“Everyone’s Favored Year for War—or Not?”

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To the Editors (Jack S. Levy writes):

Jack Snyder’s article “Better Now Than Later: The Paradox of 1914 as Everyone’s Favored Year for War” makes an important contribution to scholars’ understanding of World War I. Snyder argues that all of the continental powers were pessimistic about the future, optimistic about the prospects for war in 1914, and influenced by better-now-than-later thinking. The hypothesis that preventive logic strongly influenced German and Austria-Hungarian decisionmaking is familiar, but the idea that it significantly influenced Russian and French decisionmaking is relatively new. It is also paradoxical. Underlying shifts in power that create incentives for one state to fight sooner rather than later should generate the opposite incentives for its adversary. Snyder documents the “puzzle of simultaneous optimism” in 1914 (p. 73), and makes a theoretical contribution by analyzing the utility of a modified bargaining model of war for explaining this puzzle.

I agree with many of Snyder’s arguments about the outbreak of World War I and with his conclusions about the limitations of the standard bargaining model of war. I do not, however, accept his central thesis that 1914 was “everyone’s favored year for war.” Concerns about the future were countered by fears of a devastating war. None of the European powers wanted a world war, though each was willing to take substantial risks to maintain its influence and avoid a humiliating diplomatic defeat. German political leaders wanted a localized Austro-Serbian war and were willing to accept a larger war with Russia and France, but only if they believed they could avoid a three-front war that included Britain. Although French leaders feared that Russia’s commitment to France might decline as Russian military power continued to grow, Snyder is wrong to conclude that leaders in both St. Petersburg and Paris were eager for war in 1914 (p. 79). Both states had concerns about their military readiness, and both recognized that war would be more risky in 1914 than in two or three years, when Russia would be stronger.

In arguing that an important cause of war in 1914 was that “all of the continental

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great powers judged it a favorable moment for a fight” (p. 71), Snyder fails to answer the question, “What kind of fight?” Most political and military leaders in 1914 recognized the possibility of several different kinds of war: an Austro-Serbian war that was localized in the Balkans; a continental war resulting from Russian, German, and French intervention in support of their respective allies; and a world war resulting from the intervention of Britain on the side of its Entente partners. For what kind of war was this a favorable moment, and for whom? Snyder’s argument is conceptually ambiguous, because it fails to differentiate among different kinds of war.5

In practice, this question of what type of war is not problematic for Russia or France. Given the commitments of Russia to Serbia and France to Russia, and given the Entente with Britain, Russia preferred a world war to a continental war and a continental war to a local war. France would fight alongside Russia regardless of the conditions under which war occurred.6 Whether each preferred a world war to a negotiated peace, as entailed by the favorable-moment-for-war hypothesis, is a more interesting question, and I return to it later. The issue of what kind of war, however, is relevant for Austria-Hungary and Germany. Here I focus on Germany.

Given their fears of the rising power of Russia and the continued decline of Austria-Hungary, and influenced by preventive logic,7 nearly all German leaders, like their Austrian counterparts, preferred a local war to a negotiated peace, expecting that a crushing victory by the Dual Monarchy over Serbia would end the Serbian threat to the integrity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.8 To achieve this goal, they were willing to risk Russian intervention and a continental war. A more widely debated question is whether German leaders preferred a world war to a negotiated peace, perhaps one along the lines of the “Halt-in-Belgrade” plan proposed by Kaiser Wilhelm II on July 28, 1914. Closely related to this question about preferences is the question about expectations: Did German leaders expect that Britain would stand aside, at least in the early stages of a continental war, when its intervention might make a difference?9

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8. Austria-Hungarian leaders were willing to initiate war only after receiving Germany’s “blank check” of unconditional support on July 5–6. See Otte, July Crisis, pp. 55–89.
9. Depending on the answer to these questions, there are two variations of the hypothesis that German leaders saw 1914 as a favorable moment for war: (1) German decisionmakers believed that it was a favorable moment for a world war against Russia, France, and Britain; or (2) German decisionmakers believed that 1914 was a favorable moment for a continental war and that Britain would not intervene. Snyder is not clear about which of these variations he favors, but his article strongly implies that German and Austro-Hungarian leaders perceived 1914 as a favorable moment for a world war.
The evidence suggests that most German political leaders believed that, given the Entente’s advantages in military capabilities, economic strength, and ability to sustain a long war, a world war would be the worst possible outcome. They preferred a continental war or, even better, a local war, to a negotiated peace, even a one-sided settlement favoring Austria-Hungary, as long as they were confident that Britain would stay neutral. But they preferred a negotiated settlement to a world war. As Konrad Jarausch argues, German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg “clearly preferred local war, was willing to gamble on continental war, but he abhorred world war.”

