1 Introduction

Historians, political scientists, and the causes of the First World War

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Overview

It has been 100 years since the Great War, as it was called at the time, scorched the earth and psyches of the West, transforming our lives and world forever. As George Kennan remarked, the First World War was "the great seminal catastrophe" of the twentieth century.\(^1\) The war destroyed empires and it led to political and social upheavals across Europe, the emergence of new national states, and a redrawing of the map of the Continent. It set the stage for the rise of Hitler and the Second World War and, indirectly, for the Cold War. It also triggered a significant shift in attitudes toward war, from one in which war was seen as acceptable and natural to one in which war was seen as abhorrent, if not irrational, and to be avoided. In military terms, the First World War also marked a shift away from the limited wars of the mid-nineteenth century to total war with extensive social mobilization. The experiences of the war also produced a substantial body of work in literature and film that continues to shape images of war generations later. The impact of the war was all the greater because it became a political and emotional issue after the inclusion of the war guilt clause in the Versailles Treaty.

Historians have now debated the origins of the First World War for a century. These debates have been motivated in part by the complexity of the processes leading to the war, and by the fact that the war provides some evidence to support a large number of different interpretations. As Paul Kennedy remarked, "the First World War offers so much data that conclusions can be drawn from it to suit any a priori hypothesis which contemporary strategists wish to advance."\(^2\) Those clinging to a version of the

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“slide to war” hypothesis have been further motivated by the gap between what they regard as the relatively limited aims of most of the participants, and the enormity of the destruction of the war and of its political and social consequences. Many others have been motivated by the politicized nature of interpretations of the war, affecting conceptions of national identity and having implications for government policies years later.  

The First World War has also captured the imagination of international relations (IR) scholars. The war has had a disproportionate impact on the development of numerous theories of international conflict, from theories of balance of power, power transitions, alliances, economic interdependence, and offense–defense, to theories of scapegoating, rigid organizational routines, and misperceptions. It is also a commonly used case to illustrate and test a wide range of theories of international conflict. The First World War remains the case to which nearly every IR conflict theorist is drawn.

This should not be surprising. Historiographical debates about the origins of the First World War parallel many theoretical debates that are central to the international relations field: structure and agency; the relative importance of international and domestic sources of causation; the causal role of individual personalities and belief systems; the rationality and coherence of the decision-making process; the dynamics of the security dilemma; the role of international norms and institutions; and the impact of strategic and societal culture, to name a few. The war is also intriguing because it started with a crisis that most observers at the time thought would be managed successfully. Within a few days it spiraled out of control and diffused rapidly from a local war to a continental war, and then to a world war that eventually engulfed all the major states in every region of the globe. Seemingly rational decisions led to irrational outcomes. The processes leading to war were characterized by extraordinary causal complexity involving an intricate interplay of variables from all levels of analysis: structural pressures, dyadic rivalries, social upheaval, insecure regimes, bureaucratic intrigue, long-standing strategic cultures, idiosyncratic leaders, and decision-making under enormous uncertainty.

In addition, the First World War has left an extensive documentary record. After the new Bolshevik government attempted to discredit the tsarist regime by publishing its secret treaties, other governments, determined to demonstrate that they were not to blame for the war and had little to hide, published volumes of documents from their own archives. This has generated a vast literature reflecting different perspectives on a variety of events for all the countries involved, making this by far the most studied interstate war in history. The selective nature of the publication of these documents further politicized early debates about the origins of the war.

After nearly a hundred years, extensive research and debate about the outbreak of the Great War have resolved many questions. New questions have emerged, however, as historians have uncovered new documents and as political scientists have invoked new theories in an attempt to explain the war. Research in each discipline has also broadened its scope in recent years, from a primary focus on the outbreak of the war to heightened interest in the conduct of the war and the processes leading to its termination. The centennial of the war is generating a wave of new research, with new books, articles, and anthologies. What is distinctive about this volume is that it is the only one we know of that attempts to bring historians and international relations theorists together on a topic that has long been a central question in each discipline.

This volume focuses on the causes and immediate expansion of the First World War. It touches upon a number of the analytic themes mentioned above, including structure and agency, international and domestic sources of causation, and the impact of shifting power and preventive logic. It also addresses the questions of whether the primary causes of the war were located in Berlin, or in Vienna and the Balkans, or elsewhere, and the critical, but long-neglected, question of why the war broke out in 1914 but not before. In the process, our contributors highlight the complex nature of causation in the outbreak and spread of war. The volume links historiographical debates about the causes of the First World War to debates in the theoretical literature on international conflict.

We see our niche and contribution to the literature as providing analytic perspectives on a set of critical questions on the war from an interdisciplinary perspective of political scientists and diplomatic historians. Our overarching focus, as reflected in the subtitle of the volume, is on the relationship among, and interplay between, structure, politics, and decision-making. The structure of the system – global, European, and local – embodies long-term causes of the war and creates the incentives and constraints shaping the choices open to decision-makers. That structure evolves over time, and is itself influenced by the strategic interactions of states. The domestic politics of each state help to shape the preferences of the state, the resources available to it, the range of feasible options within international constraints, the internal distributional consequences of various options for both society and bureaucratic organizations, and

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4 This raises a potentially serious problem, of course, if a historical case that is influential in the formulation of a theory is then used to test the same theory.
policy-makers' choices among these options. All of this is filtered through the mindsets, perceptions, judgments, and decision-making of key individuals and their closest advisors, which shape the final decisions that determine state policy. Equally important is how these different variables from various levels of analysis interact. How one makes sense of the highly complex interactions of these various factors is a function not only of the sequences of events, but also of the analytic perspectives one brings to the table.

