

THE ORIGINS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

I. WORLD WAR I IN PERSPECTIVE

- A. In 1890 Europe was a *nice, quiet place. Things were cool.* Question:
how could such a great war emerge from such an untroubled world?
- B. WWI unleashed an avalanche of violence that pervaded the 20th century.

II. FOUR COMMON EXPLANATIONS FOR WWI

- A. "Germany caused the war." Three main variants are offered:
 - 1. The minimalist Germany-blaming view: Germany consciously risked a great war in July 1914 in order to make gains for the German/Austrian alliance. Germany preferred the prewar status quo to a general war, but did knowingly risk a general war.
 - 2. The intermediate Germany-blaming view: Germany preferred a continental war to the prewar status quo, but preferred the prewar status quo to a world war (a war against Britain, France, and Russia). This is the view of "Fischer School" moderates, exemplified by Imanuel Geiss.
 - 3. The maximalist Germany-blaming view: Germany preferred even a world war to the prewar status quo. The First World War as deliberate plot. This is the extreme "Fischer School" view.
- B. "Russia, or Serbia, or Britain, or France, or Austria caused the war."
 - 1. During 1919-1945 many Germans alleged that Britain organized the encirclement of Germany and conspired to cause the war. Germany, they said, was wholly innocent.
 - 2. Sidney Fay and other scholars have put prime responsibility on Austria and Russia; some heavily blame Serbia; some blame France and Britain for not restraining Russia more firmly; some suspect that France egged Russia on.
- C. "Crisis bungling caused the war." In this view no European power willfully risked war. European leaders simply mismanaged the July crisis.
 - 1. "Russia began pre-mobilization without realizing that mobilization meant war, or that partial mobilization against Austria was impossible."
 - 2. "Austria failed to give Russia its evidence showing that Serbia was responsible for the death of the Archduke. Had Russia known Serbia's guilt it would have sympathized more with Austria's position."
 - 3. "British leaders (Grey) did not realize that mobilization meant war; hence they unwisely failed to restrain Russian mobilization."
 - 4. "German leaders (Jagow) falsely assured Russia that Germany would tolerate Russian partial mobilization against Austria, leading Russia to mobilize."
- D. "The explosive military situation caused the war." In this view the widespread belief in the power of the offense and the general embrace of offensive plans primed the world for war. This explosive military backdrop magnified the dangers posed by a minor crisis and the usual crisis blunders that it produced.

III. BACKGROUND TO WAR: EUROPE 1890-1914

- A. The Powers' relative strength: they ranked as follows: (1) Germany; (2) Britain; (3) Russia; (4) France; (5) Austria-Hungary; (6) Serbia. (See Paul Kennedy tables, attached to these notes, especially Tables 7 and 9.)
- B. Social Structure and Domestic Politics in Europe, 1890-1914.
 - 1. Oligarchy and fears of upheaval in Europe, e.g., in Austria-Hungary and Germany.

