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CHAPTER TWO

The Coming of the First World War:
A Reassessment

THE IDEA that a great war need not be the product of deliberate decision—that it can come because statesmen “lose control” of events—is one of the most basic and most common notions in contemporary American strategic thought. A crisis, it is widely assumed, might unleash forces of an essentially military nature that overwhelm the political process and bring on a war that nobody wants. Many important conclusions, about the risk of nuclear war and thus about the political meaning of nuclear forces, rest on this fundamental idea.¹

This theory of “inadvertent war” is in turn rooted, to a quite extraordinary degree, in a specific interpretation of a single historical episode: the coming of the First World War during the July Crisis in 1914.² It is often taken for granted that the sort of military system that existed in Europe at the time, a system of interlocking mobilizations and of war plans that placed a great emphasis on rapid offensive action, directly led to a conflict that might otherwise have been avoided. “The war systems of the day,” Paul Bracken says, “stimulated each other into a frenzy. Political leaders lost control of the tremendous momentum built up when their armies went on alert.”³ It was as though an enormous, uncontrol-

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¹ For a penetrating analysis of the question of “loss of control,” see Robert Powell, “The Theoretical Foundations of Strategic Nuclear Deterrence,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 100, no. 1 (Spring 1985), esp. pp. 83–92.

² See, for example: Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn., 1966), pp. 221–25; Graham Allison, Albert Carnesale, and Joseph Nye, eds., *Hawks, Doves, and Owls: An Agenda for Avoiding Nuclear War* (New York, 1985), pp. 17–18, 30, 43, 210, 217; Richard Ned Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management: A Dangerous Illusion* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987), pp. 24–26, 32–35, 59–60, 109–13, 122–23. Note also the rather extreme argument in Paul Bracken’s *The Command and Control of Nuclear Forces* (New Haven, Conn., 1983). This book is laced with references to the July Crisis; see esp. p. 65 where Bracken admits that his argument about how a nuclear war could begin might sound a bit extreme “were it not for the history of the outbreak of World War I.” A certain interpretation of the Cuban Missile Crisis is also frequently used to support the inadvertent war theory. For an analysis of that interpretation, see Marc Trachtenberg, “New Light on the Cuban Missile Crisis?” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Spring 1990).

³ Bracken, *Command and Control*, p. 53.

lable machine had begun to move. There was, Thomas Schelling writes, "a great starting of engines, a clutching and gearing and releasing of brakes and gathering momentum until the machines were on collision course."⁴ "Armies," says Michael Howard, "were juggernauts which even their own generals could hardly control."⁵

This basic problem, the argument runs, was compounded by a whole series of other factors. Because of the complexity of the mobilization process, the war plans had to be worked out in advance down to the last detail. This meant that the plans were extraordinarily rigid, and could not be adjusted to changing political circumstance. In the planning process itself, political considerations were never really taken into account; the plans were elaborated instead essentially on the basis of technical, military considerations. "The German Army's almost total autonomy," according to Ned Lebow, "enabled it to plan for war in a political vacuum. When the July Crisis came, Germany's political leaders were confronted with a military plan that had been formulated solely with reference to narrow organizational criteria and requirements."⁶ The political leadership, it is further argued, was abysmally ignorant, both of the plans themselves and especially of their implications. "The bland ignorance," Howard wrote in 1964, "among national leaders of the simple mechanics of the system on which they relied for the preservation of national security would astonish us rather more if so many horrifying parallels did not come to light whenever British politicians give their views on defence policy to-day."⁷ The failure to understand what mobilization meant was the basis for a series of disastrous miscalculations on the eve of the war, when this measure was ordered by statesmen who simply had no real understanding of how extremely dangerous it in fact was.

The term "inadvertent war" can have many meanings. It might bring to mind the full range of factors that can lead to a war that nobody wants or expects at the beginning of a crisis—miscalculation, misapprehension, and misjudgment; the impulsiveness of statesmen and the deviousness of ambassadors; the sheer momentum of a mounting crisis, the difficulty of backing down from positions taken, the need for toughness in order to force the adversary to give way. The term, however, is frequently used in a much narrower sense: a war is often said to be inadvertent if it breaks out because statesmen are overpowered by the workings of the military system.

The main purpose of this article is to examine the idea that World War I was in this sense an inadvertent war. Before this analysis can begin, however, there is one major issue that first has to be cleared up. It is necessary

⁴ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 221.

⁵ Michael Howard, "Lest We Forget," *Encounter* (January 1964), p. 65.

⁶ Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, p. 78.

⁷ Howard, "Lest We Forget," p. 65.

at the outset to examine the claim that Germany deliberately set out from the very start of the crisis to provoke a European conflict. For if World War I were in essence a war of German aggression, one could hardly claim that it came about because a political process, which might otherwise have brought about a peaceful settlement, had been swamped by forces from within the military sphere. It turns out that the argument that Germany contrived throughout the crisis to bring on a great war is quite weak, but this in itself does not mean that the European nations simply stumbled into the conflict. A positive case has to be made if the "inadvertent war" thesis is to be accepted. To test this theory, the specific arguments on which it rests therefore have to be examined, and the most important of these arguments will be analyzed here: claims about the rigidity of military plans, about the "cult of the offensive," and, most importantly, about preemption and interlocking mobilizations. What this analysis will show is that this theory, broadly speaking, is not supported by the evidence. The war did not break out in 1914 because events had "slipped out of control"—because statesmen had been overwhelmed by forces that brought on a conflict that all the governments had been trying to avoid.

THE FISCHER THESIS

In the early 1960s, the German historian Fritz Fischer set off a storm of controversy by arguing that the German government decided to seize the opportunity created by the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, and adopted a policy designed to lead to a European war. This thesis was first laid out, rather obliquely, in a chapter in Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht* ("Grab for World Power"), translated into English as *Germany's Aims in the First World War*.⁸ In his sequel, *War of Illusions*, the argument was made explicit. The First World War, Fischer repeatedly claimed, had been "started" by German politicians; their goal had been "to defeat the enemy powers before they became too strong" and thus bring about "German hegemony over Europe." The decision to start a war with Russia and France—although not with Britain—had been taken at the beginning of July. The plan had been "to use the favorable opportunity of the murder at Sarajevo for the start

⁸ Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York, 1967). The message, however, was never far below the surface, and as Fischer himself later pointed out, his thesis in that book was that Germany saw "the murder at Sarajevo as a golden opportunity to declare war." Fritz Fischer, *World Power or Decline: The Controversy over Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York, 1974), p. 95. See also Imanuel Geiss, ed., *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War. Selected Documents* (New York, 1967), p. 370.

of the continental war." This plan, he says, was in fact "carried out successfully."⁹

A number of Fischer's students and followers, most notably Imanuel Geiss and John Röhl, also published a number of books and articles in this vein. Fischer's followers soon began to claim victory. His originally controversial views, it was said, had now been generally accepted. As one of Fischer's supporters put it in a survey of the Fischer debate: "No serious German historian today can venture to pit himself against the evidence compiled by the Fischer school."¹⁰

It is certainly not true, however, that the views of the Fischer school have come to be almost universally shared, either inside Germany or out. The older interpretations of people like Pierre Renouvin, Bernadotte Schmitt, and Luigi Albertini—which, while quite critical of Germany, never went so far as to claim that the German government deliberately set out to provoke a general war—are still very widely accepted.¹¹ Albertini's massive account, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, which was published in Italy in the middle of World War II, is the most impressive of these works. Regardless of what one thinks of certain of his conclusions, the work itself must be regarded as monumental. Because of the completeness of the documentation, and the intelligence and honesty of the author, this study is still the point of departure for all serious work on 1914.¹²

Fischer's followers claim that their views fall within this older tradition. Geiss, for example, said that in his chapters on the origins of the war in *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, Fischer "did nothing more than introduce Albertini's results into Germany for the first time."¹³ But on the central issue, Albertini's and Fischer's views were diametrically opposed—"it is undeniable," Albertini wrote, "that in 1914 neither the Kaiser nor his Chancellor wanted a European war"¹⁴—and the claim that the German

⁹ Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914* (New York, 1975), pp. 470, 473, 480, 494, 515.

¹⁰ John Moses, *The Politics of Illusion* (London, 1975), p. 127. See also John Röhl, *1914: Delusion or Design? The Testimony of Two German Diplomats* (London, 1973), p. 21.

¹¹ See Jacques Droz, *Les Causes de la Première Guerre Mondiale: Essai d'historiographie* (Paris, 1973). This, in my opinion, is the best discussion of the Fischer debate and related issues. Note also Droz's "Bulletin historique," in the *Revue historique*, no. 552 (October–December 1984), pp. 512–20.

¹² Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols. (London, 1952–57), a translation of his *Le origini della guerra del 1914*, 3 vols. (Milan, 1942–43). The two other works mentioned are somewhat older and more limited in their use of sources: Pierre Renouvin, *Les Origines immédiates de la guerre* (Paris, 1927); and Bernadotte Schmitt, *The Coming of War 1914*, 2 vols. (New York, 1930).

¹³ Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 11.

¹⁴ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, p. 252.

political leadership deliberately engineered the conflict represented a radical departure from this older interpretation.

Albertini had stressed the role of miscalculation and bungling in bringing on the conflict. Given that no one wanted a great war, it was a "source of amazement" that it came about anyway. To be sure, Germany had wanted Austria to go to war against Serbia; she had encouraged Austria to strike and had sabotaged all attempts at mediation. But this was all with the hope that the war in the Balkans could be kept from escalating, and this turned out to be a terrible misjudgment. The political leaders had no real understanding of military realities, and this also helps explain why moves were made that set off the avalanche. Beneath it all was an "utter lack of political horse-sense," "the main cause," according to Albertini, "of European disorders and upheavals."¹⁵

Had Albertini, however, missed the point? Maybe it was not just a case of blundering; maybe Germany, as Fischer claimed, had actually set out to provoke a continental war. Whether Fischer's argument on this key issue stands or falls is ultimately a function of the adequacy of the evidence on which it rests. Does he prove that right after Sarajevo the German leadership adopted a plan to engineer a war with Russia and France? The evidence, if it exists, should appear in his section in *War of Illusions* on the initial phase of the crisis, a section entitled "The Occasion is Propitious—the first Week in July."¹⁶ But he gives no real evidence here of a decision by the German government to provoke such a conflict. The material in this section only shows that the German government was aware that a tough line on the Serbian question might lead to European complications, but this in itself hardly proves that the Germans had decided to use the occasion to bring about a great European war.¹⁷

It is true that at two points in Fischer's account the Emperor William II is made to appear bellicose at this phase of the crisis, but this impression results from a simple twisting of the evidence. The very first document Fischer cites in this section is a report of a conversation that the well-connected German publicist Victor Naumann had with a top Austrian Foreign Ministry official on July 1. Naumann was sure, according to Fischer's summary, that in Germany, "unlike the year before not only the military but also the Foreign Ministry and the Emperor no longer objected to a preventive war against Russia."¹⁸ The original document, however, had said nothing at all about the emperor in this context, and indeed all Naumann had said was that in the military and in the foreign ministry, "the idea of a preventive war against Russia was regarded with

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 252–53.

¹⁶ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 473.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 473–80.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 473. Emphasis added.

less disfavor than a year ago," which itself was considerably weaker than Fischer's paraphrase.¹⁹ Two pages later Fischer writes that a certain official had been wrong to assume that William II wanted to avoid a European war, and his proof is the emperor's famous marginal comment on a dispatch from the German ambassador in Vienna, "Now or never," which Fischer had in fact used as the subtitle of the chapter. But again this is misleading: the "now or never" referred not to a great war with Russia and France, as Fischer had implied, but to a "final and fundamental reckoning" between Austria-Hungary and Serbia.²⁰ Certainly the German leadership wanted Austria to bring matters to a head with Serbia, and it is also clear that elements within the German government, especially in the army, thought the time was right for a European war. Fischer, however, gives no direct evidence that the top political leadership, the people who were really making German policy at this point, consciously decided to use the assassination to provoke a crisis that would lead to a great war.

