

# The Origins of World War I

Edited by

**RICHARD F. HAMILTON**

*Ohio State University*

**HOLGER H. HERWIG**

*University of Calgary*



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## World Wars

### *Definition and Causes*

Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig

It is only fair to ask: *Why* another book on 1914? Surely, the origins of that war have been studied, reviewed, and revised almost beyond any reader's endurance. Vladimir Dedijer, arguably the leading expert on the Sarajevo assassination, claimed that already in 1966 more than 3,000 books had been published on that subject alone. And the torrent of ink spilled on that tragic murder has never abated. Hence, why more?

The short answer is that many of us have missed several key elements in the vast literature on 1914. First, who precisely *were* the decision makers? Monarchs, presidents, foreign ministers, staff chiefs, or a combination of these? And what were their mindsets in July 1914? How had the experiences of the recent past (and especially of the two Balkan Wars of 1912–13) shaped their outlooks? Second, *how* did those governments go about declaring war? In other words, was there a constitutional definition of war powers? Were cabinet and parliamentary approval required in all cases? Or could war be declared simply by royal fiat? Third, *which* “social forces” or extraparliamentary lobbies had input into the decision for war? And fourth, what *were* the reasons? What were the justifications for the decisions to go to war? Why did those decision makers do it? Were there common or similar justifications? Or is a differentiated reading needed? In short, we sought answers to questions that had troubled us from previous readings on July 1914. We hope in this volume to have provided not only answers, but, above all, stimulus for further thought and research.

### The Road to 1914

World War I, once called the Great War, seems to defy explanation: Why did it happen? Numerous books on the subject carry the words “causes” or “origins” in their titles. The literature on the subject is extensive, probably the largest for any war in human history.<sup>1</sup> To address that question, we begin with a definition of what constituted a world war and then proceed to a discussion of possible causes regarding July 1914. It is our argument that the numerical suffix established in 1919 for the “war to end all wars” (1914–18) as constituting the “first” world war is flawed. Rather, we see it in terms of the *longue durée*, of five centuries of conflicts that transcended “normal” or “short” wars in terms of both intensity and globalization. We offer this overview to place the “Great War” in historical perspective, fully aware that our selections are open to debate (precisely our intention).

We define a world war as one involving five or more major powers and having military operations on two or more continents. Wars of such extent are costly ventures. The principal “actors” therefore have to be rich nations and ones with substantial intercontinental outreach. Rich, of course, is a relative term. The masses in a given nation might have been poor, but that nation, relative to others, could be rich, sufficiently so as to allow it to sustain large armies and navies in distant struggles for extended periods. For example, The Netherlands could do that in the seventeenth century when it was a rich nation. In the eighteenth century, when relative to others it was not so rich, that nation was no longer a “great power.” China, a rich nation, presents the opposite experience. It was a rich nation with a demonstrated ability to reach out, but then in 1433 by imperial decree the voyages ceased, overseas trade was severely restricted, and the construction of ocean-going ships stopped. Confucian-trained officials, it seems, “opposed trade and foreign contact on principle.”<sup>2</sup> China’s foreign involvement ended at that point.

Since central Europe tore itself apart during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), eight wars fit our definition of a world war. They are: the

<sup>1</sup> For a partial listing, see the first section of the bibliography, Appendix C.

<sup>2</sup> John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 138–9; and Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1403–1433* (New York, 1994). Levathes reports a more extended transformation: “In less than a hundred years, the greatest navy the world had ever known had ordered itself into extinction” (p. 175). In the course of the fifteenth century, she reports, “China’s tax base shrank by almost half” (p. 178).

War of the Grand Alliance (sometimes called the War of the League of Augsburg), 1689–97; the War of the Spanish Succession, 1701–14; the War of the Austrian Succession, 1740–48; the Seven Years' War, 1756–63; the French Revolutionary Wars, 1792–1802; the Napoleonic Wars, 1803–15; then, after a ninety-nine-year interlude, World War I, 1914–18; and, two decades later, World War II, 1939–45. The participating powers and measures of battle fatalities are given in Table 1.1.<sup>3</sup> Following our definition, within this time span the “Great War” was actually World War VII.

A few cautionary remarks should be noted. The “severity” figures in the table considerably understate the total wartime deaths: Neither civilian deaths nor the deaths – military and civilian – suffered by smaller countries (i.e., not great powers) are included. One source gives World War I deaths as 14,663,000 and World War II as between 41 and 49 million.<sup>4</sup> Seen in relative terms (losses per 1,000 of population), some other wars were much more destructive. The victorious Athenians put to death “all the grown men” of Melos in 416 B.C. The destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C., it is said, “was essentially total.” Taking an unlikely high estimate of European losses in World War I, one author suggests a loss of “about 4.1 percent.” The German states lost one-fifth of their population in the Thirty Years' War; Prussia, one-seventh of its population in the Seven Years' War. A very destructive war, one that receives little attention, was a civil war, the Taiping Rebellion in China (1851–64), with a loss of some 20 million lives. We routinely focus on wars as the big killing events but neglect another even more lethal one. In March 1918 an influenza epidemic broke out among army recruits in Kansas. Subsequently

<sup>3</sup> In Britain's North American colonies, the first three wars are known as King William's War, Queen Anne's War, and King George's War. The Seven Years' War is known there as the French and Indian War; in Germany it is called the Third Silesian War.

