6 The sources of preventive logic in German decision-making in 1914

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Preventive war is a familiar concept in the history and theory of international relations. It refers to the use of military force to forestall an adverse shift in relative power with respect to a rising adversary. Political leaders adopt “better-now-than-later” logic and calculate that it is better to try to defeat the adversary (or degrade its capabilities) while the opportunity is still available than to wait and risk the consequences of continued decline. Those consequences include diminishing bargaining leverage, the likelihood of escalating demands by an increasingly powerful adversary, the risk of war under worse circumstances later, and fear of the peace that one would have to accept to avoid a future war. In preventive logic, specific conflicts of issue at stake play a secondary role. The primary issue is power.

Historians and political scientists have described a number of historical cases as “preventive wars,” with the First World War getting more than its share of attention. The German military had been advocating a strategy of preventive war against France since the 1870s and against Russia since 1905,¹ and Austrian Chief of Staff Conrad von Hötzendorf had been pushing for a preventive attack against Serbia and against other states as well.² I focus here on Germany in 1912–1914. Much of the literature addressing the role of preventive war thinking in German decision-making uses the term rather loosely, however, and fails to specify the full range of factors giving rise to the preventive motivation for war or the nature of the causal logic. My aim in this chapter is to identify the sources of preventive

* I thank Marc Trachtenberg and John Vasquez for their helpful comments on this chapter.

¹ See Mulligan, Chapter 5, this volume.
thinking in German decision-making leading to war in 1914, and to specify the underlying military, diplomatic, and domestic conditions that increased the influence of preventive logic.

I set aside the broader question of the causes of the First World War as a whole, which are extraordinarily complex. As Christopher Clark suggests, the First World War is "the most complex event of modern times." This helps to explain why historians have been arguing about those causes since the war had barely begun. Given that nearly all analysts agree that Germany played a central role in the outbreak of the war (with many arguing that it played the central role), German preventive logic is undoubtedly important in the overall structure of causality for the war. Exactly how important is a question I leave for another time.

Before I engage the processes and events leading to the war, however, I briefly address some conceptual issues that have plagued the application of the preventive war concept to the First World War and to other historical cases.

Conceptual issues

How broad a definition?

I define preventive war narrowly in terms of a military response to the anticipation of an adverse shift in relative power. Some scholars define preventive war more broadly to incorporate responses to a wider array of threats, including actions to forestall "a grave national security threat" such as the loss of prestige or an anticipated breakdown in international order. These are important motivations for war, but to classify them under the single conceptual umbrella of preventive war stretches the concept too broadly and impedes a discriminating assessment of causation. The aims of maintaining prestige or stabilizing a fragile international order are sufficiently different from the aim of defeating the adversary before it grows too strong that we need different concepts to describe them.

Preemption and prevention

Although it is common to use the concepts of preventive and preemptive attack interchangeably, and although both represent better-now-than-later thinking, they embody different causal logics and it is important to distinguish between them. Preemptive logic is driven by expectations of an imminent attack by the adversary and by the aim of securing first-mover advantages in a war perceived to be nearly certain. Preventive logic is driven by expectations of an adverse shift in power and the fear of a future in which one has relatively less military power and consequently less bargaining leverage. Preventive strategies aim to forestall an adverse shift in power by defeating the adversary in war now (or, in the case of limited preventive strikes, degrading adversary capabilities). Preemptors do not want war, but feel that they have no choice. Preventers want war in the short term to avoid the risk of war under less favorable conditions in the long term. Although preventers usually initiate war, they do not always do so. They sometimes prefer to allow the adversary to strike first, to shift the blame for the war to their adversary, and to secure the diplomatic and/or domestic political benefits of doing so.

The underlying causal logics for preemption and prevention are different. The primary cause of wars begun by a preemptive attack is not preemption per se, but whatever it was that created the anticipation of an imminent attack and hence the decision to preempt. Theoretically, preemption is central to theories of conflict spirals, offense-defense, defensive realism, crisis instability, and inadvertent war. The underlying

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3 Clark, Sleepwalkers, p. 561.
9 In the extreme, nearly all wars would be preventive, in the sense that nearly all wars are designed to prevent something worse from happening.
10 Prevention and preemption are often confused and used interchangeably in the historiography of the First World War. Scholars often talk about pressure from the German military for a "preemptive attack" against Russia going back to 1912, at a time when there was little fear of an imminent Russian attack and thus nothing to preempt.
11 If the assumption that war is imminent is erroneous, the sources of that misperception are causally important.
cause of wars associated with preventive strategies is shifting power (or at least the anticipation of such). Shifting power does not usually lead to war, however, and the conditions shaping whether it does or does not must be incorporated into the causal story. Although preventive logic is primarily about power, not about issues, it is hard to find cases of “pure” preventive wars driven only by power considerations, and the interaction effects between declining power and other variables (including disputes over issues) usually need to be incorporated into the explanation. Theoretically, preventive war is central to theories of balance of power and power transitions. It involves the “commitment problem” emphasized in the “bargaining model of war.” Shifting power makes it difficult for adversaries to agree on a negotiated settlement that each side currently prefers to war and is confident will be honored in the future, after power has shifted.

Some wars might be driven by a combination of preventive and preemptive logics. One side may fear both an adverse shift in power and its intermediate- to long-term consequences, and an imminent attack by the adversary and its short-term consequences. I will analyze the argument that this pattern applies to Germany in 1914.

Preventive war: type of war or state strategy?

In Chapter 8, John Vasquez makes an important contribution to the theoretical literature by positing a list of criteria that must be satisfied before a war can be classified as a preventive war. These are useful criteria, and I incorporate them into my analysis, but I prefer to frame the question in a slightly different way. Rather than ask “Was the First World War a

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Preventive War?,” I focus on the relative causal weight of preventive logic (or the preventive motivation) in the processes leading to war. Admittedly, Vasquez’s usage of the preventive war concept is fairly standard, but I think it is necessary to highlight some analytic problems raised by this terminology. Most fundamentally, to ask whether a war is a preventive war implies that a preventive war is a kind of war. This confounds cause and effect in a single concept, in the sense that the cause of a preventive war becomes the preventive motivation for war. This complicates the task of assessing causation, in several ways.