If a case is to be made at all, it has to rest on indirect reasoning. To go from the correct point that the German government encouraged Austria to move against Serbia to the conclusion that Germany was trying to engineer a continental war, Fischer and his followers therefore have to argue that a local war between Austria and Serbia, with all the other powers remaining on the sidelines, was a political impossibility—that what was called "localization" was never in the cards—and that the German government knew it. "As innumerable documents show," Fischer writes, "Germany knew that Russia would never allow Austria-Hungary to act in the Balkans unopposed."²¹ And Geiss says: "Berlin was well aware that Russia would be forced to intervene, making world war inevitable."²²

Was it in fact a foregone conclusion that Russia would intervene militarily in the event that Austria attacked Serbia? The original Russian policy during the July Crisis had been to advise the Serbs not to resist an

¹⁹ "Hoyos' Conversation with Victor Naumann," July 1, 1914, republished in Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 65–66. Fischer also claimed on p. 473 of *War of Illusions* that "Naumann warned that if Austria-Hungary failed to use this opportunity Germany would drop Austria as an ally," but in fact no such threat was reported in the document. The closest Naumann came was to point out that "Austria-Hungary will be finished as a Monarchy and as a Great Power if she does not take advantage of this moment," which was a comment that many Habsburg leaders would have agreed with. On the role of Austria during the crisis, see Samuel Williamson, "Vienna and July 1914: The Origins of the Great War Once More," in Samuel Williamson and Peter Pastor, *Essays on World War I: Origins and Prisoners of War* (New York, 1983).

²⁰ For William II's marginalia, see Tschirschky to Bethmann Hollweg, June 30, 1914, in Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 64–65.

²¹ Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, p. 63.

²² Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 364.

Austrian invasion and to "entrust her fate to the judgment of the Great Powers."²³ One of the major determinants of Russian policy in this matter, moreover, was the attitude of the western powers, and the British especially were by no means eager for war over the Serbian question. As late as July 25, the Russian foreign minister, S. D. Sazonov, referred to the fact that, except for the *London Times*, "nearly the whole of the British press was on the side of Austria."²⁴

Whatever the reality, however, did the German government calculate that Russian intervention was inevitable? Are there "innumerable documents" which prove that for the German government "localization" was simply a sham? Fischer gives no evidence to prove that the top German leadership thought that Russia was bound to intervene if Austria attacked Serbia.²⁵ All that Fischer shows is that the German government under-

²³ Special Journal of the Russian Council of Ministers, July 24, 1914, and Sazonov to Strandtmann, July 24, 1914, in Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 186–88.

²⁴ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 307. Sazonov's characterization of British attitudes was somewhat exaggerated, but a good part of British, and especially Liberal, opinion was pro-Austrian, and the Liberals were of course the governing party. See D. C. Watt, "The British Reactions to the Assassination at Sarajevo," *European Studies Review*, vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1971), pp. 233–47.

²⁵ Geiss says that Bethmann "originally expected" intervention, but the one document he cites to support this claim had said nothing about the chancellor, and had simply reported the views of unidentified officials at the foreign office. Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 61, 68, 365. In another book, however, he reprints a letter from Bethmann to Austrian foreign minister Berchtold of February 10, 1913, pointing out that Russia "will hardly be able to observe passively any military action by Austria-Hungary against Serbia without a tremendous loss of face," and that a full-scale war between the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente would be the likely result. Imanuel Geiss, *German Foreign Policy, 1871–1914* (London, 1976), p. 205. But an argument developed for dissuasive effect in 1913 does not necessarily reflect Bethmann's real views in 1914. Indeed, since the Fischer school argues that Bethmann in July 1914 was counting on British neutrality in a continental war, and since Bethmann here takes British intervention for granted, it would presumably accept the conclusion that the Chancellor was taking an exaggeratedly somber line in 1913, presumably to keep the Austrians under control. In more recent writings, Fischer and his followers cite evidence that Zimmermann, the number two man in the German Foreign Office, allegedly told the Austrian representative Hoyos early on in the crisis that an Austrian attack on Serbia would lead "with 90 percent probability to a European war." If true, this would be important evidence, even though Zimmermann's views were generally more extreme than those of Bethmann. (Fischer, for example, refers to him as a "strongly pan-German oriented diplomat.") But this piece of evidence cannot be accepted uncritically. It comes from a memorandum that Hoyos wrote after the war, and Fritz Fellner, who discovered and analyzed the document, situates it in the context of post-1914 attempts by Austria and Germany to blame each other for precipitating the conflict. Moreover, if Zimmermann had actually said something of this sort at the time, one would expect this very important fact to have been reported to the highest authorities in Vienna, and to have been reflected in at least some other sources, but there is no evidence that it was. Finally, it is simply not plausible that if Fischer's general theory is correct, and Zimmermann in particular really wanted to bring on a European war, that he would have revealed this calculation to the Austrians. This would

stood there was a certain chance that Russia and France would come in.²⁶ Its goal, in fact, was to reduce this chance to a minimum by adopting a forceful policy: "the more determined Austria shows herself, the more energetically we support her, so much the more quiet will Russia remain."²⁷

This quotation is from a letter that the German foreign secretary, Gottlieb von Jagow, sent to Prince Lichnowsky, the German ambassador in London, laying out the basic thinking underlying German policy in the crisis. Fischer himself says that this document sums up Germany's attitude "in a nutshell."²⁸ In it Jagow took localization seriously and viewed it as a real possibility: "I still hope and believe, even today, that the conflict can be localised." The basis for Jagow's hope—and in this he was by no means atypical—was his conviction that Russia was not ready for war in 1914, and that she would be much better prepared to fight a few years later. Fischer, however, turns this point on its head: Jagow's argument that war with Russia could be avoided in 1914 is, through the use of some creative paraphrasing, transformed into an argument for provoking a war with Russia before she became too strong.²⁹

The German government thought until very late in the crisis that Austria might be able to have her war with Serbia without having to face Russia as well. Indeed, the whole point of pressing Austria to act quickly

run the risk of frightening them off, and according to the Fischer school, the Germans were quite worried as it was that Austria was too prone to hesitate. For all these reasons, the whole story has to be taken with a grain of salt. Fritz Fellner, "Die Mission Hoyos," in W. Alff, ed., *Deutschlands Sonderung von Europa 1862–1945* (Frankfurt, 1984), pp. 292–96 and n. 32; Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, "Germany and the Coming of War," in R. J. W. Evans and H. P. von Strandmann, eds., *The Coming of the First World War* (Oxford, 1988), p. 115, and Fritz Fischer, "The Miscalculation of English Neutrality: An Aspect of German Foreign Policy on the Eve of World War I," p. 371, in Solomon Wank et al., *The Mirror of History: Essays in Honor of Fritz Fellner* (Santa Barbara, 1988).

²⁶ Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, pp. 63–64.

²⁷ Jagow to Lichnowsky, July 18, 1914, in Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 123. For the original text, see Karl Kautsky, comp., *Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch*, 4 vols. in 2 (Charlottenburg, 1919), doc. 72, translated into English as *Outbreak of the World War: German Documents Collected by Karl Kautsky* (New York, 1924).

²⁸ Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, p. 60.

²⁹ "The struggle between Teuton and Slav," he paraphrases Jagow as saying, "was bound to come . . . which being so, the present was the best moment for Germany, for 'in a few years Russia . . . will be ready.'" Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, p. 59. But in the original text, there is no reference to a "struggle between Teuton and Slav," let alone to its inevitability. All Jagow did was comment that in Russia "the feeling of the Slavic element is becoming more and more hostile to Germany." Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 122–24. Nor is this an artifact of mistranslation. For the German originals: Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegzielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18*, 3d ed. (Düsseldorf, 1964), pp. 69–70; Kautsky, *Deutschen Dokumente*, vol. 1, no. 72.

was to minimize the risk of third power intervention.³⁰ The strategy of "localization" may not have worked, but it was not a sham. So the indirect argument, which is based on the contention that the German government knew from the very outset that localization was impossible, also fails.

If, however, there is little basis for the extreme Fischer view that Germany set out deliberately to provoke a war with Russia and France, this does not mean that more moderate versions of the thesis do not capture the essence of what was going on. Germany, for example, may not have wanted a European war in 1914, but she might have been prepared to accept one if Austria felt she could not compromise on the Serbian question. Such an attitude, in turn, might have been strongly influenced by the idea that if war broke out that year, this would not be the worst thing that could happen: Germany could then still fight such a war with some hope of success, whereas in a few years this would no longer be possible.

One can, in fact, imagine a spectrum of possible interpretations of the July Crisis:

1. The extreme Fischerite view that Germany was deliberately trying to bring about war with Russia and France.
2. A more moderate view that still emphasizes volition. Maybe no one wanted war. But the Germans and Austrians were intent on crushing Serbia, even if this meant a European conflagration, and Russia, supported by France, was determined to prevent this, regardless of the consequences. The war, in this case, would be the product of a simple political conflict. If one assumes that Germany and Austria took an extreme and uncompromising position with the full knowledge that this policy would probably lead to war with Russia and France, and if one assumes further that such an attitude was rooted in a deep-seated sense that maybe it would not be so bad if war broke out in 1914, then this view merges into the more moderate versions of the Fischer interpretation.
3. An approach that emphasizes non-volitional factors. Here the war is not seen as the product of a simple clash of wills. What happened during the crisis itself is viewed as very important. This interpretation stresses the role of miscalculation, misperception, and misunderstanding, and also emphasizes the sheer dynamics of the crisis situation, the way a developing crisis tends to take on a life of its own. Each side was drawn in deeper and deeper; as the stakes rose, it became increasingly difficult for either side to draw back.

³⁰ See, for example, Szögyény to Berchtold, July 25, 1914, in Geiss, *July Crisis*, pp. 200–201. See also the extracts from the diary of General von Plessen, the Kaiser's military adjutant, in the editor's introduction to August Bach, *Deutsche Gesandtschaftsberichte zum Kriegsausbruch 1914* (Berlin, 1937), summarized in G. P. Gooch, *Recent Revelations of European Diplomacy* (London, 1940), p. 5.

The result is that the different parties to the conflict may have ended up taking positions that none of them would have taken if they had been able at the outset to see how things were going to develop.

4. Finally, the "inadvertent war" interpretation, which focuses on one special set of non-volitional factors, those that relate to the nature of the military system that was in place in 1914. The rigidity of the war plans, the heavy emphasis on offense, and the pressure to mobilize first, are all viewed as playing an important role in bringing on the war. The assumption is that if it had not been for factors of this sort, an armed conflict might well have been avoided.

My own view falls about midway between (2) and (3). In general, historians of the war origins question today attribute greater weight to the factor of intentionality than they did in the past. This has partly been the result of new evidence that has come to light on international politics, and especially on German foreign policy, in the pre-1914 period.³¹ But it is also a product of a new way of thinking about the problem, and here Fischer certainly played a leading role. The attitudes of different elements in German society can be studied; knowing the structure of power within that country, inferences can be drawn about how much weight those views probably carried. There was certainly a good deal of aggressiveness in German political culture before 1914; even the preventive war strategy had considerable support within Germany, especially in military circles. It is reasonable to assume that all this had some impact on the way events in July 1914 ran their course.