The table suggests a level of knowledge and degree of precision that, as seen below, is not warranted. The severity/intensity numbers are rough estimates best interpreted as involving fair-sized margins for error. The dates vary somewhat from source to source. The War of the Spanish Succession, for example, ended with the Peace of Utrecht, 1713, but that was supplemented with other treaties in 1714. For brief reviews, see Stanley Chodorow, MacGregor Knox, Conrad Schirokauer, Joseph R. Strayer, and Hans W. Gatzke, *The Mainstream of Civilization*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Fort Worth, 1994); Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, and Frank M. Turner, *The Western Heritage*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2001); and R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History from 3500 B.C. to the Present*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, 1993). For brief reviews of those wars in North America, see John M. Blum, Edmund S. Morgan, Willie Lee Rose, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Kenneth M. Stampp, and C. Vann Woodward, *The National Experience: A History of the United States*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Fort Worth, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Dupuy and Dupuy, *Encyclopedia of Military History*, pp. 990 and 1198.



TABLE 1.1. *World Wars*

War	Dates	Number of great powers	Countries <sup>a</sup>	Severity <sup>b</sup>	Intensity <sup>c</sup>
Grand Alliance	1689–97	5	ABFNS	680	6,939
Spanish Succession	1701–14	5	ABFNS	1,251	12,490
Austrian Succession	1740–48	6	ABFPRS	359	3,379
Seven Years' War	1756–63	6	ABFPRS	992	9,118
French Revolutionary Wars	1792–1802	5	ABFPR	663	5,816
Napoleonic Wars	1803–15	5	ABFPR	1,869	16,112
All European wars, 1815–1913 (N = 18)	1815–1913	3 or fewer	A: 6; B: 1; F: 8; R: 5	Fewer than 217	Fewer than 1,743
World War I	1914–18	8	ABFGIJRU	7,734	57,616
World War II	1939–45	7	BFGIJRU	12,948	93,665

<sup>a</sup> Countries participating in war: A: Austria-Hungary; B: Britain (England); F: France; G: Germany; I: Italy; J: Japan; N: Netherlands; P: Prussia; R: Russia; S: Spain; U: United States.

<sup>b</sup> Severity of war: total battle fatalities suffered by great powers, in thousands.

<sup>c</sup> Intensity of war: total battle fatalities suffered by great powers, per million European population.

Source: Joshua S. Goldstein, *Long Cycles: Prosperity and War in the Modern Age* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 236–37. Reprinted with the permission of Yale University Press.

called the Spanish flu, it spread, within a year, to all continents. Estimates of total deaths range from 25 to 39 million, more than twice the World War I total. The rates would be equivalent to the above-mentioned wartime losses of Prussia and the German states.<sup>5</sup>

The eight world wars were initiated by well-off, indeed, rich European nations. Five or more major powers were involved in those struggles. Most history textbooks, understandably perhaps, emphasize the battles fought on the European continent. But in each case, the wars were fought also in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. In three of those wars, the English and French fought in India, with France ultimately losing out. And in four of them, the same contenders fought in North America. In the last of those

<sup>5</sup> For the comparisons with other wars, see John Mueller, "Changing Attitudes Towards War: The Impact of the First World War," *British Journal of Political Science* 21 (1991): 1–28. On the "Spanish flu," see K. David Patterson and Gerald F. Pyle, "The Geography and Mortality of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 65 (1991): 4–21.

struggles, in 1763, the British gained the vast territories of New France. In the course of the same war, the British “took” Martinique, Grenada, Havana, and Manila (all later returned).

World wars, as defined here, require extensive economic, technological, and political development. Five or more nations had to generate considerable wealth, create capable naval forces, and acquire overseas empires. Basically, they had to establish and maintain relatively large military forces and send them enormous distances. That initially meant transport with large seagoing vessels armed with effective cannons. Later, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, railroads, motor vehicles, and air transport came to be the decisive factors.<sup>6</sup>

A military revolution occurred in the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> The most important of the many changes was a considerable growth in the size of the armies. Those large forces could no longer “live off the land”: steal supplies from the populace. That change forced the creation of “the train,” a large number of horse-drawn wagons to carry foodstuffs (for men and animals), munitions, medical supplies, and so forth. The size of military operations increased accordingly, with armies marching over several roads and converging later, it was hoped, at the site of battle. For several reasons, the military was forced to give much greater emphasis to drill and discipline; much more elaborate arrangements for command and control became necessary.

<sup>6</sup> Carlo Cipolla, *Guns, Sails, and Empire: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion* (New York, 1965). For more extensive treatments, see Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge, 1977); William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago, 1982); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987); and John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York, 1993).

There are always complications and specifications. Russia was a rich and powerful nation with a sizable army. But it had a small navy, one with limited ocean access. In the 1880s Russia's leaders viewed Britain as their implacable enemy but were frustrated by their inability “to strike back at London in any meaningful way. How indeed could the elephant exert pressure on the whale?” From William C. Fuller, Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600–1914* (New York, 1992), p. 332.

<sup>7</sup> See Michael Roberts, *The Military Revolution, 1560–1660* (Belfast, 1956); Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1996); Brian M. Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, 1992); Clifford J. Rogers, *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation in Early Modern Europe* (Boulder, 1995); and MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, eds., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050* (New York, 2001).

The increase in the size of armies and their growing complexity required the development of trained professional leaders, changes that came about in the next two centuries. No longer did it suffice to send aspirants to cadet schools at Lichterfelde in Germany, Sandhurst in Britain, St. Cyr in France, or West Point in the United States. Now, staff officers were formally educated at academies (*écoles militaires*) in Berlin, St. Petersburg, Vienna, Woolwich, Santiago de Chile, and Nanking. Likewise, naval colleges were created in Brest, Kronstadt, Newport, and Etajima. While Maximilien Robespierre's experimental *École de Mars* eventually failed, the French Revolution was highly successful with its new engineer officer training academy (*École polytechnique*) as well as its advanced gunnery school at Châlons and its military engineering school at Metz. At the end of the Napoleonic period, the Prussians founded a special advanced war academy (*Kriegsschule*, later called *Kriegsakademie*) in Berlin.