For one thing, war—defined as sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations—involves the intersection of the actions of two or more states (or other political entities). The preventive motivation for war, or preventive logic, describes the motivations of a single state (or a state-level strategy). Consequently, it cannot account for the strategic interaction that leads to war or to peace as a dyadic or systemic-level outcome. The perceptions, motivations, and constraints—internal as well as external—of both sides must be included in a complete explanation for war.

Even if we put the issue of strategic interaction and bargaining aside and focus on explaining the decisions of a single state to resort to military force in response to an anticipated decline in relative power, the multi-causal nature of most decisions for war, including the First World War, raises the question of how important the preventive motivation has to be before we could call the resulting war a preventive war. The preventive war label might be warranted if the preventive motivation is a sufficient condition for a particular war, but I can think of no empirical case that qualifies. More common are cases where the preventive motivation is a necessary condition for a particular war. Describing such a war as a preventive war, however, tends to suppress debate about the multiple causes of the war and how they interrelate. This is particularly troublesome for wars that

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13 On the conditions under which power shifts are most likely to lead to war, see Dale C. Copeland, The Origins of Major War (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Norin M. Ripman and Jack S. Levy, “The Preventive War that Never Happened: Britain, France, and the Rise of Germany in the 1930s,” Security Studies 16(1) (2007): 32–67; Levy, “Preventive War: Concept and Proposition,” An important part of the explanation is why the preventive use of force is preferred to other strategies for responding to decline.


17 Most of the theoretical literature on preventive war focuses on the preventer and says little about the perceptions, calculations, and strategies of their rising adversaries. Do leaders of rising states anticipate that they might be the target of a preventive military strike if they do respond? Do they attempt to appease their adversary, adopting a strategy of “buying time” until the ongoing shift in power puts them in a stronger position? Do they consider preempting the preventer? This is an interesting question to ask of Russia in 1914. If trends in relative power gave Germany incentives to move sooner rather than later, why did those same trends not give Russia incentives to delay?

18 Thus, I disagree with Copeland’s comment (in Origins of Major War, p. 116, and Chapter 7, this volume) that the First World War was “one of the most mono-causally driven major wars in history.”
have multiple necessary conditions. To call the war a preventive war would inappropriate privilege one necessary cause over another.

For these reasons, it is better to refer to the preventive motivation for war or to preventive logic as a causal variable or mechanism, rather than to describe a war as a preventive war. We can also speak of preventive war as a state strategy, recognizing that it is the intersection of state strategies, not a single state’s strategy, that determines war or peace. This line of argument in no way invalidates Vasquez’s criteria in Chapter 8. It just interprets them as criteria for assessing the causal weight of preventive logic in a state’s decision-making or, alternatively, for assessing whether a state has a strategy of preventive war.

To say that a state has a strategy of preventive war raises its own conceptual problems, of course. We observe state actions. Concluding that a state has a particular strategy involves a difficult inferential leap. It may be possible, in cases involving a dominant decision-maker or widespread consensus on policy in a collective decision-making body, to identify a well-defined state strategy. Often, however, there are multiple actors, in different organizational roles, each with different preferences, perceptions, and political power. Even if all major actors support a decision for war, they may do so for different reasons. Preventive logic may be more important for some actors than for others, and more important at some stages in the decision-making process than at other stages. It might be relatively easy to assess the relative causal weight of the preventive motivation for some individual actors (like Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the German General Staff in 1914), but more difficult for others (like German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg). Aggregating these individual motivations over multiple individuals with different degrees of influence in a complex decision-making process compounds these analytic problems.

**Status quo and revisionist preventive war strategies**

It is generally assumed that preventive war strategies aim to maintain the status quo against an adverse shift in relative power. But there is another possibility, one that is neglected in the theoretical literature on preventive war. If a state has expansionist or hegemonic ambitions, and if it anticipates an adverse shift in power that would foreclose future opportunities to achieve its revisionist aims, the state may adopt a strategy of preventive war to block the power shift and gain a position of hegemony, or at least remove the obstacles for doing so later. "Revisionist" preventive war strategies are less common than "status quo" preventive war strategies, but we can find historical examples, or at least historiographical debates, about what type of strategy a particular state is pursuing.

In fact, two conflicting interpretations of German strategy in 1914 reflect these different types of preventive war strategy. Some argue that German decision-makers were content with their position as the strongest European power, that they were driven primarily by the fear of decline, and that their primary aim was to maintain the status quo by blocking the rising power of Russia. Others, most notably Fritz Fischer, suggest that Germany was driven more by hegemonic ambition than by fear. Fischer implicitly acknowledges the distinction between these two types of preventive war strategies when he argues that: "There is no doubt that the war which the German politicians started in July 1914 was not a preventive war fought out of 'fear and despair.' It was an attempt to defeat the enemy powers before they became too strong, and to realize Germany's political ambitions which may be summed up as German hegemony over Europe." Similarly, in her attribution of preventive thinking to von Moltke, Annika Mombauer writes that: "Preventive' war is here to be understood not in the sense of preempting an attack from one of Germany's possible future enemies, but of preventing a situation in which Germany would no longer herself be able to launch an attack successfully."

A similar distinction is reflected in theoretical debates between "offensive realists," who argue that security in an anarchic and uncertain world requires offensive strategies and expansion, and "defensive realists," who argue that defensive strategies are generally sufficient for security. Each argument incorporates preventive war strategies, as illustrated by conflicting interpretations of the First World War offered by Keir Lieber

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20 My thinking about this issue has benefited from correspondence with Joshua Shifrinson.

21 Explanations for revisionist preventive war strategies must include both shifting power and the sources of the state’s revisionist objectives. It is probably less imperative that explanations for status quo preventive war strategies include an explanation for the goal of maintaining the status quo and avoiding decline. In this sense preventive logic plays a greater causal role in status quo preventive strategies than in revisionist preventive strategies.


and Jack Snyder.\textsuperscript{25} This case demonstrates, however, that it is not always easy to separate the two motivations. If leading German decision-makers believed they faced a choice between “world power or decline,” the distinction between status quo and revisionist strategies blurs considerably.\textsuperscript{26}

**Multiple dimensions of power**

Nearly all the theoretical literature on preventive war treats power and power shifts in the aggregate, as unidimensional and undifferentiated concepts.\textsuperscript{27} This might facilitate the task of constructing parsimonious theories, but it impedes a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the impact of shifting power among states. Certain states at certain times feel more threatened by some kinds of adverse power shifts than by others.\textsuperscript{28} It is useful to differentiate among military, economic, and demographic power, and within these categories as well. In the 1930s, France most feared rapid increases in German land-based military power; Britain was consumed by the German air threat; and Hitler was concerned about Germany’s long-term demographic and economic limitations. In 1941, Japan was most troubled by its shortages of resources and its inability to keep up with American economic power.\textsuperscript{29} In 1981, Israel was concerned almost exclusively with Iraq’s potential nuclear power. Often financial strength and the ability to tax and borrow are critical. States sometimes perceive increasing threats on multiple dimensions of power simultaneously.