Diplomatic historians and IR scholars have each struggled with the problem of understanding the complexity of the processes leading to the First World War, but each in their own way. The different perspectives, approaches, and methodologies adopted by each discipline only enhance the extent to which they can learn from each other. By facilitating a dialogue among diplomatic historians and political scientists, and building on their different, but complementary, approaches to the study of international relations, we expect to gain new insights about the First World War—both in terms of providing novel answers to some perennial questions, as well as raising fresh questions and perspectives that shed new light on the underlying causes of the war. We also expect that this dialogue will help to sharpen the analytic perspectives that scholars bring to the study of the First World War and of war in general.

Our volume is not intended to summarize well-known events or to provide new narratives of the war as a whole. Our audience is scholars and advanced students, and our aim is to present new scholarly contributions that enhance understanding of the outbreak of the war. The centennial has already produced new narratives that provide new interpretations of the war and new perspectives on old historiographical debates, and much more is on the way. We see no need to duplicate that material. Our volume follows more in the footsteps of Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson, who collected a group of scholars in a conference to focus on a set of specific questions, in their case a group of historians to debate the question of whether the war was improbable. Here, we have brought together both historians and political scientists to focus on a limited number of theoretically based questions relating to the causes of the war. At the broadest level, these questions concern causal factors relating to structure, politics, and decision-making. It is possible, however, to identify a more specific set of questions that serve as central themes running throughout the volume.

Introduction

One central question, addressed explicitly by some of our contributors and more indirectly by others, is the accuracy of the view that Germany was the key actor in bringing about the war. This view goes back to the Treaty of Versailles, of course, but it has really dominated historiographical debates in the half century since Fritz Fischer published *Griff nach der Weltmacht*. This "German paradigm," as Samuel Williamson calls it, has been increasingly challenged. Both sides of this debate are represented in this volume.

The question of the validity and utility of the German paradigm naturally leads to the question of preventive war, which is a central theme of the German paradigm. This is the argument that Germany's primary motivation for war was its fear of the rising power of Russia and the consequences of shifting power for Germany's position in Europe.

The question of preventive war in response to shifting power is directly related to the broader theme of the impact of structural change in the international system, which is central to all realist theories of international relations. Because many conceptualizations of preventive war define the concept in terms of perceptions or anticipations of decline in relative power, the question of perceptions of power and of changes in power is another key theme in the volume. This is the focus of T. G. Otte's chapter on perceptions of Russia by the other Great Powers, but it is addressed by most other contributors as well. Preventive war is just one of many alternative responses to perceptions of relative decline, of course, and which of those policy alternatives is selected is significantly shaped by the political decision-making process within the state in question.

The questions of preventive war, perceptions of power, and the deeply political nature of a state's strategic response to anticipated decline raises another important question that has received insufficient attention by neither historians nor political scientists. Germany had faced the rising power of France after the latter's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of

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6 Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (eds.), *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914* (New York: Berghahn, 2007).


8 Williamson, Chapter 2, this volume.


1870–1871, and the rising power of Russia since Japan’s humiliating defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. The German military had been pressing their political leaders for a preventive war for years in response to these challenges. If preventive logic was as important in bringing about war in 1914 as some scholars argue, why did it not bring about war before then, when crises provided the opportunity for war and when German leaders could have been even more confident of a military victory? Both William Mulligan and Dale Copeland directly address this question in their chapters, but several other scholars engage it as well.

This question of “why 1914 but not before” can be generalized to the many other causal factors invoked to account for the outbreak and immediate spread of the First World War. Many of those hypothesized causal factors have been in place for several years. The polarization of the alliance system, intense strategic rivalries, and aristocratic societal cultures are a few such factors that come to mind. If it is true that many (though perhaps not all) of the same military, diplomatic, political, and cultural conditions hypothesized to cause the First World War were also present in the years leading up to the war, one is forced to ask why those same factors did not lead to war before, especially during the several crises that broke out in 1905, 1908–1909, 1911, and 1912–1913. What was different? Differences in the outcome variable in two or more cases can be explained only by identifying differences in causal variables or their interaction effects. A good explanation for the First World War should explain not only why war occurred in 1914, but why it did not occur before. Such explanations need to be tested historically through comparative case studies.

If one challenges the German paradigm, then one must address what role the other states played. What were the causal factors driving the decision-making of other states: their goals, motivations, external and internal constraints, leadership, key domestic actors and their respective preferences, and the nature of their political decision-making processes. Indeed, one reaction to the Fischer controversy was the belief that the historiography on the war had become too preoccupied with Germany and that a more balanced comparative perspective was needed. The same kind of intensive analysis that Fischer applied to Germany ought to be applied to the other European Great Powers. More attention also needs to be given not only to state foreign policies, but also to strategic interactions between them, and to signaling and bargaining between states. For these purposes, some international relations models might be useful.

It is these and related questions that guide the contributions to this volume: the role and interplay of structure and agency; the continued viability of the German paradigm as a primary explanatory model; the role of other states; the role of fears of decline, shifts in power, and preventive logic in Germany and elsewhere; and the question of why 1914 and not before or later. Although the studies will address other questions, the substantive contribution of the volume centers on these interrelated questions. Each of these tells us something about the relationship between structure, politics, and decision-making in the processes leading to war in 1914, and in international relations more generally.