Some scholars argue that, contrary to the above preference ordering, German political leaders favored a continental war over a local war, to defeat a rising Russia in a preventive war while the opportunity was still available. I disagree. German decision-makers tried to localize the war in the Balkans—first by pushing for a fait accompli while Austria-Hungary still had the sympathies of Europe, then through deterrent threats against Russia. They did so because they believed that an Austro-Hungarian victory over Serbia would trigger a diplomatic revolution in the Balkans, and possibly divide the Entente. Bethmann stated that “if war does not break out, if the Tsar is unwilling or France, alarmed, counsels peace, we have the prospect of splitting the Entente.”

German leaders’ primary goal was to break up the Entente and end the encirclement of Germany. They preferred to accomplish this diplomatically or through a local war, rather than through a costly and risky war with Russia. They also expected that Russia would stand aside, though with what degree of confidence is uncertain. Decision-makers in Berlin were convinced that neither Russia nor France was ready for war. They assumed that the leaderships in St. Petersburg and Paris understood this, as well as the fact that time favored Russia—given the expanded army and strategic railroad network planned by the Great Programme of military reform and given Russia’s superior ability to finance an arms buildup. German leaders also assumed, for much of the July crisis, that Russia would behave as it had in the crises of 1908–09 and 1912–13, and withdraw its support from Serbia rather than risk escalation to war. Finally, the kaiser and others were convinced that the tsar would not “side with the regicides.”

The key assumptions behind the German localization strategy—that France would

10. Chief of the General Staff Helmuth von Moltke and the German military preferred a continental war but were convinced that Britain would intervene, and they were not deterred by that prospect. See Annika Mombauer, Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 77, 104, 109.
12. Fischer, Germany’s Aims in the First World War.
13. Kurt Riezler diary, July 8, 1914, cited in Jarausch, “The Illusion of Limited War,” p. 58. Recall Snyder’s statement that after failing to support each other’s country in earlier crises, French and Russian leaders feared that the Entente might not survive if they failed to support each other in the July crisis (p. 75).
not strongly support Russia, that Russia would stand aside in an Austro-Serbian war, and that a possible result was a breakup of the Entente—were fundamentally misguided. They were among the more consequential misperceptions of the July crisis. Another was the assumption, accepted by Bethmann, the kaiser, and most German political leaders, but not by Chief of the German Staff Helmuth von Moltke, that Britain would remain neutral in a continental war.

German political leaders had assumed since 1912 that British neutrality (and support from the Social Democrats at home) was conditional upon Britain’s perception that Germany was fighting a defensive war in response to Russian aggression. They did everything possible to shift the blame for the war onto Russia. The validity of the British neutrality assumption is a matter of historiographical debate, but the bulk of the evidence supports it.15 Particularly striking is Moltke’s May 1914 comment, referring to Bethmann and the Foreign Office, that “they unfortunately always expect a declaration from England that she will not participate.”16

This expectation was a necessary condition for the German blank check to Austria-Hungary. The importance of that informational assumption is reflected in German responses to the collapse of that assumption. When the kaiser learned on July 28 that Britain would intervene, he called for negotiations based on the Halt-in-Belgrade plan. Late on July 29, after Bethmann finally understood that Britain would enter the war, he immediately demanded that Austro-Hungarian leaders pull back, negotiate with Russia, and accept mediation based on the kaiser’s plan.17 Austro-Hungarian leaders resisted his efforts, and Bethmann did not persist with his pressure as preemptive threats increased, but the immediate reactions of the kaiser and chancellor are telling.18 Similarly, when the kaiser first received the erroneous August 1 telegram suggesting that Britain would not intervene if Germany spared France, he immediately instructed Moltke to turn his entire army to the east, abandoning the deeply entrenched Schlieffen plan.