The point, however, cannot be taken too far. Bellicose rhetoric may have been common in Germany before 1914, and the emperor himself often expressed extreme views. But this does not in itself mean that the political leadership during the crisis pursued an aggressive policy on the Serbian question with its eyes open, fully aware that this was likely to lead to a European war which could be accepted "with equanimity." If the chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, and the other key German policy-makers had been able to see in early July that their policy would lead Germany into a world war, or even into a great continental war, it is hard to believe that events would have unfolded more or less as they did. On the other hand, it is also clear that the German leadership had not rejected the "preventive war" arguments out of hand. Bethmann in particular

³¹ On Germany, see especially Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London, 1980); Peter Winzen, *Bilows Weltmachtkonzept* (Boppard a. R., 1977). See also David Kaiser, "Germany and the Origins of the First World War," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 55 (September 1983). On Austria, see Williamson, "Vienna and July 1914," and on Russia, see D.C.B. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (New York, 1983), chap. 5, esp. pp. 141-43.

thought that these arguments had a certain force, and recognized that eventually he might have to take the plunge.³² But the choice was difficult and could be put off until it became inescapable. A young man like his assistant Kurt Riezler might be drawn to war, attracted, he thought, by the "lure of the uncertain." For Bethmann himself, however, Riezler wrote in mid-July, a decision for war was a "leap into the dark." He might someday have to choose war. But such a decision would be his most difficult responsibility.³³

There is no need, however, to resolve the war origins question here. It is sufficient to note that a whole range of interpretations is possible, and that therefore one does not have to take a particularly dark view of German intentions in 1914 in order to question the "inadvertent war" theory.

THE RIGIDITY OF MILITARY PLANS

The argument that the German government consciously and systematically engineered a European war in 1914 is quite weak. If the war, however, cannot be attributed simply to German aggression, it does not automatically follow from this that it came about because statesmen "lost control" of events, and were overwhelmed by forces of a military nature. A positive argument has to be made, and indeed the "inadvertent war" theory rests on a series of claims which purport to lay out what those forces are—that is, what these mechanisms were that led to a war that otherwise might well have been avoided. To test the theory, these claims therefore need to be examined systematically.

The first of these arguments focuses on the nature of military planning in the period before 1914. It is often alleged that the "inflexibility" of operational thinking and the "rigidity" of war and mobilization plans played a very important role in bringing on the war.³⁴ The war plans

³² See, for example, the sources cited in Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 80-81.

³³ Riezler diary entry for July 14, 1914, K. D. Erdmann, ed., *Kurt Riezler: Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente* (Göttingen, 1972), p. 185.

³⁴ See, for example: Bernard Brodie, "Unlimited Weapons and Limited War," *The Reporter*, November 18, 1954, p. 21; Howard, "Lest We Forget," p. 65; Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army* (New York, 1964), p. 295. For the most influential account: Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York, 1962), esp. pp. 72, 79, 169. These are, of course, all old, and—from the point of view of many contemporary historians—outdated sources. But they played an important role in shaping beliefs about the meaning of the July crisis in what remain the classic works in the strategic studies literature, and are still frequently cited in that literature. Since the present aim is not simply to report contemporary

themselves, it is said, had a momentum of their own which statesmen were in the end powerless to resist.

In support of this claim, one story is told over and over again. At the very last minute, on August 1, with the storm in its full fury about to break, the German government was told by its ambassador in London that Britain might remain neutral, and might even guarantee French neutrality, if Germany did not attack France and conducted the war only in the east. The emperor was jubilant and wanted to take the British up on this offer and march only against Russia. But General Helmuth von Moltke, the chief of the general staff, explained that Germany had only one war plan—what has come to be called the “Schlieffen Plan” after its architect, General Alfred von Schlieffen, head of the general staff from 1891 to 1905—and this provided only for a massive initial attack on France to be followed after France’s defeat by a campaign against Russia. It was too late now, he said, to change that strategy; the plan would have to be carried out. The chancellor and the emperor, Gordon Craig writes—and this is characteristic of the way this story appears in many accounts—“had no answer for this and gave way.”³⁵ It soon turned out that British views had been misunderstood, but Bernard Brodie’s comment on the affair is typical of the way this story is interpreted: “The falsity of the initial report saved that particular episode from being utterly grotesque; but the whole situation of which it formed a part reveals a rigidity and a habit of pleading ‘military necessity’ that made it impossible after a certain point to prevent a war which no one wanted and which was to prove infinitely disastrous to all the nations concerned.”³⁶

This is certainly a wonderful story. The only problem with it is that it happens to be wrong on the most important point. On the issue of whether the attack on France had to proceed as planned, it was the Kaiser and not Moltke who won. This should have been clear from the most important source on the incident, Moltke’s memoirs, written in November 1914 and published posthumously in 1922; Moltke’s account is confirmed by a number of other sources, extracts from which appear in the sections on the episode in Albertini’s book.³⁷ It is true that there was a

historical opinion, but rather to examine certain traditional views, these older works will be taken seriously here—not because of their intrinsic merit, but simply because they provided the basis for what are still strongly held beliefs about the coming of the war, beliefs which have an important bearing on how the fundamental problem of war and peace is approached today.

³⁵ Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, p. 294. See also Fischer, *Germany’s Aims*, p. 86; Barry Posen (citing Craig), “Inadvertent Nuclear War? Escalation and NATO’s Northern Flank,” *International Security*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Fall 1982), p. 32; Brodie, “Unlimited Weapons and Limited War,” p. 21.

³⁶ Brodie, “Unlimited Weapons and Limited War,” p. 21.

³⁷ Helmuth von Moltke, *Erinnerungen—Briefe—Dokumente, 1877–1916* (Stuttgart,

violent argument on August 1 between Moltke and the political leadership about whether to accept what appeared to be the British proposal. Although Moltke succeeded in convincing the emperor that for technical reasons the concentration in the west would have to “be carried out as planned,” and that only after it was completed could troops be transferred to the east, a basic decision was made to accept the “offer.” “In the course of this scene,” Moltke wrote, “I nearly fell into despair.” Bethmann then pointed out how important it was, in connection with this British proposal, that the plan for the occupation of neutral Luxemburg be suspended. “As I stood there the Kaiser, without asking me,” Moltke went on, “turned to the aide-de-camp on duty and commanded him to telegraph immediate instructions to the 16th Division at Trier not to march into Luxemburg. I thought my heart would break.” Moltke again pleaded that the very complicated mobilization plan, “which has to be worked out down to the smallest details,” could not be changed without disastrous results. It was essential, he said, for Germany to secure control over the Luxemburg railroads. “I was snubbed with the remark that I should use other railroads instead. The order must stand. Therewith I was dismissed. It is impossible to describe the state of mind in which I returned home. I was absolutely broken and shed tears of despair.”³⁸

This story is of interest not only in itself, but also because it bears on the general issue of the relationship between strategy and policy in pre-war Europe. It is commonly argued that at least in Germany, and perhaps

1922); extracts appeared in translation in *Living Age*, January 20, 1923, pp. 131–34. Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, pp. 171–81, 380–85. See also Harry Young, “The Misunderstanding of August 1, 1914,” *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 48, no. 4 (December 1976), pp. 644–65.

³⁸ Quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, pp. 172–76. It is sometimes argued that despite the Kaiser’s order, the Luxemburg frontier was violated, and that this shows that the plans had a momentum of their own, which the political leadership was unable to control. In fact, an infantry company had moved into Luxemburg before the Kaiser’s order had been received, but a little later a second detachment arrived and ordered it out (in accordance, one assumes, with the Kaiser’s instructions). This episode thus scarcely proves that central control over military operations had been lost. The story has been clear since the publication of the Kautsky documents in 1919, the source Tuchman relies on for her accurate account in *Guns of August*, p. 82. Note also the story about the revocation of the Russian general mobilization order by the Tsar after he had agreed to it the first time on July 29. According to one account, when the Chief of Staff told him “that it was not possible to stop mobilization, Nicholas had replied: ‘Stop it all the same,’” and of course this order was respected. Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 560. See also the excellent analysis and refutation of Conrad’s claim that technical military requirements prevented him from adjusting his strategy to the new situation created by Russian mobilization in N. Stone, “Moltke and Conrad: Relations between the Austro-Hungarian and German General Staffs, 1909–1914,” in Paul Kennedy, ed., *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914* (London, 1979), pp. 235–41; see also Stone’s chapter on Austria-Hungary in Ernest May, ed., *Knowing One’s Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, 1984).

in Europe as a whole, there was an almost hermetic separation between military and political concerns. The war plans had been based mainly on technical military considerations; political considerations had been essentially ignored. The plans could not be adjusted to changing political conditions. Governments, on the other hand, had not been able to adjust their foreign policies to these immutable strategic realities, because the military authorities had kept the political leadership in the dark: the civilians were not familiar with the plans, and were thus overwhelmed during the crisis by military imperatives that they had not been able to anticipate.³⁹

Had the plans been worked out essentially on the basis of technical military considerations—that is, had political considerations been largely ignored? Germany is held up as the principal case in point: the Schlieffen Plan, according to Gerhard Ritter, was rooted not “in political considerations, but exclusively in military-technical ones.”⁴⁰ There is, however, a certain basis for skepticism on this issue. The German military leadership was not sealed off from its political counterpart; Schlieffen and Friedrich von Holstein, the leading figure at the Foreign Office in Schlieffen’s day, were on particularly intimate terms.⁴¹ The military leadership, as Ritter himself shows, had strong political convictions. The elder Moltke, chief of staff during the Bismarckian period, had, according to Gerhard Ritter, been very much against “territorial conquests in Russia or anywhere else.” It is hard to believe that such a view was unrelated to the very conservative military strategy he had opted for.⁴² The opposition of his nephew, the younger Moltke, on August 1, 1914, to any change in the German war plan, was based not just on narrow, military considerations, but on his skepticism that France would really keep out of a Russo-German war—that is, on what turned out to be a perfectly realistic *political* judgment.⁴³

As for Schlieffen himself, he clearly had strong political beliefs. In

³⁹ See, for example, Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, p. 295; Howard, “Lest We Forget,” p. 65; Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 479–83, 579; and, for a more contemporary example, Richard Ned Lebow, “The Soviet Offensive in Europe: The Schlieffen Plan Revisited?” *International Security* (Spring 1985), p. 69. Some other examples are cited and then criticized in L.C.F. Turner, “The Role of the General Staffs in July 1914,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 11, no. 3 (December 1965).

⁴⁰ Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth* (London, 1958), p. 97. Note also Fischer’s comment on the plan to violate the neutrality of the Low Countries: “The military technician Schlieffen had taken no account of the political implications of such violations of neutrality and it was not really for him to do so.” *War of Illusions*, p. 391.

⁴¹ Norman Rich, *Friedrich von Holstein: Politics and Diplomacy in the Era of Bismarck and William II*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 698.

⁴² Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, p. 18.

⁴³ See the extracts from Moltke’s memoir quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, pp. 173–74. On these issues in general, see M. Messerschmidt, *Militär und Politik in der Bismarckzeit und in Wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Darmstadt, 1975).

1905, for example, after Russia’s defeat by Japan, he evidently favored a preventive war against France: “We are surrounded by an enormous coalition, we are in the same position as Frederick the Great before the Seven Years War. Now we can escape from the noose. The whole of Russia’s west is stripped of troops, it will be years before Russia can take action; now we can settle the account with our bitterest and most dangerous enemy, France, and would be fully justified in doing so.” Ritter’s comment on this quotation is rather defensive: “Well, why should Schlieffen not have talked on such lines to a friend? It would almost be surprising if he had not entertained such sentiments as a soldier; they are reported of other senior members of the officer corps too. But all this has nothing to do with a political action as Chief of the General Staff.” Perhaps not: Schlieffen might never have formally proposed that Germany launch a preventive war. But the comment still reflects a way of looking at the world that may well have helped draw Schlieffen to the strategy of the knockout blow against France—that is, to a strategy that aimed at total victory in a European conflict.⁴⁴ Indeed, a new mood had emerged in Germany in the post-Bismarckian period: the nation as a whole was no longer a satiated continental power, and important elements in German society now wanted very much to transform Germany’s position in the world. The military shared these aspirations, and it is safe to assume that the Schlieffen strategy was closely related to these new political attitudes.