An interdisciplinary approach

The most distinctive thing about this collection of essays on the outbreak of the First World War is its interdisciplinary orientation. The volume brings together diplomatic historians and international relations scholars with a common interest in the origins of the war. Historically oriented political scientists have been reading the work of diplomatic historians on the war for years, and historians are increasingly reading political science research on the war, but more direct engagements are relatively rare. One early example of such interdisciplinary engagement on the First World War goes back to the 1970s, with the “1914 project” of Robert


In their discussions of the outbreak of the First World War and of other wars, historians usually use the language of the “origins” of the war. This is reflected in the titles of countless books. Political scientists usually speak in terms of the “causes” of war. Anthropologists use the term origins to refer to the advent of war at the dawn of human civilization.
North and his colleagues. That project analyzed both the impact of changing international structures in the processes leading to the war, and the role of decision-making factors such as misperceptions. North's 1914 project and the related work of Ole Holsti attracted the attention of diplomatic historians, who were often quite critical, especially of the attempt at quantification.

An interdisciplinary approach is valuable because each party brings different theoretical and methodological perspectives to the table. In the case of diplomatic history and international relations theory, the conventional wisdom is that diplomatic historians are primarily interested in explaining fairly well-defined events or historical episodes, while international relations scholars are primarily interested in refining concepts and developing and testing theoretical generalizations. This does not imply that historians are atheoretical, only that they use theory in different ways. Among other things, historians are often less explicit than are political scientists about the theoretical preconceptions underlying their historical analysis and the meanings of some of the concepts they use. Political scientists are trained to lay out their analytic assumptions, and develop and justify their theoretical propositions before they even think about applying their theory to a particular historical case.

These differences in the research objectives of historians and political scientists lead to other important differences. Given their generalizing objectives, political scientists often aim for parsimonious explanations that can be applied to other cases. The goal of providing complete explanations of individual historical cases leads historians to more complex explanations involving a larger number of variables. Political scientists argue that the more complex an explanation for a war, the less likely it is that all its nuances will be applicable to other cases, making it more difficult to generalize. Their emphasis on parsimony, however, means that they are less likely to provide complete explanations of individual cases.


19 This point is nicely developed by Elman and Elman (eds.), “Introduction,” Bridges and Boundaries, pp. 28–35.

20 Levy, “Explaining Events and Developing Theories.”
interdisciplinary efforts is that they often study the same event. This is particularly the case with the First World War, although the Cold War and the Second World War are two other subjects of common interest. In addition, the two disciplines approach the subject with the same goals of explanation and an analysis of causes, dynamics, and consequences. This provides an opportunity to learn from each other in terms of overcoming the same pitfalls and sharing lessons regarding fruitful avenues of inquiry as well as new information and concepts.

Both disciplines also share a positivist stance, broadly defined, in that both maintain that an objective knowledge of the subject is possible – philosophically and practically – and that certain protocols permit knowledge claims to be established through a rigorous analysis of evidence.21 This shared “positivism” has come more to the fore as postmodernist perspectives have swept both disciplines, although the impact of postmodernism, coupled with the “democratization of history,” has been much greater in diplomatic history than international relations.22 As Annika Mombauer argues, however, in an important respect postmodernism has not significantly influenced debates on the First World War. The Fischer school and its critics have each believed that a positivist focus on documents would eventually reveal the “truth” about the origins of the war.23 These commonalities make interdisciplinary work easier and less arduous than in situations where the purpose, case studies, and underlying philosophy of inquiry may differ.

As noted, recent years have witnessed a tendency toward greater interaction among historians and political scientists. Almost fifteen years ago Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman brought together diplomatic historians and international relations scholars in a conference to discuss the bridges that could be built across the two disciplines, and the boundaries that separated the two. They discussed not only philosophical and disciplinary questions, but also shared work on specific cases. This was a landmark event, and later gave rise to organized sections in the American Political Science Association and then the International Studies Association to institutionalize such efforts. Likewise journals such as the


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International History Review, International Security, and Security Studies have provided outlets read by scholars from each discipline. The advent of H-Diplo and more recently H-Diplo/ISSF (International Security Studies Forum) has done much to make for more routine interactions.24 Conferences with sustained face-to-face conversation play an important role in the promotion of interdisciplinary engagement. More and more diplomatic historians have been attending the annual meetings of the International Studies Association, and we have begun to see more and more panels and roundtables involving a mixture of historians and political scientists. We have each participated on a number of such panels – on intelligence, grand strategy, the Second World War, and, more recently, on the First World War, as detailed in the Preface to this volume. It is our hope that the latest in a continuing dialogue between diplomatic historians and international relations scholars will provide new insights, new answers to old questions, and new questions that help to advance the debate. To have any hope of doing that we felt it necessary to focus on a few questions in depth rather than deal with all the questions that could be addressed regarding the First World War, although we will mention some of these in the section on future research.