2. Militarism (see assigned Martin Kitchen readings).
 - a. The military's influence was large, especially in Germany.
 - b. The military's ideas were dangerous. These included:
 - i. Offense is easy // windows are common & large // surprise is essential.
 - ii. Waving big sticks makes others nice.
 - iii. Others are hostile.
 - iv. Empires are valuable.
 - v. War is short, glorious, even fun.
3. Self-glorifying nationalist myths in the schools--history as fiction (see assigned Langsam reading).
4. Lack of independent scholarship. Professors were propagandists for the state who repeated fatuous ideas instead of evaluating them, especially in Germany (see L.L. Snyder, German Nationalism, in "further readings," chapter on scholars).
- C. The Changing Nature of War
 1. The rise of mass armies and the mobilization system:
 - a. Preliminary mobilization vs. full mobilization.
 - b. Why did mobilization mean war? Because Germany's Schlieffen plan mandated a surprise attack on Belgium as soon as mobilization began.
 - c. Was secret mobilization possible? No, but some thought so.
 2. The rise of the power of the defensive on the battlefield: machine guns, barbed wire, railroads, and mass armies.
 3. The growth of the "cult of the offensive": Germany's Schlieffen Plan, France's Plan XVII, Russia's Plan 20, Austria's offensive war plans; the cult of the offensive at sea.
 Question: What war plans would have made the most sense for each power? Once at war, what was the best way for each side to fight?
- D. Perceptions in Europe (see assigned Geiss reading).
 1. The rise of international Social Darwinism and the cult of the offensive.
 2. Big stick ideas in Germany: Admiral Tirpitz's Risk Theory and Kurt Riezler's theory of "bluff diplomacy."
 3. The self-encirclement of Germany, and the German myth that others had conspired to bring it about.
 4. The need for empire--Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism; expansionism in Germany, Russia, Serbia (!), and France.
 5. "War is good for you"--a remarkable idea.
- E. German expansion and the Fischer Controversy (see Geiss reading).
 1. How expansionist was Germany? The "War Council" of December 8, 1912: how to interpret it?
 2. How expansionist were the other European powers?
- F. The decline of British power and the Anglo-German Detente of 1912-1914.
- G. The appearance of a tight (offensive) network of alliances in Europe (the transformation of alliances from "epimachies" to "symmachies.")
- H. The crises of 1905, 1908, 1911. Were these causes of trouble or mere symptoms of other causes?
- I. The naval and land arms races. Were these causes of trouble or mere symptoms of other causes?
- J. The rise of economic interdependence (it was high in 1914!) and international cooperation (e.g., international agencies regulated railways, postal service and telegraph).
- K. The alleged appearance of dumb national leaders in Russia, Germany, Britain, and Austria-Hungary.
- L. The rise of (incompetent?) peace movements: "let's arbitrate disputes!"; "lets have arms control!"

IV. THE "JULY CRISIS": JUNE 28-AUGUST 4, 1914

Ask three questions of these events: (1) What caused the war? i.e. what conditions, events, or actions made the war inevitable? (2) Who caused the war? What states, or political groups or persons within states? (3) Why

did these actors cause the war? What expectations and intentions animated their actions? Were they trying to cause war? Expecting to cause war?

A. The Sarajevo Assassination of Austria's Archduke Ferdinand, June 28. Was the Serbian government responsible? I think yes, although some say no.

B. The German "Blank Check" to Austria, July 5-6. Germany does more than approve an Austrian war against Serbia: it pushes Austria toward war.

1. German expectations: what were they?

>Did the German government think that such a war would provoke Russia to intervene? Most evidence (see Geiss) suggests that most Germans thought Russia would sit quietly, from monarchic solidarity, and for window reasons: Germany's good window was the Russian-French bad window. However, some straws in the wind suggest that some Germans foresaw where the crisis would lead.

>Was British intervention in such a war expected? Again, this is debated, but most evidence suggests that most Germans thought not.

2. German desires: what were they?

>Did Germany want a war? The elite was split. The Army actively wanted a continental war, the Kaiser and Bethmann didn't. In my view the preferred center-of-gravity outcome of the elite was a crisis victory; the next preferred outcome was a continental war; the next was status quo ante; and the least-desired result was world war. Bethmann and the Kaiser preferred the status quo ante to continental war, but the Army didn't, and prevailed--ultimately in an unrecorded confrontation on July 30.

C. The Austrian Ultimatum to Serbia, July 23. This had a 2-day deadline, and was designed to be impossible to accept. Austria's plan was then to smash the Serbian army and vassalize Serbia, but not to annex it, because Austria-Hungary's Hungarian politicians wouldn't accept more Slavs in the empire.

D. Serbian reply, 6:00 p.m., July 25. The Serbs considered accepting all Austria's demands but in the end rejected Austria's demand to allow Austrian officials to participate in the Serbian enquiry into the assassination of Franz Ferdinand.

On receiving this reply the Austrian government promptly ordered mobilization of its army against Serbia. This order reached the army command at 9:23 p.m. July 25; it posited July 27 as "alarm day," and July 28 as the first day of mobilization.

E. Russian Preliminary Mobilization, July 25, with orders issued at 4:00 p.m.--even before the Serbian time limit expired at 6:00. Russian leaders also decide in principle to mobilize later against Austria (but not Germany).

The French also began pre-mobilization on July 25, although this had less effect on the crisis, perhaps because these measures were still substantially undetected by July 28.

Why did the Russians pre-mobilize? With what expectation?

Answer: we don't know. This grave decision, a key to the crisis, has never been fully explained.

