Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914

Jack S. Levy


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Did World War I occur primarily because of the conflicting interests of the European great powers in 1914, or was it the result of the misperceptions, miscalculations, overreactions, and loss of control by political leaders? Could statesmen have acted to avoid war while preserving their vital interests? Did political leaders mismanage the crisis, or did they perceive no interest in managing the crisis to avoid war in the first place? These questions are still critical. World War I is the most frequently cited illustration of "inadvertent war," the primary source of many hypotheses on the subject, and a common historical and strategic metaphor in the nuclear age. Thus it is essential that we understand precisely in which respects (if any) World War I was inadvertent. This is especially important in light of the ongoing debate over Fritz Fischer’s argument that German elites provoked a great power war in 1914 in order to secure Germany’s position on the continent, establish its status as a world power, and to solve its domestic political crisis. A Social Science Research Council/MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in International Peace and Security provided partial support for this study. I have benefited from helpful comments from Michael Adas, Raymond DuVall, John Freeman, Alexander George, Cliff Morgan, Scott Sagan, Stephen Van Evera, John Vasquez, Phil Williams, and various participants in international relations colloquia at the University of Minnesota, Washington University—St. Louis, and at Rutgers University.

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Previous attempts to answer these questions have failed, in part because of a lack of rigor in their formulations of the problem and the failure to use a theoretical framework adequate to the task. Crisis management frameworks generally do not acknowledge that some crises are structured in such a way—in terms of the preferences of the actors and their military and diplomatic constraints—that induce rational actors to take a series of actions that lead to a war they would prefer to avoid. Hypotheses of inadvertent war are weakened by the ambiguity of that concept. Assertions that actors “did not want war” are meaningless without the precise specification of the full range of policy alternatives and the perceived costs of each; the simple war/non-war dichotomy is not analytically useful. Psychological and other actor-oriented explanations usually neglect structural constraints; analyses of power distributions, alliance patterns, and the structural instability of the international system rarely consider the motivations of individual actors; and neither acknowledges the importance of domestic politics.

On theoretical grounds, neither an actor-based nor a structure-based explanation is complete without the other, and it has become increasingly evident that neither actor preferences nor the constraints on their choices...
can be fully specified in the absence of domestic variables. With these considerations in mind, I use a rational-choice framework based on preferences, constraints, and choices to organize an analysis of the outbreak of the First World War. I do not assume unitary nation-state actors, however, and I define constraints to include internal bureaucratic, organizational, and domestic variables as well as external military and diplomatic factors. I reformulate my initial question as follows: To what extent was the outbreak of World War I determined by the foreign policy preferences of the great powers and the strategic and domestic constraints on their choices?

I begin by specifying four possible outcomes of the July crisis and the preferences of each of the great powers over these outcomes. I then identify a number of critical decision points in the processes leading to war; at each, I specify the options available to each of the great powers, the external and internal constraints on political leaders, and decision-makers' expectations regarding the intentions of their adversaries and the likely consequences of various courses of action. I analyze the extent to which the strategic choices of political leaders were compelled by their perceived interests, expectations, and the constraints under which they operated, and the extent to which those actions can be better explained by theories of flawed information processing, decision-making, and crisis mismanagement. I also examine whether the expectations and probability assessments of political leaders were reasonable in light of the information available at the time, and I utilize counterfactual reasoning to analyze whether more timely or different actions might have had more favorable consequences, and whether more creative statecraft might have generated new options and changed the structure of incentives in a way which could have led to a less costly outcome.


10. The concept of preferences refers (in the formal decision-theoretic sense) to preferences over possible outcomes of the crisis, not preferences over alternative strategies to achieve those outcomes. Preferences are not always uniform among leading political and military decision-makers, and I note important differences among key factions within each state.

11. Because my primary concern is to evaluate whether the combination of interests and constraints precluded political leaders from acting in ways that might have avoided a major war, and to do so within a reasonably parsimonious framework, I will not give much attention to the psychological factors and human limitations that affected the behavior of decision-makers.
I conclude that the image of World War I as inadvertent and the image of World War I as the intended consequence of Germany’s drive for world power are both exaggerated. Germany wanted a local war, but neither Germany nor any other great power wanted a general European war with British involvement. Although there were several points at which political leaders could have done more to manage the crisis so as to secure their vital interests without the costs of a general war, their ranges of choices were extremely limited. The primary causes of World War I were the underlying international and domestic forces which shaped the preferences of the great powers and the strategic and political constraints on their actions. The mismanagement of the crisis by political leaders was a secondary factor contributing to the outbreak of the war.

*The Interests, Preferences, and Expectations of the Actors*

In the aftermath of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, political leaders throughout Europe expected that Austria-Hungary would seek some form of compensation from Serbia, and that significant Serbian concessions would be forthcoming and be sufficient to maintain the peace. Few feared war or even a major crisis, but this changed abruptly on July 23–24 with the news of the extreme demands of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia.\(^{12}\) Interlocking alliance agreements increased the fear that a Austro-Serbian war might draw in Russia in support of Serbia, Germany in support of Austria-Hungary, and France in support of Russia, along with the Balkan allies of each of the great powers.\(^ {13}\) Such a continental war could expand further into a general European or world war through the intervention of Britain on the side of the Entente.

Thus most leading European decision-makers in July 1914 recognized four possible outcomes of the July crisis:


1) a peaceful but one-sided negotiated settlement based on extensive but not unconditional Serbian concessions to Austria;
2) a localized Austro-Serbian war in the Balkans;
3) the expansion of the Austro-Serbian conflict into a continental war involving Russia, Germany, and France as well as Austria-Hungary and Serbia;
4) the expansion of the continental war into a world war through the intervention of Britain.\(^{14}\)

These four possibilities constitute the set of feasible outcomes of the crisis in the decision-theoretic framework that guides this study. Next, I explain how each key state defined its interests and preferences.

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY. Faced with increases in the strength and hostility of Serbia, intractable ethnic problems and internal decay in Austria-Hungary’s multinational empire, and the decline of her position among the great powers, Austro-Hungarian leaders believed that they must break Serbia’s hold on the loyalties of the Serbian and Croatian minorities of the Dual Monarchy, and that this required war.\(^{15}\) Austrian leaders preferred a local war over a riskier continental war, but preferred the latter over a negotiated peace that failed to eliminate Serbian influence.\(^{16}\) Although they were willing to risk a continental war, Austrian decision-makers believed they could minimize the risk of Russian intervention by a fait accompli against Serbia backed by firm assurances of German support, particularly since the assassination provided

\(^{14}\) Additional outcomes might include an unconditional Serbian acceptance of all terms of the Austrian ultimatum, a limited Austro-Hungarian invasion of Serbia based on the “Halt-in-Belgrade” plan, or an earlier punitive strike, but the inclusion of these considerations would unnecessarily complicate the analysis at this time.

\(^{15}\) Since 1867, Austria and Hungary had shared a common monarch. They also shared a Ministry of Foreign Policy and Ministry of War, which were dominated by Austrian officials, particularly during the July crisis. Austro-Hungarian leaders believed that without the reconstruction of the Balkans under Austrian domination, the Dual Monarchy would collapse. They would have accepted an unconditional capitulation by Serbia, but recognized that would be politically impossible for any Serbian regime, and constructed a humiliating ultimatum that would certainly be rejected but which they hoped would provide a rationale for Austrian military action. When Serbia unexpectedly accepted nearly all of the terms of the ultimatum, Austria-Hungary still proceeded with a declaration of war. See Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, trans. Isabella M. Massey (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1980; orig. pub. 1928), Vol. 2, pp. 168–69, 286–289; L.L. Farrar, Jr., “The Limits of Choice: July 1914 Reconsidered,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (March 1972), p. 10.

\(^{16}\) The worst case for Vienna involved British intervention, for that would put more pressure on Germany in the West, delay Berlin’s ability to divert its armies to the East, and therefore leave Austria-Hungary in a very vulnerable position with respect to Russia. But Austrian leaders dismissed this possibility as being extremely unlikely.
a cover of legitimacy for military action and since Russia and France were not yet ready for war. They also believed that a preventive war against Serbia to arrest both external and internal decline was necessary while the military and diplomatic context were still favorable.

Vienna’s preference for a local war over a negotiated settlement based on Serbian concessions was not unconditional, but for both strategic and domestic political reasons was clearly contingent on German support, which was forthcoming in the “blank check” of July 5–6. Luigi Albertini concludes that if Germany had not wanted Austria to move against Serbia, “neither [Emperor] Francis Joseph, nor [Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister] Berchtold, nor even [Chief of the General Staff] Conrad would have gone ahead with the venture.” Thus German support was a necessary condition for an Austro-Hungarian war against Serbia.

Serbia. Serbia preferred peace to war with Austria, and was willing to make significant concessions in order to preserve it, but only up to a point. Prime Minister Nikola Pašić was determined not to accept any Habsburg demands that infringed on Serbian sovereignty, and while his uncompromising position predated both the ultimatum and Russian pressures for firmness against Austria, his confidence in Russian support undoubtedly strengthened his resolve. Pašić was further constrained by a severe domestic political crisis and by tensions between the army and his civilian government, and in fact he was away campaigning for the general elections when the ultimatum was issued.

