to France. Then on Sunday 2 August, Grey finally won cabinet approval for two significant steps: Britain would protect France's northern coasts against any German naval attack and London would demand that Germany renounce any intention of attacking Belgium. Britain had edged closer to war.

On Monday 3 August, the British cabinet reviewed the outline of Grey's speech to parliament that afternoon. His peroration, remarkable for its candour and its disingenuousness about the secret Anglo-French military and naval arrangements, left no doubt that London would intervene to preserve the balance of power against Germany; that it would defend Belgium and France; and that it would go to war if Germany failed to stop the offensive in the west. This last demand, sent from London to Berlin on 4 August, would be rejected. At 11 p.m. (GMT) on 4 August 1914 Britain and Germany were at war.

With the declarations of war the focus shifted to the elaborate prear- ranged mobilization plans of the great powers. For the naval forces the issues were relatively straightforward: prepare for the great naval battle, impose or thwart a policy of naval blockade, protect your coast lines, and keep the ship- ping lanes open. For the continental armies, the stakes were far greater. If an army were defeated, the war might well be over. Committed to offensive strat- egies, dependent on the hope that any war would be short, and reliant on the implementation of their carefully developed plans, the general staffs believed they had prepared for almost every possible contingency.

In each country the war plans contained elaborate mobilization sched- ules which the generals wanted to put into action at the earliest possible moment. While mobilization raised the risks of war, in only two cases did it absolutely guarantee a generalized engagement: (1) if Russia mobilized, Ger- many would do so and move at once to attack Belgium and France; (2) if Ger- many mobilized without Russian provocation, the results were the same. Any full Russian mobilization would trigger a complete German response and, for Germany, mobilization meant war. Very few, if any, civilian leaders fully com- prehended these fateful interconnections and even the military planners were uncertain about them.

The German war plans in 1914 were simple, dangerous, and exception- ally mechanical. To overcome the threat of being trapped in a two-front war between France and Russia, Germany would attack first in the west, violating Belgian neutrality in a massive sweeping movement that would envelop and then crush the French forces. Once the French were defeated, the Germans would redeploy their main forces against Russia and with Austro-Hungarian help conclude the war. The Russian war plans sought to provide immediate assistance to France and thereby disrupt the expected German attack in the

west. The Russians would attack German troops in East Prussia, while other Russian forces moved southward into Galicia against the Habsburg armies. But to achieve their goals the Russians had to mobilize immediately, hence their escalatory decisions early in the crisis, with fateful consequences for the peace of Europe.

The Italians, it should be noted, took some preliminary measures in August 1914 but deferred general mobilization until later. Otherwise Rome took no further action to intervene. Rather the Italian government soon became involved in an elaborate bargaining game over its entry into the fray. Not until April 1915 would this last of the major pre-war allies enter into the fighting, not on the side of their former allies but in opposition with the Triple Entente.

The Process of Escalation

By 10 August 1914 Europe was at war. What had started as the third Balkan war had rapidly become the First World War. How can one assess responsibility for these events? Who caused it? What could have been done differently to have prevented it? Such questions have troubled generations of historians since 1914. There are no clear answers. But the following observations may put the questions into context. The alliance/*entente* system created linking mechanisms that allowed the control of a state's strategic destiny to pass into a broader arena, one which the individual government could manage but not always totally control. Most specifically, this meant that any Russo-German quarrel would see France involved because of the very nature of Germany's offensive war plans. Until 1914 the alliance/*entente* partners had disagreed just enough among themselves to conceal the true impact of the alliance arrangements.

The legacy of Germany's bombastic behaviour, so characteristic of much of German *Weltpolitik* and *Europolitik* after 1898, also meant that Berlin was thoroughly mistrusted. Its behaviour created a tone, indeed an edginess, that introduced fear into the international system, since only for Germany did mobilization equal war. Ironically, and not all historians agree, the German policy in 1914 may have been less provocative than earlier. But that summer Berlin paid the price for its earlier aggressiveness.

Serbia allowed a terrorist act to proceed, then sought to evade the consequences of its action. It would gain, after 1918, the most from the war with the creation of the Yugoslav state. Paradoxically, however, the very ethnic rivalries that brought Austria-Hungary to collapse would also plague the new state and its post-1945 successor.

Austria-Hungary feared the threat posed by the emergence of the south Slavs as a political force. But the Dual Monarchy could not reform itself sufficiently to blunt the challenge. With the death of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who had always favoured peace, the monarchy lost the one person who could check the ambitions of General Conrad and mute the fears of the civilians. While harsh, Ottokar Czernin's epitaph has a certain truth to it: 'We

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were compelled to die; we could only choose the manner of our death and we have chosen the most terrible.'