War offices and admiralties were created to provide both the training and the command structures. Those rich modern states were able to create the disciplined and organized forces that allowed the conduct of coherent and effective military operations over long periods not only in Europe, but also, as indicated, across broad expanses of the world's oceans.

Although often overlooked, economic costs are a constant factor in military and diplomatic affairs. The military revolution increased those costs considerably. There were more soldiers to be housed, clothed, fed, armed, and trained. The number of infantry and artillery pieces required grew, and with the technological advances, the unit costs of those weapons also increased. The sources of wealth allowing this revolution were diverse: New World gold and silver as well as trade and commerce (tea, coffee, cocoa, sugar, silk, spices, slaves, woolens, and, later, cotton goods). Machine manufacture had a considerable impact, increasing national wealth and making new weapons possible. This innovation came first in the production of cotton goods, and then in that of iron and steel. The latter industry produced the steam engines for cotton manufacture, pumps for the mines, rails and locomotives for the railways, and ever more effective cannons.

A nation's military capacity, at all times, is limited by its economic strength, by its ability to pay. One can increase taxes and borrow money to pay the costs. But ultimately, an end point would be reached, forcing that nation out of the struggle. Histories generally focus on monarchs and generals when discussing wars. But that overlooks another important figure: the finance minister. When the tax monies reach their limit

and no further loans are possible, the war ends. Austria's participation in the Seven Years' War is a classic case in point. Campaigns were budgeted for 10 to 12 million florins per annum, but a single campaign in 1760 cost 44 million florins. Overall, the costs for the Seven Years' War came to 260 million florins. The war ended in large part when the finance minister told Maria Teresa that Vienna had reached its financial limit.<sup>8</sup>

A curious interpretative bias appears in this connection. Many writers focus on the military outcome: Who won the war? But the economic consequences are often markedly different. The Seven Years' War ended in 1763. But the debts incurred continued and, in the case of France, subsequently had very serious impacts, especially with the added costs of its involvement in the American Revolution. An important lesson was restated here: that wars can contribute to revolution.

Another economic linkage should be noted. Britain was likely the richest of the European nations on the eve of the French Revolution. Though maintaining only a small army, Britain's wealth allowed the hiring of mercenaries and the payment of subsidies to its allies. Above all, Britain's wealth, combined with its insular position and command of the seas, allowed it to participate in as much or as little of a European war as it desired. In raw figures, Britain spent £1,657 million on wartime expenditures between 1793 and 1815, up more than £1,400 million from the period 1776 to 1783. Much of that was to finance the various coalitions it formed against Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>9</sup>

The above paragraphs deal with necessary conditions, with the prerequisite factors that make world wars possible. One must also consider

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Duffy, *The Army of Maria Theresa: The Armed Forces of Imperial Austria, 1740-1780* (Vancouver and London, 1977), p. 124. For a brief account of the struggles between the ministries of war and finance in Russia, see Fuller, *Strategy and Power*, p. 329. For the problems facing the chancellor of the exchequer in Britain in the years before the Great War, see David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, 6 vols. (London, 1933-6), vol. 1, pp. 8-10. The nations differed also in the efficiency and the sensed justice of their taxation arrangements. In these respects, Britain was well ahead of France, its most important continental rival. See John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); J. F. Boshier, *French Finances, 1770-1795* (Cambridge, 1970); and Kennedy, *Rise and Fall*, chs. 3 and 4.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, *Rise and Fall*, pp. 81, 136. British subsidies kept Prussia and other mercenary states involved in the struggle during the Seven Years' War. *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 98. John M. Sherwig, *Guineas and Gunpowder: British Foreign Aid in the Wars with France, 1793-1815* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), makes the point that these subsidies, though large in aggregate, constituted only a small percentage of the military outlays of Britain's continental partners.

the sufficient conditions, the circumstances that would lead five or more great powers to engage in such a war. Some of these world wars (1688, 1701, 1803) were fought by coalitions to thwart the ambitions of a dominant power; others (1740, 1756, 1792) were fought to *create* a dominant power or hegemon once a war had started. Louis XIV had obvious expansive ambitions; in response, combinations of English, Dutch, Austrian, Spanish, Swedish, and German principalities allied at various times to resist the Sun King's aspirations. In 1688 Louis XIV invaded and laid waste to the Palatinate. In what we have termed the first world war, the Grand Alliance sought to block his ambitions. The war involved five major powers and lasted nine years. It raged from Belgrade to Bantry Bay (Ireland), and from Lagos to the British and French settlements in America.

In 1700, the Spanish monarch, Carlos II, died without heir. Both Habsburgs and Bourbons had claims to the succession. If the Bourbons gained the crown, the French-Spanish linkage (with their massive overseas connections) would produce a very formidable power. Once more, Louis XIV chose war (our second world war) to pursue his hegemonic aspirations. And once more, the other European powers – England, Austria, The Netherlands, Portugal, Prussia, and many of the smaller German states – combined to thwart that possibility. Again, the struggle reached beyond the European continent: from Cartagena to Mallorca, and from Port Royal to St. Augustine to Quebec. After twelve years of war, a compromise was reached. The Bourbons retained the Spanish throne, but the settlement excluded joint occupancy. France and Spain would continue as two separate nations.