19. Both Foreign Minister Leopold Berchtold and Chief of Staff Conrad von Hőtzendorf feared abandonment by Germany, and preferred a negotiated settlement to fighting a two-front war with Russia and Serbia without German support. They also believed that their decaying monarchy could embark on war only if it was united internally. But Hungarian Prime Minister Stephen Tisza opposed war and Emperor Franz Joseph wanted to wait until the official investigation of the assassination proved Serbian complicity. The “blank check” satisfied Conrad and (after some negotiation) the political opposition within Austria-Hungary. Fischer, War Aims, pp. 52, 56; Ritter, Sword and the Scepter, Vol. 2, p. 236; A.J.P. Taylor, The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1914 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 527.
20. Albertini, Origins, Vol. 2, p. 162. German support might not have been necessary for a limited Austrian punitive strike against Serbia, or for an Austrian decision for war after Vienna declared war on July 28. (A declaration of war was not equivalent to war.) Williamson, “Origins of World War I,” p. 807.
received. Pašić accepted most of the terms of the Austrian ultimatum, and thereby won the sympathies of Europe. But he carefully evaded the demands that representatives of the Austro-Hungarian government be allowed to participate in the Serbian inquiry into the origins of the assassination plot (for Pašić knew where such an inquiry could lead) and in the suppression of subversive activities directed against the Austro-Hungarian state. The conciliatory but brilliantly evasive Serbian reply represented Serbia’s maximum concessions, but they still fell short of Austria’s minimum demands.

RUSSIA. Russian decision-makers believed that their strategic and economic interests in the Turkish Straits depended on maintaining Serbia and Romania as buffer states, and that Russian influence in the Balkans and indeed its great power status depended on maintaining its influence among the southern Slavs and its patronage of Serbia. But Tsar Nicholas II was appalled by the royal assassination and could not risk alienating Britain by giving unconditional support to Serbia. On balance, he was willing to allow Serbia to be chastised severely as long as Austria removed from the ultimatum “those points which infringe on Serbia’s sovereign rights.” Although Russian leaders preferred peace based on some Serbian concessions to a Austro-Serbian war, for both diplomatic and domestic political reasons they preferred a continental war, and therefore preferred a world war with British intervention on their side over a local war in the Balkans in which Serbia would undoubtedly be crushed by Austria. Sensitive to Russia’s humiliating defeats in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War and the 1908–09 Bosnian crisis, Russian leaders feared that another retreat would permanently undermine Russian influence in the Balkans and reduce Russia to “second place among the powers.”


22. The Austrian ultimatum also demanded that Serbia suppress anti-Austrian propaganda in Serbia in general and in its public schools in particular, remove all army officers and civilian officials who had engaged in such propaganda, arrest two named officials suspected in the assassination, dissolve the Serbian nationalist association Narodna Obrana and prevent the formation of similar societies in the future, and eliminate the traffic in arms across the border between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. For the text of the ultimatum, Serbia’s reply, and Austria’s line-by-line response, see Albertini, Origins, Vol. 2, pp. 286–289, 364–371.

23. Serbia preferred a continental war with Russian support (and therefore also a world war with British intervention), to a localized war with Austria-Hungary, but its role in the expansion of the war is negligible.

Russian leaders also believed that domestic stability and their own political interests required an assertive foreign policy.  

Britain. Although British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, like most others in England, preferred a negotiated settlement to any war, he was more concerned to localize the conflict and prevent a great power war than to avoid Austrian action per se. Grey strongly preferred a local war to a continental war as long as Austrian actions were limited, but recognized that the best way to avoid a continental war was to prevent a local war, and to that end he undertook several diplomatic initiatives. These included his July 26 proposal for a four-power conference in London, and his July 29 proposal that Austria halt its military advance in Belgrade. But if the war were to escalate to a general continental war, Grey and his political allies recognized that British interests in the integrity of France and the balance of power in Europe required British intervention, and Grey thus preferred a world war to a continental war. But significant factions in the Cabinet, Parliament, the financial community, and elsewhere preferred neutrality, and it took the German violation of Belgian neutrality to sway the idealists on the left.

France. France had no direct strategic or reputational interests in the Balkans, but the French alliance with Russia was the cornerstone of French security policy. French leaders feared entrapment in a Russo-German dispute involving Austria and the Balkans, but not as much as they feared abandonment in a Franco-German conflict. They had to support Russia in any war with Germany, but could not behave so provocatively as to alienate Britain, whose military support would be essential. President Raymond Poincaré and


28. For domestic reasons it was highly desirable that French public opinion perceive that the issue over which the war was fought involved a direct threat to France, and that Russia not initiate the war. Joll, First World War, p. 99; Taylor, Struggle for Mastery, pp. 486–488.
Premier René Viviani hoped that Austria would not push too hard and that Russia could tolerate some Serbian concessions, and their first preference was thus a negotiated peace, their second a local war. They attempted to restrain Russia without alienating her, and to support plans for the localization of any Austro-Serbian war (including the “Halt-in-Belgrade” Plan), but their absence from France during much of the crisis limited their role.\textsuperscript{29} Thus France preferred a negotiated peace to a local war, and the latter to a continental war. But if Russia insisted on war, French leaders knew that they had to follow rather than risk the disintegration of the alliance, and in that case preferred a world war with Britain on the French side.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Germany.} Germany is the critical case, for key Austrian and particularly Hungarian decision-makers were unwilling to move against Serbia without German support. I argue that German officials preferred a local war in the Balkans to even a one-sided negotiated settlement, and that while they preferred a local war to a continental war, they were willing to risk the latter if necessary to achieve these goals. All of this was conditional, however, upon German confidence that they could avoid their worst-case scenario, a world war resulting from British intervention.

There is substantial evidence that the “blank check” granted by Germany went beyond giving Austrian leaders a free hand, and encouraged them to move militarily against Serbia.\textsuperscript{31} Many German leaders doubted Vienna’s resolve, repeatedly urged Vienna to move as quickly as possible against Serbia, and subsequently did their best to sabotage the crisis management efforts and mediation proposals of Grey and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov.\textsuperscript{32} While willing to risk a continental war, and acknowledging that

\textsuperscript{29} Poincaré’s and Viviani’s absence also increased the influence of Maurice Paléologue, the revanchist ambassador to Russia. John F.V. Keiger, \textit{France and the Origins of the First World War} (New York: St. Martin’s, 1983), chap. 7.

\textsuperscript{30} Some early revisionists claimed that France wanted a world war to recover Alsace-Lorraine, and that Russia wanted such a war to seize the Turkish Straits. See, e.g., Harry Elmer Barnes, \textit{The Genesis of the World War: An Introduction to the Problem of War Guilt} (New York: Knopf, 1926).

\textsuperscript{31} The revisionist view in the 1920s held that Germany did not want war of any kind but needed to maintain Austria-Hungary as Germany’s only great power ally, and that in spite of its best efforts to restrain Vienna, Germany was ultimately dragged into a world war by its weaker ally. Fay, \textit{Origins}, Vol. 2. This hypothesis has been discredited by the path-breaking work of Fischer (see fn. 2), but I differ from Fischer’s conclusion that Germany preferred a continental war to a local war.

those risks were real, German decision-makers hoped and expected that an Austrian fait accompli against Serbia in the immediate aftermath of the royal assassination, backed by German warnings to Russia, would minimize the likelihood of Russian intervention.\textsuperscript{33} Austria would almost certainly defeat Serbia in a local war, increase its relative strength, and reduce the Slavic threat in the Balkans. Moreover, German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg believed that if France were economically and militarily unable or unwilling to come to the aid of Russia, the Entente might very well split apart and give way to a new diplomatic realignment, which was Germany’s primary foreign policy objective.\textsuperscript{34}

There is little doubt that world war was seen as the worst case by all German leaders. As Konrad Jarausch concludes, “Bethmann clearly preferred local war, was willing to gamble on continental war, but he abhorred world war.”\textsuperscript{35} Even Fritz Fischer and Imanuel Geiss, the strongest supporters of the German war guilt hypothesis, argue strongly that Bethmann sought the neutrality of Britain.\textsuperscript{36} It would be much easier to handle Britain after the defeat of France and Russia, or after Austria smashed Serbia, leaving the Entente in shambles.\textsuperscript{37}


\textsuperscript{34} Fischer, \textit{Germany’s Aims}, p. 60. On July 8 Bethmann said that the assassination provided the opportunity for a victorious war or for a crisis in which “we still certainly have the prospect of maneuvering the Entente apart.” Quoted in Van Evera, “Cult of the Offensive,” p. 80n. See also Bethmann to Roedern (Secretary of State for Alsace-Lorraine), July 16, in Geiss, \textit{July 1914}, p. 118. Similarly, Jarausch argues, in “Illusion of Limited War,” p. 58, that “a local Balkan war would bring a diplomatic triumph, a realignment of the south-eastern states and the break-up of the Entente.” But it is not clear exactly how confident Bethmann was that a local war would split the Entente or why he believed it. He may have assumed that France would support Russia if and only if Russia were directly threatened by Germany (as stipulated by the terms of the Franco-Russian alliance), and that the absence of French support would not only prevent Russia from coming to Serbia’s aid, but also lead it to drop France as an unreliable ally. I have argued that, although France preferred to stay out of a local war, and might try to convince Russia that it was in Russia’s interests to do the same, France would follow its ally if necessary and give whatever support Russia needed.


\textsuperscript{36} Fischer, \textit{Germany’s Aims}, chap. 2; Geiss, “Outbreak of the First World War,” pp. 84, 88.