Of course, fears of adverse changes in non-military elements of power are often driven by the anticipated consequences of those changes for military power and potential. It is still useful, however, to differentiate among the various components of declining power. States have different strategies for dealing with these different threats. The point in time at which each of these different threats will materialize is different, and thus differentially affects the trade-offs leaders make between current risks and future risks. Leaders’ time horizons are generally the shortest for military threats, intermediate for economic threats, and the longest for demographic threats.\textsuperscript{30} Another advantage of separating components of power is that it makes it easier to analyze the effects of particular combinations of power shifts. One of the most dangerous situations is one in which a state holds a current advantage in military power (making war feasible now), but faces relative economic decline, undercutting its future military potential and power, and creating incentives for war now.\textsuperscript{31}

With these theoretical considerations in place, let us turn to the role of preventive logic in German foreign policy on the eve of the First World War.

**Germany and the First World War**

**The interdependence of decisions in Berlin and Vienna**

My focus on Germany’s decision calculus has no necessary implications for the ongoing debate over whether the overall causes of the First World War derive more from decisions in Berlin, Vienna, or elsewhere. I am not necessarily siding with what Williamson calls the “German paradigm.”\textsuperscript{32} The road to war went through both Vienna and Berlin, and their decisions were highly interdependent. Austria-Hungary would not have initiated a war against Serbia without unambiguous German support, given the perceived likelihood of Russian intervention in any Austro-Serbian war. Thus, the German “blank check” was a necessary condition for an Austro-Serbian war. Because an Austro-Serbian war approximated a necessary condition for a continental war pitting Germany against Russia and France,\textsuperscript{33} the German blank check was a necessary condition for the First World War as a whole.\textsuperscript{34}

At the same time, Germany could not have pushed Austria-Hungary into a war the latter did not want.\textsuperscript{35} German leaders recognized this,

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\item[26] Snyder and Lieber, “Correspondence,” pp. 177–178 (Snyder contribution).
\item[27] An exception is Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, who emphasizes the relationship between underlying economic power and military power.
\item[31] Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, ch. 2.
\item[35] Williamson, *Austria-Hungary*, also Chapter 2, this volume.
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which is why Moltke and other proponents of war in Germany insisted that "the casus belli had to result from circumstances that would definitely involve...Austria-Hungary." Consequently, the most favorable conditions for war for Germany involved a crisis in the Balkans. This would engage both Austro-Hungarian and the terms of the alliance between the two Central Powers. This helps to explain why the assassination provided an ideal context for an aggressive German policy. As Bethmann-Hollweg said ten days after the assassination: "If war comes from the east so that we have to fight for Austria-Hungary and not Austria-Hungary for us, we have a chance of winning." Thus, an Austro-Hungarian preference for war was a necessary condition for an Austro-Serbian war, and hence for a general war. As I noted above, German support for Austria-Hungary was also a necessary condition for a local war and for a general war. Other scholars have talked about the responsibility of Serbia, Russia, and France. With two or more necessary conditions for a continental war, causality (or responsibility) cannot be attributed exclusively to one capital over another. Any complete analysis of the outbreak of the Austro-Serbian war and the general war that followed requires a careful assessment of decision-making in both Vienna and Berlin. I now turn to Berlin, and more specifically to the sources of the preventive motivation for war for German decision-makers.

The sources of German preventive logic

The First World War is a good example of the importance of the systemic context for a dyadic shift in relative power. German leaders believed that the Franco-Russian alliance made it almost certain that any Great Power war in Europe would be a two-front war in which Germany would face enemies that were stronger in numbers and resources, which meant that Germany could not win a long war of attrition. This assumption was the basis for the Schlieffen Plan, developed in 1905 by Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, Chief of the German General Staff. The plan assumed that Russian mobilization would be slow, that a small German army in the east would provide a sufficient defense in the early stages of a war, and that the bulk of the German army, with an enveloping movement on the right flank moving through the Low Countries, could defeat France quickly in the west before turning to deal with the Russian "steamroller." One immediate problem with the Schlieffen Plan was that Germany did not have the army strength necessary to implement the plan or the transport system to move troops to the front as quickly as the plan required. The plan might have been a bargaining ploy to argue for the enlargement of the army, but neither Schlieffen nor his successor Helmuth von Moltke (the Younger) made an effort to expand the army—at least not until after the 1911 Agadir crisis and the shift in Germany’s attention from the naval race with Britain to the Continent.

In addition, Schlieffen had not incorporated into his plan any allowance for a substantial increase in Russian military strength. This was critical. Russian military and economic power increased dramatically...
after its nadir in 1905 following Russia’s defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. Whereas the combined peacetime strength of the French and Russian armies exceeded that of the German/Austro-Hungarian combination by 261,000 in 1904, that gap had grown to 1 million by 1914. In terms of full wartime strength in 1914, the German army could mobilize about 2.1 million men, plus another 1.4 million Austria troops. The combined wartime strength of Serbia, Russia, France, Belgium, and Britain was 5.4 million troops. The growth in Russian power increasingly brought into question the assumption that Germany would be able to defeat France quickly in the west and still have time to defeat a more slowly mobilizing Russian army in the east. Indeed, as the Russian army was modernized, the time it would take to fully mobilize continued to shrink, putting more time pressure on the Schlieffen Plan. Subsequent military, diplomatic, economic, and political developments further eroded the effectiveness of the Schlieffen Plan. The Anglo-Russian entente of 1907 led German military planners to fear that any two-front war might become a three-front war with British intervention. By 1912, concerns about Russia’s growing power and its shift in attention from the Far East to the Balkans, and the realization that Germany could not compete with Britain as a world power, had led German leaders to concede the naval race to Britain, redirect their defense spending away from the navy to the army, and generally “retreat to the European continent.”