Although Snyder is right that both Russia and France had some concerns about the


future, these did not add up to beliefs that 1914 was a favorable moment for a world war. For Russia, readiness for war was a major question. On July 23, War Minister Vladimir Sukhomlinov stated that Russia’s Great Programme “cannot be completed until 1917,” that “even with France’s support, we would find ourselves until 1917... or 1918, in a position of indisputable inferiority to the combined forces of Germany and Austria. Consequently, we should do everything in our power to avoid war.”

Despite these readiness concerns, the tsar’s “fear and abhorrence of war,” and Russia’s real need for peace to facilitate the development of its internal resources, Russian leaders did not do everything possible to avoid war. Their belief that Austro-Hungarian actions were directed by Berlin, and their concerns about Serbian independence, Russia’s reputation, and Russia’s perceived vulnerability to strategic preemption, led them to adopt a badly flawed strategy of deterrence. It was accompanied by mixed signals that added to German confusion about Russian intentions. In addition, Russian political leaders did not understand the extent to which their military actions would foreclose subsequent opportunities for negotiations and a peaceful outcome.

Snyder is correct that French leaders worried that an increasingly powerful Russia would have less need for France, and that they were willing to risk war rather than see their alliance collapse in 1914. He goes too far, however, in concluding that French leaders believed that it was a favorable moment for war. As John Keiger emphasizes, in terms of military capabilities and organization, finance, and public opinion, France was not ready for war, and it had every reason to delay war for at least two years. The three-year military service law of 1913 would ultimately increase French military strength, but it created disorganization that reduced French power in the short term. In a startling speech to Parliament on July 13, 1914, former army officer Charles Humbert detailed the extensive material and organizational limitations of the French army. The

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19. I agree with Otte that Russia had a defensive military posture, that “an offensive war... made little sense,” and that “there is no clear evidence of aggressive designs on [Russia’s] part.” See Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 246, 519.


next day Gen. Christian Michelet wrote to the president of the Senate, “L’armée est un malade.” The image of a sick army was reinforced by a public statement by War Minister Adolphe Messimy emphasizing that French military weaknesses would be addressed by 1917.30 Given these weaknesses, France’s best outcome in 1914 was a negotiated peace between Austro-Hungary and Serbia that was acceptable to Russia. Still, if it came to war, concerns about the cohesion of the alliance left France unconditionally committed to Russia.

To summarize, I disagree with Snyder’s claim that leaders of all of the continental powers saw 1914 as a favorable moment for a world war. None of the powers wanted a world war, but all were willing to run considerable risks to achieve a diplomatic victory or at least to avoid a humiliating and perhaps divisive diplomatic defeat. German political leaders perceived a favorable moment for a continental war and especially for a local war, but not for a world war. Russian leaders, fully backed by France, adopted a policy of deterrence to defend Serbian sovereignty and maintain the status quo. Still, in the context of underlying trends that would leave Russia in a much stronger position within a few years, the risky nature of Russian policy, particularly the general mobilization beginning July 30, is puzzling. Snyder’s application of a modified bargaining model takes a step closer toward understanding this puzzle, but further investigation is necessary.31

—Jack S. Levy
New Brunswick, New Jersey

To the Editors (Jack Snyder replies):

Jack Levy’s thoughtful, historically astute letter provides a welcome opportunity to clarify some points in my article, “Better Now Than Later,” and to consider the theoretical implications of our approaches to analyzing the choices leading to war in 1914.1 Levy expresses reservations about my calling 1914 “everyone’s favored year for war,” so in this reply I explain that terminology more fully. Levy also writes that I leave ambiguous the great powers’ preference ranking of the kinds of war they were seeking or willing to risk, which bears on whether a potential bargain existed that all the powers would have preferred to war. Although I think there is no historical consensus on the full preference ranking that Levy proposes, I address how such preferences bear on the bargaining theory that I evaluated in my article.