\textsuperscript{37} It is more difficult to establish the intensity of the preferences for a continental war or a negotiated peace over a world war among various German decision-makers, and therefore the risk of British intervention they were willing to tolerate. The German military were most willing to take this risk; unlike their civilian counterparts, many expected British intervention. See note 49 below.
The question of German preferences between a continental war and a local war are more difficult to establish. Fischer and his associates argue that German political and military elites preferred a continental war because they wanted a preventive war against Russia before Russia completed its “Great Program” and the modernization of its railroad system, expected by 1917.38 A military victory would bolster the German elites’ domestic political support, and give them added time to deal with internal crises generated by industrialization and the rise of social democracy.39 I argue that the fear of Germany’s decline as a great power and the need for a dramatic foreign policy victory for domestic purposes led German political leaders to prefer a continental war over the status quo, but that their expectations that a localized Austro-Serbian war would split the Entente led them to an even higher preference for such a war, as a less costly and less risky means of achieving Germany’s larger security interests.40 That is, German leaders preferred a local war to a continental war, and the latter to a negotiated settlement, but they were willing to risk a continental war in order to avoid an unfavorable status quo.

SUMMARY OF PREFERENCE ORDERS
Table 1 summarizes the preferences of the five leading great powers plus Serbia over the set of the four most likely outcomes of the crisis. All of the European great powers plus Serbia preferred a negotiated settlement to a world war, yet they found themselves entrapped in a world war that involved enormous human and economic costs, led to the collapse of three empires, settled little, and set the stage for another cataclysmic world war only two decades later. An analysis of the calculus of choice at each of a series of critical decision points demonstrates that this unwanted outcome resulted

Table 1. The Preferences of the Great Powers in 1914.

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<td>Germany:</td>
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<td>Serbia:</td>
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NOTES: These are the preferences of the central decision-makers in each state; there were significant differences within each state, as noted in the text.
NP = a negotiated peace based on significant but not unconditional Serbian concessions
LW = a localized Austro-Serbian war in the Balkans
CW = a continental war where Germany allies with Austria, and Russia and France ally with Serbia
WW = a general European war or world war, with Britain joining the war against the Central Powers
> = “was preferred to”
? = a definitive preference cannot be established

CONFLICTING SCHOOLS OF INTERPRETATION. The primary differences among the “inadvertent war” school, Fischer, and myself and others can be summarized by our respective views of German preference orderings:

“Inadvertent war school”: NP > LW > CW > WW
                             or  LW > NP > CW > WW
Fischer school:            CW > LW > NP > WW
Levy:*                     LW > CW > NP > WW


primarily from the diplomatic, military, bureaucratic/organizational, and domestic constraints on the choices of political elites, and only secondarily from their mismanagement of the crisis.

Critical Decision Points

Political leaders were confronted, not with a single decision whether to go to war in 1914, but instead with a series of decisions at a succession of critical
decision points as the crisis unfolded over time. Their preferences as to outcomes were stable over time, but their international and domestic constraints, available information and expectations, and policy options and strategies were constantly changing. Each decision altered the constraints existing at the next critical juncture, and further narrowed political leaders’ freedom of maneuver.\footnote{41}

The choices made at several of these critical points follow directly from the preferences of leading decision-makers, along with their expectations regarding the probabilities of various actions and the consequences of those actions. This was certainly true for the Austrian decision to attack Serbia rather than accept negotiated Serbian concessions, given Austrian confidence in German support; for the German decision to support Austria, given German assumptions of British neutrality; for Serbia’s refusal to accept unconditionally all Austrian demands; for the Russian decision to intervene in support of Serbia rather than allow it to be crushed by Austria; and for the German decision to come to the aid of Austria once Russia made its intentions clear.\footnote{42} But all of these choices hinged on the German assumption of British neutrality, which was the critical link in the escalation of all stages of the crisis. I argue that Bethmann and other key German political leaders were quite confident of British neutrality, that they based their policy on that expectation, and that only with the shattering of their assumption on July 29 did they reverse their policy and attempt, briefly, to manage the crisis to avoid war. I explain why Germans clung to this erroneous assumption for so long, focusing both on the British failure to give a clear commitment and on the German failure to recognize warnings that did exist. I then return to three other sets of critical decisions in the July crisis: Austria’s failure to move immediately after the assassination; the failure of the Halt-in-Belgrade proposal; and the interlocking sequence of mobilization decisions.

THE GERMAN ASSUMPTION OF BRITISH NEUTRALITY

Kaiser Wilhelm II and Foreign Secretary Jagow were convinced from the beginning of the crisis that Britain would stand aside from a European

\footnote{41} Thus the attempt to model the 1914 case as a 2 X 2 game in normal form (e.g., Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977], p. 207) is flawed on several counts: the situation cannot be reduced to two homogeneous coalitions, to two strategic options for each actor, to the simple dichotomy between war and peace, or to a single choice in a one-play game.

\footnote{42} Each of the first three decisions (by Austria, Germany, and Serbia) was a necessary condition for a local war, and thus for any larger war. Russian intervention was a necessary and sufficient condition for a continental war; it was not sufficient for a world war.
conflict. Although Bethmann recognized the uncertainties involved and sometimes wavered in his estimates of British intentions, the bulk of the evidence suggests that he was generally confident of British neutrality. He based his entire policy on this assumption, and undertook several diplomatic initiatives to secure a formal commitment of non-intervention from Grey. German leaders believed, however, that British neutrality was contingent on the British perception that Germany was fighting a defensive war in response to Russian aggression. Thus Bethmann went to great lengths to ensure that Germany did not mobilize before Russia, in an attempt to shift the onus for starting the conflict onto Russia. He believed that by blaming Russia he could also secure the support of the Social Democrats in Germany, which he thought to be politically necessary. The military were generally less confident of British neutrality, but, given their short-war assumptions, they were confident that any intervention would come too late to influence the outcome of the war against France. There is no doubt

43. Jagow said on July 26, “We are sure of English neutrality.” Albertini, Origins, Vol. 2, p. 429. Later in the war the Kaiser exclaimed, “If only someone had told me beforehand that England would take up arms against us!” Tuchman, Guns of August, p. 143.
45. As early as winter 1912–13, Bethmann expressed confidence that Britain would stand aside “if the provocation appeared to come directly from Russia and France,” and Moltke insisted that “the attack must come from the Slavs.” The German bid for British neutrality failed because it required that German involvement in war be sufficient for neutrality, whereas Britain insisted that it could offer neutrality only in the event of an unprovoked attack on Germany. Fischer, Germany’s Aims, pp. 27, 31–33 (quotation), 63, 70–85; Fischer, “Miscalculation,” pp. 373–382; Geiss, July 1914, pp. 269, 350; Jarausch, “Illusion of Limited War,” pp. 63–68; Joll, First World War, pp. 20–29, 116; Albertini, Origins, Vol. 2, p. 502.
47. Bethmann believed that it was essential to maintain a united front at home, and was uncertain of the intentions of the Social Democrats, who had vacillated between a socialist-internationalist and a social-patriot position (supporting the Army Bill in 1913). Fischer, War of Illusions, p. 494; Geiss, July 1914, p. 269; Jarausch, “Illusion of Limited War,” pp. 67–68. I thank Daniel Garst for ideas on this point.
48. L. L. Farrar, Jr., The Short-War Illusion (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-Clio, 1973). Gerhard Ritter, The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth, trans. Andrew and Eva Wilson (New York: Praeger, 1958), pp. 71, 161–162; Fischer, Germany’s Aims, p. 49. Tirpitz and some others wanted to do everything possible to delay British entry, which reinforced German determination not to mobilize first. Sagan, “1914 Revisited,” pp. 170–171. Military views were not crucial, however, for they had limited influence on German foreign policy decisions prior to July 30, and by that time civilian
that Bethmann, even in his most pessimistic moods, accepted this minimum assumption.⁴⁹

The importance of the German assumption of British neutrality is also demonstrated by the reaction in Berlin to reports (beginning July 25) from Prince Lichnowsky, German ambassador to Britain, that Grey had changed his position toward opposition to Germany. The Kaiser was the first to take these warnings seriously (July 27), and within a day made his compromise Halt-in-Belgrade proposal, which was delivered to Austria on the morning of July 29.⁵⁰ Late on July 29 Bethmann received Lichnowsky’s telegram with an unequivocal warning from Grey that Britain could not stand aside in a continental war involving France.⁵¹ The response in Berlin was immediate and quite revealing. As Fischer argues, Bethmann and other German political leaders were “shattered” by the telegram, for “the foundation of their policy during the crisis had collapsed.” Bethmann responded with a flurry of increasingly urgent telegrams that night. He proposed that Vienna accept mediation and the Halt-in-Belgrade proposal, and warned that Germany would not allow itself “to be drawn wantonly into a world conflagration by Vienna.”⁵² Thus in a desperate attempt to avoid the one outcome that he