The Balkan Wars in 1912–1913, triggered in part by the Italo-Turkish War of 1911–1912, also had important implications for the distribution of power in the Balkans, the security threats facing Austria-Hungary, and consequently for the likely effectiveness of the Schlieffen Plan. Serbian territory doubled and its population grew by half, substantially increasing the threat to an ever-more fragile Austro-Hungarian Empire. In addition, Bulgaria was lost as a possible counterweight, Romania proved to be an unreliable ally, and the likelihood of Italian support in any war diminished. As Clark argues, “the system of geopolitical balances” that had helped to contain local conflicts was “swept away,” leaving Austria’s Balkan policy “irreparably ruined.” German leaders worried that Austria-Hungary would focus its primary attention to the increased security threat from the Balkans, diverting additional troops away from the Russian front, and putting more pressure on the Schlieffen Plan to secure a rapid defeat of France so that German armies could deal with the enhanced Russian threat.

The altered security environment after the First Balkan War (along with Russia’s partial mobilization in Poland during the war) led to the German army bill of July 1913, which called for an increase of 119,000 men. Though this was only 40 percent of what Moltke had requested in order to match increases in France, it was still substantial, the largest peacetime increase in German history. The German army bill contributed to an increase in tensions and to an acceleration of the land arms race. It was a major factor leading France to introduce its three-year military service law (by undercutting political opposition to a lengthening of the term of service), which would eventually result in a significant increase in the size of the French army.

More significantly, the German army bill led the Russian Duma to pass the “Great Programme” of rearmament in June 1914. The Great Programme called for a nearly 40 percent increase in the size of the army (by about 470,000 men) and a 29 percent increase in the officer corps by 1917, along with a substantial increase in artillery and other armaments. The Great Programme built on other changes that St. Petersburg had initiated in the last five years. These included an army reorganization in 1910, which German leaders feared would substantially reduce mobilization times, along with a substantial expansion of the Russian railroads in western Russia, initiated in fall 1913. As Holger Herwig argues, “the Great


48 These increases, along with the general recovery of the Russian economy from near-bankruptcy in 1905, were made possible by extensive loans from French banks, which were pressured by the French government. Patrick J. McDonald, The Invisible Hand of Peace: Capitalism, the War Machine, and International Relations Theory (Cambridge University Press, 2009), ch. 7.


51 Clark, Sleepwalkers, pp. 242, 281.

52 Mulligan, Origins of the First World War, p. 83; Mombauer, Helmuth von Moltke, pp. 144–145. The Balkan Wars also contributed to a significant hardening of Russian attitudes, a shift in Russia’s internal balance of power, the increasing diplomatic isolation of Austria-Hungary, and its loss of confidence in the efficacy of diplomacy. Clark, Sleepwalkers, ch. 5.


56 Fuller, Strategy and Power in Russia, pp. 423–433; Stevenson, Armaments and the Coming of War, pp. 159–163.
Programme soon became the 'key obsession' of German decision-makers. Moltke feared (in Mombauer's words, perhaps with some exaggeration) that once Russia completed its army increases and once its railroad network was extended to the German border, "[Russian] troops would be in Berlin as quickly as the Germans hoped to be in Paris." The specific problems created by the Great Programme were compounded by German military and civilian leaders' growing fears that Germany would not be able to keep up with Russia and France in the arms race, leading to the continued erosion of the viability of the Schlieffen Plan and the prospects for a German military victory. These fears were enormously consequential. Niall Ferguson argues that "the decisive factor in 1914 which pushed the German Reich over the brink into war was the conviction of both military and civilian leaders that Germany could not win the arms race against its continental neighbours." Similarly, Patrick McDonald concludes that "Germany launched a preventive war in July 1914 because it could not keep pace with an accelerating arms race that was rapidly shifting the balance of military power on the continent to its detriment."

Several factors contributed to Germany's inability to hold its own in the arms race. The Dual Alliance was at a disadvantage in terms of key demographic and economic indicators. They had only 46 percent of the population and 61 percent of the gross national product (GNP) of the Entente. In addition, since 1890 Russia had been outpacing Germany in terms of rates of growth in population, GNP, and iron and steel production. However, other economic indicators were more favorable to Germany. Germany was growing faster than any of its adversaries in terms of exports and in terms of gross domestic capital formation, and faster than Britain and France (but not Russia) in GNP and steel production. Ferguson concludes from his comparative analysis of the political economies of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and their main rivals that Germany had the economic capability to spend considerably more on defense, and thus in principle to keep up with the arms race. The problem was that there were domestic constraints on Germany's ability to tax and borrow. Ferguson concludes that "the domestically determined financial constraint on Germany's military capability was a – perhaps the – crucial factor in the calculations of the German General Staff in 1914." Ferguson argues that Germany could not win the arms race because it was "Unable to borrow as much as the Russian or French states, unable to raise as much in direct taxation as the British, and unable to reduce the large shares of the states and local government in total public revenue ..." Germany's creditworthiness had been declining, and its short-term indebtedness was growing. Germany's politically more centralized adversaries were less constrained in securing tax increases, while decentralized Austria-Hungary was even more constrained. Underlying Germany's financial constraint were a number of institutional and political constraints.

Institutionally, Germany's federal structure left most control over taxation to individual German states, to the extent that only about a third of total public revenues went to the Reich. The states, not the Reich, could impose income taxes, but they generally opposed the funding of the army. Politically, the Reichstag also posed constraints on both conscription and taxation. The Social Democrats, the leading party by 1912, along with their many allies in the center left, opposed conscription and the taxation necessary to support it because their costs would fall disproportionately on the working classes. This made it very difficult for the government to put together a legislative coalition that would facilitate an increase in defense spending and in the size of the army.