Beyond these two points, Levy and I agree on many of the basic causal processes at work in the July crisis. We both focus on the way that perceptions of structural constraints, such as potential power shifts and offensive military plans, produced what

30. Ibid., p. 261.

Levy has called “better-now-than-later thinking for many of the Great Powers,” which drove key decisionmakers to unyielding bargaining positions and acceptance of a high risk of major war.² Much in Levy’s letter and his other writing on this subject is consistent with my central points: (1) the strict-rationality version of the bargaining model of war fails to explain why all of the European powers considered war in 1914 preferable to risking war later on what might be less favorable terms; (2) a bounded rationality version of the bargaining model that incorporates military organizational biases and a disproportionate focus of attention on domestic and alliance concerns does help to explain the paradoxically universal preference for war in 1914;³ and (3) the strategic problem posed by shifts in interstate power is not simply whether to launch a massive preventive war, but also whether to risk escalation to large-scale war as a result of geopolitical competition over the control of resources or territory that might be sufficient to prevent—or cause—an expected power shift.⁴

Levy does not accept my statement that 1914 was “everyone’s favored year for war,” arguing correctly that key actors in many of the great powers saw reasons to delay war or not to have war at all. Levy and I disagree about terminology rather than facts. We agree, for example, that France would gain the benefit of the recent increase in its term of military service to three years only after the new cohorts were fully trained. We both highlight that German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, Chief of the German General Staff Helmuth von Moltke, and other European soldiers and statesmen feared that a major war could be devastating to their social order. Conversely, we also both note that the crucial continental states had important reasons to prefer war in 1914 to a later war in less favorable circumstances: the Germans because of the impending rise in Russian military power, and the Russians and the French because each was committed to the fight in 1914 and might not be in a future scenario.

My discussion of the “puzzle of simultaneous optimism” in the theory section of my article (p. 73) may have also been a terminological distraction that motivated Levy to respond. Levy is correct to point out that any preference for war now over war later in 1914 was mainly the result of greater pessimism about war in the future, not excessive optimism about war in the short run. Similarly, when I wrote that Russia and France were “eager” to have the war in 1914 (p. 79), I meant not that they saw an opportunity for easy victory but rather that they were motivated by fear of mutual abandonment in the future.

In short, 1914 was a “favored” year for war in the sense that each state felt, not unreasonably, that others had taken forcing actions that heightened its risk of waiting: Russia’s decision to expand its army by 40 percent over three years put time pressure on Germany; Germany’s blank check gave Austria an opportunity to coerce Serbia that might not have come again; the prospect of the consolidation of Austro-German power in the Balkans and Turkey might have endangered Russia’s economic and military security; and for France the Balkan contingency was a guarantee of Russian participation.

³. See, for example, Levy, “The Sources of Preventive Logic in German Decision-Making in 1914,” pp. 149–150, 159.
⁴. Ibid., p. 165.
that might not recur. To act forcefully was risky, but under the circumstances, not to act had become riskier still. The alternative to action was no longer the status quo but a possibly fatal setback in the power competition.

Once past these semantic issues, I see considerable commonality in the structure of our two arguments, as reflected in Levy’s letter as well as his 1990/91 International Security article and his 2014 book chapter, on which his letter draws. Like me, Levy invokes the bargaining theory of war in noting that “[s]hifting power makes it difficult for adversaries to agree on a negotiated settlement that each side currently prefers to war.”5 Like me, Levy locates the sources of German preventive war thinking in the Schlieffen Plan’s strategy for an offensive, two-front war; the fact that Germany was too weak to carry this out with a high likelihood of success, and the time pressure put on the plan by the expected increase in Russia’s army, a concern shared not only by the German military but also by Bethmann-Holweg.6

Levy’s account of how these strategic dilemmas of 1914 were created and how they played out in July 1914 is appropriately multifaceted. He invokes many of the same “underlying” structural factors that I do: the international structure of power and alliances, the cult of the offensive, and domestic political constraints on leaders. Although he also invokes misperceptions of the likely actions of other states among the immediate causes of war, he states that “my [Levy’s] 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; these miscalculations were, in part, the product of those incentives and constraints.”7 This explanation seems similar to my discussion of bounded rationality in the updating of prior strategic beliefs.