Sources of bias

From the very beginning, debates on the origins of the First World War have been framed from the perspective of blame and guilt. This was a prime motivation in the initial release of documents by governments. It was also the motivation behind the writing of some memoirs and release of diaries.25 Such motivations are also evident in the release or compilation of documents by domestic critics or opponents of the war regimes, such as in the collection by Kautsky in Germany and the Soviet release of documents.26 Contenders have been concerned primarily with questions of justice, which, in our view, have distorted the more important task of understanding and causal explanation. Conflicting interpretations of the war often became embroiled in domestic political contention, in terms of

24 See www.h-net.org/~diplo and www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF.
25 Some diaries, such as those of Kurt Riezler, appeared to have been partially rewritten after the fact; see Sean McMeekin, The Russian Origins of the First World War (Cambridge, CA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 256, n. 5. See also Clarke, Sleepwalkers, p. 643, n. 52; Mombauer, Origins of the First World War, pp. 158–159. Our thanks to Mira Rapp-Hooper for detailing how different sections of the diaries have been classified by historians in terms of their authenticity.
their implications for national identity, foreign policy, and party support. This was particularly the case in Germany. Annika Mombauer has outlined this process and how it shaped historiography both inside and outside Germany.\textsuperscript{27} The Fischer thesis, the most recent controversy, was certainly conducted in this vein.\textsuperscript{28} As a result, many scholars have entered debates about the origins of the war with preconceived answers or are looking for answers that support a normative case. In this sense a number of previous efforts, including the early compilation of the major collections of documents, were conducted by scholars who were behaving more like lawyers than neutral scholars.

A general problem with the emphasis on responsibility is that it rests on a number of assumptions that are not always made explicit, but that shape the analysis in a number of ways. For one thing, the focus on responsibility tends to bias the analysis toward agent-centered explanations and away from structural explanations, by giving more attention to the choices made by political leaders than to the international structural forces that shape those choices. Both sets of variables are important, but scholars need to be more explicit about the criteria they use to evaluate the causal weights of these very different sets of factors. Closely related, the focus on responsibility biases the analysis toward the actions of single states, while underestimating the role of strategic interactions between states in the form of the dynamics of international rivalries, crisis bargaining, and other multilateral processes. In addition, the focus on blame tends to assume that behavior is intentional, minimizing the effects of inadvertent consequences. As Christopher Clark notes, “the quest for blame predisposes the investigator to construe the actions of decision-makers as planned and driven by a coherent intention. You have to show that someone willed war as well as caused it.”\textsuperscript{29}

Clark highlights additional problems with what he calls the “blame-centered account.” It presumes, he argues, that “in conflictual interactions one protagonist must ultimately be right and the other wrong,” or at least that we can apportion blame proportionately. In the case of the First World War, based on Clark’s own narrative, he argues that “the question is meaningless.” Clark concludes that the outbreak of the war was “a tragedy, not a crime,” for which it is nearly impossible to apportion responsibility.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{27} Mombauer, Origins of the First World War.
\textsuperscript{28} Fischer, Germany’s aims; Fischer, War of Illusions; Mombauer, “The Fischer Controversy after 50 Years.”
\textsuperscript{29} Clark, Sleepwalkers, pp. 560–561.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

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The search for “blame” is not the only kind of bias that hinders understanding. Some critics of the generalizing enterprise argue that some political scientists, in “testing” their theories in specific historical cases, are more interested in interpreting the facts to fit their theories than in letting the facts fall where they may.\textsuperscript{31} This is an equally damaging but slightly different kind of bias. Instead of analysts seeing what they want to see based on their political interests or emotional needs, they see what they expect to see based on their prior theoretical expectations. The former is a kind of “motivated reasoning.” The latter is often described as an unmotivated cognitive bias.\textsuperscript{32} Analysts often invoke these biases to explain the judgments and actions of political leaders, but analysts themselves are vulnerable to the same kind of biases. The more they can be made aware of these biases, the greater the chances of minimizing them.

Having expressed our views about two sources of bias, we will now summarize some of the substantive questions guiding the organization of this volume, explaining in the process how the various chapters in the volume fit into these broader themes.

Substantive questions

This volume is organized around a number of analytic issues and related substantive questions, each related to our overarching themes of structure, politics, and decision-making. The first major substantive question we focus on is the German paradigm and challenges to it. Samuel Williamson raises this question in Chapter 2. As we noted in the last section, much of the intellectual history of scholarship and commentary on the causes of the First World War has been focused on Germany, and the debate over its responsibility and war guilt. Williamson reviews the historical work on the war and shows how the German paradigm has gradually been eroded as the question of war guilt has taken more of a back seat. His analysis makes clear how more normative questions dominated the empirical questions in early studies of the origins of the war. Nonetheless, the empirical questions were still analyzed and even the questions of responsibility provide evidence for addressing the empirical question of who and what brought about the war. Generally, much of the

\textsuperscript{31} Political scientists reply that this danger is countered to a certain extent by the disciplinary norm for analysts doing case study research to test their preferred theory against the leading alternative theoretical explanations, and to use the same standards of rigor and evidence in analyzing alternative theories as they do their own.
historical literature sees Germany as central, with other states playing a lesser or ancillary role.

One of the exceptions to this is the work of Sidney Fay, which is an early revisionist interpretation of the war published in the late 1920s. Adopting what is in many respects a more objective and neutral stance, Fay argued that no single power bore primary responsibility for the war. He traced the causes of the war to the nature of the state system, the nature of secret alliances, and economic imperialism, along with militarism, nationalism, and the role of newspapers in nearly all the Great Powers.  

Fay’s work became the “slide into war” thesis, which relates to theories of conflict spirals and inadvertent war. 34 This was captured by the widely cited comment of Lloyd George, a former British prime minister and leader of a wartime coalition government from 1916 to 1922. In his War Memoirs, Lloyd George wrote that “the nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay... The nations backed their machines over the precipice... not one of them wanted war; certainly not on this scale.” 35 The “slide into war” thesis was itself political, however, because Lloyd George had been an early critic of British policy.