68 Mombauer, Halbmann von Moltke, p. 108.
70 The importance of the demographic dimension was reinforced in the eyes of those influenced by Social Darwinism and the school of geopolitics. See Thomas Lindemann, Die Macht der Perspektiven und Perspektiven von Macht (Berlin: Duncker & Humbolt, 2000), pp. 228–251.
76 For a theoretical analysis of institutional sources of financial constraints on the ability of politically decentralized states to prepare for war, see McDonald, Invisible Hand of Peace.
Requests for army expansion also generated concerns among the military about the consequences of substantial increases in military spending. The War Ministry cut the December 1912 Moltke–Ludendorff request for a 50 percent increase in defense expenditures by over half because they feared the social and political consequences. One War Ministry bureau chief said that “If you continue with these armaments demands, then you will drive the German people to revolution.” The military also had long-standing concerns about the impact of army expansion on the social composition of the army, and its political consequences. The main fear was a dilution of the aristocracy’s dominance over the officer corps and an increasingly “bourgeois” General Staff. War Minister Heeringen stated that the Moltke–Ludendorff request would result in the “democratization” of the army.

These constraints complicated Bethmann-Hollweg’s efforts to pass the army law of 1913 and forced him to take politically risky actions. His decision to fund the increases through property taxes won him the support of the Socialist left, but alienated conservatives, traditional allies of the kaiser and a core base of his own parliamentary support. As McDonald concludes, “the arms race on land had thus pushed Germany to its financial limits and threatened the government’s capacity to sustain it.”

German leaders had been expressing their concerns about the security consequences of financial constraints on rearmament for a number of years. In 1909, the kaiser lamented that Germany did not have the financial capabilities to improve the readiness of the fleet because of the “inevitable constraints of the tightness of funds.” In his argument for war at the December 1912 “War Council,” Moltke argued that “the army would get into an increasingly unfavourable position, for the enemies are arming more strongly than we, as our money is very tied up.” An article in a September 1913 General Staff journal focused on “Russia’s growing financial strength after 1906.”

The final straw for Moltke came in July 1914, when German War Minister Falkenhayn opposed his request for additional troops, largely on financial grounds. Moltke concluded that no army increases would be forthcoming in the immediate future. This meant that Germany’s position could only decline, while Russian and French armies continued to grow, further undercutting the Schlieffen Plan. As Mombauer argues, “The debate over army increases is thus crucial background to understanding Moltke’s decision-making during the July crisis.”

These concerns were reflected in more general pessimism about the future among German leaders. In Moltke’s last meeting with Conrad at Carlsbad on May 12, 1914, he said that “To wait any longer meant a diminishing of our chances; as far as manpower is concerned we cannot enter into a competition with Russia.” He later told Jagow that:

Russia will have completed her armaments in two or three years. The military superiority of our enemies would be so great that he [Moltke] did not know how we might cope with them. In his view there was no alternative to waging a preventive war in order to defeat the enemy as long as we could still more or less pass the test.”

Bethmann-Hollweg shared many of Moltke’s concerns. On July 6–7, he told his personal secretary Kurt Riezler that “The future belongs to Russia . . . as it grows and grows and weights upon us like an ever-deepening nightmare.” Austria was becoming “weaker and more immobile,” increasingly undermined from north and south-east, at any rate incapable of going to war for German interests as our ally.” Bethmann-Hollweg was particularly worried about the completion of the Russian railroad system, concerns that had been reinforced by two recent General Staff studies: “The Completion of the Russian Railroad Network” and “The Growing Power of Russia.” He said that “After the completion of their strategic railroads in Poland our position will be untenable.”

Several years later, when pressed about his earlier motivations, he said (in February 1918), “Lord yes, in a certain sense it was a preventive war,” motivated by “the constant

74 Mombauer, Holmich von Moltke, p. 181.
76 Bethmann-Hollweg’s fears were greatly enhanced by news in May–June 1914 that Britain and Russia were holding secret naval talks. For two years Bethmann-Hollweg had relied on detente with Britain to restrain Russia, minimize Germany’s sense of encirclement, and help to maintain peace and stability in Europe. With intelligence reports of the naval talks, and with additional mistrust generated by Grey’s public denial of the talks, Bethmann-Hollweg lost faith in the restraining effects of detente, gave greater weight to the alliance with Austria, and embarked on a more assertive policy. See Mulligan, Origins of the First World War, pp. 88–90; Clark, Sleepwalkers, p. 421.
77 Cited in Herrmann, Arming of Europe, p. 214. Bethmann-Hollweg had expressed a similar pessimism two years earlier when he said that there was no use planting new trees on his estate because the Russians would be there within a few years. Fischer, War of Illusions, p. 224.
78 Jarausch, Illusion of Limited War,” p. 57; Herrmann, Arming of Europe, p. 214.
threat of attack...its inevitability in the future, and by the military’s claim: today war is still possible without defeat, but not in two years!”

Foreign Secretary Jagow had similar fears. He told Lichnowsky on July 18 that “Russia will be ready to fight in a few years. Then she will crush us by the number of her soldiers; then she will have built her Baltic fleet and her strategic railroads. Our group, in the meantime, will have become weaker right along.” Max Warburg recounts the kaiser’s remarks in a June 21, 1914 meeting between the two friends: “Russia’s armaments, the big Russian railway constructions were in his view preparations for a great war which could start in 1916...oppressed by his worries he even considered whether it might not be better to attack than to wait.”

German fears that the military situation would continue to decline, and that financial and domestic factors would prevent a German army expansion and rearmament that might preserve the existing distribution of power on the Continent, created enormous pressure for a strategy of preventive war while the odds of winning were reasonably good. This preventive logic was exacerbated by additional factors, including preemptive logic driven by the growing belief that war was inevitable and imminent.

**Preemptive pressures**

Given the Schlieffen Plan’s requirement for a quick victory in the west, if war ever came to be perceived as imminent, Germany had strong military incentives to secure first-mover advantages by preempting. Those incentives were enhanced by Moltke’s modifications in Schlieffen’s original plan. Rejecting Schlieffen’s assumption that France would pursue a purely defensive strategy, Moltke modestly reduced the ratio of the enveloping forces on the right wing to the defensive forces in the south. He also modified Schlieffen’s original plan to outflank France’s eastern fortresses by going through Holland as well as through Belgium. Moltke had grown increasingly skeptical of the widespread assumption that a European war would be short. He calculated that by avoiding Holland

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he could secure Dutch neutrality and use that country as a “windpipe” that would allow Germany to “breathe” by securing access to outside markets during the long struggle against economically stronger opponents.