Germany believed that it must support its Danubian ally. This in turn influenced Berlin's position towards Russia and France. Without German backing, Vienna would probably have hesitated to be more conciliatory toward Belgrade. But, anxious to support Vienna and possibly to detach Russia from the Triple Entente, Berlin would risk a continental war to achieve its short- and long-term objectives. Berlin and Vienna bear more responsibility for starting the crisis and then making it very hard to control.

Nevertheless, the Russians must also share some significant responsibility for the final outcome. St Petersburg's unwavering support of Serbia, its unwillingness to negotiate with Berlin and Vienna, and then its precipitate preparatory military measures escalated the crisis beyond control. Russia's general mobilization on 30 July guaranteed disaster.

Those Russian decisions would in turn confront the French with the full ramifications of their alliance with Russia. Despite French expectations, the alliance with Russia had in fact become less salvation for Paris and more assuredly doom. France became the victim in the Russo-German fight. Throughout the crisis French leaders could only hope to convince Russia to be careful and simultaneously work to ensure that Britain came to their assistance. Paris failed in the first requirement and succeeded in the second.

The decisions of August 1914 did not come easily for the British government. Grey could not rush the sharply divided cabinet. The decade-old *entente* ties to the French were vague and unwritten and had a history of deception and deviousness. Nor did the vicious political atmosphere created by Ireland help. Grey desperately hoped that the threat of British intervention would deter Germany; it did not. Could Grey have done more? Probably not, given the British political system and the precarious hold the Liberal Party had on power. Only a large standing British army would have deterred Germany, and that prospect, despite some recent assertions, simply did not exist.

In July 1914 one or two key decisions taken differently might well have seen the war averted. As it was, the July crisis became a model of escalation and inadvertent consequences. The expectation of a short war, the ideology of offensive warfare, and continuing faith in war as an instrument of policy: all would soon prove illusory and wishful. The cold, hard, unyielding reality of modern warfare soon replaced the romantic, dashing legends of the popular press. The elite decision-makers (monarchs, civilian ministers, admirals, and generals) had started the war; the larger public would die in it and, ultimately, finish it.



POSTSCRIPT

Were German Militarism and Diplomacy Responsible for World War I?

Recent events in the former Yugoslavia may have spurred interest in World War I—the first time that the Balkan powder keg exploded into the world's consciousness. Yugoslavia was created after that war, and some see its recent problems as a failure of the Versailles settlement.

Regardless of the truth of this assumption, it is certainly true that the last decade has seen the publication (and republication) of a number of important works on the Great War, including books by both authors in this issue: Berghahn's *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (St. Martin's Press, 1993) and Williamson's *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (St. Martin's Press, 1991). David G. Hermann's *The Arming of Europe and the Making of World War I* (Princeton University Press, 1996) concentrates on the size and strength of land armies and their role in the genesis of the war, a subject that has been neglected by historians who have emphasized naval buildup.

Many recent books on World War I have either been written by English historians or have concentrated on England's role in the war. Edward E. McCullough's *How the First World War Began: The Triple Entente and the Coming of the Great War of 1914-1918* (Black Rose Books, 1999) is a revisionist work that sees the creation of the Triple Entente as a prime force in the causes of the First World War. Comparing the condition of Germany today to England, France, and Russia, McCullough questions not only the folly of the war but notes its counterproductive results.

In *The Pity of War* (Basic Books, 1999), Scottish historian Niall Ferguson takes the revisionist viewpoint to a higher level. Arguing that the First World War was not inevitable, he asserts that the British declaration of war turned a continental conflict into a world war. He further argues that not only was Britain's participation in the war a colossal error, but it was counterproductive to the interests of the British nation and its people. He finds proof in the causes and results of World War II and the present condition of Great Britain.

Eminent English military historian John Keegan's *The First World War* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1999) may well prove to be one of the most widely read and influential volumes on the Great War. A general work written with skill, scholarship, and readability, it is strongly recommended. *World War I: A History* (Oxford University Press, 1998), edited by Hew Strachan, contains 23 chapters, each written by a different historian, that cover the war from origins to memory and everything in between. William Jannen's *The Lions of July: Prelude to War, 1914* (Presidio Press, 1997) is an extremely readable account of Europe's last month of peace as its statesmen and military men blundered into war.