These points are pertinent:

1. Evidence suggests that Russian leaders thought Germany meant to push matters to war and felt compelled to move first to prepare for the coming conflict. Sazonov, the Russian Foreign Minister, said on July 24 "*C'est la guerre Européenne!*" when he heard the terms of the Austrian ultimatum. It seems the Russians already expected war at this point: they felt the Austro-German move showed that Austria and Germany planned to smash Serbia, and that Russia would have to allow this or fight; and since Russia wouldn't allow this, it would have to fight. Perhaps they also felt that Germany would merely find another excuse for war if Russia conceded on Serbia, making concessions fruitless.

If so, it seems likely that the Russians pre-mobilized to gain the first strike (really first-mobilization) advantage in the war that Germany and Austria seemed to be forcing upon them. Since war seemed inevitable, and the Russians thought that whoever mobilized first would have the upper hand, quick mobilization made sense.

Note: the July crisis occurred against the backdrop of manifest signs of war fever in Germany (e.g., the Jubilees of 1913) that Russia had detected.

Note: during July 24-25 Russian civilians also made a decision in principle to fully mobilize against Austria but not Germany. This suggests a civil-military split on preempting Germany: the civilians were not yet sold on it. Did the Russian military manipulate unwitting civilian consent to Russian military measures?

2. Russian civilians (Sazonov and the Czar) were apparently unaware that mobilization meant war until later in the crisis. We can surmise that their soldiers talked them into these preliminary measures before they realized that mobilization meant war.
3. Russian civilians (Sazonov and the Czar) were apparently unaware that Russia had an "all or nothing" mobilization plan; Russia had to mobilize against Germany if it mobilized against Austria. The Russian chief of staff failed to explain this to the civilians at the key meetings on July 24-25. This misconception eased the Russian decision in principle to mobilize against Austria.
4. Russian leaders did not receive Austria's dossier showing Serb responsibility for the Sarajevo murder of Archduke Ferdinand until after Russia had pre-mobilized on July 25 and mobilized on July 30.

F. Germany hangs tough, July 25-30.

The British proposed mediation of the crisis under British auspices. But the Germans kept pushing Austria forward, seeking to get the fait accompli finished. The German problem: Austria wouldn't be ready to attack Serbia until August 12. Hence, to foreclose diplomacy, the Germans urged Austria to declare war on Serbia, which Austria did on July 28. This in turn helped spur Russia to declare partial mobilization on July 29, and then full mobilization on July 30.

What went on? Some details:

1. Bethmann sabotages the Kaiser's peace effort. The Kaiser wasn't told of the Serbian reply for several days. When he saw it, he wrote (July 28) that "every cause of war falls to the ground." He then asked Bethmann to ask Austria to offer the "Halt in Belgrade" peace plan to Russia.
But Bethmann didn't do it! He waited half a day, and then late on July 28 he told the Austrian's something much milder! He never told them how strongly the Kaiser wanted the crisis ended!
2. Moltke sabotages Bethmann's peace effort. Then late on July 29 Bethmann reversed course and tried to pull the Austrians back from the brink, in messages sent overnight, asking Austria to accept the Halt in Belgrade. These messages were sent at 2:55 a.m. and 3:00 a.m. July 30.

Too much can be made of this change. Even on July 30 Bethmann never made a clear threat to Austria, or clearly stated that the crisis should be called off. Still, it was a change.

- a. What caused it? Some say it was the latest warning from Britain, received at 9:12 p.m. July 29. Some say it was Russian partial mobilization, which convinced him that Russia wouldn't cave. I also wonder if it wasn't Belgian mobilization too; Germany learned of significant Belgian mobilization measures on July 29 at 4:00 p.m.
- b. Moltke sabotaged Bethmann's effort at 2:00 p.m. July 30 with a telegram to Austria urging immediate Austrian

mobilization against Russia and promising that Germany would follow suit.

It's possible that Moltke also made more direct efforts to persuade Bethmann to halt his peace effort. Bethmann was inactive during the morning of July 30. If he really meant to avoid war, he should have been telling Russia that he was now willing to pressure Austria, and asking it not to mobilize in the meantime; and he should have been telling Britain the same thing, and asking it to restrain Russia. He didn't. Could coercion or persuasion by Moltke be the reason?

However, assuming that this happened, we still don't know why. Two very different interpretations are possible.