These changes had enormous consequences for military planning and consequently for crisis stability. Avoiding Holland meant that additional forces had to be routed through Belgium without creating extra delays. Moltke’s plans required a coup de main on Liège so that the First and Second armies could pass quickly through a narrow 12-mile corridor. Because the invasion of France could not proceed until the vital forts and railroad lines of Liège had been secured, the Moltke–Schlieffen Plan required that German armies would advance into Belgium as an integral part of mobilization, even prior to a declaration of war. This magnified the belief that small delays could be enormously costly, cutting further into the narrow temporal window of opportunity required by the Moltke–Schlieffen Plan. This added to Germany’s military incentives to preempt once war became likely.

These considerations explain German military leaders’ concerns when their intelligence revealed that on July 29 Belgium had called up reservists (more than doubling the size of the Belgian standing army), reinforced the garrison at Liège, and begun defensive military preparations. As Stevenson argues, the Belgian action “set a time bomb ticking under the German Schlieffen Plan...”

Of even greater concern to the German military, however, were early Russian military actions in the form of the secret “period preparatory to war” that was approved on July 24, begun the next day, and quickly observed by German intelligence. The geographic scope of the actions

Military leadership is not clear. Moltke did not share his doubts about the likely duration of the war and the odds of Germany winning it with Bethmann-Hollweg, the kaiser, or other civilian leaders. Mombauer, *Heinrich von Moltke*, pp. 85, 288.


The political consequences were substantial. Bethmann-Hollweg strove for British neutrality without realizing (because he was unaware of the details of mobilization) that mobilization itself would draw Britain into the war. In addition, because mobilization meant war, it further reduced Germany’s diplomatic options in a crisis. On the political rigidity of the Schlieffen Plan, and links to theories of organizational processes and politics, see Jack S. Levy, “Organizational Routines and the Causes of War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 30(2) (1986): 193–222.


(in districts opposite Germany as well as Austria-Hungary, and in the Baltic as well as by the Black Sea Fleet) significantly added to German insecurities. To Moltke, this looked like the early stages of a Russian mobilization, helping Russian armies to threaten Germany’s thinly guarded eastern frontier before Germany could achieve a decisive victory over France.

Despite its military incentives to move quickly, and contrary to theories of the cult of the offensive, German political and military leaders did not rush to take preemptive action or otherwise escalate the crisis, at least not until July 31. They did not respond in kind to Russian pre-mobilization actions. When Falkenhayn proposed on July 29 to declare Kriegsfahrzeugstand, the “threatening danger of war,” Moltke objected, and the war minister backed off. Later that evening, after receiving news of the Russian partial mobilization, Bethmann-Hollweg rejected a call for German mobilization. After receiving new information about the progress of Russian military preparations, by noon on July 30 Moltke had joined Falkenhayn and other generals in pushing for Kriegsfahrzeugstand, but Bethmann-Hollweg refused.

Up to this point, preemptive logic had little impact on German decision-making. Pressure from the military continued to escalate, however, and by 9 pm that night Bethmann-Hollweg agreed to declare Kriegsfahrzeugstand by noon on July 31 unless Russia reversed course. Bethmann-Hollweg issued a 12-hour ultimatum to Russia to stop all military preparations, but Russia rejected the ultimatum and announced a general mobilization before noon on July 31. The Russian mobilization was a sufficient condition for German mobilization, and German mobilization was a sufficient condition for war because the Schlieffen Plan required the seizure of Liège as part of mobilization.

Berlin’s cautious responses to events in the week before July 31 raise questions about the argument that German preemption played a central causal role in the processes leading to war. One of the problems with the sizable theoretical literature on “offense–defense theory” is that it generally defines first-strike advantages in strictly military terms. For Germany, however, calculations about the costs and benefits of preemption (and military action in general) were significantly shaped by domestic and diplomatic considerations.

**Domestic and diplomatic constraints on German mobilization**

When Moltke invoked preventive logic in arguing for war at the December 1912 “War Council,” he emphasized the importance of gaining the support of public opinion. Moltke, along with other German leaders, was convinced that domestic unity was a key to military victory, and that unity required a war that was publicly perceived to be legitimate. With that goal in mind, he proposed a press campaign. He later told Bethmann-Hollweg that prospects were bright “if we manage to formulate the _casus belli_ in such a way that the nation will take up arms unitedly and enthusiastically.”

This required convincing the public – particularly socialists, liberals, and left-wing Catholics, who were a political majority, and who had opposed armament increases and hard-line foreign policies in the absence of a clear threat – that Germany was fighting a defensive war started by Russia. Moltke recognized that it would be necessary for Germany to delay its military actions and let Russia mobilize first. From the beginning, Moltke insisted that “the attack must come from the Slavs.” Late on July 29, 1914, Moltke, with unanimous support, instructed Conrad: “Do not declare war on Russia but wait for Russia’s attack.” Similarly, Bethmann-Hollweg insisted that Germany wait for a state of war between Russia and Austria, “because otherwise we should not have

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89 Stevenson, “Militaryization,” pp. 152–153; Boboff (Chapter 9) and Williamson (Chapter 2), this volume.
92 Levy, “Preferences, Constraints, and Choices,” pp. 179–182. This leads many to regard the Russian mobilization as the decisive act leading to war, though taking place in a causal chain in which German actions also played a critical role. Paul M. Kennedy (ed.), _The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914_ (Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 15; Albertini, _Origins of the War of 1914_, vol. 3, p. 31. On Russia, see Lieven, _Russia_, ch. 5; McMeekin, _RussianOrigins_, chs. 1–2; Boboff, Chapter 9, this volume.
93 If Russian leaders had delayed the Russian mobilization without accepting the terms of the German ultimatum, and if Bethmann-Hollweg had gone ahead with his promise to declare Kriegsfahrzeugstand by noon on July 31, we would be giving greater causal weight to German preemptive logic at the end of the crisis.
95 There is a substantial literature on the domestic sources within Germany pushing for war. See J. E. Fischer, _War of Illusions_, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, “Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914,” _Central European History_ 6 (1) (1973): 3–43. The focus here is different: on domestic constraints on an early German mobilization for war.
96 See _Mulligan, Chapter 5, this volume._
97 _Mombauer, Helmuth von Moltke_, p. 145.
98 Moltke to Conrad, February 10, 1913, cited in Fischer, _Germany’s Aims_, p. 33.
public opinion with us either at home or in England.\textsuperscript{99} As Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria stated in August 1914, "Everyone knows what this war, which is forced upon us, is all about; it is a true people’s war (Volkskrieg), whereas if war had resulted from the Moroccan matter, this would not have been understood among the people."\textsuperscript{100} The people’s war argument was easier to make after the First Balkan War than before. Although the German left and center had long shared the image of Russia as autocratic, backward, and barbaric, until 1913 they did not view Russia as their primary threat. That changed with the First Balkan War. This shift in definition of the enemy helped the German leadership convince the center left to support a defensive “people’s war” against a Tsarist Russia they had always held in contempt.\textsuperscript{101}