⁴⁹. Bethmann’s statement to the Kaiser (July 23), that “it was improbable that England would immediately enter the fray,” implies that the expected delay was critical. (Jarausch, “Illusion of Limited War,” p. 62.) He stated that “England’s interest in the preservation of a European balance of power will not allow a complete crushing of France,” assumed this was the British threshold for intervention, and was confident that intervention could be avoided by promising that Germany would “demand no territorial concessions from France.” Germany’s primary war aims, after all, were to support Austria and defeat Russia. Fischer “Miscalculation,” p. 382. Thus, civilian and military leaders shared the assumption that if the British intervened at all, they would do so too late to influence the outcome of the war against France. Even if Trachtenberg (“Meaning of Mobilization,” pp. 134–137) and others are correct that Bethmann did not expect British neutrality per se, that would not undermine the essence of my argument: German political and military leaders were confident that, at a minimum, Britain would not intervene until France was about to be crushed, that this would be too late to influence the outcome of the war in the west, and that Germany could influence the British decision by providing guarantees that it sought no territorial annexations from France. Bethmann would not risk a continental war in the absence of these assumptions. Thus my earlier proposition, that the German assumption of British neutrality was a necessary condition for war of any kind, holds if “neutrality” is interpreted broadly to mean “no immediate intervention.”
⁵¹. German Documents Relating to the Outbreak of the World War, collected by Karl Kautsky and edited by Max Montgelas and Walther Schucking (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), No. 178, pp. 321–322. Grey indicated that Britain could remain neutral if France were not involved.
⁵². Bethmann to Tschirschky (2:55 a.m., 3:00 a.m.), July 30, 1914, in Kautsky, German Documents,
had always feared, but only on the 29th had recognized was likely, Bethmann suddenly reversed the policy that had guided Germany throughout the July crisis. 53

Had Bethmann initiated this pressure any earlier, particularly before the Austrian declaration of war on the July 28, it would have been extremely difficult for Austria to resist, as I discuss below. First, however, why were German political leaders so confident of British neutrality? It is easy to say that Germany should have known that Britain would intervene in any continental war involving its French and Russian allies, particularly if Belgian neutrality were violated. A German victory in a two-front war would give it a position of dominance on the continent and control of the critical Channel ports, leave Britain without strong allies on the continent, and provide Germany with a strategic and industrial base from which to mount a global

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Nos. 192, 193, pp. 344–346. Fischer, Germany’s Aims, pp. 78–82; Albertini, Origins, Vol. 2, pp. 504–527; Bernadotte Schmitt, Coming of the War, Vol. 2, pp. 156–172; Jarasch, “Illusion of Limited War,” pp. 65–68; Lynn-Jones, “Détente and Deterrence,” pp. 143–144. Fischer (Germany’s Aims, pp. 79–82), and to a lesser extent Geiss (July 1914, p. 269) argue that Bethmann’s policy shift on July 29–30 was temporary, and that “peace moves” later that day were simply tactical expedients to deceive Britain and ensure that the blame for the conflict could be shifted onto Russia. Lebow (Between Peace and War, pp. 135–139) emphasizes the importance of psychological stress, emotional turmoil, exaggerated confidence and pessimistic fatalism, and hypervigilant coping behavior in Bethmann’s shifts in policy on July 29–31. For an alternative interpretation of these events see Trachtenberg, “Meaning of Mobilization.”

The critical impact of British intentions is also demonstrated by the German response to Lichnowsky’s August 1 report of Grey’s offer that if Germany “were not to attack France, England would remain neutral and guarantee the passivity of France.” Albertini, Origins, Vol. 3, pp. 380–381. With the Chancellor’s eager support, the Kaiser announced “now we can to war against Russia only. We simply march the whole of our army to the East.” Tuchman, Guns of August, p. 98. Molke objected but was overruled, and Germany telegraphed its acceptance of what was thought to be the British proposal, only to learn that Lichnowsky’s report had been erroneous. Albertini, Origins, Vol. 3, pp. 380–386. For more on the German response to Lichnowsky’s August 1 report, see Jack S. Levy, “Organizational Routines and the Causes of War,” International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 30, No. 2 (June 1986), pp. 199, 213–214.

53. Trachtenberg (“Meaning of Mobilization,” pp. 136–137) argues that it was the news of the Russian partial mobilization, rather than the warning from Grey, that was the primary cause of Bethmann’s sudden policy shift. He argues that Lichnowsky’s telegram with Grey’s warning, which was received at the German Foreign Office at 9:12 p.m., could not have been decoded in time to explain Bethmann’s subsequent behavior. There is enough evidence, apart from Bethmann’s behavior that night, of the German expectation of British neutrality in a continental war, that Trachtenberg’s argument, if correct, would not undercut my assessment of German preferences or my overall interpretation of the causes of the war. But my own review of the sequence, timing, and content of Bethmann’s outgoing telegrams on the night of July 29–30 suggests that Trachtenberg is not correct in these conclusions. Bethmann was late in getting the news from Russia, as well as from England, and the telegrams (dispatched at 2:55 and 3:00 a.m.) in which he first referred to the warning from Grey exhibited a much greater sense of fear and urgency than a slightly earlier telegram containing his first reference to the Russian mobilization.
challenge to Britain. Moreover, there had been numerous warnings that Britain would not be able to stay neutral in a continental war.

Although the German political leaders’ dismissal of these warnings and their failure to appreciate Britain strategic interests can be explained in part by motivated psychological biases and wishful thinking, their assumption of British neutrality was not entirely unreasonable. Not all of the signals coming out of London were consistent with the warnings from Lichnowsky. Though Grey repeatedly refused to give Berlin an unconditional commitment of neutrality, he also refused to give France and Russia a commitment to come to their defense. That German “misperceptions” derived as much from the inherent uncertainty of the incoming signals, as from any motivated biases, is suggested by the fact that officials in France and Russia, whose motivated biases would have led in the opposite direction from Germany’s and who had constantly pressured Britain for a clear commitment, were also uncertain of British intentions. Indeed, the British themselves were unclear as to what they would do. Cabinet members David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill were both skeptical regarding whether the government would intervene on the continent, and Grey himself was uncertain.

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54. First, naval agreements with France, of which the Germans had some knowledge, created an additional British obligation. Second, British reputational interests were also at stake. Third, British policies in the two Moroccan crises indicated that no British government was likely to stand aside while Germany increased its influence at the expense of France. Moltke had argued in a 1913 memo that Britain would intervene in a Franco-German war “because she fears German hegemony, and true to her policy of maintaining a balance of power will do all she can to check the increase of German power.” Tuchman, Guns of August, p. 144; Trevor Wilson, The Myriad Faces of War: Britain and the Great War, 1914–1918 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), chap. 1; Sir Llewellyn Woodward, Great Britain and the War of 1914–1918 (Boston: Beacon, 1967), pp. 19–20.

55. See Lebow, Between Peace and War, pp. 130–131.

56. Lebow, ibid., p. 129, argues that Lichnowsky was out of favor in Berlin and that his early warnings were discounted for that reason.


Britain’s failure to give a clear and timely commitment in support of her allies was a critical step in the processes leading to an Austro-Serbian war and its expansion into a world war, for it eliminated the one threat that would have led German political decision-makers to restrain their counterparts in Vienna. Yet British leaders were faced with serious diplomatic and domestic political constraints, and it is not clear that they could easily have acted differently. Their strategic dilemma was that while a clear commitment would reinforce deterrence against Germany, it might at the same time encourage Russia to pursue a riskier course against Austria-Hungary. Many British leaders assumed that by leaving their commitment ambiguous they could maximize the likelihood that they could restrain Russia without alienating her, and deter Germany without provoking her.\footnote{Grey’s policy of diluting and delaying Britain’s deterrent threat against Germany was reinforced by the British perception that Anglo-German relations had improved over the previous three years and his belief that a more accommodative strategy toward Germany might induce a cooperative solution to the July Crisis, as it had in the Balkan Wars. The fear of provoking Germany was undoubtedly less compelling after July 27–28, however, for the German rejection of Grey’s proposal for a four-power conference and the Austrian declaration of war greatly reduced any remaining doubt regarding the intentions of the Central Powers.}

By July 27, if not before, the primary factor preventing Grey from issuing a clear warning to Germany was cabinet politics in England. About three-quarters of the Liberal cabinet were opposed to British involvement in war, and Grey knew that it would be difficult to secure any commitment from them.\footnote{Grey’s objectives were to prevent a continental war if at all possible,}
but if war occurred, to bring Britain into the war united. An early warning to Germany might advance the first aim but generate a domestic reaction that threatened the second. With regard to warning Germany that Britain would declare war if Germany attacked France or violated Belgian territory, Churchill later wrote:

I am certain that if Sir Edward Grey had sent the kind of ultimatum suggested, the Cabinet would have broken up, and it is also my belief that up till Wednesday (29th) or Thursday (30th) at least, the House of Commons would have repudiated his action. Nothing less than the deeds of Germany would have converted the British nation to war.62

It is significant that Churchill refers to German deeds. Austrian action against Serbia was not sufficient to bring Britain in, for if a settlement were not possible, Britain preferred a localized war in the Balkans, whatever its outcome, to a continental or world war. But what specific German deeds would be necessary or sufficient to bring Britain into the war?63 Although one cannot know for sure how the cabinet would have acted under various contingencies, it appears that the critical trigger for cabinet approval of British intervention in the early stages of the war was the German violation of Belgian neutrality, which was an integral part of the German Schlieffen Plan.64 For years the radicals had refused to be swayed by balance of power taken. On July 29 the cabinet refused to specify the conditions under which it would decide for war. On August 1 Grey stated that “we could not propose to Parliament at this moment to send an expeditionary military force to the continent”; British Documents, Vol. 11, No. 426. See also Steiner, Britain and the First World War, chap. 9; Wilson, “The British Cabinet’s Decision,” pp. 148–159; Woodward, Great Britain and the War, pp. 21–22.