Many political scientists have also seen Germany as primary, although they have given less attention to the question of responsibility. Early power transition theorists like Organski and Kugler focused on Germany as a rising challenger to Britain as the dominant power in the system. 36 Long-cycle theory also saw the Germany–Britain dyad as key, with the two in a struggle for global leadership. 37 The focus on Britain as the dominant power was based on power transition theory’s emphasis on gross national product as the key element of power, and on long-cycle theory’s emphasis on naval power and position in leading sector technologies. Germany was a challenger on each dimension. Although many historians emphasize the

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34 On models of conflict spirals, see Jervis, Perception and Misperception, ch. 3.


Debates over agency and structure, the relative importance of each, and the nature of their interrelationship have become standard in the social sciences, and in the study of history as well. They are central to the study of the causes of war in general, and of the First World War in particular. Christopher Clark provides a particularly interesting reflection on the agent–structure debate through his distinction between why the war occurred and how it was brought about. Clark argues that although these questions are logically inseparable, they lead the analyst in different directions: “The question of how invites us to look closely at the sequences of interactions that produced certain outcomes. By contrast, the question of why invites us to go in search of remote and categorical causes: imperialism, nationalism, armaments, alliances, high finance, ideas of national honour, the mechanics of mobilization.” Clark self-consciously focuses on the how question, and notes that the story he tells in The Sleepwalkers is “saturated with agency.”

Debates about structure and agency include questions about the inter-relationship between the two. One useful metaphor is reflected in “powder-keg” models, which combine both structure and agency by incorporating both windows of opportunity and catalysts. Windows of opportunity are created by changing international structures and serve as necessary conditions for catalysts (usually the result of actions by agents) to have their maximum causal effect. For interpretations of the First World War, the structure provides the powder keg and the assassination and the resulting July 1914 crisis provide the spark.

Many scholars, of course, give much greater emphasis to either the powder keg or the spark. Those who emphasize the powder keg see the war as the product of long-term forces that produced an environment or set of conditions that made it highly likely that some crisis at some point would come along that would escalate into war even if the July 1914 crisis could have been successfully managed for a time. This is another way of saying that the repeated crises worked within a structure and helped to refine the existing structure to make it increasingly difficult for the decision-makers to avoid war. For some, like William Thompson, it

43 See Clark, Sleepwalkers, p. xxix. 46 Ibid.
45 An interesting example of a powder-keg model (but one that does not use that term) is Richard N. Lebow, “Contingency, Catalysts, and Nonlinear Change: The Origins of World War I,” in Gary Goertz and Jack S. Levy (eds.), Explaining War and Peace: Case Studies and Necessary Condition Counterfactuals (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 85–112. Lebow emphasizes three underlying causal chains—centered in Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia, respectively—and the spark or catalyst of the assassination, which he regards as a necessary condition for the First World War.
is because rivalries were becoming more intense. For others, like Paul Schroeder, it is because the existing peace system – the Concert of Europe – was no longer following the norms that it had effectively created, and was breaking down so that individual states were now following their particular interests unilaterally rather than taking care of their collective interests.49

The debate between structure and agency is reflected in the two chapters in Part II of this volume. The chapter by Karen Rasler and William Thompson examines four systemic elements: the decline of the global leader, namely, Britain; the rise of a regional leadership challenge by Germany; the bipolarization of the major states into two blocs, and nonlinear rivalry dynamics. The latter provides a new way of conceptualizing the role of rivalries and interstate interactions in bringing about the war. It maintains that it was not just the individual rivalries that helped to bring about the war – for example, the Franco-German, Anglo-German, or Austro-Hungarian–Russian rivalries – but the interaction of these rivalries. Rasler and Thompson see the war as coming out of four streams of rivalries (see Figure 3.3). They also add an element of contingency by their “pinball model,” which is a step toward resolving the debate between structure and decision-making. They state explicitly that: “It is not a case of the system making them do it.” They argue, however, that rivalry dynamics significantly increased the probability of war.

T. G. Otte takes a more agency-oriented approach, one that emphasizes the role of perception, interpretation, judgment, and decision-making in international relations. He begins by challenging the “quasi-teleological” approach that sees the war as an outcome of successive crises. He argues that history is less deterministic and more open than that. In particular, he sees that perceptions of two factors – the changing nature of Russian power and the possibility of détente – made things far from inevitable. For Otte, the attitudes and perceptions toward Russia made the situation just prior to 1914 quite fluid. The rise of Russian power, as a result of its economic recovery from the 1904–5 debacle and the prospect of the completion of its railroad system, made for a fluid situation that produced concerns. The British were concerned about the future of the 1907 Anglo-Russian convention. The French were worried that increased Russian power would make Russia less dependent on them. They also worried about a possible German–Russian alliance.

Détente with Russia and the hopes for a German–Russian alliance pushed Germany in one direction, while Russia’s growth in power gave support to hard-liners who sought a preventive war.50 Austria-Hungary focused on the short term, and there it saw Russia as militarily unprepared for war. This pushed Austria in two directions: either use this as an opportunity for a grand compromise or exploit the weaknesses to gain an advantage through firm action. Otte points out that these contradictory tendencies made war far from inevitable as crises repeated, and that many decisions and outcomes were contingent. This, he argues, places decision-making at the heart of any satisfactory analysis of the causes of the war.