The German government, moreover, certainly understood in general terms what the plans called for, and was in particular fully aware that Belgium would be invaded in the event of war. Arguments to the contrary, common in the older historical literature, are not supported by the evidence. Craig, for instance, writes that the German General Staff “did not see fit even to inform” the Foreign Office of the Schlieffen Plan “except in the most general and misleading terms.”⁴⁵ The footnote appended to this very sentence, however, states that “there can be little doubt” that Chancellor Bülow and Holstein “knew of the invasion plan,” and gives a reliable source to back this up.⁴⁶ Craig then comments simply that “it is less easy to determine how much Bethmann knew.” But it is clear that Beth-

⁴⁴ From Hugo Rochs, *Schlieffen. Ein Lebens- und Charakterbild für das deutsche Volk*, 5th ed. (Berlin, 1940), p. 40, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 55; Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, p. 106. For other countries, the argument that military planning was apolitical is weaker still. In France, for example, the army was interested in attacking Germany through Belgium, and even some of the political leaders were attracted to the idea of a preemptive invasion of that country, but they were all held back for fear of the British reaction. See S. R. Williamson, *The Politics of Grand Strategy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), pp. 210–18.

⁴⁵ Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, p. 295.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Indeed, five pages earlier he had pointed out that Moltke had written to his Austrian counterpart Conrad describing Germany’s basic military strategy for a European war, and that the emperor and Bülow had been informed of the contents of this letter. See also Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, vol. 1, pp. 15–16.

mann was familiar with the plan for the invasion of Belgium; and Jagow remarked in his unpublished memoirs that he had been informed of the German campaign plan when he became foreign secretary in January 1913. The basic Schlieffen strategy, in fact, had in 1900 been cleared first with Holstein and then with the chancellor at the time, Prince Hohenlohe. Soon even foreign governments knew in rough terms what Germany intended to do in the event of war; Schlieffen himself, after his retirement, published an article in which he took the invasion of Belgium as self-evident; and the Kaiser in effect even told the Belgian king that if war broke out, Germany would march through his country.⁴⁷

The collaboration between military and political authorities was of course by no means perfect in Germany before 1914.⁴⁸ Military strategy was obviously not inspired by a Clausewitzian recognition that political concerns were fundamental.⁴⁹ But the divorce between military and political considerations was not total. To the degree that military strategy, however, was an independent element in the story, what difference did it actually make? Is it simply to be taken for granted, as a matter of principle, that rigid plans are a source of danger—that they were, almost by definition, an important cause of the war, and that more flexible military arrangements would have led to greater stability? Since Germany is by far the most important case—the Schlieffen Plan dominated the whole military situation in 1914—this issue turns on the question of the effect a more flexible German strategy would have had.

⁴⁷ On Bethmann: see Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, p. 94, and Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 168, citing a Bethmann note of December 21, 1912. On Jagow: Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 390. On these matters in general, see L.C.F. Turner, "The Significance of the Schlieffen Plan," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 13, no. 1 (April 1967), pp. 53–55; and Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 91–95. On British knowledge, note especially the extract from Churchill's *The World Crisis*, cited on p. 53 of the Turner article. The French certainly knew about the German strategy well before the outbreak of the war; see Henry Contamine, *La Revanche, 1871–1914* (Paris, 1957), pp. 95–97; France, Ministère de la Guerre, Etat-Major de l'Armée, Service historique, *Les Armées françaises dans la Grande Guerre*, part 1, vol. 1 (Paris, 1936), p. 37; and finally Isvolsky to Sazonov, February 2, 1911, quoted in Friedrich Stieve, *Isvolsky and the World War* (New York, 1926), p. 51. Jan Karl Tanenbaum, "French Estimates of Germany's Operational War Plans," in May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, is the most detailed account. Schlieffen's article, "Der Krieg in der Gegenwart," *Deutsche Revue* (January 1909), created a sensation when it came out and even had diplomatic repercussions. See Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, p. 94n. One strongly suspects that the political leadership did not simply accept the need for an invasion of Belgium without asking why it was so necessary, and that in this way became familiar with the basic thinking underlying German military strategy at the time. The military leadership, for its part, had an interest in explaining the strategy so that it could convince the government to provide the funds needed if the plan was to be implemented with some prospect of success; budgetary support was far from automatic.

⁴⁸ See n. 155 below.

⁴⁹ This point has been made by many writers. See, for example, Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, p. 96; Kennedy, *War Plans*, p. 17; Craig, *Politics*, p. 277.

Suppose Germany had been able, if she chose, to implement the strategy of the elder Moltke—that is, to stay on the defensive in the west and concentrate her attack on Russia. The basic effect would have been to improve Germany's general position.⁵⁰ If Germany had simply secured her defenses in the west and refrained from invading Belgium, France and Britain would have been much less able to intervene on Russia's behalf in a militarily effective way—if indeed they, or at least Britain, ended up intervening at all. The great bulk of German power could in that case be thrown against Russia. In such circumstances, why should Germany have been less likely to risk war? But if a more flexible German strategy would in principle have strengthened Germany's position, then this can only mean that the rigid Schlieffen strategy was a source of weakness and thus in theory should have served as a brake on German policy. If it failed to do so, this would not be because of the rigidity of the plan, but because the political judgment had been made that in spite of this weakness, Germany should still plunge ahead.

There is also the case of Russia to consider. The rigidity of Russian military planning is sometimes viewed as one of the causes of the disaster. "The Russians," Paul Kennedy writes, "possibly possessed the most inflexible plan of all, and their inability to mobilise separately against Austria-Hungary proved to be one of the most fateful errors of the July crisis."⁵¹ But if an adequate partial mobilization plan had existed, why would events have taken a fundamentally different course? As will be seen, it was the fear that general war was imminent that led the Russians to order general mobilization. Even if a partial mobilization against Austria could have been implemented without difficulty, the Russians would still have felt the same pressure to escalate to full mobilization. Albertini, incidentally, goes a bit further and argues in effect that the Russian plans were if anything insufficiently rigid: the world would have been better off if it had been abundantly clear from the outset that a partial mobilization was impossible, so that it would never have been ordered in the first place.⁵² The ruling out of such limited options could have created a kind of "firebreak" that might have helped keep the conflict from escalating.

The war plans certainly determined how the initial campaigns would be fought. But it is hard to see how the inflexibility of these strategies was in any real sense a major cause of the war—that is, why war would have

⁵⁰ This is in fact an old argument. See, for example, Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911–1914* (New York, 1924), pp. 281–82. Note also Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984), pp. 141–45, which brings out the irrationality of Schlieffen's preference for the west-oriented strategy.

⁵¹ Kennedy, *War Plans*, p. 4.

⁵² Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 294.

been less likely if the European powers had created more military options for themselves.

THE "CULT OF THE OFFENSIVE"

In Europe before 1914, there was a great bias in favor of offensive as opposed to defensive military operations; the attack was glorified, and highly offensive strategies were assumed to be the best way to conduct a war. This "cult of the offensive," it has been argued in recent years, was a root cause of a wide range of dangers that played an important role in bringing on the war.⁵³

The point of departure for this body of literature was Robert Jervis's seminal article, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," which appeared in *World Politics* in 1978.⁵⁴ The term "security dilemma" refers to the idea that in trying to increase their own security, states do things, such as building up their own military power, which tend to diminish the security of other states. What makes this a "dilemma" is the assumption that this is an unintended or even undesired consequence: states might prefer that other powers not feel threatened, and yet, in order to provide for their own safety, they are virtually forced to take measures which will alarm these other states, who will then respond in kind. This sense of mutual threat introduces an element of tension and therefore instability into the situation: the tension goes well beyond what would be warranted by genuine political conflict. Hence the link with the "inadvertent war" argument: war can come in large part because states are, in Jervis's phrase, "trapped by the dynamics of the situation." Because of the security dilemma, the range of choice in certain circumstances may be quite narrow, and unless statesmen are exceptionally able, states might easily be drawn into conflict with each other.

The offense-defense balance, according to this school, is the basic factor that determines how pernicious the security dilemma is.⁵⁵ When the

⁵³ Van Evera, "Cult of the Offensive," esp. pp. 58, 105; see also Jack Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," *International Security*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Summer 1984). Note also Steven Miller's introduction to the issue of *International Security* in which these articles appeared: "The Great War and the Nuclear Age: Sarajevo after Seventy Years," pp. 3-5. The whole issue was republished as Steven Miller, ed., *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War* (Princeton, 1985). Note also in this context the section "Deterrence and World War II; Spiral Model and World War I," in Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, 1976), pp. 94ff.

⁵⁴ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2 (January 1978).

⁵⁵ Jervis, "Security Dilemma," p. 186ff; Van Evera, "Cult of the Offensive," pp. 63-66.

balance shifts in favor of the offense, expansion is seen as both easier and more necessary (to deprive an adversary of resources that might serve as the basis for offensive military action against one's own homeland); pre-emption also becomes both more attractive and more necessary. States, moreover, become increasingly sensitive to trends in the military balance, and might even come to think in terms of preventive war. In such a world, even status quo powers are forced to act like aggressors. It follows from this point of view that the pre-1914 "cult of the offensive" could be expected to have had important destabilizing consequences. Indeed, certain claims about the coming of the First World War play a central role in providing a degree of empirical support for this general theory.

Stephen Van Evera in his influential article, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," identifies a series of dangers "which helped pull the world to war," and discusses how those dangers were linked to the emphasis on offensive military action.⁵⁶ Germany's expansionist policy, first of all, was rooted in a belief that the offense had the advantage. It was this, he says, that "made empire appear both feasible and necessary."⁵⁷ The "cult of the offensive," moreover, "magnified the incentive to preempt": the first strike or first mobilization advantage is more valuable in a world where small shifts in force ratios between states lead to major shifts "in their relative capacity to conquer territory." Furthermore, it was this belief in offense-dominance that caused people to be so concerned with impending shifts in the military balance: Germany's "window of opportunity" opened wider, and the "window of vulnerability" which German statesmen saw opening a few years down the road was taken more seriously than it would have been if German leaders had understood that it was the defense that really had the upper hand in land warfare at the time.⁵⁸ Indeed, the "cult" was based on an extraordinary misconception: if the military realities of 1914 had been understood, if the actual power of the defense had been recognized, the whole system would have been much more stable, and "in all likelihood, the Austro-Serbian conflict would have been a minor and soon-forgotten disturbance on the periphery of European politics."⁵⁹

What is to be made of these arguments? That a "cult" existed, in the sense of a set of military practices considerably more extreme than what the objective situation truly warranted, seems to me beyond question. Scott Sagan, in criticizing the "cult of the offensive" theorists, argued that it was the political need to support allies and relieve military pressure on them that led states to adopt offensive strategies. Alliance considerations

⁵⁶ Van Evera, "Cult of the Offensive"; the quotation is on p. 105.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65, 79ff.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105. See also Jervis, "Security Dilemma," pp. 191, 214.

were of course important, but these strategies went well beyond what was needed for such purposes. Sagan, for example, in arguing that the French opted for a more offensive strategy because they were "haunted" by the prospect that if they stayed on the defensive, Germany would be able to defeat her opponents piecemeal, quotes General Joffre, the French chief of staff, as saying that the French increased the emphasis they placed on offensive action in part because they were afraid the Germans might return to the strategy of the elder Moltke for a campaign focusing on the east. It might have been necessary, of course, for France to prepare for offensive action against Germany as soon as there were indications that Germany was returning to the old Moltke strategy. But until she showed signs of doing so, a defensive strategy would have made more sense for the first phase of the war, since, as Sagan himself points out, "it has been generally recognized since Clausewitz that defense is almost always 'easier' in land warfare because of the advantages of cover and the capability to choose and prepare terrain and fortify positions."⁶⁰ Joffre's preference for offense at the beginning of the war, before France's allies had a chance to fully generate their own forces, can therefore scarcely be rationalized in terms of alliance considerations.⁶¹

It is one thing, however, to recognize the existence of a certain degree of irrationality in this area. It is quite another to show that it was in major ways responsible for the coming of the war. How well do the specific arguments about the relationship between the "cult" and the outbreak of the war hold up in the light of the evidence? The weakest claim relates to

⁶⁰ Scott Sagan, "1914 Revisited: Allies, Offense and Instability," *International Security*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Fall 1986), pp. 161, 164. See also the correspondence between Sagan and Snyder in *International Security*, vol. 11, no. 3 (Winter 1986-87).