63. To Grey, any Franco-German war sufficiently threatened British interests that it required intervention. For the cabinet, severe military setbacks to France and the threat of German continental hegemony was probably prerequisite to intervention; this was the German “weak neutrality assumption,” described above. Grey was also worried about parliamentary support. Mayer, “Domestic Causes,” pp. 298–299.
64. The Schlieffen Plan was based on the assumptions that any continental war would be a two-front war for Germany, that the offensive was the dominant form of warfare, that France and Russia had to be dealt with sequentially and in that order, that France could be defeated only by an enveloping movement through Belgium, and that this required the preemptive seizure of Liège early in the mobilization process itself (no later than the third day). Ritter, The Schlieffen Plan; Snyder, Ideology of the Offensive, chap. 4–5. Without the German violation of Belgian neutrality, British intervention in a continental war would have been considerably less likely, or at least delayed, for British radicals probably would not have been convinced of the strategic necessity for military action short of severe military setbacks to France. Thus the Schlieffen Plan and the envelopment of France through Belgium not only precluded the effective management of the crisis by Germany to avoid the world war they feared, but it also ensured
arguments, and in the end they needed the moral justification provided by the 1839 guarantee of Belgian neutrality.65

Grey’s domestic political constraints still permitted him some means of influencing Germany. Although a formal threat to Berlin was probably precluded by cabinet politics, an informal warning was not. Although Grey’s warning of July 29 had not been approved by the cabinet, that warning had a tremendous impact on Germany, and a similar informal warning could have been issued much earlier. Had a warning been issued prior to the Austrian ultimatum on the 23rd, or perhaps even as late as the 27th, it would have been sufficient to alarm Germany and to provoke successful German pressure against Austria-Hungary, and war could have been averted, at least for a time. But Grey was, in that period, constrained by strategic considerations. Although we now know that Germany was more in need of restraint than was Russia, and that earlier British pressure against Berlin probably would have averted war, it is more difficult to say that Grey should have known this in July 1914.

Although the erroneous assumption of British neutrality was a necessary condition for German support of an Austrian invasion of Serbia, and consequently for a continental or world war (at least until the Austrian declaration of war on July 28), it was not a sufficient condition. It is conceivable that a continental war could have been avoided if Austria had undertaken military action immediately following the assassination, if Austria had agreed to the Halt-in-Belgrade plan for limited military action against Serbia, or if diplomatic efforts to force Austria’s acceptance of this plan and manage the crisis had been given more time to work. Below I consider each of these "roads not taken," and identify the strategic and domestic constraints that made these options too costly in the eyes of statesmen.

THE DELAY OF Austro-Hungarian MIlitary aCTIO
Austria pursued a fait accompli strategy, but delayed military action against Serbia for a month after the assassination of the Archduke. The timing was

that the British would enter the war at an early stage and thus maximize their impact. Thus part of the explanation for the erroneous assumption of British neutrality by political decision makers must be traced to their miscalculation of the consequences of the Schlieffen Plan, to which I return below.

65. Steiner, Britain and the First World War, p. 237. Thus the significance of Belgium, particularly for the radicals in the cabinet, was more political than strategic; the balance of power on the continent and the future of Belgium and its channel ports would ultimately depend upon the outcome of a Franco-German war, regardless of whether Belgian neutrality was violated at its outset.
critical, for the combination of universal outrage against Serbia, the widespread belief that a limited Austrian response in defense of its honor would be legitimate, the fear of a wider war, and German threats against Russia might have been sufficient to localize the war. A.J.P. Taylor concludes that “the one chance of success for Austria-Hungary would have been rapid action.”

Most German political and military leaders assumed that a larger war might be avoided through immediate action, and this was a primary factor underlying their pressure on Austria to move as quickly as possible. The greater delay, however, the more the punishment of Serbia would be decoupled from the assassination that might have provided it some legitimacy, and the more the Tsar would shift his concerns from the principle of monarchial solidarity to his strategic and reputational interests in the Balkans. A major consequence of the delay was to transform the possibility of an early punitive strike into a larger local war that was more likely to escalate.

How do we explain the delay? Nothing could be done before the blank check from Germany July 5–6. Among the reasons for the extensive delay after this, one was military. Berchtold, who initially wanted to attack Serbia without first mobilizing, was distressed to learn from Conrad on July 6 that an invasion could not begin until two weeks after mobilization. The delay was exacerbated by domestic structural and political constraints. The goal of a unified monarchy precluded any further action (including an ultimatum or


68. Albertini, Origins, Vol. 2, p. 455. The critical questions are whether Austria could have taken limited military operations (a punitive strike) against Serbia, independent of a general invasion; whether contingency plans for this option existed in early July (or later, with the Halt-in-Belgrade proposal); and whether such an action would have interfered with a subsequent mobilization against Serbia or Russia. See Levy, “Organizational Routines,” p. 200; Pierre Renouvin, The Immediate Origins of the War (28th June–4th August 1914), trans. Theodore Carswell Hume (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928), p. 128; Holsti, Crisis, Escalation, War, pp. 157, 216. But A.J.P. Taylor argues that Serbia had decided not to defend Belgrade; Taylor, “War by Timetable,” in Purnell’s History of the Twentieth Century (New York: Purnell, 1974), p. 445. If so, Austria could easily have occupied Belgrade without interfering with later operations.
declaration of war) until July 14, when Hungarian Prime Minister Tisza agreed to war, in return for the willingness of the Austro-Hungarian Council of Ministers to accept his demand for the renunciation of territorial annexations (excepting minor frontier “adjustments”) at Serbia’s expense.69

Two additional factors explain the nine-day delay in the ultimatum after July 14. Organizational constraints imposed by the timetable of the harvest leaves for the army complicated the recall of troops before their scheduled return on July 21–22, for that might disrupt the harvests and possibly the railroad-based mobilization plans, and eliminate the possible benefits of surprise.70 In addition, Austrian decision-makers did not want to deliver the ultimatum to Serbia until after the state visit of Poincaré and Viviani to St. Petersburg on July 23, fearing that they might encourage a stronger Russian response.71 But by this time, the cloak of legitimacy for an Austrian military action resulting from the royal assassination would have dissipated. Moreover, once the unprecedented terms of the ultimatum became known, European political leaders began to see Austria, not Serbia, as the primary violator of international norms. At this point, it is more likely that the best hope for peace lay in a delay of the Austrian declaration of war.

Although Conrad wanted to delay a declaration of war and a crushing fait accompli against Serbia until August 12, when military operations could begin, Berchtold insisted (July 26) on an early declaration of war to pacify Germany and an increasingly vocal press and domestic public.72 Berchtold now welcomed the lapse between the declaration of war and the invasion, and hoped it would provide time for additional coercive pressure to secure Serbia’s “unconditional submission.”73 The timing was critical, first, because the Aus-


71. Tschirschky to Bethmann, July 14, in Geiss, July 1914, pp. 114–115. The ultimatum was delivered on July 23.


73. Thus Berchtold apparently shifted his preferred strategy from military victory over Serbia to coercive diplomacy. After designing the ultimatum so that its inevitable rejection would provide a justification for the war that he wanted, and then recognizing that Austria lacked the means for an immediate fait accompli, Berchtold switched to a coercive strategy but did not combine it with the diplomatic measures that might have made it effective. He did not soften
trian declaration of war and concurrent mobilization against Serbia led directly to the partial Russian mobilization, which initiated a rapid and nearly irreversible sequence of threats and mobilizations over the next four days. Second, it made it much more difficult for Vienna to give in to German pressures for restraint, which began during the night of July 29–30 after Lichnowsky’s warning from Grey.

It is important to recognize that Vienna’s declaration of war and military mobilization were driven by political rather than military considerations, as a brief examination of Austria’s mobilization plans and its strategic dilemma suggests. Facing the prospect of a two-front war against both Russia and Serbia, Austrian military planners incorporated a degree of flexibility into their mobilization and war plans. They allowed for partial mobilization against either Serbia or Russia, and for offensive action against one and defensive action against the other, depending on the specific threat. But once a partial mobilization was initiated against Serbia, the troops involved could not easily be shifted back to the Galician front to meet a major Russian attack. Although this created an incentive for Vienna to speed up the flow of events rather than slow them down once mobilization had begun, it also created a military incentive to delay mobilization as long as possible, while Russian intentions were uncertain. Mobilization was, for Berchtold, an essential element of a strategy to force Serbia’s submission by coercive diplomacy if possible and by war if necessary. But mobilization was not essential to Conrad’s preparation for war, and in fact was damaging to it.\textsuperscript{75}

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the degrading terms of the ultimatum to provide Serbia with a face-saving way out of the crisis, and he compounded matters further with a premature declaration of war that only strengthened the resolve of Serbia and the Entente, and contributed to the further escalation of the crisis. I thank Alexander George for suggesting this line of argument.

74. This rigidity was due to the inherent difficulties of fighting a two-front war, the poor quality of the Austro-Hungarian railway system, and to the inability and unwillingness of the Germans to provide significant help against Russia in the early stages of a war because of the requirements of the Schlieffen Plan. Conrad’s defense plan called for minimal defense forces in both Galicia (A-Staffel, thirty divisions) and in the Balkans (Minimalgruppe Balkan, ten divisions). An additional twelve divisions (B-Staffel) could be sent either to the Balkans (where they would add sufficient strength to destroy Serbia) or to Galicia (where they would combine with A-Staffel to provide for a powerful offensive against Russia). But once committed, B-Staffel could not be shifted to the other front easily or quickly. Stone, “Moltke and Conrad,” pp. 225–226, 243–244.