Still, Bethmann-Hollweg was very concerned about the domestic consequences of war. Whereas some believed that war would generate a “rally round the flag effect” and diffuse the political threat from the left, Bethmann-Hollweg believed that war would “strengthen tremendously the power of Social Democracy . . . and would topple many a throne.” War would lead to “a revolution of everything existing.”\textsuperscript{102}

The kaiser, Bethmann-Hollweg, and other civilian leaders saw additional diplomatic reasons for insisting that Germany did not act until Russia had mobilized first. Although there is substantial debate about whether Bethmann-Hollweg and other German civilian decision-makers expected Britain to enter the early stages of a continental war, they certainly hoped that Britain would stay out.\textsuperscript{103} Bethmann-Hollweg believed that British neutrality was contingent on the British perception that Germany was fighting a defensive war in response to Russian aggression, and he repeatedly insisted to the kaiser and to the military that

\textsuperscript{100} Mombauer, Holmuth von Moltsch, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{101} Hewitson, Germany, pp. 130, 188; Stevenson, Cataclysm, pp. 30–31.
\textsuperscript{103} See the exchange in Jack S. Levy, Thomas J. Christensen, and Marc Trachtenberg, “Correspondence: Mobilization and Inadvertence in the July Crisis,” International Security 16(1) (1991): 189–203. See also Levy, “Preferences, Constraints, and Choices,” p. 165, and Copeland, Chapter 7, this volume. The issue was not whether Britain would intervene at all — surely it would if France was about to get crushed by Germany — but whether any intervention would come too late to affect the outcome of the war in the west. This was the meaning of Bethmann-Hollweg’s reassurance to the kaiser on July 23, 1914, that “It is improbable that England will immediately enter the fray.” Cited in Jarausch, “Illusion of Limited War,” p. 62.

\textsuperscript{104} Jarausch, “Illusion of Limited War,” p. 67. \textsuperscript{105} Fischer, Germany’s Arms, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{106} The real question is not whether or not German leaders expected British neutrality, but the probability they attached to that outcome.
\textsuperscript{107} Moltsch had assumed since 1912 that Britain would intervene. Mombauer, Holmuth von Moltsch, pp. 77, 104, 109.
\textsuperscript{109} I develop my argument about German expectations of British neutrality in “Preferences, Constraints, and Choices,” pp. 163–170. See also Fischer, Germany’s Arms, ch. 2; Scott D. Sagan, “1914 Revisited: Allies, Offense, and Instability,” International Security 11(2) (1986): 151–175, at 171–172; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, “Detente and Deterrence: Anglo-German Relations, 1911–1914,” International Security 11(2) (1986): 121–150. This argument is reinforced by Moltsch’s comment in May 1914 that “Our people unfortunately still expect a declaration from Britain that it will not join in.” Fischer, War of Illusions, p. 400. It is also reinforced by the fact that serious political divisions in the British Cabinet meant that as late as July 29–30 the British had not decided what they would do in the event of a continental war. I read Clark, Sleepwalkers, as generally supporting this interpretation of the views of Bethmann-Hollweg and of the Kaiser. For different views, see Trachtenberg, “Meaning of Mobilization”; Copeland, Chapter 7, this volume.
\textsuperscript{110} See my argument in Levy, Christensen, and Trachtenberg, Correspondence. For a more cynical explanation of Bethmann-Hollweg’s behavior, see Copeland, Origins of Major War, and Chapter 7, this volume.
Bethmann-Hollweg reversed course and in a flurry of telegrams tried to hold back Austrian leaders. He urged them to adopt some version of the Halt in Belgrade plan, and hinted that Germany might abandon its Austrian ally rather than be drawn into a world war. Bethmann-Hollweg's efforts to restrain Vienna lasted less than a day, but his radical shift in behavior in response to the new information about Britain suggests the importance he attached to British intentions. Röhl makes a similar argument about the Kaiser. He notes that from July 27–31 the Kaiser's mood "flip-flopped from wild aggression to half-baked attempts at mediation and back again. The key to explaining these mood swings... is to be found... in Wilhelm's perception of Britain's attitude," which Röhl goes on to document.111

Interaction effects between shifting power and other variables

As I emphasized earlier, whether states respond to adverse shifts in relative power usually depends on the presence of other conditions or beliefs. One important variable is expectations about the costs and risks of war now. The greater the expected probability of victory with minimal costs in war now, the greater the incentives for a preventive war strategy.112 An analysis of this factor for Germany in 1914 is complicated by the existence of some variation in views among both German military and political leaders, with the latter being somewhat more optimistic.

The idea that the military shared a "short war illusion" is no longer the conventional wisdom among historians. Moltke in particular recognized that a general war was likely to be a long and enormously destructive war of attrition.113 As Mombauer emphasizes, however, Moltke never made his fears widely known, and as a result German political leaders were quite confident of a decisive victory at minimal cost.114 This suggests that some causal role in German decision-making needs to be given to organizationally driven misperceptions of political leaders. In the end, however, the German decision was shaped more by fears of the future than by confidence in war now. They were convinced that things would only get worse, and that it was essential for Germany to seize the opportunity before it vanished. On July 26, 1914, Moltke said that "We shall never again strike as well as we do now, with France's and Russia's expansion of their armies incomplete."115

Another theoretical condition contributing to the preventive use of military force is expectations that a future war is inevitable or highly likely.116 This increases the fear of the future, and the costs and risks of inaction now, and it reduces both the attractiveness of alternative strategies for dealing with decline and decision-makers' incentives to try to manage the crisis to avoid war. Expectations of inevitable war also undercut internal opponents of preventive war, who can no longer claim that avoiding preventive war will avoid war. A number of factors mentioned earlier contributed to growing German estimates of the likelihood of a future war. These include increasingly belligerent Russian policies; the departure of more moderate voices from the Russian government; Russian sponsorship of the Balkan League; the acceleration of the arms race through the Great Programme; the Anglo-Russian naval talks; and Russian pre-mobilization measures. Expectations of a high probability of war constitute a causal variable in its own right, but it gains added causal weight through its interaction effects with declining power.