⁶¹ The German emphasis on offense reflects a similar degree of irrationality. In his famous memorandum of December 1905, Schlieffen had outlined a strategy for a one-front war, but even this he thought was "an enterprise for which we are too weak." Over the next decade, Russia recovered her strength, and it became clear that Britain would probably intervene with a sizable expeditionary force. Schlieffen himself, in his writings after his retirement, ignored these factors; he suppressed his own skepticism about the "theory of a decisive battle" in the west; this, he had said in 1905, was "not the way of wars today." One answer was to increase the size of the force the Germans would be able to deploy when the war began; but although there were significant increases in the army budget before the war, the measures taken were by no means adequate to deal with the problem. A massive expansion was resisted in large part because it would have altered the social composition of the officer corps and thus might in the long run have reduced the power of the old Junker elite. But the plans were never adequately adjusted to all these realities. See Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 53, 66-67, 73-74, 77, and Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 139, 141-45, 153. For a similar point about Austria, see Samuel Williamson, "Military Dimensions of Habsburg-Romanov Relations during the Era of the Balkan Wars," in Bela Kiraly and Dimitrije Djordjevic, eds., *East Central European Society and the Balkan Wars* (Boulder, Colo., 1987), esp. pp. 330-31.

the alleged connection between German expansionism and the belief in offense-dominance. When one looks at such a broadly based phenomenon as German imperialism, it is difficult to see a technical judgment about the balance between offense and defense on the battlefield as a major driving force. Indeed, if such a judgment were the key factor, and physical security against land attack were the fundamental goal, one would expect German expansionism to have focused on adjoining areas in Europe. Instead, the interests Germany most actively pursued lay in Africa and the Near East. In an offense-dominant world, where security is (in Van Evera's term) a "scarce asset,"⁶² one would expect a continental power like Germany to concentrate on building a strong land army; instead, resources were diverted into the construction of a great navy. The purpose of the navy was to help Germany acquire an empire. But even if she succeeded in acquiring colonies, this would hardly improve her security position: as the most clear-sighted Entente statesmen occasionally pointed out, German colonies would be hostage to Anglo-French naval power.⁶³ Whether this policy was successful or not, the whole effort was bound to have an unfavorable effect on Germany's security position: the policy in fact drove Britain onto the side of her enemies, thereby strengthening France and Russia and thus enabling them to pursue more aggressive anti-German policies, first in Morocco and then, with the formation of the Balkan League in 1912, in southeastern Europe as well.⁶⁴ Germany's position had been weakened by the policy; but she continued to pursue it, even when it became clear that she was paying such a price, and indeed was taking on Britain, France, and Russia all at the same time. This was hardly a world in which for Germany "security was scarce." Germany was not driven to expand because, in Jervis's phrase, "there seemed no way for [her] merely to retain and safeguard her existing position."⁶⁵ If that had been her basic goal, her foreign policy problems would have been quite manageable. As Kiderlen-Wächter, then foreign secretary, pointed out in 1910 in a passage quoted by Van Evera, the British and the French were too committed to peace to ever cause a war, so if Germany did not provoke one, "no one else certainly will do so."⁶⁶

The "cult of the offensive" theorists are on firmer ground when they

⁶² Van Evera, "Cult of the Offensive," p. 64.

⁶³ See especially the remarkable analysis by Jules Cambon, French ambassador in Berlin: Cambon to Pichon, July 8, 1913, *Documents diplomatiques français*, series 3, vol. 7, no. 317, esp. p. 352.

⁶⁴ When Poincaré, then prime minister, was shown the text of the basic treaty setting up the Balkan League, he remarked that "it contained the seeds not only of a war against Turkey, but of a war against Austria as well." Quoted in Pierre Renouvin, *La Crise européenne et la première guerre mondiale* (Paris, 1962), p. 173.

⁶⁵ Jervis, "Security Dilemma," p. 191.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Van Evera, "Cult of the Offensive," p. 69.

turn to factors more purely military in nature. The various war plans, and above all the Schlieffen Plan, placed an extraordinary emphasis on offensive military operations: if a war was to be fought, total victory had to be the goal, and the only way to achieve it was by overwhelming the enemy as quickly as possible, and destroying his power to resist. But while these plans certainly reflected a belief that a heavy emphasis on offense was *necessary*, they did not reflect a belief that offense would be *easy*. The point of departure for the German strategy was Schlieffen's realization that French defenses on the border with Germany made a direct attack out of the question, and indeed the chief of staff was fully aware of the defender's advantages: "We shall find the experience of all earlier conquerors confirmed, that a war of aggression calls for much strength, and also consumes much, that this strength dwindles constantly as the defender's increases, and all this particularly in a country with fortresses."⁶⁷

A strategy of this sort led to a certain interest in preemption. A swift seizure of the Belgian city of Liège became an important part of the German war plan in 1911. The Liège fortress system, Moltke wrote, had to be neutralized at the very beginning of the war: "everything depends on meticulous preparation and surprise."⁶⁸ It is not altogether clear, however, what role such considerations played in bringing on the war; the "cult of the offensive" theorists are in any case quite moderate in their claims about preemption.⁶⁹ But whatever interest there was in preemption in 1914, it is important to note that it was not rooted in a belief that conquest would be easy. It was because conquest was viewed as so difficult that small advantages, which if seized might just swing the balance, could count for so much on the margin—that is, as long as one was absolutely committed to total victory. Nor is it clear that preemption would have been less likely if the Germans had not opted for the Schlieffen strategy. If they *had* been able to see what the war was going to be like, and had chosen to stay on the defensive in the west and fought the war mainly in the east—that is, the more rational strategy that Van Evera assumes they would have adopted if no "cult of the offensive" had existed⁷⁰—the slowness of the Russian mobilization might still have given the Germans a great incentive to act quickly and attack the Russians before their preparations were complete. Indeed, the elder Moltke's final plan, worked out

⁶⁷ Quoted in Turner, "Schlieffen Plan," p. 50.

⁶⁸ Moltke memorandum, in Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, p. 166. On the Liège issue, see n. 161 below.

⁶⁹ Van Evera, "Cult of the Offensive," p. 79, says that the war was "in some modest measure preemptive." Snyder does not see preemption as a decisive factor for either Germany or Russia: "Civil-Military Relations," pp. 113–14.

⁷⁰ Van Evera, "Cult of the Offensive," p. 90.

in 1888, provided for "the encirclement of the main Russian force behind Warsaw and a surprise attack while it was deploying."⁷¹

Van Evera's strongest argument relates to "windows" and preventive war. In 1914, victory was still possible; but the balance was moving against Germany, and it is certainly true that many influential people thought that Germany should take advantage of what we would now call this "window of opportunity" before it closed and perhaps deliberately bring about a war.⁷² The preventive war argument in its pure form was particularly strong in the army. The views of the political leadership were less extreme. From its point of view, given the way things were moving, there was a good chance that Germany would eventually find herself at war with the Entente; this was especially true if Russia was determined to tighten the noose around the Central Powers; if such a war was inevitable, it was better for Germany that it come sooner rather than later; and the test of its inevitability, the test of Russian intentions, was whether the Russians would now tolerate a tough Austrian policy against Serbia. A policy of annihilating Serbia as an independent factor in European politics was thus for Germany, as Naumann put it at the time, "the touchstone whether Russia meant war or not."⁷³

This assessment of how the balance was shifting—this sense that Germany's "window of opportunity" was closing rapidly—was in turn rooted in the sort of strategy that Germany had adopted, the highly offense-oriented strategy embodied in the Schlieffen Plan. This plan depended on the existence of a tactical "window": Germany would be able to attack France with the great mass of her army because the slowness of Russian mobilization meant that Germany's eastern border would not

⁷¹ Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, p. 20.

⁷² On preventive war thinking in Germany before the war, see especially Walter Kloster, *Der deutsche Generalstab und der Präventivkriegsgedanke* (Stuttgart, 1932); Adolf Gasser, "Deutschlands Entschluss zum Präventivkrieg 1913/14," in Marc Sieber, ed., *Discordia concors: Festgabe für Edgar Bonjour*, vol. 1 (Basel, 1968); and Albrecht Moritz, *Das Problem des Präventivkrieges in der deutschen Politik während der ersten Marokkokrise* (Frankfurt, 1974).

⁷³ Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 66. Some of these considerations are reflected in other documents; see for example Szögyény to Berchtold, July 12, 1914, and Jagow to Lichnowsky, July 18, 1914, both in Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 110, 123, and also Mérey's comments quoted in Albertini, vol. 2, p. 383. Note also an important letter from Count Hoyos describing his mission to Berlin at the beginning of the crisis (during which the famous "blank check" was issued). The Austrians wanted to know, Hoyos said, how the Germans felt about an Austrian move against Serbia, and in particular, "whether, from a political and a military point of view, it judged the moment as favorable." The chancellor and a top foreign office official replied that "if war should break out, we [that is, the Germans] think that it is better that it should happen now than in one or two years when the Entente will have become stronger." Hoyos to Mérey, July 20, 1917, *Revue d'histoire de la guerre mondiale*, vol. 10, no. 1 (January 1932), pp. 110–11.

have to be heavily defended during the initial phase of the war. But with the construction of Russian strategic railroads and other measures, this tactical "window" was disappearing—indeed, the central purpose of these measures was to close it⁷⁴—and this meant that the Schlieffen Plan would soon become unworkable. In other words, the disappearance of the tactical window meant that Germany's strategic window was also closing.⁷⁵ With a more defensive strategy, the "preventive war" arguments would have carried much less weight.

This does not in itself mean, however, that "window" thinking was an important cause of the war. The reason is that these "window" arguments should have had opposite effects on the two sides: Germany's "window of opportunity" was the Entente's "window of vulnerability," and although Germany had an extra incentive to act, Russia and France had an extra incentive to be cautious and put off the conflict if they could. It seems in fact that Russian leaders understood the situation in these terms.⁷⁶ Why did the two effects not cancel each other out? If they did not neutralize each other, other factors must have intervened, in which case they, and not the "window" arguments, were the crucial factors as far as the war origins question is concerned. And certainly some of these factors were not military in nature—for example, the astonishing irrationality of the Russian leadership at the time, in the sense of its willingness to plunge into a venture that it knew was beyond Russia's strength.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ This emphasis on the construction of strategic railroads thus reflects a basic understanding of the logic of the Schlieffen Plan by the French and Russian military leadership. The French were especially eager for the construction of these railroads, and made Russian cooperation in this area a condition for the issuance of new loans to Russia. This was thus not a subject that the military could keep to themselves; the civil authorities had to be brought in. Much of the story can be followed in *Documents diplomatiques français*, series 3, vols. 7–9; see also René Girault, *Emprunts russes et investissements français en Russie, 1887–1914* (Paris, 1973), pp. 561–68.

⁷⁵ For an exceptionally well informed discussion of this issue, see Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914–1917* (New York, 1975), pp. 39–43.

⁷⁶ See, for example, I. V. Bestuzhev, "Russian Foreign Policy, February–June 1914," in Walter Laqueur and George Mosse, eds., *1914: The Coming of the First World War* (New York, 1966), p. 91, and also the testimony of General Yanushkevich, in 1914 the Chief of Staff, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 559.