In 1740, Frederick II of Prussia, who had just recently taken the throne, on the flimsiest of pretexts took Silesia from Austria. Maria Theresa understandably responded, which led to the War of Austrian Succession (our fourth world war). It involved six powers (Austria, Britain, France, Prussia, Russia, and Spain) and lasted eight years. Overseas, the war witnessed two mainly Anglo-French wars, one in India and the other in North America.

But the War of Austrian Succession solved little. From 1756 to 1763, Austria and Prussia (and later Britain, France, Sweden, Russia, and most small German states) fought the Seven Years' War. Again, the six major powers fought in Europe. Elsewhere the war was fought in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, in India and in the Americas. For eight years, six major powers mounted seven major campaigns. In India, Robert Clive drove the French under Thomas Lally off most of the subcontinent. In

the Americas, the French were driven out of Canada in 1760 and out of Martinique in 1762.

Our fifth world war took place between 1792 and 1802, as the French revolutionary forces, like Louis XIV before them, tried to establish dominion over the Continent. In this case, five major powers (but mainly France and Austria) fought for ten years. The non-European component of the war extended from Egypt to Ceylon, and from the West Indies to Mysore and Bangalore.

Of particular interest in the French Revolutionary Wars is a second revolution in military affairs: the engagement of the citizenry in the effort. For the first time, rulers dared arm their subjects in vast numbers. Nationalism and patriotism rather than impressment and bad fortune would, presumably, prompt young men to take up arms. The concept of the *levée en masse*, of the “nation in arms,” was formulated by the Committee of Public Safety and passed by the Convention on 23 August 1793. It declared that:

From this moment until that in which every enemy has been driven from the territory of the Republic, every Frenchman is permanently requisitioned for service with the armies. The young men shall fight: married men will manufacture weapons and transport stores: women shall make tents and nurse in the hospitals: children shall turn old linen into lint: the old men shall repair to the public squares to raise the courage of the warriors and preach the unity of the Republic and hatred against the kings.<sup>10</sup>

Military practice was dramatically altered, as the number of men directly involved escalated considerably. Some words of caution should be added. Achievement fell far short of aspiration. Legislative decrees do not easily transform mass sentiments. Monarchists did not become Jacobins; faithful Catholics did not become ardent secularists.

Napoleon Bonaparte put the new principle into practice in his imperial wars from 1803 to 1815, the sixth of the world wars. For twelve years, the emperor and his subjugated allies fought wars against the Revolution's major-power opponents. Once again, the conflict extended well beyond the European continent: to the West Indies, to Turkey, and to Egypt, with indirect effects in the United States and Canada (War of 1812), and in Latin America (the wars of independence). With a single stroke of the pen (and for a good deal of cash), Napoleon in 1803 sold much of a continent,

<sup>10</sup> Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* (Bloomington, Ind., 1980), p. 100.

the Louisiana Purchase, which gave the United States claim to lands from Louisiana to Alberta. Politics, strategy, and finances were all combined in a single operation.

The first six of these world wars depended on “executive decisions”: A ruler (or rulers) initiated and others responded. The decision makers typically consulted within an immediate circle of advisors. Imperialism, or intercontinental outreach, was clearly involved (although it differed in character from the later efforts). The causal factors that appeared in the course of the nineteenth century – nationalism, militarism, newspapers, public opinion, and insurgent “masses” – are notably muted in discussions of the causes of the first six of these world wars.

### The Men of 1914

Of the eight wars, World War I poses the most serious challenges with regard to explanation. The heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne was assassinated on 28 June 1914. The Austrian government alleged official Serb involvement, issued an ultimatum, and, rejecting negotiation, began hostilities with a bombardment of Belgrade. In a linked series of decisions, four other major powers – Russia, Germany, France, and Britain – joined the struggle. In all instances, the decision makers recognized the hazards involved. They knew their choices could enlarge the conflict and significantly escalate the dimensions of the struggle. A key notion, as one German participant, Kurt Riezler, put it, was that “[w]ars would no longer be fought but calculated.” The assumption underlying this “calculated risk” was that one power could enter the conflict without motivating the next power to make the same choice. Bluff, or offensive diplomacy, could be played, forcing other possible participants to desist just short of a major war.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, however, twenty-nine nations would be involved.<sup>12</sup>

The notion of the “calculated risk” requires further comment. It evokes an image of calm, reasoned deliberation, effectively a scientific judgment.

<sup>11</sup> Andreas Hillgruber, “Riezlers Theorie des kalkulierten Risikos und Bethmann Hollwegs politische Konzeption in der Julikrise 1914,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 202 (1966): 333–51. See also Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> This count is based on a listing of declarations of war contained in Ian V. Hogg, *Historical Dictionary of World War I* (Lanham, Md., 1998), pp. 57–8. Our total indicates participants rather than declarations (thus eliminating double counts). Most accounts, understandably, are selective, passing over the declarations by, among others, San Marino, Siam, Liberia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Haiti, and Honduras.

But in fact, the decision makers in the major European capitals were beset by doubts, fears, emotions, even panic as they considered their various choices and reached their decisions for war. Chaos and confusion, rather than reason and rationality, reigned. All of Carl von Clausewitz's "irrational" factors came into play: interaction, escalation, friction, chance, and the proverbial "fog of war." The German chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, perhaps was closest to the mindset of decision makers in July 1914 when he spoke of a "leap in the dark." The "calculated risk" proved more like playing *va banque* against the house dealer at Monte Carlo.