Part III of the volume examines the extent to which the First World War grew out of a German strategy of preventive war. These chapters nicely follow those in Part II on rivalries and on perceptions of power. Many, but not all, proponents of the German paradigm argue that Germany was driven by preventive logic (or the preventive motivation) in bringing about the war. Our contributors offer several different perspectives on this question. If preventive war thinking was so important, William Mulligan asks, why did it not lead to war earlier when circumstances seemed to be ripe.51 Defining preventive war more broadly than either Levy or Vasquez in their perspective chapters, Mulligan examines the nature and influence of preventive war thinking in the decades prior to 1914. Focusing on the question of why Germany and Austria did not adopt a strategy of preventive war in earlier crises, Mulligan examines the 1875 “War in Sight” crisis; pressure from the German and Austrian militaries for war against France and Russia between 1886 and 1888; the First Moroccan Crisis in 1905–1906; and Chief of the Austrian General Staff Conrad’s pressure for a preventive war against Italy in 1911. Mulligan emphasizes the fear of triggering a hostile coalition; the inherent risks of war; concerns about domestic reactions; the civilian control of the military; and ethical constraints on the idea of preventive war limiting preventive wars.

Though Mulligan does not examine the 1914 case in detail, it is clear that each of these constraints had eroded by that time. Mulligan highlights the role of restraints in the system, including the restraints imposed by norms. This emphasis on the importance of ethical constraints is particularly notable because that factor has received relatively little attention.


50 Otte does not see Bethmann-Hollweg among the latter, but as one who thought that some modus vivendi was possible with Russia.

51 Dale Copeland also engages this question in Chapter 7 in this volume.
in the theoretical literature on the conditions under which states are most likely to adopt preventive war strategies. Mulligan's discussion of Bismarck and Franz Joseph shows how these norms affected specific decisions about war in general and preventive war specifically.

In the second study in this section, Jack Levy begins with a clarification of the meaning of the preventive war concept, and in the process distinguishes between prevention and preemption, and between "status quo" and "revisionist" preventive war strategies. He also calls for theoretically differentiating among military, economic, and demographic elements of shifting power on the grounds that they generate different perceptions of threats over different time horizons and for different types of states, and elicit different responses. Levy then examines the military, economic, and financial factors that led to perceptions of relative decline by German political and military leaders in the years leading up to 1914, along with the political constraints that complicated German efforts to keep up with Russia in the arms race. He argues that preventive logic had an important influence on German decision-makers -- on some more than others -- but that there is insufficient evidence to support the argument that Germany had a sustained strategy of preventive war from the end of 1912.

Dale Copeland argues that preventive war thinking was the primary influence on German security policy, and the primary cause of the First World War as a whole. In this sense his chapter provides an exemplary example of the German paradigm. For Copeland, the Russian mobilization is not the real cause of Germany's involvement, but simply a move that Bethmann-Hollweg welcomed and even encouraged because it created the diplomatic and political conditions facilitating the war that he and Moltke had sought all along. Copeland compares his preventive war explanation with three leading competitors: a spiral model, a domestic model, and a structural realist model emphasizing multipolarity and alliances. He argues that the preventive war model outperforms the others not only in explaining the outbreak of war in 1914, but also in explaining other puzzles associated with the First World War.

John Vasquez disagrees with the preventive war explanation. In Chapter 8, he outlines a set of criteria that need to be satisfied in order for any war to be seen as a preventive war. He then applies these to individual decision-makers in Germany and finds the case for preventive war deficient. He argues that among the major decision-makers only Moltke held a consistent preventive motivation as a reason for going to war against Russia. He argues that the First World War was not a preventive war because the two decision-makers in charge of foreign policy, namely, the Kaiser and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, were not pursuing a policy of preventive war in July 1914, and that their position was clearly distinguishable from that of Moltke. In fact, both the Kaiser and Bethmann-Hollweg were trying to avoid a world war once it was clear that Britain would intervene. As with Williamson, Vasquez finds a shift away from the German paradigm as helpful in understanding the war. He argues that the war emerged from the local Austro-Hungarian-Serbian local war through a series of diffusion processes.

These different perspectives of Levy, Copeland, and Vasquez on preventive war in 1914 make it clear that the question of the role and impact of the preventive motivation and its sources is critical to determining how central Germany was in bringing about the war. The final part of the book returns to the question with which the book began -- the viability of the German paradigm -- by looking at the role of Germany's two primary adversaries, Russia and France, and their role in bringing about the war. Ronald Bobroff raises new questions about the role of Russia. He sees Russia as having grievances that led to an aggressive foreign policy. Russia was not just reacting to events, but attempting to shape them. The mobilization plays a key part in bringing about the war for Bobroff as well as for many other scholars, and he tries to explain why Russian leaders took the actions they did. Unlike McMeekin, Bobroff does not see Russia as having certain preordained goals (like greater influence over the Turkish Straits) for which it wanted a war. Rather, the war emerged out of a process that made for crisis escalation. Williamson is also willing to see a greater role for Russia, though he believes that Russia is ancillary to Austria-Hungary.

For Bobroff, the main reason Russia was brought into the war was that Russian leaders were trying to deter Germany and Austria through a demonstration of its resolve and ultimately a mobilization. They resorted to this policy because they felt that Russia had no choice given the way that it had been treated, especially by Germany. Russian leaders had, in Bobroff's words, grown to distrust Germany because many of the events of the previous decade had challenged both Russia's political and economic vital interests. Any further backing down would be at great cost to its prestige among the Great Powers and with its Serbian ally, and could


53 McMeekin, Russian Origins.
even jeopardize Russia's status as a Great Power. Bobroff does not think Russia wanted a war, but got into one because the other side would not back down. The rise of some hawks within Russia prevented its own backing down.