⁷⁷ In 1909, Russia had given in during the Bosnian Crisis after General Roediger, the war minister, had stated that the army could not even wage a defensive war against Germany and Austria. But the war minister in 1914, Sukhomlinov, while admitting in private, as Albertini says, that "Russia was throwing herself unprepared into a venture beyond her strength," and even warning Sazonov through an intermediary that Russia was not fully prepared for war, was unwilling to come out openly and tell the Council of Ministers what the real situation was. The minister of the interior, Maklakov, when asked to sign the mobilization *ukaze*, spoke about how war would bring revolution; but "sitting at a table laden with ikons and religious lamps," crossed himself, saying "we cannot escape our fate," and

What difference then did the "cult of the offensive" make? If the military situation had been correctly understood, would matters have been all that different? One can scarcely argue that if the power of the defense had been understood correctly, the situation would have been more stable because instead of attacking, the armies would have simply "rushed for the trenches":⁷⁸ if the Russians had just entrenched themselves on their borders, they would have been writing off Serbia; but if they were willing to do that, what was the point of going to war in the first place? Moreover, if the Germans had opted for a more defensive strategy in the west and conducted their offensive operations mainly in the east, the effect would have been to strengthen the German position. France, in the event of such a war, might well have felt obliged to relieve pressure on her ally by throwing her armies against the German border. But this would have been a hopeless effort if the Germans had built modern fortifications in that area.⁷⁹ The political benefits to Germany of such a strategy—not having to invade Belgium, not appearing as the aggressor, an increased probability that Britain would remain neutral—were yet an additional source of strength. But the stronger Germany was, the more unyielding she could be in the dispute over southeastern Europe. Perhaps Russia, for opposite reasons, would in such a case have been more willing to sacrifice Serbia. But even if these two effects just canceled each other out, it is hard to see how an eastern strategy—that is, a strategy based on a better understanding of military realities—would have made war less likely in 1914.

To the extent that a belief in the power of the offense had in 1914 come to mean a belief that one's own side would prevail in war quickly and easily, the "cult" might well have been an important source of instability. It is clear that there is a certain psychological affinity between a strategy that stresses offensive action and a belief that such action would be successful. But the two ideas are not the same: a general judgment about how well the attacker will do on the battlefield is by no means equivalent to an assumption that one's own side is likely to win. Conquest cannot simultaneously be easy for both sides; in an offense-dominant world, one side will win relatively quickly, and the other side's defeat will be absolute. In such a world, the stronger side's greater hope of victory might be

then signed the document. Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 546; Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 108–9, 115.

⁷⁸ As both Jervis and Van Evera argue: Jervis, "Security Dilemma," pp. 191, 214; Van Evera, "Cult of the Offensive," p. 105.

⁷⁹ The French border fortifications had convinced the Germans that frontal attack was no longer possible. Indeed, this realization was one of the great taproots of the Schlieffen strategy of outflanking the French forces by marching through Belgium. German fortifications on their side of the border would presumably have a similar effect. See Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, p. 243.

balanced—perhaps, in general, more than balanced—by the weaker side's greater fear of defeat. Even if the outcome of the war could objectively be rated a toss-up, the fear of total defeat might be expected for both sides to outweigh the hope of total victory; if so, the net impact would be to make the two sides more cautious than they would be if the risks were relatively limited. Indeed, one might argue—and Jervis at one point in fact does argue—that in a defense-dominant relationship where the risks *are* limited, statesmen might approach war in a much more cavalier way.⁸⁰ It is important to note in this connection, moreover, that political and military leaders in 1914 thought of a European war as a very serious undertaking. If a conflict broke out, the British foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, said, it would be “the most terrible war which Europe had ever seen”; “rivers of blood would flow,” said the Russian foreign minister, Sazonov; and even Moltke spoke of the European states tearing “one another to pieces,” and of a war which would “annihilate for decades to come the civilization of almost the whole of Europe.”⁸¹

In short, the “cult of the offensive” theory, while highly suggestive and in some respects quite elegant analytically, does not really provide the key to the puzzle of how the First World War broke out. The world of 1914 was not a world whose natural equilibrium had been destroyed by an exaggerated belief in the importance of offensive action. The military plans themselves, while certainly highly offensive in terms of their basic orientation, did not generate the political conflict that had led to the war, nor did they preclude its peaceful resolution.

MOBILIZATION PLANS AND PREEMPTION

“World War I,” says George Quester, “broke out as a spasm of pre-emptive mobilization schedules.”⁸² It was this system of interlocking mobilization plans, Paul Bracken writes, that “swamped the political process in 1914.”⁸³ Statesmen tried to draw back on the eve of the war, according to Barbara Tuchman, “but the pull of military schedules dragged them

⁸⁰ Jervis, “Security Dilemma,” p. 176. The relationship between Britain and Russia in the 19th century, a defense-dominant relationship if there ever was one, is an excellent example. See especially the extraordinary evidence on Disraeli's attitude toward war with Russia in 1877, presented in R. W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question* (London, 1935), esp. pp. 217–18.

⁸¹ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 307, 410, 488. See also General Ludwig Beck, *Studien*, ed. Hans Speidel (Stuttgart, 1955), pp. 105–6, 150–51, and Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 153–54.

⁸² George Quester, *Deterrence Before Hiroshima* (New York, 1966), p. 17.

⁸³ Paul Bracken, *Command and Control*, p. 2.

forward.”⁸⁴ A.J.P. Taylor agrees: in 1914, Schlieffen's “dead hand automatically pulled the trigger.”⁸⁵ Arguments of this sort are extremely common and form the heart of the “inadvertent war” thesis. Given how important and how widespread they are, it is amazing how little critical analysis such arguments have received.⁸⁶ The goal of this section is to examine these claims in a more or less systematic way, and this examination will show, I think, just how weak this set of arguments is.

It is not that the conventional wisdom is wrong in assuming that there was a system of interlocking mobilization plans in 1914. A system of this sort certainly did exist, with the Schlieffen Plan as its linchpin. That strategy proposed to take advantage of the relative slowness of Russian mobilization: the idea was that Germany, by mobilizing rapidly and then attacking in the west with the great mass of her army, would be able to defeat France before having to face Russia. The Germans could not therefore allow a Russian general mobilization to run its course without ordering their own mobilization and in fact attacking France. Russian mobilization would lead to German mobilization, and under the German war plan mobilization meant war.

A mechanism of this sort clearly existed, but was it actually a *cause* of the war? It is important to think through what is implied by the claim that this mechanism of interlocking mobilization plans helped bring on the cataclysm. One can begin with a simple analogy. Suppose it takes me thirty minutes to get home when the traffic is light, but a full hour during the rush hour. I promise to be home by 6:00, but I choose to leave at 5:30 and arrive a half-hour late: “I'm sorry about the delay, but it's not my fault. It was because the traffic was so bad.” The rush hour traffic, however, could hardly be said to be a *cause* of the delay, since I had chosen to leave at 5:30, knowing full well what the situation was. Knowledge of the situation had been factored into the original decision. On the other hand, if the heavy traffic had been caused by something that had not been anticipated—by an accident, for example—then it would make more sense to blame it for the delay.

Similarly, if in 1914 everyone understood the system and knew, for example, that a Russian general mobilization would lead to war, the existence of the system of interlocking mobilization plans could hardly be said in itself to have been a cause of war—assuming, that is, that the political authorities were free agents and that their hands had not been forced by military imperatives. Some people argue that the mobilization system was a “cause” of war because once it was set off the time for

⁸⁴ Tuchman, *Guns of August*, p. 72.

⁸⁵ A.J.P. Taylor, *Illustrated History of the First World War* (New York, 1964), p. 15.

⁸⁶ The best discussion is in Van Evera, “Cult of the Offensive,” pp. 71–79.

negotiation was cut short. But if the working of the system was understood in advance, a decision for general mobilization was a decision for war; statesmen would in that case be opting for war with their eyes open. To argue that the system was a "cause" of the war would be like arguing that any military operation that marked the effective beginning of hostilities—the crossing of borders, for example, or an initial attack on enemy forces—was a real cause of an armed conflict, simply because it foreclosed the possibility of a negotiated settlement. Such operations are in no real sense a "cause" of war, because their implications are universally understood in advance. Similarly, assuming everyone understood how the system worked, the mobilization process could not be viewed as a cause of the war, but should instead be seen simply as its opening phase.

It follows, therefore, that for the inadvertent war theory to hold, it must be shown *either* that the implications of mobilization were not understood, *or* that the political leadership was under such great pressure to act that it was not really free to hold back. The "inadvertent war" arguments in this area in fact fall into these two categories.

The first basic set of arguments focuses on the alleged failure of the political leaders to understand what the military plans actually meant. As a result, it is said, they made their moves and ordered their mobilizations light-heartedly, thinking that they were engaged in simple political maneuvering, seeking only to deter their adversaries. But once set loose, the forces they had unleashed could scarcely be controlled.⁸⁷ "The absence of all understanding of military matters on the part of the responsible statesmen" is for Albertini a major cause of the war. "It was," he says, "the political leaders' ignorance of what mobilization implied and the dangers it involved which led them light-heartedly to take the step of mobilizing and thus unleash a European war."⁸⁸ The basic contention here is that the statesmen did not understand that general mobilization meant war. This claim will be examined in the next section. But it is also argued that the political leadership failed to understand that even a *partial* Russian mobilization, directed only against Austria, would have led to war "no less surely than general mobilization," and that this was also a major cause of the disaster.⁸⁹ So to test the claim that ignorance of crucial military realities played an important role in bringing on the conflict, a second section will examine the argument that even a partial mobilization would have inevitably led to war.

⁸⁷ Taylor, *Illustrated History*, pp. 14–15; Howard, "Lest We Forget," p. 65; Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, pp. 26, 109–12.

⁸⁸ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 479–83, 579. L.C.F. Turner, in *Origins of the First World War* (New York, 1970), p. 99, follows Albertini on this point.

⁸⁹ Turner, *Origins*, pp. 92, 108; Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 392, 485n. (for the quote), 529–30, 541.

The other set of arguments focuses on the claim that the statesmen were not really free agents when the mobilization decisions were made. The basic argument here is that military considerations, and especially the pressure to move preemptively, came at the crucial moment to dominate policy. It is often taken for granted that the very existence of a military regime based on mass armies and mobilizations automatically created incentives for preemption. Writing of World War I, for example, Herman Kahn remarked: "This ability to increase one's force by a large factor and in a very short period of time gave a disastrous instability to the situation, because it promised to give the nation that mobilized first a crucial advantage."⁹⁰ The point is hardly self-evident, since mobilizations are difficult to conceal, and if detected quickly might lead to such rapid counter-mobilizations that there may be scarcely any advantage to going first.⁹¹ Was it in fact the case, however, that the incentive to go first, to the extent that it really did exist, played a significant role in shaping at least some of the key decisions that were made on the eve of the war? Was it true that "general staffs, goaded by their relentless timetables, were pounding the table for the signal to move lest their opponents gain an hour's head start"?⁹²

There is also the closely related issue of whether the military effectively took control of policy—at least in Germany and perhaps in Russia as well. According to Craig, for example, by the end of the crisis Moltke "had superseded the Chancellor in all but name"; the military technicians "had overborne the civilian authorities and brought war on in their own way"; in the end "the great decision of 1914 was made by the soldiers."⁹³ Albertini also has Bethmann "surrendering" to Moltke, "capitulating" to his "will to war," and says: "at the decisive moment the military took over the direction of affairs and imposed their law."⁹⁴ With regard to Russia, he remarks that after the Austrian declaration of war on Serbia, Sazonov lost "control of the situation" which, he says, "passed into the hands of the military."⁹⁵ If these claims are valid, it would make sense to hold the system in some measure responsible for the coming of the war.

The claim that policymakers were "stampeded" into war in 1914 thus needs to be tested.⁹⁶ This set of issues will therefore be examined in a third

⁹⁰ Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, 1960), p. 359.

⁹¹ As far as I can tell, Van Evera is the only one to make this point. Van Evera, "Cult of the Offensive," p. 75.

⁹² Tuchman, *Guns of August*, p. 72.

⁹³ Craig, *Politics*, pp. 291, 294, 295.

⁹⁴ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, pp. 13, 27, 31, 190, 232, 248.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 540.

⁹⁶ See, for example, Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, pp. 34, 60.

section focusing on the most important phase of the crisis: the final hours before Russia ordered general mobilization on July 30.