To understand the origins of this war, we must know who was involved in the decision making. Specifically, we need to know who were the leaders of the five major European powers. In each case we are dealing with a coterie of some six, eight, or ten individuals. The coterie, in most cases, consisted of the monarch, a prime minister, a foreign minister, a war minister, an army chief of staff, and possibly a finance minister. Several other persons appeared in ancillary roles, in most cases as ambassadors to the other major powers.

And we need to know the grounds for their decisions. What factors led them to make the choices they did? How did the decision makers see the events of the immediately preceding years and those of July 1914? How did they define their nations' interests? What logic or rationale led them to their decisions?

The decision making is best seen as involving "small group dynamics" as opposed to the notion of hierarchy and authority. The British monarch, George V, took no significant part in the discussions. Emperor Franz Joseph had only a peripheral role (although the final decision was his). In those two instances, the British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey and the Austro-Hungarian Chief of Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, determined "subordinates," led the other participants to the ultimate decisions. In all cases, it was the combination of "information" (of perception, fact, logic, and rationale) and "group dynamics" that produced the result, the decision to become involved.

Most university-level history and social science courses reviewing the causes of the war focus on "big" events, processes, or structures. Most accounts of the war's origins begin with the alliance system and continue with discussions of nationalism, imperialism, and militarism. All of these factors are "big" and all are routinely assumed to have had powerful impacts. They are, accordingly, treated as appropriate or acceptable causes. Accounts focused on individuals – on Emperor Franz Joseph,



Kaiser Wilhelm II, or Tsar Nicholas II; on their outlooks, whims, and fancies; and on their closest advisors – are viewed as “small.” The peculiar traits of an individual or the chance presence of a given person, in short, are treated as somehow unacceptable.

The big-cause preference was anticipated by Alexis de Tocqueville in his most famous work. “Historians who write in aristocratic ages,” he wrote, “are inclined to refer all occurrences to the particular will and character of certain individuals: and they are apt to attribute the most important revolutions to slight accidents. They trace out the smallest causes with sagacity, and frequently leave the greatest unperceived.” Historians writing “in democratic ages exhibit precisely opposite characteristics. Most of them attribute hardly any influence to the individual over the destiny of the race, or to citizens over the fate of the people: but, on the other hand, they assign great general causes to all petty incidents.”<sup>13</sup>

Tocqueville did not analyze modern societies in either/or terms, either general or particular causes or, to use current terms, either structure or contingency. “For myself,” he wrote, “I am of the opinion that, at all times, one great portion of the events of this world are attributable to very general facts and another to special influences. These two kinds of cause are always in operation: only their proportion varies.” As may be seen in any of Tocqueville’s writings, his main concern was to sort things out, to generalize where it was appropriate, and, where it was not, to particularize. The obvious imperative is that one should be guided by evidence, by the “facts of the case.” This is also our position.

The above discussion may be summarized with four generalizations.

First: World War I resulted from the decisions taken by the leaders of five nations, those referred to as the great powers: Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, France, and Britain.

Second: In those nations the decision to go to war was made by a small number of men, basically by coteries of five, eight, or ten persons. A considerable element of chance or contingency was involved in each of the decisions. Three of those nations were authoritarian regimes, and, accordingly, their decision making is best viewed, in Tocqueville’s terms, as resulting from “the particular will and character of certain individuals.” France and Britain, with parliamentary regimes, had somewhat

<sup>13</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (New York, 1963), vol. 2, pp. 85–8. This brief chapter is entitled “Some Characteristics of Historians in Democratic Times.” The bias in favor of “general causes” is found, with even greater insistence, in the social sciences.

more complicated procedures, but even there the decisions rested with very small numbers of individuals.

Third: Explanations for the war's origins must center on the considerations that moved the members of those five groups of decision makers. One must delineate the information, perceptions, and motives involved in each case. The key question: What were the concerns that moved those groups? Put differently, what were their agendas? If the review of motivations reveals a common tendency – that the five coterie were moved by nationalism, imperialism, and militarism – then a general conclusion, a focus on those big causes, might be warranted. If the agendas differed, then some other explanatory strategy is appropriate.

The drive for generalization is often defended in terms of intellectual economy, with reference to William of Ockham's "razor," that is, his caution against unnecessary complication. The aim, it is said, should be simplification, the discovery of a small number of powerful general statements. But another central aim of scientific presentations is accuracy. If economy brings distortion or, worse, misinformation, it must be avoided. If the causal process is complicated – for example, if the five major powers had separate and distinct agendas – then a more complicated formulation is necessary.

The fourth generalization is concerned with constitutional arrangements: All countries have procedures, formal and informal, that specify who will participate in the decisions to go to war. A curious gap appears in many narrative histories: The question of war powers is rarely addressed.<sup>14</sup> How did it happen that a given set of, say, seven individuals made "the decision"? A few others may have played ancillary roles, but everyone else (persons, groups, or elites) in the nation was "out of it." The procedures specifying the war powers provide the cast of decision makers. They stipulate which individuals (or office holders) will be present. And each of those arrangements, in turn, would have an impact on the agenda brought to bear on the decision. A narrowly based coterie consisting of the monarch, his chosen political leaders,

<sup>14</sup> Most narrative histories bypass this important question, proceeding to report the actions of various individuals without asking, "Why them?" Comparative government textbooks rarely discuss war powers. The same holds for international relations textbooks. Apart from the work of a small band of specialists, sociology is indifferent to the entire subject of war and the military. Perhaps most surprisingly, many historians view the subject with disdain, some with evident hostility. On the latter point, see John A. Lynn, "The Embattled Future of Academic Military History," *Journal of Military History* 61 (1997): 777–89.

and the heads of the military might readily agree on a given agenda. Other elites – bankers, industrialists, press lords, clergy, or intellectuals – might have different concerns and, if present, might favor quite different options.