One cannot speak of Russia without speaking of France. To place J. F. V. Keiger's chapter (Chapter 10) in context, it would be useful to remember Williamson's argument in Chapter 2, Part I, of this volume. Williamson sees France as playing an important role in bringing about the war. Poincaré, in particular, had foreign policy goals that could be facilitated by going to war, and in some cases, like Alsace and Lorraine, could be attained only by war. Waiting for the right diplomatic opportunity is a key strategy. Williamson points out some of the recent research that supports the view that both Russia and France were more aggressive than they have been seen in the past. In addition, France played a key role as Russia's banker, helping it to stage a remarkable economic recovery after its military defeat in 1905, and then helping it to finance strategic railroads that were perceived by German leaders as a threat.

Keiger, however, reaffirms the more traditional view that France did not play a key causal role in bringing about the war. He begins by raising general theoretical questions about the extent to which political leaders engage in rational cost-benefit calculations in international crises, and whether they carefully identify, assess, and prioritize various risks to the national interest that might result from different strategies. Invoking Clausewitz, Keiger gives particular attention to the question of how sensitive leaders are to questions of military readiness when they find themselves in escalating crises. Keiger's main argument is that France was not ready for war in 1914, and that that lack of readiness served as a significant constraint on French behavior. He concludes, however, that rational models give insufficient attention to the human dimension, including the vagaries of leaders' personalities, their risk orientations, their responses to highly stressful environments, and distortions in their processing of information. Keiger emphasizes that French President Poincaré was risk averse, and that this basic personality trait, combined with French lack of readiness, was a powerful constraining factor on French behavior.

**Future research**

The analyses in the book answer many questions about the First World War, but in the process they raise new questions that historians and political scientists will need to address, and they suggest new approaches that should be considered. We will mention two questions and approaches that seem particularly promising—one methodological and one substantive—using counterfactuals and examining the diffusion of the war.

Of the two, counterfactuals are the better known, though they are often used loosely. Historians and political scientists have long speculated about key turning points in the processes leading to war, have asked whether political leaders might have made different decisions at those critical junctures, and argued about what the consequences might have been. One particularly important form of counterfactual is the necessary condition counterfactual. If condition or action $x$ is hypothesized as a necessary condition for outcome $y$, the necessary condition counterfactual posits that if decision or action $x$ had not been taken or did not occur, $y$ would not have occurred.

The classic counterfactual question with respect to the First World War, of course, is what would have happened in the absence of the assassination of the archduke. The argument that without the assassination the war would not have occurred, at least not in summer 1914, is a necessary condition counterfactual. Counterfactuals like this are important for assessing causality. The best way of validating a necessary condition counterfactual is to provide a compelling argument that in the absence of the posited necessary condition (the assassination), the observed outcome (the First World War) would not have occurred. Many scholars have made this argument, with Lebow providing one of the most rigorous analyses.

Scholars have identified a number of other conditions, actions, and events generating counterfactual implications. Clark argues that the bipolarization of the European alliance system was a “crucial pre-condition” for the war of 1914. Levy and others argue that Germany's "blank check" to Austria-Hungary on July 6-7 was a necessary condition for an Austrian war against Serbia, which was a necessary condition for a general war. Some scholars argue that the German assumption of British neutrality was a necessary condition for German support for Austria-Hungary, which was a necessary condition for war. Others argue that if Austria-Hungary had accepted the Halt in Belgrade plan, war might have been avoided. Niall Ferguson raises the question of what might have happened.

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54 Otte, in Chapter 4, also sees France as playing a significant role in bringing about the war.

55 Gary Goertz and Jack S. Levy, Explaining War and Peace: Case Studies and Necessary Condition Counterfactuals (London: Routledge, 2007).


57 Clark, Sleepwalkers, p. 123.

58 Levy, Chapter 6, this volume, p. 147.
if Britain had stood aside rather than entering the war.\textsuperscript{59} One can identify numerous other counterfactuals worth investigating. We still do not have clear markers in the process of the onset of war of whether certain decisions, if made differently, could have put the collectivities on a path that could have avoided the catastrophe. It would be useful to have a more systematic list of possible turning points. Different analytic perspectives and different historical narratives, of course, will generate different turning points.

Some counterfactual arguments are more persuasive than others, especially for the purposes of shedding light on causation. In this regard, it is important to note that there is a growing literature on the methodology of counterfactual analysis in historical case studies.\textsuperscript{60} Scholars have attempted to specify criteria by which the rigor and plausibility of a counterfactual analysis ought to be evaluated. The use of counterfactual analysis in the study of the First World War would benefit from closer attention to these criteria. This is not the place for a complete survey of criteria for useful counterfactuals, but it would be useful to mention two to give a flavor to the argument we are making.

One is the "minimal rewrite criterion," which concerns the plausibility of the antecedent in the alternative world (for example, the absence of an assassination). The fewer things that change in moving from the real world to the counterfactual world, the easier it is to argue that the differences in outcomes in the real and counterfactual worlds are due to a single causal factor. That is why highly contingent events like the hypothesized failure of the assassination attempt against the archduke make such useful counterfactuals. It would be necessary to change very little for the assassination not to have happened. In fact, the \textit{a priori} probability of the assassination attempt failing was considerably higher than if it succeeding. If one can make a compelling argument that a European war would not have erupted in a parallel world without an assassination, one can confidently claim that the assassination was a necessary condition for the war.

Compare that to the counterfactual that if Bismarck had been German chancellor in 1914, the probability of war would have been much lower.