The Meaning of Mobilization

On July 23 the Austrians issued their ultimatum to Serbia; the Serbs were given forty-eight hours to reply; on July 24 the Russian government considered and on July 25 decided to prepare a partial mobilization against Austria. The Russians also decided on the 25th to enforce "throughout the entire Empire the order for the period preparatory to war." Important pre-mobilization measures were to be put into effect secretly the next day.⁹⁷ The crisis had moved into its military phase.

With the decisions of July 25, Russia was moving closer to general mobilization. Did the Russian leaders understand what they were doing—that their full mobilization would lead to a German mobilization, and that for Germany mobilization meant war? It is an important element of the "inadvertent war" thesis that they did not, and Albertini returns to this point repeatedly. "Russia," he says, "had no knowledge of the fact that for Germany mobilization meant going to war," and Sazonov in particular did not understand that Germany could not afford delay, but would begin military operations almost immediately.⁹⁸ Many political scientists seem to have accepted these arguments, and have perhaps even taken them a step or two further. According to Lebow, for example, "Russian political leaders mobilized in 1914 in the belief that mobilization would be a deterrent to war"; "neither the czar nor Sazonov," he says, "believed that their action would directly trigger war."⁹⁹ It is quite clear, however, from the evidence that Albertini himself presents, that the Russian government understood very well what mobilization meant when it made its mobilization decisions at the end of July.

The Russian documents show, first of all, that support for general mobilization was rooted in a belief in the virtual inevitability of war. On July 30, the day the fateful decision was made, A. V. Krivoshein, the leading figure in the government, met with Sazonov before the latter was scheduled to see the Tsar. According to Baron Schilling, whose official diary is the single most important source on Russian policy during the crisis, their conversation "was almost exclusively concerned with the necessity for insisting upon a general mobilization at the earliest possible moment, in

⁹⁷ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 290–94, 304–8; Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 207.

⁹⁸ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, p. 245; vol. 2, pp. 579–81. See also Paul Kennedy's comments in Kennedy, *War Plans*, p. 16, and Stephen Van Evera, "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914," *World Politics*, vol. 38, no. 1 (October 1985), p. 104.

⁹⁹ Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, pp. 26, 111.

view of the inevitability of war with Germany, which every moment became clearer." When Sazonov saw the Tsar, he argued along similar lines: "During the course of nearly an hour the Minister proceeded to show that war was becoming inevitable, as it was clear to everybody that Germany had decided to bring about a collision, as otherwise she would not have rejected all the pacificatory proposals that had been made and could easily have brought her ally to reason. . . . Therefore it was necessary to put away any fears that our warlike preparations would bring about a war and to continue these preparations carefully, rather than by reason of such fears to be taken unawares by war."

Sazonov here was virtually conceding that mobilization ("our warlike preparations") would in all probability bring on war; his argument was that since war was now unavoidable, this point could no longer carry weight. The Tsar, however, resisted Sazonov's arguments, because he also knew what mobilization meant: "The firm desire of the Tsar to avoid war at all costs, the horrors of which filled him with repulsion, led His Majesty, in his full realization of the heavy responsibility which he took upon himself in this fateful hour, to explore every means for averting the approaching danger." As a result, the Tsar "refused during a long time to agree to the adoption of measures which, however indispensable from a military point of view"—again, an allusion to general mobilization—"were calculated, as he clearly saw, to hasten a decision in an undesirable sense," i.e., to precipitate the war. But finally he agreed that "it would be very dangerous not to make timely preparations for what was apparently an inevitable war, and therefore gave his decision in favour of an immediate general mobilization."¹⁰⁰

The argument for holding back had thus been based on the idea that it might still be possible to save the peace. This in turn reflected an assumption that a decision for mobilization would in itself make it for all practical purposes impossible to avoid war. It was taken for granted that there was a trade-off between seizing the military advantages of the first mobilization and paying the price of precipitating the war; the argument for making the move thus turned on the point that the price now was really low, because war was virtually inevitable anyway. The notion that the Russians ordered general mobilization in the belief that "mobilization would be a deterrent to war" is without foundation. It was clearly understood that to order mobilization was to cross the Rubicon: there could be no turning back.

Sazonov had certainly been told many times what the situation was. As

¹⁰⁰ Baron Schilling, *How the War Began in 1914* (London, 1925), pp. 62–66; Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 565, 571–72. Note also the account of the meeting held the previous day that had led to Russia's first decision for general mobilization, a decision later revoked by the Tsar: Schilling, *How the War Began*, pp. 49–50; Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 555.

early as July 25, for example—that is, before any irrevocable decision had been taken—the British ambassador had warned him that “if Russia mobilized, Germany would not be content with mere mobilization or give Russia time to carry out hers, but would probably declare war at once.” Sazonov did not dispute the point. He simply pointed out that because the political stakes were so great, Russia, sure of French support, would “face all the risks of war.”¹⁰¹ The following day, Bethmann instructed Count Pourtalès, the German ambassador in Russia, to issue a warning: “Preparatory military measures on the part of Russia aimed in any way at us would compel us to take measures for our own protection which would have to consist in the mobilization of the army. Mobilization, however, would mean war.”¹⁰² The warning was issued the next day, but Sazonov did not show alarm, and Albertini infers from this that it failed to register on the foreign minister.¹⁰³

The evidence that Albertini gives to support his argument about Sazonov not understanding what mobilization meant is extremely weak. Sazonov had admitted in his memoirs that Pourtalès had warned him that German mobilization would immediately lead to war. But according to Albertini, the foreign minister was mistaken about having been warned, and the proof, he says, comes from Pourtalès himself: “Sazonov put the question: ‘Surely mobilization is not equivalent to war with you, either, is it?’ I replied: ‘Perhaps not in theory. But . . . once the button is pressed and the machinery of mobilization set in motion, there is no stopping it.’”¹⁰⁴ Pourtalès was thus clearly saying that for all practical purposes mobilization meant war, but Albertini insists on interpreting the remark in exactly the opposite sense: the ambassador’s remark “seemed to imply that mobilization was not yet war.”¹⁰⁵ Similarly, referring to Bethmann’s important warning of the 29th that “further progress of Russian mobilization measures would compel us to mobilize and that then a European war could scarcely be prevented,” Albertini emphasizes that Bethmann said “‘scarcely,’ but not ‘not at all’”—as though this had the slightest practical importance.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, earlier that day Pourtalès and Sazonov had another meeting, the record of which shows that the foreign minister understood that for

¹⁰¹ Buchanan to Grey, July 25, 1914, Great Britain, Foreign Office, *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, vol. 11 (London, 1926), no. 125; Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 307.

¹⁰² Bethmann to Pourtalès, July 26, 1914, *Outbreak of the World War*, doc. 219; Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 428.

¹⁰³ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, p. 43.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* Note, similarly, the discussion in Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, pp. 112–13.

Germany mobilization meant war. Sazonov pointed out that “in Russia, unlike western European states, mobilization is far from being the same as war. The Russian army could, at need, stand at ease for weeks without crossing the border.”¹⁰⁷ There is no question that by “western European states,” Sazonov had Germany in mind, and Albertini in effect admits as much later in the book.¹⁰⁸ The Russians, of course, had an interest in arguing that their mobilization did not necessarily mean war, since if they could get Germany to tolerate a Russian mobilization, the military position of the Entente in the event of war would improve dramatically. This point was very widely understood in Europe; even Grey realized that asking Germany to acquiesce in a Russian mobilization of any sort, even one directed only against Austria, would be tantamount to asking her to “throw away the advantage of time.”¹⁰⁹ For the same reason, however, the Germans had a great interest in explaining why they could not do this.¹¹⁰ Thus, for example, Pourtalès pointed out to Sazonov on the 29th that “the danger of all military measures lies in the counter-measures of the other side. It is to be expected that the General Staffs of eventual enemies of Russia would not want to sacrifice the trump card of their great lead over Russia in mobilization and would press for counter-measures.”¹¹¹ If Sazonov had not already understood this, one would again expect some expression of surprise or dismay. But in Pourtalès’s account, there is no record of any such reaction. Sazonov once again took the point in stride.

In short, the Russian leadership certainly understood what mobilization meant. The evidence is quite overwhelming. Albertini himself admits in the end that Sazonov advised the Tsar to order general mobilization, although he was “well aware that this would bring Germany on the scene, and render war practically inevitable.”¹¹² Even the Tsar, more removed from the situation than Sazonov, spoke about being “forced to take ex-

¹⁰⁷ Pourtalès to Foreign Office, July 29, 1914, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 549. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 658.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 339. See also the extract from Grey’s memoirs quoted in *ibid.*, p. 392.

¹¹⁰ Assuming, that is, that their goal was to avoid war by getting the Russians to back down. If, as the Fischer school argues, their aim was to provoke a war for which Russia would be blamed, a Russian mobilization would have been welcome, and the German government would not have attempted to deter Russia from ordering it by issuing this series of warnings.

¹¹¹ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 549.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 581. As for the French, note the analysis in *ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 105–8. Albertini argues, quite persuasively in this case, that President Poincaré and Prime Minister Viviani were disingenuous in declaring that “mobilization is not war,” and that it was “the best means of assuring peace with honor.”

remeasures which will lead to war"—an obvious reference to general mobilization.¹¹³ At the crucial moment, moreover, when he was asked to sign the general mobilization decree, Nicholas clearly realized what was at stake. "Think of the responsibility you are advising me to assume," he said to Sazonov. "Consider that it means sending thousands and thousands of men to their deaths."¹¹⁴

It follows that a failure to understand what general mobilization meant was not the problem. For tactical reasons, certain statesmen might have pretended to believe that a Russian general mobilization need not lead to war, but such assertions can scarcely be taken at face value. The Russian political leadership certainly understood how risky this movement toward mobilization was, and, as Bethmann's warnings show, German statesmen were also fully aware of the situation.

The Russian Partial Mobilization

On July 28, Austria, finding the Serbian reply to her ultimatum unsatisfactory even though most of her demands had been accepted, declared war on Serbia. As a result, the Russian government decided later that day to order a partial mobilization against Austria. Neither of these moves was made for essentially military reasons. From the military point of view, the Austrian declaration of war came two weeks too early. Baron Conrad, the chief of the Austrian general staff, had told the foreign minister, Count Berchtold, that he wanted war declared only when he was capable of beginning military operations, "say on August 12." But the foreign minister wanted to act quickly in order to put an end to "various influences." "The diplomatic situation," he told Conrad, "will not hold so long."¹¹⁵

As for the Russian decision to mobilize against Austria, this too was taken for political and not military reasons.¹¹⁶ "Its object," Schmitt writes, "was to indicate Russia's earnestness of purpose and to compel Austria-Hungary, under pressure of a 'military demonstration,' to consent to negotiate a pacific settlement of her quarrel with Serbia."¹¹⁷ From

¹¹³ This is from a telegram he sent to the Kaiser, dispatched at 1 a.m. on July 30, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 542.

¹¹⁴ Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, vol. 2, p. 243. See also Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 558.

¹¹⁵ Baron Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, *Aus meiner Dienstzeit 1906-1918*, 5 vols. (Vienna, 1921-25), vol. 4, pp. 131-32; quoted in Turner, *Origins*, p. 98.

¹¹⁶ See Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 291-92, 529.