In retrospect, Conrad’s preference for a delay in the declaration of war until the onset of military operations may have increased the probability of a peaceful settlement, but not by much. Russian interests were threatened far more by the Austrian mobilization than by the declaration of war per se. Given the acceleration of events unleashed by the Russian mobilization, it is unlikely that a delay in the Austrian declaration of war would have bought much time for crisis management. On the other hand, Russian leaders might have been somewhat less certain of Austrian intentions in the absence of the declaration of war, and therefore slightly less inclined to mobilize, which would have provided a little more time for efforts to manage the crisis through the Halt-in-Belgrade proposal.\textsuperscript{76} In addition, the Austrian declaration of war may have been more difficult to reverse, in the eyes of its decision-makers, than was mobilization.\textsuperscript{77} A delay in the declaration of war alone would therefore have reduced the reputational, domestic political, and psychological costs to Austrian leaders of reversing course, and thus increased somewhat the likelihood that they might have accepted the Halt-in-Belgrade proposal under German pressure.\textsuperscript{78} But it is impossible to say whether the magnitude of these changes would have been large enough to delay, even temporarily, a world war that none of the great powers wanted.

THE “HALT-IN-BELGRADE” PROPOSAL
After hearing of Austria’s ultimatum on July 24, Russian leaders concluded that it was designed to provoke war. The next day the Tsar authorized preparatory military actions (short of mobilization) in order to deter an Austrian move against Serbia, and, if that failed, to facilitate military intervention in Serbia’s defense.\textsuperscript{79} Grey began exploring the possibility of British mediation

\textsuperscript{76} This is particularly true had the Russians understood the opportunities created by technical rigidities in Austrian mobilization plans, as I argue below.
\textsuperscript{77} The Austrians, unlike the Germans, did not perceive that mobilization necessarily meant war. See Schmitt, \textit{Coming of the War}, Vol. 2, pp. 215.
\textsuperscript{78} This assumes that Grey would have seen the combination of the ultimatum, Bethmann’s rejection of the proposal for a four-power conference, and Russia’s early preparations for war as threatening enough—even in the absence of a Austrian declaration of war—to issue a strong warning to Germany. Nothing less than such a warning would have induced Germany to pressure Austria for restraint.
on the same day, and on July 26 invited France, Germany, and Italy to send their ambassadors to a conference in London. Austria refused; so did Germany, which continued to press for immediate military action as a means of localizing the war.

By July 27–28 the Kaiser began to fear British intervention, and at the same time believed that after the conciliatory Serbian reply "every cause for war has vanished." He instructed Jagow to request that Vienna accept a "temporary military occupation" of Belgrade pending successful great power mediation. The "Halt-in-Belgrade" proposal aimed to manage the escalating crisis and to localize it in the Balkans, by allowing Austria to gain a significant diplomatic victory and demonstrate its military prowess and prestige without damaging Russia's reputation.

Bethmann's pressure on Austria for restraint, induced by his changed perceptions of British intentions, came less than a day after the Kaiser's Halt-in-Belgrade proposal was delivered to Austria. Although Berchtold's formal response was delayed and deliberately evasive, he immediately told German Ambassador Heinrich Tschirschky that it was too late to change course. Strategically, Berchtold believed that the temporary occupation of Belgrade would not be sufficient to achieve Austria's initial objective of eliminating the threat from Serbia and the southern Slavs. He feared that although a temporary occupation of Belgrade would provide leverage against Serbia, it would also generate diplomatic pressure on Vienna to soften its demands. Moreover, even if Russia were willing to tolerate an Austrian occupation of Belgrade, it would be "mere tinsel," for the Serbian army would remain intact and see Russia as its savior, and Serbia would provoke another crisis in two or three years under conditions much less favorable to Austria.

Berchtold was also concerned about the reputational and domestic political costs of reversing course after an earlier declaration of war. After considerable pressure from Germany to move quickly against Serbia, Austro-Hungarian leaders had taken the politically difficult decisions to issue the ultimatum,

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80. German Documents, pp. 273–274. Grey made a similar proposal the next day. He requested that Russia suspend military operations against Serbia, while Austria "hold the occupied territory until she had complete satisfaction from Servia . . . [but] not advance further." British Documents, No. 286, p. 182.
81. Austro-German negotiations were also complicated by disagreements over how much to concede to their Italian ally to keep it in line. Schmitt, Coming of the War, Vol. 2, pp. 217–222; Fischer, War Again, p. 73; Albertini, Origins, Vol. 2, pp. 656–57. It has also been argued that Vienna was constrained because it had no contingency plans for the occupation of Belgrade. Holsti, Crisis, Escalation, War, pp. 157, 216. See sources cited in note 68 above.
declare war, and begin mobilization. Once taken, these actions were very
difficult to modify and redirect. This would have undermined Austrian cred-
ibility, upset a coalition of domestic political interests that had been very
difficult to construct, and broken a serious psychological commitment.82

This episode demonstrates the importance of the timing of actions designed
to reinforce crisis management. Had Germany initiated this pressure against
Austria prior to the declaration of war on the 28th, it would have been far
more difficult for Vienna to resist. Austria would have been even more likely
to acquiesce had the German pressure come before the ultimatum was deliv-
ered on July 23, and there is every reason to believe that an earlier warning
from Grey would have been sufficient to trigger a German warning to Vienna.
Albertini concludes that, "if Grey had spoken before 23 July, or even after
the 23rd but not later than the afternoon of the 27th, as he spoke on the
29th, Germany would very likely have restrained Austria from declaring war
on Serbia and the European war, at least for the time being, would have
been averted."83

Even as late as July 30, however, it is still conceivable that war could have
been avoided, though the margin for maneuver was admittedly thin. Berch-
told continued to delay a response to Bethmann's proposal, and Bethmann
continued his pleas for peace but without increasing the pressure against his
Austrian ally.84 This was critical, for stronger German pressure, including an
explicit threat to withdraw support from Austria, probably would have been
sufficient to compel Vienna to accept the Halt-in-Belgrade plan and thus
avoid more extensive military action, at least for the time being. Despite the
costs of reversing course after a declaration of war, the prospect of being left
to fight Russia and Serbia alone was even less desirable. In addition, Hun-
garian Prime Minister Tisza might have seized on German pressure as an
excuse to back out of a decision that he had undertaken only with the greatest
reluctance, and his defection would have undermined the internal unity
necessary for a successful war effort. Thus David Kaiser argues, "the Vienna

82. Lebow, Between Peace and War, p. 136, argues that "having finally crossed their psychological
Rubicon, the Austrian leaders obviously felt a tremendous sense of psychological release and
were hardly about to turn back willingly."
83. Albertini, Origins, Vol. 2, p. 514; Vol. 3, p. 643. See also Lynn-Jones, "Détente and Deter-
84. Lebow emphasizes Bethmann's increasing fatalism and perception of narrowing options
and loss of control, induced by psychological stress; Between Peace and War, pp. 136–147.
government could not possibly have held out against united pressure to accept some variant of the Halt-in-Belgrade plan.\textsuperscript{85}

But German pressure on Vienna was only moderate in intensity, accompanied by mixed signals, and withdrawn early. The Kaiser’s proposal was ready for delivery early on July 28, before the declaration of war, but Bethmann delayed sending it to Ambassador Tschirschky in Vienna for twelve hours and distorted its content in significant ways to reduce its impact.\textsuperscript{86} Tschirschky delayed further and in fact may have encouraged Austrian belligerency.\textsuperscript{87} The ambiguous signals from Berlin continued even after Bethmann reversed course on July 29 and began pressing Vienna to accept Grey’s Halt-in-Belgrade proposal. At the same time that Bethmann was urging Berchtold to consider the Halt-in-Belgrade proposal, Chief of the German General Staff Moltke was urging Conrad, his Austrian counterpart, to press forward with mobilization, and warning that any further delay would be disastrous. This led Conrad to complain, “Who actually rules in Berlin, Bethmann or Moltke?”\textsuperscript{88}

Berlin’s pressure, too weak to impress Austrian leaders with the potentially serious consequences of their failure to accept the peace proposal, was not sustained. Bethmann reversed his position and effectively withdrew German support from the Halt-in-Belgrade proposal on the evening of July 30, after fresh reports that Russia was about to begin mobilization, that Belgium had

\textsuperscript{85} Kaiser, “Germany and the First World War,” p. 471. Albertini (\textit{Origins}, Vol. 2, pp. 659, 669–673) concludes that “Berchtold was assailed by doubts and hesitations [about general mobilization on July 31], so that it remains an open question whether he would actually have put the order into execution if he had received further strong pressure from Berlin in favor of the Halt-in-Belgrade and mediation.”

\textsuperscript{86} Whereas the Kaiser insisted only that Austria had to have a “guaranty that the promises were carried out,” the chancellor emphasized in his telegram (No. 174) to German Ambassador Tschirschky that the aim of the temporary occupation was “to force the Serbian Government to the complete fulfillment of her demands”; Bethmann deleted the phrase about war no longer being necessary. He also told Tschirschky “to avoid very carefully giving rise to the impression that we wish to hold Austria back . . . [we must] find a way to realize Austria’s desired aim . . . without at the same time bringing on a world war, and, if the latter cannot be avoided in the end, of improving the conditions under which we shall have to wage it.” \textit{German Documents}, pp. 288–289; Fischer, \textit{Germany’s Aims}, p. 72.