Levy and I both stress perceived structural dilemmas and how those dilemmas played out in crisis interactions. For Levy this hinges on each power’s preference ordering for the scale of war: local, continental, worldwide (involving British participation in naval war), or none. He shows how the perceived strategic dilemmas created by the Schlieffen Plan and power trends shaped states’ preferences over different kinds of war and the choices they made as the crisis unfolded.8 His central substantive charge is that I do not emphasize states’ preference orderings sufficiently in my analysis of the timing paradox.

For Levy, this matters because, notwithstanding the Schlieffen plan and the commitment problem caused by power shifts, he thinks that there existed a small bargaining range of solutions preferable to war for all states in 1914. In particular, once Germany realized that Britain would fight alongside France, every state should have regarded a compromise such as the kaiser’s “halt in Belgrade” as more attractive than world war. That Europe’s statesmen did not seize on such a solution at the eleventh hour of the crisis reflects, in Levy’s view, not only each state’s assessment of its incentives for war now versus later, but the flawed and complex dynamics of crisis decisionmaking.

As Levy acknowledges, there is no historical consensus on the various states’ prefer-

5. Ibid., p. 142.
6. Ibid., pp. 149–150, 155.
ence orderings over different scales of war and their ranking relative to possible negotiated settlements. In part, this is because of the difficulty of distilling what Christopher Clark calls the “chaos of competing voices” into a single national preference.9 Political leaders and military leaders in a given state sometimes disagreed about their preference orderings. As Levy notes, Moltke and other military figures often spoke in favor of preventive war whether or not Britain would participate, whereas Bethmann momentarily got “cold feet” with the news that Britain would fight. Complicating matters further, historians disagree on whose opinion mattered most—in Germany and in Russia—that of the politicians, the sovereigns, or the generals, who had substantial independent clout in decisionmaking and had significantly constrained their countries’ options by developing military plans that restricted civilian choices. Moreover, individual leaders were internally conflicted in their preference orderings or spoke differently depending on the occasion. For example, Levy quotes Russian War Minister Vladimir Sukhomlinov’s statement that the deficiencies of Russian military power would last until 1917, but at a January 1914 meeting of the Russian Council of Ministers, Sukhomlinov affirmed “categorically” that “Russia was perfectly prepared for a duel with Germany, not to speak of one with Austria.”10

At the theoretical level, Levy’s preference-ordering framework helps to tell an analytic narrative of the crisis, but it is difficult to reduce this scheme to a simple set of game-theory-driven covering laws about strategic or bargaining interactions. Although Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing attempted something of this kind in Conflict among Nations, which included the 1914 case, Levy himself does not try to use the tool of preference ordering in this abstract way.11 Daunted by the difficulties of implementing a preference-ordering approach to adapting the bargaining theory of war to the 1914 case, I tried a somewhat different approach that nonetheless highlights Levy’s key issue of the risk of escalation to continental and world war.

Developing a side point in James Fearon’s article on the bargaining theory of war, I argued in “Better Now Than Later” that a central objective of crisis interactions is to gain power resources, including those that might forestall a future adverse shift in relative power.12 In the July 1914 crisis, for example, these included efforts to control the Turkish Straits and to influence the balance of local military power in the Balkans. In that sense, successful coercive diplomacy can be a substitute for preventive war. Both Levy and I discuss this kind of contest. We both make the point that the great powers in 1914 felt that they had to “accept” the risk of continental and world war, even if major war were not their most preferred outcome, because refusing to fight over important stakes would undermine their power position and their reputation for resolve.13 We

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also both make the point that the perceived security dilemma created by the Schlieffen Plan and the cult of the offensive exacerbated the effect of the possible power shifts, leaving little leeway for compromise.

Although Levy and I may not agree on every question of theory or historical interpretation, our approaches are similar and largely compatible. In particular, our respective writings suggest that the problem of power shifts and preventive war should not be viewed solely as a one-time gamble on a decisive reckoning but also as a background dilemma that creates incentives for lesser contests to shape and reshape the power balance between states.

—Jack Snyder
New York, New York