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Even if that were true, what inferences could we draw from that about causation? It would be tempting to say that it suggests the causal importance of individual political leaders. So many things would have needed to change for Bismarck (or someone like him) to be chancellor, however, that we would have a tough time arguing that it was the leader, his belief systems, and personality that caused the lower probability of war, as opposed to the range of other changes that would have been necessary to create that counterfactual world. Counterfactuals involving short causal chains are generally seen as more plausible than counterfactuals involving longer causal chains.

A second, and related, criterion concerns the question of the likelihood that political leaders might have made different decisions. The more leaders seriously considered making a different decision, the greater the explanatory utility of the counterfactual. If the structure of the situation truly gave them little choice, or if they had a strong interest (national or domestic) in not making a different decision, it is less useful to pose the alternative as a useful antecedent in a counterfactual scenario. To take an example, a general war might have been avoided if Austria-Hungary had accepted the Halt in Belgrade plan. But that would have been contrary to Austro-Hungarian interests as defined by their leaders. It would have required going back on a declaration of war and halting military operations already begun, which would have been very difficult politically. In addition, the Halt in Belgrade plan was contrary to German interests as defined by Bethmann-Hollweg. Bethmann-Hollweg preferred an Austro-Serbian war over a negotiated peace, and, at least until the evening of July 29–30, believed that such a war could be localized.\textsuperscript{61} More interesting than the counterfactual question of the consequences of accepting the Halt in Belgrade plan are the questions of why Austrian and German leaders defined their interests in a way that made them hostile to the plan. Similarly, the utility of the counterfactual of whether an earlier unambiguous statement by British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey might have deterred Germany from an aggressive stance is undercuts the fact that such a statement would have been politically unacceptable and consequently would not have been made. Churchill claimed that the Cabinet would have broken up.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{61} The kaiser had proposed a Halt in Belgrade on July 28, but Bethmann-Hollweg diluted the message sent to Vienna and helped to marginalize the kaiser's influence at this time. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices," pp. 175–177.

Qualitative methodologists offer other criteria as well for the evaluation of the utility of different kinds of counterfactual arguments. We cannot summarize them all here. Our point is that more attention to these criteria by scholars of the First World War would increase the value of counterfactual argumentation for the purposes of making causal claims about the conditions, events, and processes leading to the war.

A second set of ideas for future research that deserves greater scrutiny than it has received is the question of why the war spread. Most analyses, like those in this volume, focus on the onset of the war. Yet after 1914 many more states entered the war. Why did they? Why did so many have a difficult time remaining neutral? These are questions that are very relevant to the study of the First World War. In his chapter in this volume Vasquez even goes as far as to frame the entry of Germany, Russia, France, and Britain as a question of diffusion. He argues that explaining the diffusion or spread of war requires a different explanatory structure than that required to explain the outbreak of war.

A recent special issue of Foreign Policy Analysis examined the question of the spread of the war using both quantitative analysis and historical analysis involving both political scientists and historians. They lay out both some initial findings and an agenda for further research. The question of why the war spread raises some of the same issues as does the initial outbreak of the war, in particular the relationship between structure and agency. Were political leaders’ decisions on whether or not to enter an ongoing war shaped more by structural pressures or by the nature of their political decision-making systems and processes? This interrelationship raises the additional question of how structures affect decisions in general, and how previous decisions themselves produce a structure, or at least an environment, that constrains decision-makers from adopting certain policies while encouraging them to take others. Vasquez et al. analyze the role of the system and also lay out at the theoretical level how they think system structures and actor decisions feed off each other. Stevenson, in the same special issue, identifies the factors that affected each individual country’s decision to intervene, including how over time the cumulative impact of intervention became a force in its own right.


64 Vasquez et al., “Forum”; Vasquez et al., “ConflictSpace.”

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The main theoretical difference between analyzing the outbreak of the war and its spread, is that the latter seeks to investigate the extent to which a contagion or diffusion process is causally shaping the process. What the nature of such a process would be, how and why it produces a clustering, and how it is related to other diffusion processes like city riots, democratization, or even fashion trends or fads are theoretical questions not relevant to two-party wars. The latter raises the issue of whether the initial outbreak of the First World War after the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war through the end of August should be seen as a multiparty war with an overarching set of causes or as a two-party war that spread quickly by some sort of diffusion process. Vasquez argues the latter, while Levy the former in the Foreign Policy Analysis special issue.65

Nonetheless, everyone agrees that by 1915 the factors that produced the initial outbreak were different from those that made the war spread. Diffusion or contagion is a causal factor when as one state intervenes it affects, positively, the probability that another state will intervene. A question that deserves further study is whether there are certain diffusion mechanisms or processes that operate. Vasquez et al. examine four: contiguity, alliances, rivalry, and shared territorial disputes. Others have also been posited, such as the breakdown of the political order, economic dependence, and bandwagon effects themselves.66 How the various diffusion processes interacted and how they operated in each pair of states that joined the war are two subjects that have rarely been investigated by either historians or social scientists. These questions deserve more attention. On the whole, if there is one question on the First World War that has been understudied, it is diffusion. And this is somewhat ironic, since the impact of the war had so much to do with its spreading across Europe and across the globe.

The last one hundred years of scholarship and writing on the First World War have produced much – more than anyone can read – and given us important theoretical and policy insights. The case is so complex, however, that there is still much to learn. While the work is difficult, it is also fascinating. We have enjoyed studying the First World War and engaging scholars from another discipline. We have learned an enormous amount in the process. We hope our readers will feel the same way.


66 Vasquez, The War Puzzle, ch. 7.