\textsuperscript{87} Tschirschky also delayed notifying Berlin of the Austrian declaration of war. Albertini concludes that Tschirschky and Berchtold “were in league” to deceive Berlin and deflect German pressure for restraint. \textit{Origins}, Vol. 2, pp. 653–661.

begun preparations for war, and that Austria was concentrating its forces against Serbia. These reports led to an abrupt shift in Moltke’s position, an uneasiness among the military, an increase in military influence in the political decision-making process, greater inclination toward a preventive war, and intense pressure for the declaration of a “state of imminent war.” The consequences were enormous. Albertini concludes that, “if on the 30th Bethmann had not let himself be overruled by Moltke, had insisted with Berchtold, on pain of non-recognition of the casus foederis, that Austria should content herself with the Anglo-German proposals, and had then waited for Sazonov to follow suit, the peace of the world might have been saved.”

The Russian mobilization was particularly important in the shift in German policy and escalation of the crisis; careful examination reveals that the structure of Russian mobilization plans provided an opportunity for Russia to slow down the accelerating pace of events without threatening its vital interests. Nevertheless, the likelihood of war was already quite high by this point.

THE RUSSIAN MOBILIZATION

Russian leaders hoped that mobilization, in conjunction with diplomatic pressure from the other powers, would deter Austria from an all-out military attack against Serbia, limit the concessions Serbia would have to make, and improve Russia’s ability to defend Serbia in the event of war. Russia did

90. The military did not exert much pressure on Bethmann prior to July 30. See note 48, above. 91. At 9 p.m. on July 30 Bethmann sent Telegram 200 to Vienna, requesting that Austria accept the Halt-in-Belgrade plan. But this request was not accompanied by the coercive pressure that was necessary for its success, and in any event it was followed in two hours by another telegram suspending the first. Albertini (Origins, Vol. 3, pp. 21–24) interprets this as evidence of the increasing influence of the military, but Trachtenberg (“Meaning of Mobilization,” p. 139) dissents.
93. It led political and military decision-makers to believe that a continental war was inevitable and that they had lost control of events. These perceptions began to acquire a self-fulfilling character. Decision-makers became more willing to let events run their course, and efforts to deter war gave way to preparations for an unavoidable war. Joll, First World War, pp. 21, 107, 203; Lebow, Between Peace and War, pp. 134–139, 254–256.
not need to mobilize to achieve these goals, however; it only needed to 
threaten to do so. The Austrian mobilization against Serbia posed no imme-
diate military threat to Serbia, for an Austrian invasion could not begin until 
August 12. Neither did it threaten Russia. The longer Russia delayed, the 
more Austrian mobilization against Serbia would progress, and the more 
difficult it would be for Austria to mount a successful defense against any 
Russian offensive from the east, which would ultimately determine Austria’s 
fate. As L.C.F. Turner concludes, “it was very much to Russia’s advantage 
to delay any mobilization until a substantial part of the Austrian Army was 
tangled in operations against Serbia.”

Thus Russia could have delayed a partial mobilization for several more 
days without harming Russian interests in the Balkans. Such a delay would 
presumably have delayed the alarm felt by Moltke and the German generals, 
eliminated the need for a German mobilization or even preparatory military 
action, and thus provided more time for Bethmann to continue to press 
Vienna to accept the Halt-in-Belgrade plan. The Russian decision to mobilize 
taken in part, wrote L.C.F. Turner, because “Sazonov and the Russian 
generals failed to grasp the immense diplomatic and military advantages 
conferred on them by the Austrian dilemma.”

The Russians’ belief that mobilization against Austria was necessary had 
serious consequences, however, because for technical military reasons it 
would be costly to initiate a partial mobilization against Austria and then 
wait before mobilizing against Germany. A partial mobilization would disrupt 
railway transport and delay for months a systematic general mobilization 
tagainst Germany. Russia would be dangerously exposed to a hostile and 
war-prone Germany, and unable to come immediately to the aid of France. But 
Russian leaders perceived that speed was of the essence, that a few days’ 
delay would put France in an increasingly precarious position, that war had 
become inevitable, and consequently that they must mobilize as quickly as

2, p. 482; Vol. 3, p. 31.
96. Turner, Origins, p. 93; Turner, “Russian Mobilisation,” pp. 258, 266; Kennedy, War Plans, 
p. 15. Sazonov’s original plan was to wait until Austria invaded Serbia before initiating partial 
97. Albertini concludes that the Russian choice was, “either general mobilization or none at 
all.” Albertini, Origins, Vol. 2, p. 543. Russian General Danilov wrote a decade later that the 
military, given a choice, might have preferred no mobilization to partial mobilization. Turner, 
Origins, p. 92; Schilling, How the War Began, p. 117.
98. Trachtenberg, “Meaning of Mobilization,” pp. 125–126. This belief was reinforced by Russia’s
possible. Thus the Tsar, convinced that he lacked military options that would allow him to stand firm against Vienna without threatening Berlin, and beset by increasing pressure from the Russian military and from Sazonov, decided to order general mobilization for July 31 rather than a partial mobilization against Austria-Hungary alone.\footnote{Kennedy, \textit{War Plans}, p. 15; Turner, \textit{"The Russian Mobilisation"}; Albertini, \textit{Origins}, Vol. 3, p. 31; Levy, \textit{"Organizational Routines"}, p. 210.} This was tragic, because the Russian mobilization was the decisive act leading to the war,\footnote{Russian political leaders’ lack of comprehension of the meaning and consequences of mobilization also affected decision-making earlier in the crisis, though it is hard to assess its importance. Until fairly late in the crisis, Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov perceived partial mobilization as a usable and controllable instrument of coercion, and did not realize that it would precipitate a general mobilization by Austria, which would invoke the Austro-German alliance, trigger a general mobilization by Germany, and therefore lead to war. Nor did Sazonov realize that a Russian partial mobilization would seriously interfere with a subsequent general mobilization. His ignorance is explained in part by the fact that Janushkevich had been chief of staff for only five months, was not familiar with the details of mobilization, and therefore failed to warn Sazonov of the implications of partial mobilization. The situation was compounded further by Germany’s failure to warn Russia of the risks involved. In fact, on July 27 Jagow had assured both the British and then the French ambassadors to Berlin that “if Russia only mobilized in the south, Germany would not mobilize.” Albertini concludes that if Sazonov had understood this, there is “no doubt” that he would have acted differently. He would have attempted to delay mobilization, rather than press for it from July 24, or proclaim it on July 29, and the Tsar probably would have gone along. Albertini, \textit{Origins}, Vol. 2, pp. 294, 480–82 (quotation), 624; Vol. 3, p. 43; Turner, \textit{"The Russian Mobilisation"}, p. 260; Van Evera, \textit{"Cult of the Offensive"}, p. 76. This would have slowed down the momentum of events in Germany and provided additional time for political leaders to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis through the Halt-in-Belgrade plan. But whether this would have made a significant difference is open to question, for in the absence of an early partial mobilization by Russia it is unclear whether Grey would have issued the warning that induced Germany to restrain Austria. See Trachtenberg, \textit{"Meaning of Mobilization"}, for a critique of this line of argument.} Additional opportunities for Russia, rarely noted in the literature, were provided by German mobilization plans, discussed next.

\begin{quote}
THE GERMAN MOBILIZATION

Because German political and military leaders believed strongly that for diplomatic and domestic political reasons it was essential that Russia be perceived as the aggressor, they had a strong incentive not to be the first to mobilize. Thus some form of Russian mobilization was for all practical pur-
poses a necessary condition for German mobilization. Russian general mobilization was a sufficient condition for German mobilization; but was a Russian partial mobilization a sufficient condition? Although Albertini and others may be correct that a partial mobilization by Russia “would have led to war no less surely than general mobilization,” the causal linkage was delayed and indirect rather than immediate and direct: a Russian partial mobilization would eventually lead to a German mobilization because of the Russian threat to Austria, not because of the direct threat to Germany. In fact, the Russian threat to Germany would have been lessened somewhat as Russian partial mobilization measures against Austria progressed, because they would have delayed a subsequent Russian general mobilization. If Russian leaders had known of these diplomatic and domestic political constraints on Germany, and recognized that rigidities in the Russian mobilization plans gave Germany incentives to delay mobilization, Russia could have avoided its fateful mobilization without undermining its coercive pressure against either Austria or Germany.

This argument is supported by evidence that German military and political leaders were cautious in reacting to Russian military actions prior to the Russian general mobilization. Germany did not respond in kind to Russia’s pre-mobilization measures, as evidenced by Moltke’s refusal to support War Minister von Falkenhayn’s July 29 proposal for a proclamation of Kriegszustand, or “threatening danger of war.” Later that evening Bethmann refused to order an immediate German mobilization, on the grounds that Germany must wait for a state of war between Russia and Austria-Hungary, “because otherwise we should not have public opinion with us either at home or in England.” The German military began pressing hard for


103. An early partial Russian mobilization would also have allowed Austria to avoid a premature partial mobilization against Serbia.

104. Note that Falkenhayn did not believe that a preemptive mobilization by Germany was necessary. Albertini, Origins, pp. 496–497, 502; Trachtenberg, “Meaning of Mobilization,” p. 138.