It is easy, especially for Americans, to think in terms of written constitutions with fixed jurisdictions and specifications of powers. Four of the five major powers did have written constitutions, but their importance should be neither assumed nor exaggerated. Russia had a constitution after the 1905 revolution, but the tsar announced he would pay it little attention.<sup>15</sup> The actual arrangements in those nations were loose, informal, and easily altered depending on ad hoc needs or personal fancy. A determined ruler could at will bring others into the decision making. A lazy monarch could, by either plan or indifference, delegate power. An aggressive and/or astute minister could significantly enhance his power or, at minimum, could cajole an easily influenced ruler.

Many present-day accounts of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history have been written in terms of newly enfranchised masses, the advance of responsible government, and an insistent loss of old regime privileges. But the image of irrepressible movement is misleading. The constitutions were not as “progressive” as one might think.<sup>16</sup> And the authoritarian regimes showed unexpected capacities to resist the “advance of democracy” and, in some instances, to reverse the movement.<sup>17</sup>

Among the powers that remained, unambiguously, in the hands of old-regime elites in Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia was the power to declare war. The German constitution specified that the powers “to declare war and to conclude peace” rested solely with the kaiser. His decision for war required the approval of the Federal Council, or Bundesrath, the Upper House of the legislature. In republican France, the

<sup>15</sup> Dominic Lieven, *Nicholas II: Emperor of all the Russias* (London, 1993), p. 152.

<sup>16</sup> The Russian constitution of 1906 is routinely viewed as a “step ahead,” as an important progressive achievement. The text, however, tells a different story: “Article 4. To the All-Russian Emperor belongs the Supreme Autocratic Power. To obey his power, not only through fear, but also for the sake of conscience, is commanded by God Himself”; “Article 9. Our Sovereign the Emperor shall sanction the laws and without his sanction no law may go into effect”; “Article 12. Our Sovereign the Emperor shall be the supreme leader of all external relations of the Russian State with foreign powers . . .”; “Article 13. Our Sovereign the Emperor shall declare war and conclude peace as well as treaties with foreign states.” From Albert P. Blaustein and Jay A. Sigler, eds., *Constitutions That Made History* (New York, 1988), p. 259.

<sup>17</sup> See Arno Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York, 1981).

decision makers, officially, were the premier, the cabinet, and the Chamber of Deputies. In fact, however, the decision was largely the work of the president and the premier. Britain was a constitutional monarchy with cabinet government. Formally, the prime minister and the cabinet, some fifteen or twenty of his appointees, had “the power.” The decision for war required a majority vote in cabinet, and a tiny minority led by Edward Grey, the foreign secretary, generated that majority and brought about the final decision. The American constitution stipulates that “Congress shall have the Power . . . to declare War.” However, the decision in 1917 was largely the work of one man, Woodrow Wilson.

Another constitutional factor deserves some consideration. Over the long term, the “power of the purse” came to be vested with a representative legislature. In Germany, for example, the Reichstag had the authority to say “no” to the war budget. It is one of the great “what ifs” of history: What if a majority had voted “no” on 4 August? But that did not happen, a problem that deserves some attention. The issue comes up regularly in leftist historiography, the Socialist parties, presumably, being the most likely nay-sayers.<sup>18</sup>

One important implication follows from our guiding assumptions. A decision for war made by individuals, by a small coterie, means that contingency is very likely. Misinformation, weak nerves, ego strength, misjudgment of intentions, misjudgment of consequences, and difficulties in timing are inherent in the process. Put differently, diverse choices are easy to imagine.

Arguments focused on the “big” causes, on the so-called structural factors, assume highly determined processes. Those “ineluctable” forces would yield a given outcome regardless of the character or concerns of the decision makers. Nationalism, for example, would be an irresistible force. Its “power” would be felt by any and all decision makers. But the choice of interpretative options, whether coterie and contingency or powerful

<sup>18</sup> None of the 78 Socialist deputies voted against war credits on 4 August (although 14 had indicated opposition in the prior caucus). See Richard N. Hunt, *German Social Democracy 1918–1933* (New Haven, 1964), p. 22. The Prussian police had carefully investigated the party, checking for likely Socialist initiatives, but eventually shelved plans to arrest the party’s leaders. See Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt, Berlin, and Vienna, 1973). For comparable investigations in France, see Jean-Jacques Becker, *Le Carnet B: Les Pouvoirs publics et l’antimilitarisme avant la guerre de 1914* (Paris, 1973). See also Georges Haupt, *Socialism and the Great War: The Collapse of the Second International* (Oxford, 1972), ch. 9; and James Joll, *The Second International 1889–1914*, rev. ed. (London, 1974), ch. 7.

compelling structures, should not depend on a priori stipulation. Both logic and evidence should be central to the decision.

### The “Big” Causes

One of the earliest works dealing with the origins of the war, the compendious revisionist history, *The Origins of the World War*, by Sidney Bradshaw Fay (1928), begins with a chapter on the “Immediate and Underlying Causes.”<sup>19</sup> Fay discusses the early readings on the subject, reviews and comments on recently published documents, and finally considers the underlying causes. He reviews five of these: the system of secret alliances, militarism, nationalism, economic imperialism, and the newspaper press. Four of those causes appear routinely in present-day histories, but the argument of newspaper agitation has largely disappeared.<sup>20</sup> Many accounts add another cause, social Darwinism, to the basic list. And some authors offer still another, the argument of “domestic sources.” This holds that the powers, some or all of them, chose war to head off or to quell internal dissent. Another option, one that appeared immediately after the war’s end, is the argument of a “slide.” The Great War, it is argued, was an accident; it was neither intended nor foreseen by any of the decision makers. This argument, clearly, differs significantly from the others on our list.