Conclusion

One can find enough evidence to provide some support for nearly every interpretation of the outbreak of the First World War. This helps to explain why historians have debated the origins of the war for nearly a century, and why political scientists have used the war to test or illustrate a wide range of theoretical models of war at nearly every level of analysis. My aims have been more modest: to identify the sources of preventive war thinking in Germany, and in the process to raise some analytic issues surrounding the concept of preventive war. I see these theoretical and empirical tasks as necessary first steps before tackling the larger objectives discussion in the French parliament detailing a wide range of French military weaknesses. See John F. V. Keiger, France and the Origins of the First World War (London: Macmillan, 1983); Keiger, Chapter 10, this volume; Clark, Sleepwalkers, p. 440.115

Ferguson, "Public Finance," p. 146.116

of assessing the precise causal role of preventive logic in German decision-making leading up to the war, and of assessing the role of shifting power and preventive logic in the outbreak of the war as a whole.

Recent research has made it increasingly clear that a more satisfactory interpretation of the causes of the war will require more attention to the role of the other Great Powers and of Serbia. One interesting theme that emerges is that it was not only German and Austrian political leaders who feared that their states had reached the peak of their influence and who saw some advantages in a war sooner rather than later. Even French leaders were concerned about the growing power and assertiveness of Russia, feared that they might be abandoned by their stronger ally, and worried that they were “working against the clock.”\(^{117}\) The current Austro-Serbian crisis engaged Russian interests and ensured that France would not face Germany alone. Russian leaders feared that their strategic position was becoming increasingly fragile, and that their opportunities for influence in the Straits would soon diminish.\(^{118}\) The causal strength of this better-now-than-later thinking for many of the Great Powers is an important question for further research.

As for Germany, although there is little doubt that preventive logic played an important role, attaching a precise causal weight to this factor raises difficult historical and conceptual issues. Minimal criteria for such an assessment include identifying the influence of preventive logic on each of the leading decision-makers, and specifying the influence of each actor on the decision-making process.\(^{119}\) Even if we focus our attention on the three leading decision-makers (the kaiser, Bethmann-Hollweg, and Moltke), it is clear that the influence of preventive logic and the impact of other factors that pushed for a less aggressive policy varied in each of these actors. In addition, historians continue to debate the relative influence of each of these actors in the German decision-making process.

In terms of policy preferences, Moltke was the most consistently and most powerfully driven by preventive logic, though even he was insistent that Germany must allow Russia to mobilize first. Bethmann-Hollweg shared Moltke’s concerns, but was generally restrained by other factors. Bethmann-Hollweg’s primary strategy for eliminating, or at least mitigating, the security threat to Germany was not preventive war, but instead the promotion of a localized Austro-Serbian war, which would precipitate a diplomatic realignment in the Balkans and relieve pressure on Austria-Hungary. Bethmann also believed (perhaps aided by some wishful thinking) that a localized war might lead to a break-up of the Entente, ending Germany’s problem of encirclement. From 1911 to 1914, he relied heavily on détente with Britain to restrain Russia. It was only after he learned of the Anglo-Russian naval talks in May 1914 that Bethmann-Hollweg was willing to seriously contemplate war. He also feared the potentially revolutionary domestic consequences of a European war. Bethmann-Hollweg’s temporary pressure on Austria to hold back early on July 29-30 suggests that he preferred a peaceful resolution of the crisis once it became clear that Britain would intervene.\(^{120}\)

Although preventive logic driven by fears of the rising power of Russia exerted a powerful push toward war for the kaiser, there were other factors that restrained him. He had not supported the military’s recommendations for war in the 1911 Moroccan Crisis, and the military feared that the kaiser might back away again in the July Crisis.\(^{121}\) When the kaiser learned of Serbia’s conciliatory response to the Austrian ultimatum, he stated that the grounds for war had evaporated. When he learned from London early on July 28 that Britain would probably enter the war, he immediately called for Great Power mediation based on the Halt in Belgrade proposal. As Röhl notes, the kaiser’s flip-flops are “not easy to interpret.”\(^{122}\) Though changing news from Britain explains some of this variation, psychological factors undoubtedly also played a role.\(^{123}\)

All this leads me to the provisional conclusion that although shifting power and preventive logic were among the most important motivations influencing German leaders in 1914, the evidence falls short of substantiating the argument that Germany had a consistent strategy of preventive war in the year or two leading up to the July Crisis.\(^{124}\) If it had, we would see more evidence of German preparation for war and for a war economy. Fear of decline may have led Germany to a coercive and high-risk foreign policy, but during the July Crisis Bethmann-Hollweg and the kaiser were still hoping to localize the war. As Clark notes, in military terms Germany remained “an island of relative calm throughout the crisis.”\(^{125}\)

\(^{117}\) Clark, Sleepwalkers, p. 313; Schmid, Frankreich.

\(^{118}\) McMeekin, Russian Origins; Clark, Sleepwalkers, pp. 328, 484.

\(^{119}\) Vasquez, Chapter 8, this volume.

\(^{120}\) Bethmann-Hollweg’s failure to follow through with his pressure on Austria was due to Austria’s resistance and to pressure from the German military driven (by that time) by short-term preemptive logic based on the fear of imminent war.

\(^{121}\) Mommsen, Heimlich von Moltke, p. 181.

\(^{122}\) Röhl, “William II in July 1914,” p. 86.

\(^{123}\) On psychological approaches to the study of politics, see Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy (eds.), Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology, 2nd edn. (Oxford University Press, 2013).

\(^{124}\) Clark, Sleepwalkers, pp. 520, 523.  

\(^{125}\) Ibid., p. 510.
The primary causal influence of preventive logic came through pressure from Moltke and the military, but that pressure did not have a strong impact until the very end of the July Crisis. A satisfactory evaluation of the causal impact of preventive logic will undoubtedly involve identifying its interaction effects with other variables in the complex processes leading to the First World War.