105. Moreover, Austria must not appear as the aggressor. Late on July 29, Moltke, with unanimous support, instructed Conrad: “Do not declare war on Russia but wait for Russia’s attack.” Fischer, War of Illusions, p. 496.

106. Moltke objected to this only slightly. Fischer, War of Illusions, pp. 495–496; Fischer, War Aims, p. 85. Although Russia had initiated partial mobilization by this time, it is not clear that Bethmann was aware of it. Albertini, Origins, pp. 502–503.
Kriegsgefahrenzustand only at noon July 30, after receiving new information regarding the intensity of Russian military preparations, but Bethmann rejected this demand. 107 Only with the news of the Russian general mobilization at noon the following day did Bethmann agree to a German mobilization. 108

Once both sides had mobilized, however, Germany had a strong incentive to strike first because of the demands of the Schlieffen Plan. Because the capture of Liège, with its vital forts and railroad lines, was necessary before the invasion of France could proceed, the Schlieffen Plan required that German armies cross the frontier and advance into Belgium as an integral part of mobilization. The perception that even small leads in mobilization would have significant military benefits and that small delays could be catastrophic created additional military incentives to move as quickly as possible. 109 Thus once Russia moved to a general mobilization, the German decision for war would immediately follow because of the structure of the alliance system and existing mobilization plans. Military requirements of preparing for war took precedence over political requirements for avoiding one, and a continental war was inevitable. Because the Schlieffen Plan involved movement through Belgium, a world war was almost certain to follow. 110

The Schlieffen Plan made it inevitable that any war involving Germany would necessarily be a two-front war in which Britain would be forced to intervene, independently of the particular issues at stake or the political conditions under which it occurred. This worst-case outcome for Germany derives in part from the separation of military planning in the previous decade from the political objectives which it was presumably designed to serve, and from the disproportionate emphasis given to winning a war, as

108. At this point Berlin sent a 12-hour ultimatum to St. Petersburg demanding that all military preparations be stopped. The Russian rejection of this demand was followed by the German declaration of war on August 1. Albertini, Origins, Vol. 2, pp. 494–503 and Vol. 3, pp. 6–18; Fischer, Germany’s Aims, pp. 85–86.
opposed to deterring it in the first place. The Schlieffen Plan was constructed exclusively by the military, who consulted only minimally with civilian leaders, and on the basis of technical military considerations rather than political ones. The sweep through Belgium, for example, did not take into account the political impact on England of the violation of Belgian neutrality.

The narrow military orientation of the Schlieffen Plan, and the rigidities that made it difficult to modify by political leaders in response to changing political circumstances, was compounded by the limits on political leaders' knowledge of the nature of mobilization and how existing plans might constrain their strategy of coercive diplomacy. The mobilization plans, which they thought provided an instrument for an admittedly risky strategy of coercive diplomacy, had in fact been constructed as a strategy which was to be implemented only when war was perceived to be inevitable. Bethmann might very well have acted differently had he realized that his attempts to neutralize Britain would be defeated by the demands of the Schlieffen Plan.

These and related points have led numerous analysts to conclude that the mobilization plans of the European great powers were themselves one of the leading causes of World War I. However, though it was hardly insignifi-


113. Jagow's request in 1912 that the plan for violation of Belgian neutrality be re-evaluated was rejected by Moltke, and until 1913 there was not even an inquiry into the feasibility of alternative operational plans than might carry fewer political risks. Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, p. 121; Ritter, *Sword and the Scepter*, Vol. 2, p. 205.


116. Ritter (*Schlieffen Plan*, p. 90) argues that "the outbreak of war in 1914 is the most tragic example of a government's helpless dependence on the planning of strategists that history has ever seen." Albertini (*Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 253) concludes that the primary reason that Germany
cant, the causal importance of this factor should not be exaggerated. These mobilization plans were part of the overall structure of constraints on the strategic choices of each of the great powers at several critical junctures in the July crisis, but we must keep in mind that these military mobilization and war plans were in place long before. They were the products of diplomatic alignments, strategic beliefs about the offensive nature of warfare, bureaucratic compromises among political and military leaders, and political and cultural assumptions about the interests of each of the great powers and the fundamental dynamics of international politics. 117 Although the mobilization plans, and the confusion surrounding them, clearly contributed to the spiral of escalation in the July crisis, the inference that the plans themselves were the primary cause of the war would be spurious.

Conclusions

I have argued that political leaders in each of the great powers in the July crisis preferred a peaceful settlement to a world war. The primary explanation for the outbreak of the world war, which none of the leading decision-makers of the European great powers wanted, expected, or deliberately sought, lies in the irreconcilable interests defined by state officials, the structure of international power and alliances that created intractable strategic dilemmas, the particular plans for mobilization and war that were generated by these strategic constraints, decision-makers’ critical assumptions regarding the likely behavior of their adversaries and the consequences of their own actions, and domestic political constraints on their freedom of action. Thus the causes of World War I are to be found primarily in the underlying economic, military, diplomatic, political, and social forces which existed prior to the onset of the crisis. These forces shaped the policy preferences of statesmen and the strategic and political constraints within which they had to make extraordinarily difficult decisions. Thus the probability of war was already quite high at the time of the assassination.

"set fire to the powder cask" lay in "the requirements of the Schlieffen Plan, which no doubt was a masterpiece of military science, but also a monument of that utter lack of political horse-sense which is the main cause of European disorders and upheavals." See also Taylor, War by Time-table, p. 19; Turner, Origins; Levy, "Organizational Routines," pp. 209–210.
To say that war was likely, however, is not to say that it was inevitable. At several critical points in the July crisis, political leaders took actions that increased the probability of war, and failed to take others that might have bought additional time for crisis management without seriously threatening their vital interests. No war would have occurred in the absence of the German assumption that Britain would stay neutral in a continental conflict, or at least not intervene until France was on the verge of being crushed, but that assumption was not entirely unreasonable given the information available at the time. Britain’s allies and in fact Grey himself were uncertain of what Britain would do. An earlier explicit warning from Grey might have been sufficient, but he was faced with a strategic dilemma and severe domestic constraints.

An earlier punitive strike by Austria might have avoided a larger war, but that was delayed by political pressures related to the domestic structure of the Dual Monarchy and by cumbersome mobilization plans that precluded immediate action. The ultimatum and the acute international crisis that followed transformed the minimum military option from a punitive strike to a more substantial invasion and therefore increased the likelihood of Russian intervention. The Halt-in-Belgrade plan was the only remaining hope for peace, but this required strong and perhaps highly coercive pressure on Vienna from Berlin. However, such pressure could not be forthcoming until Grey’s actions induced a change in German expectations. The Halt-in-Belgrade plan was undercut by Vienna’s premature and politically motivated declaration of war, which increased the reputational and domestic costs to Austrian leaders if they subsequently reversed course; by insufficient pressures on Vienna from Berlin; and by the premature Russian mobilization. The Russian partial mobilization on July 29 was the crucial action of the escalating crisis. It occurred because Russian leaders feared that war was inevitable, and because they failed to recognize German diplomatic and domestic incentives not to mobilize first and Russian military incentives to refrain from responding immediately to the Austrian mobilization against Serbia.\footnote{118}

Some of these miscalculations and failures of judgment might have been avoided, and some of the domestic and bureaucratic pressures might have

\footnote{118. It is perhaps not surprising that decision-makers in 1914, with limited information and under tremendous pressure, may have missed some opportunities for crisis management. Indeed, after seven decades of research and reflection, scholars continue to debate the consequences of the mobilization plans.}
been finessed, but it is extraordinarily difficult to assess the causal impact of these missteps and missed opportunities. Europe in 1914 was a highly interdependent and chaotic system in which small changes could have enormous and therefore unpredictable effects, and it is impossible to validate counterfactual propositions with any degree of confidence. But my judgment is that the causal effects of these miscalculations and oversights were modest relative to the structure of incentives and constraints which were already in place; the miscalculations were, in part, the product of those incentives and constraints and the underlying strategic assumptions that helped shape them. The windows of opportunity for the management of the July crisis by political leaders were narrow and constantly changing, at different rates and different times for each of the great powers in response to its own political dynamics. This placed enormous demands on the intellectual, diplomatic, and political skills of leading decision-makers. It is certainly possible that the July crisis might have ended differently if other individuals had been in positions of power at the beginning of July 1914. But even the most successful cases of crisis management are characterized by numerous misperceptions and perhaps some good luck as well. Thus, it is problematic to infer a causal relationship between war and misperceptions and missed opportunities, or to validate the counterfactual proposition that better crisis management would have resulted in a more peaceful outcome, particularly when the strategic and political constraints on central decision-makers are this severe.

Moreover, even if Austria had agreed to the Halt-in-Belgrade proposal, and even if that bought enough time for the negotiation of a peaceful settlement, it is far from certain that this settlement would have been sufficiently stable to survive the next crisis that would inevitably arise in the next few months or the next few years—particularly in light of Germany’s continued concern about its ability to prevail in a future war against an increasingly powerful Russia, and the likelihood of continued domestic political instability in the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and German empires.

119. Of course, different individuals (a Bismarck, for example) might have attempted to prevent the European state system from developing into a rigid two-bloc system prior to 1914.

120. The crisis mismanagement hypothesis would be more compelling if it were validated by some type of comparative research design that controlled for context—for example, one that identified other crises with equally incompatible preferences and equally constraining strategic and domestic pressures, but that turned out differently because of skillful crisis management.