Some initial comment on Fay’s and subsequent “causes” is appropriate. We first discuss the alliance-systems argument, and then consider the others in the following sequence: nationalism, social Darwinism, imperialism, militarism, the newspaper press, domestic sources, and the argument of a “slide.” Some authors understandably offer a ninth possibility, that of multiple causation, or combinations of the above. Social Darwinism, for example, stimulated imperialism, which in turn justified the expansion of armies and navies.

<sup>19</sup> Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, 2 vols. (New York, 1930). This is the second, revised edition, later reprinted by the Free Press–Macmillan in 1966. The first volume provides a detailed history of the alliances. The other factors are considered but without the same system and detail. On Fay’s importance in the historiography of the war, see Holger H. Herwig, “Clio Deceived: Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany After the Great War,” *International Security* 12 (1987): 5–44; and John W. Langdon, *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918–1990* (New York, 1991), ch. 2.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Richard Goff, Walter Moss, Janice Terry, and Jiu-Hwa Upshur, eds., *The Twentieth Century: A Brief Global History*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, 1994), pp. 102–10. Their discussion begins with the Sarajevo assassination, then proceeds to the “combustible atmosphere” that led to the “all-consuming fire.” They review four background factors: nationalism, imperialism, militarism, and the alliance system.

The “alliance system” refers to the network of mutual obligations, a set of treaties that presumably determined the August 1914 choices. As of 1907, Europe was divided between two power blocs: the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy and the *entente cordiale* of France, Russia, and Great Britain. Some readings, following the 1920s revisionism, talk of the binding character of those obligations. Some, the more relaxed formulations, talk only of their constraining character. Again, some differentiation is needed.

A brief analysis of the various alliances is necessary either to validate or to deny the deterministic character (or power) of this argument. First, the “purely defensive Agreement” between Austria-Hungary and Germany of 7 October 1879 pledged the two contracting parties to “come to the assistance one of the other with the whole war strength of their Empire” in case “one of the two Empires be attacked by Russia.” In case one of the contracting parties was attacked by “another Power,” the other “binds itself not only not to support the aggressor,” but also “to observe at least a benevolent neutral attitude towards its fellow Contracting Party.”<sup>21</sup> Since there was no Serbian attack on Austria-Hungary in June–July 1914, Germany was not contractually bound under the Dual Alliance of 1879 to issue the famous “blank check” to Austria-Hungary on 5 July.

In May 1882, Berlin and Vienna extended their alliance to include Italy. The Triple Alliance bound all three states to observe “a benevolent neutrality” in case one was threatened by a “Great Power nonsignatory to the present Treaty.” In case France attacked Italy, Austria-Hungary and Germany promised “to lend help and assistance with all their forces”; in case France attacked Germany, “this same obligation shall devolve upon Italy.” Article III of the treaty stated that if one or two of the “High Contracting Parties” were attacked and engaged in a war “with two or more Great Powers nonsignatory to the present Treaty, the *casus foederis* will arise simultaneously for all the High Contracting Parties.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, in 1914 France and Russia would have had to attack Austria-Hungary and Germany for the *casus foederis* (literally, a case within the stipulations of the treaty) to have applied for Italy. The Triple Alliance was renegotiated in 1887, 1891, 1902, and 1912.

<sup>21</sup> From Alfred Franzis Pribram, ed., *The Secret Treaties of Austria-Hungary 1879–1914*, 2 vols. (New York, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 25–31. The treaty was renewed in March 1883 and then became part of the Triple Alliance.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65–9.

In October 1883, Austria-Hungary signed an alliance with Romania. The “High Contracting Powers” agreed not to enter into an alliance “directed against any one of the States”; more specifically, Austria-Hungary promised “help and assistance” against any aggressor that threatened Romania.<sup>23</sup> Germany acceded to the treaty later that same year; Italy in May 1888. The Romanian extension of the Triple Alliance was renegotiated in 1892, 1896, 1902, and 1913. In 1914, Romania was attacked by no “aggressor” and hence there was no cause to invoke the 1883 treaty.

Many historians have focused on Austria-Hungary’s annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 as a key step on the road to war in 1914. Under Article 25 of the Treaty of Berlin, 13 July 1878, the two Turkish provinces were to be “occupied and administered by Austria-Hungary,” but to remain officially Ottoman. But that changed, in June 1881, when Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia agreed under the terms of the Three Emperors’ League that Vienna “reserves the right to annex [Bosnia and Herzegovina] at whatever moment she shall deem opportune.”<sup>24</sup> While the Three Emperors’ League eventually lapsed, in May 1897 Austria-Hungary and Russia signed an agreement whereby St. Petersburg accepted Vienna’s right, “when the moment arrives,” to “substitute” for the present status of occupation and garrisoning of Bosnia-Herzegovina “that of annexation.”<sup>25</sup> Then, in October 1904, Austria-Hungary and Russia negotiated a “Promise of Mutual Neutrality.” Both signatories agreed to “persevere” in their “conservative policy to be followed in the Balkan countries.” In case one of the “two Powers” found itself in a war with a “third Power,” that is, with a non-Balkan power, the other would “observe a loyal and absolute neutrality.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1908, Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal, Austria-Hungary’s foreign minister, proceeded with the annexation, but only after first securing the agreement of his Russian counterpart, Alexander Izvolskii. Subsequently, however, other members of the Russian government, shocked at what they saw as a betrayal of the Serbs and the Slav cause, and thus of Russian public opinion and prestige, forced its repudiation. Izvolskii then denied any agreement, and Austria-Hungary, understandably, threatened to expose the lie. In this case, annexation was “authorized” by the prior secret

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79–83.