- i. Moltke had hoped to preserve peace, but was finally persuaded that Germany had to mobilize in order to keep pace with the Russian, French, and Belgian mobilizations. He explained this necessity to Bethmann with sadness in his heart.
- ii. Moltke, having desired an opportunity for preventive war against Russia for months, and seeing in the July crisis a fine opportunity for such a war, was delighted that Russia, France and Belgium gave Germany a pretext to mobilize; was enraged that Bethmann might take this pretext as an opportunity to make peace; and either persuaded or coerced Bethmann to cease his efforts.

Interpretation #i suggests World War I was an accidental war caused by military factors that made the July crisis exceptionally dangerous. Interpretation #ii suggests that World War I was a deliberate war of aggression by Germany, which plotted to provoke, and then exploited, the excuse that Russian mobilization presented in order to wage a war of continental conquest.

Note: the Germans learned of the Russian pre-mobilization measures on July 27, two days after they began. If Germany really sought to prevent a continental war, shouldn't this news have shocked Germany into backtracking--i.e. forcing the "Halt in Belgrade" compromise on Austria? But Bethmann kept going until late on July 29. This supports the inference that the Germans viewed a continental war with equanimity, and feared only a world war.

- G. British dithering. The British never warned Germany in a crystal-clear manner that they would intervene if Germany launched a continental war, chiefly because the British themselves did not decide what they would do until August 3.
- H. Russian mobilization
 1. Partial mobilization, July 29. Russia did this partly to deter Austria from invading Serbia, partly to offset Austrian mobilization against Serbia, partly to forestall Austrian mobilization in Galicia, and perhaps partly because on July 27 German Secretary of State Jagow lullingly assured the Allies that Germany would accept a partial Russian mobilization that was aimed only at Austria-Hungary.
 2. Full mobilization, 5:00, July 30. Reasons: the conviction that war was inevitable, spurred by:
 - a. Reports that the Germans were upset by Russian preliminary mobilization, and that the Austrians still resisted any compromise; and Russian military warnings that mobilization was an all-or-nothing matter--a partial, South-only mobilization would make more difficult a full mobilization later if that became necessary.
 - b. False reports that German mobilization had begun.

- I. German mobilization. Late on July 30 (but before learning of Russian full mobilization) the German government made a commitment to decide at noon July 31 whether to mobilize. This was, in essence, a provisional decision to mobilize the next day unless something favorable (e.g., a Russian/French cave-in) happened in the interim to defuse the crisis. Germany was probably responding to continuing Russian pre-mobilization, to Belgian pre-mobilization, to the Russian partial mobilization of July 29, and/or to the Kaiser's misinterpretation of Czar's remark that Russian mobilization had begun 5 days earlier, which emerged from the Willy-Nicky correspondence. This decision meant that the war would have broken out absent Russian full mobilization, with German mobilization on July 31. (Thus the outbreak of the war was "overdetermined.")
- J. An interpretation of the crisis to consider. Note that German military leaders rightly knew that Germany could not mobilize in secret for any length of time; but Russian and French military leaders thought Germany could mobilize secretly, with the French believing secret mobilization was possible for a week (See Joffre's memoirs). Why was this? Perhaps German officers, hoping to bait Russia or France into early mobilizations that would then justify German mobilization and the preventive war that many German officers sought, primed French and Russian intelligence with false information that would scare them into a premature mobilization. Joffre does indicate that his 7-days-of-secret mobilization estimate came from secret intelligence on Germany. Had I been a German general, and had I desired a preventive war, this is exactly what I would have wanted the French to believe, and I would have polluted French intelligence with exactly this sort of information. (This is a speculative interpretation, but I know no evidence against it.)

V. WORLD WAR I AS A CASE STUDY: HOW TO USE CASES TO TEST THEORIES, & HOW TO USE THEORIES TO EXPLAIN CASES

VI. MILITARY-RELATED CAUSES OF WWI?

- A. Preemption
 - B. 3 Windows
 - C. False Optimism
 - D. Cult of the Offensive
 - E. Cheap War
- (What if all sides had possessed nuclear second-strike capabilities in 1914?)

VII. MISPERCEPTIONS AS CAUSES OF WORLD WAR I?

- A. Spiral or deterrence failure?
- B. Non-evaluation
- C. Nationalist mythmaking
- D. Non-strategy
- E. Militarism?