<sup>24</sup> Ralph R. Menning, ed., *The Art of the Possible: Documents on Great Power Diplomacy, 1814–1914* (New York, 1996), p. 201.

<sup>25</sup> Pribram, ed., *The Secret Treaties*, vol. 2, pp. 185–95.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 237–9.

treaty. But for Russia the practical realities of the moment – rather than any hard treaty calculus – effectively nullified that “understanding.” Finally, the murder at Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 demanded absolutely nothing of (and certainly constituted no *casus foederis* for) the signatories of the treaties discussed above: Austria-Hungary, Germany, Italy, Romania, and, by special extension, Russia.

With regard to the Allies, their several “alliances” were of disparate character. The Military Convention between France and Russia of August 1892 – cemented by the Franco-Russian Alliance of January 1894 – was a firm pledge of support. Russia promised to attack Germany if France were attacked by Germany “or by Italy supported by Germany”; France, for her part, promised to attack Germany if Russia were attacked by Germany “or by Austria supported by Germany.” In case one or all of the powers of the Triple Alliance mobilized, France and Russia “without the necessity of any previous concert” would also mobilize. France promised to put 1.3 million and Russia 700,000 or 800,000 men into the field at once.<sup>27</sup>

Great Britain abandoned its policy of “splendid isolation” in January 1902 by concluding an agreement with Japan, whereby both powers, should they become involved in a war with another power, pledged to “maintain a strict neutrality.” Furthermore, the two states promised to come to the “assistance” of one another in case “any other Power or Powers should join in hostilities against that ally.”<sup>28</sup>

Beyond that, Britain had no binding alliance commitments. The links to France and to Russia established in 1904 and 1907 had a limited focus. In fact, they were rather imprecise, a series of bilateral agreements eventually called the *entente cordiale*. In April 1904, Britain and France buried long-standing colonial rivalries in a convention whereby France agreed to cooperate with the British occupation of Egypt while Britain agreed to support France in Morocco. Article 9 stated that London and Paris would “agree to afford one another their diplomatic support.”<sup>29</sup> It was, as the name indicates, an “understanding” as opposed to a firm commitment. In August 1907, Great Britain signed a convention with Russia relating to Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet. The two powers agreed

<sup>27</sup> Michael Hurst, ed., *Key Treaties for the Great Powers 1814–1914*, 2 vols. (Newton Abbot, U.K., 1972), vol. 2, pp. 668–9; and Menning, ed., *The Art of the Possible*, p. 247.

<sup>28</sup> Hurst, ed., *Key Treaties*, vol. 2, pp. 726–7.

<sup>29</sup> Convention of 8 April 1904. *British and Foreign State Papers*, 170 vols. (London, 1841–1968), vol. 99, p. 229.



to divide Persia into Russian, British, and “neutral” zones. But the convention’s real importance lay in two areas: first, in the fact that London and St. Petersburg decided “to settle by mutual agreement” their often conflicting claims “on the Continent of Asia”<sup>30</sup> and, second, that the two clearly intended to exclude Germany from Persia and Central Asia and to limit its penetration of the Middle East. The convention did not include a single word about military matters, nor did it use the word “alliance” to describe the new Anglo-Russian relationship.

As of 1 August 1914, neither France nor Russia had attacked either Austria-Hungary or Germany. But at that point, Germany declared war on Russia, the first such move by a major power, that being followed by a second declaration, on 3 August, against France. Berlin was treating the French and Russian mobilizations as equivalent to an attack. The “without direct provocation” clause also leaves room for interpretation. Pointing to Austria-Hungary’s forceful behavior with regard to Serbia, Italy “opted out,” that is, chose not to join with her alliance partners.<sup>31</sup> Italy’s leaders then solicited and received offers from both sides and ultimately entered the war on the side of the *entente*.

Russia was not obliged by any alliance to come to the aid of Serbia. The Russian response had no “contractual” basis. The Franco-Russian alliance of 1892–94, as previously shown, did have a binding character: Both powers agreed to mobilize their forces in case those of the Triple Alliance, or of one of the Powers composing it, mobilized. Quite apart from “the letter” of the agreement, the leaders of the two nations were generally disposed to accept those terms. But even in this relationship, there were sources of concern and anxiety. Each needed the other, but it was a relationship filled with unsettling moments. Would the partner honor the commitment? Or would fear and anxiety obviate formal contractual agreements? When Britain and France signed their *entente* in 1904, for example, St. Petersburg feared this accommodation might prompt Paris to renege on its treaty obligation in the case of a Russian clash with Britain. In the wake of the Russo-Japanese War, there was deep-seated fear in Petersburg whether the French might reassess the value of the alliance in the wake of Russia’s humiliating defeat. Thus, during joint staff talks held at Paris in April 1906, the tsar’s General Staff “consistently” but

<sup>30</sup> Convention of 31 August 1907, in Hurst, ed., *Key Treaties*, vol. 2, pp. 805–9.

<sup>31</sup> Italy’s leaders based their decision, in part, on the provocation clause. The alliance also required that the partners be given information prior to any aggressive action. But Italy was not told beforehand of the ultimatum to Serbia. For more detail, see Chapter 11.