¹¹⁷ Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, vol. 2, p. 94. Note also the discussion, based on important material from the Bark papers, in Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 142-44. The goal was to deter Germany, but the Russian leaders were acutely

a purely military point of view, moreover, it did not make much sense to mobilize against Austria alone at that point—or at least this is what Albertini and L.C.F. Turner both argue. Russia, they say, would have been better off waiting until Austria had concentrated her forces in the south and perhaps even became involved in military operations against Serbia. Then Austria would be more vulnerable in the north, and thus more susceptible to the pressure of a Russian partial mobilization.¹¹⁸ Conrad himself thought that this was the most dangerous, and therefore the most likely, Russian strategy.¹¹⁹ The original Russian plan had in fact been to wait until Austria actually invaded Serbia before ordering partial mobilization, but Sazonov impulsively jumped the gun and opted for this measure right after hearing about the Austrian declaration of war.¹²⁰

The "inadvertent war" argument turns in this case not on causes but on consequences. The decisions had been made freely, not as the result of undue pressure from the military. But the statesmen, it is argued, had set off a process they simply could not control. "For the Austrian government," Howard writes, "a declaration of war was a political manoeuvre, for the Russian government a mobilisation order was a counter-manoeuvre; but such orders set in motion administrative processes which could be neither halted nor reversed, without causing a chaos which would place the nation at the mercy of its adversaries."¹²¹

The political leaders—not just Sazonov, but Grey and Jagow, who each in their way had consented to the Russian partial mobilization—certainly did not believe that it would lead inevitably to war. If they were wrong in this regard—if, in fact, irreversible "administrative processes" had been set off—then this would be an important point in favor of the argument that the political leaders' ignorance of military matters helped bring about the war, and in fact both Albertini and Turner argue along these lines. The claim is that a Russian partial mobilization against Austria would have led to an Austrian general mobilization, which "in turn would require Germany to mobilize." It was "ridiculous," Albertini says, to think that Germany could stand idly by and allow Russia, through even a partial mobilization, to deploy her forces more quickly in the event

conscious of the fact that this might not work; in such a case, they were prepared to go to war.

¹¹⁸ See Turner, *Origins*, pp. 92-93; Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 482.

¹¹⁹ Stone, "Moltke and Conrad," in Kennedy, *War Plans*, p. 228.

¹²⁰ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 305, 484, 532, 538. Albertini says that Sazonov acted precipitately "possibly in the belief that the invasion of Serbia would follow immediately" (p. 538). But the Austrians had told the British that if the Serbs did not accept their demands, they would not begin military operations immediately, and the British had passed this information on to the Russians. *British Documents*, vol. 11, nos. 104 and 105, and Schilling, *How the War Began*, pp. 35-36.

¹²¹ Howard, "Lest We Forget," p. 65.

of a European war and thus make the success of the Schlieffen Plan more problematic. "It is quite clear," he argues, "that even if Russia had confined herself to ordering partial mobilization, the logic of the case as presented by Conrad and Moltke would have forced Germany to demand that it be cancelled, or, in case of a refusal, mobilize in her turn in order to go to the help of Austria. In short, partial mobilization would have led to war no less surely than general mobilization."¹²²

Germany's alliance arrangements with Austria were, however, a good deal more ambiguous than Turner and Albertini imply. The important exchange of letters between Moltke and Conrad that had taken place in 1909 during the Bosnian Crisis was, as Schmitt says, the equivalent of a military convention. With the emperor's and the chancellor's approval, Moltke had promised that "at the moment that Russia mobilizes, Germany will also mobilize and will mobilize her entire army."¹²³ But it is by no means clear that this arrangement applied to the case of a partial mobilization against Austria. In view of Austria's well-known alliance with Germany, Moltke might well have calculated that mobilization against Austria alone made little military sense, that this contingency was thus unlikely to arise, and was therefore not worth worrying about.¹²⁴

It is striking that neither Conrad nor Moltke nor the Russians took it for granted that mobilization by Austria and Russia against each other would in itself lead to war. Berchtold, on the 30th, did say that such a joint mobilization would lead to war, but Conrad replied "that if the Russians do not touch us, we need not touch them either."¹²⁵ The Russians, who of course had an interest in allowing their mobilization to proceed

¹²² Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 340, 344, 392, 529–30, 541, and (for the final quotation) 485n.; Turner, *Origins*, pp. 92, 104. Fischer also accepts this conclusion: *War of Illusions*, p. 491. Albertini makes this argument even though he accepts the view of the Russian military leaders that a partial mobilization would have made a general mobilization more difficult, and thus would have placed Russia in a weaker position in the event that war broke out with Germany. Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 292–94, 541–43. If true, the Germans therefore should have had no military basis for objecting to partial mobilization, since it would have placed them in a stronger position if war came, all the more so since it would have put pressure on the Austrians to deploy their forces along their border with Russia instead of against Serbia, and this would have facilitated the implementation of the Schlieffen Plan.

¹²³ Quoted in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, vol. 1, pp. 15, 17.

¹²⁴ The Entente, on the other hand, was more careful in this regard, and in their military understandings took such contingencies explicitly into account. Under the 1913 arrangement, any German mobilization or attack would automatically lead to French and Russian mobilization, but even a general Austrian mobilization would not have such an automatic effect; specific arrangements would have to be worked out at the time. "Procès-verbal des Entretiens du mois d'août 1913 entre les chefs d'état-major des armées française et russe," *Documents diplomatiques français*, series 3, vol. 8, doc. 79.

¹²⁵ Conrad, *Dienstzeit*, vol. 4, pp. 150–51; quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 670.

for as long as possible before hostilities broke out, and who in any event had an interest in avoiding blame for the war, naturally made the same sort of argument, even about a general mobilization. "There was no fear," said Sazonov, "that the guns would go off by themselves."¹²⁶ It is much more significant that Moltke himself, after learning of the partial mobilization, told the Austrians in very direct language on the morning of the 30th that the Russian move gave the Germans "no reason" to mobilize. German mobilization, he said, would only begin after war broke out between Austria and Russia, and he advised the Austrians not to "declare war on Russia but wait for Russia to attack."¹²⁷ It is true that his attitude was to change that afternoon, but this apparently had more to do with early indications that the Russians were moving toward *general* mobilization than with his changing his mind about *partial* mobilization.¹²⁸

Finally, there is the argument that Germany could not tolerate even a partial Russian mobilization directed only against Austria: after having encouraged the Austrians to move against Serbia, the Germans would find it impossible to stand by while Austria was subjected to this form of extreme Russian military pressure. The Germans therefore had to try to prevent the Russians from implementing the partial mobilization order. Bethmann, Albertini argues, therefore on July 29 "sent Pourtalès a telegram containing such threats that they powerfully contributed to persuading Sazonov that he must mobilize not only against Austria but also against Germany."¹²⁹ In this way the partial mobilization, he says, helped bring on the war.

It is wrong, however, to say that Russia's partial mobilization led to Bethmann's warning on the 29th, which in turn led to general mobilization and thus to war. This could not possibly have been the case, because, as Albertini's own evidence shows, the warning had been issued *before* the Germans even knew about the partial mobilization. Bethmann's telegram—"Kindly impress on M. Sazonov very seriously that further progress of Russian mobilization measures would compel us to mobilize and

¹²⁶ Quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 682.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 671–72, quoting a telegram and a letter from the Austrian liaison officer in Berlin, Captain Fleischmann, to Conrad, both of July 30, 1914. It is important to note that Moltke was now drawing back from the position he had taken earlier. On July 28, Moltke had drafted his well-known memorandum for Bethmann analyzing the situation. In it, he had argued that a Russian partial mobilization would lead Austria to order general mobilization, and that then "the collision between herself and Russia will become inevitable." Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 283.

¹²⁸ See Ulrich Trumpener, "War Premeditated? German Intelligence Operations in July 1914," *Central European History*, vol. 9, no. 1 (March 1976), p. 79.

¹²⁹ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 485.

that then European war could scarcely be prevented"¹³⁰—left Berlin a little before 1 p.m. on the 29th. The Germans only learned of the partial mobilization later that afternoon.¹³¹ What the Germans seem to have been reacting to when they issued their warning were the far-reaching Russian pre-mobilization measures, many of which were directed against them.¹³² In any case, the Germans seemed to be demanding a standstill, and not a revocation of measures already put into effect.

Instead of leading to war, the partial mobilization played a key role in bringing about an important softening of German policy on the night of July 29–30. Up to the 29th, Germany had been hoping for a localization of the conflict. But now the partial mobilization order was demonstrating quite dramatically that this probably would not be possible. It was one thing to talk about backing Austria even at the risk of a European war at the beginning of the crisis when that risk was judged to be low. But it was an entirely different matter to take such a line at a time when the risk appeared much greater. Bethmann's attitude, in fact, began to shift almost as soon as he learned of the Russian move. The reply he sent off at 11 p.m. on the 29th to the telegram from Pourtalès reporting the partial mobilization "struck a different note," as Albertini says, "from his earlier one of intimidation." "Russian mobilization on the Austrian frontier," Bethmann pointed out, "will, I assume, lead to corresponding Austrian measures. How far it will still be possible to stop the avalanche then it is hard to say."¹³³ The reference here to Austrian, and not German, countermeasures was particularly significant.

Indeed, Bethmann's general attitude on the night of July 29–30 underwent a stunning shift. He comes across as a man desperately anxious to avoid war. Up to then, he was scarcely interested in working out any kind of peaceful settlement. He had effectively sabotaged all proposals that might have prevented an Austrian attack on Serbia, including an important one that had come on the 28th from the Kaiser himself.¹³⁴ But on the

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 553.

¹³¹ Ibid., pp. 498, 553. Jagow, however, did threaten war as a response, which was quite extraordinary, given that he himself, as his interlocutor, the Russian ambassador Sverbeev, was quick to point out, was the one who had just given assurances that Germany would tolerate such a move. Jagow added, however, that the views he expressed were purely personal, and that he would have to talk with Bethmann before giving a definite reply. Ibid., p. 499. Sazonov used the warning to defend his policy of moving toward general mobilization; but this was evidently a debater's argument, since he had begun to push energetically for general mobilization the previous day. Ibid., pp. 540, 556.

¹³² See *ibid.*, pp. 489, 592.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 562.

¹³⁴ The Kaiser had suggested that a settlement be based on the Serbian reply to the ultimatum; compliance would be guaranteed by the temporary occupation of Belgrade. Bethmann, in passing on a somewhat distorted version of the idea to Vienna, told the German

night of July 29–30, the chancellor sent off a series of increasingly tough telegrams demanding that the Austrians do what was necessary to head off a war. This effort culminated in a dispatch sent out at 3 a.m.: we "must decline to let ourselves to be dragged by Vienna, wantonly and without regard to our advice, into a world conflagration."¹³⁵

Why this shift? Albertini contends that it was a threat from Grey, warning that Britain would intervene in a continental war, that had led Bethmann to alter his position so radically. The Chancellor, he says, had "based his whole policy on the assumption that, in case of war, England would remain neutral."¹³⁶ The Fischer school also argues that Grey's warning explains the series of telegrams Bethmann sent to Vienna in the early hours of July 30. The German leaders, Fischer says, had been willing to face war "with equanimity" because they believed that Britain would probably stay out. When they received Lichnowsky's telegram containing Grey's warning, they were "shattered" and "grew unsure of themselves." "The foundation of their policy during the crisis"—the belief that Britain would remain neutral if Germany handled events the right way—"had collapsed." Geiss thinks that Bethmann really shifted course and was now trying to avert the catastrophe; Fischer sees only momentary shock, followed by a return the next morning to the earlier policy.¹³⁷

The problem with this interpretation, in any of these variants, is that it vastly overestimates the degree to which the Germans had been counting on British neutrality, ignores the degree to which the Germans had already been warned that Britain would intervene in a European war, and—most important of all in this context—plays down the significance of the one really great event, the announcement of Russian partial mobilization, that immediately preceded the change in Bethmann's policy. There is, first of all, little evidence to support the claim that Bethmann had been confidently counting on British neutrality. On the eve of the crisis (which according to Fischer the Germans had provoked with this calculation about Britain in mind), Bethmann was quite pessimistic about the chances that Britain would stay neutral in a continental war.¹³⁸ Dur-

ambassador there that in presenting it, he was "to avoid very carefully giving rise to the impression that we wish to hold Austria back." Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 256–57, 259–60.

¹³⁵ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 504, 522–25.

¹³⁶ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 520; vol. 3, pp. 3, 4.

¹³⁷ Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, pp. 78–80, and *War of Illusions*, pp. 495–96; Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 269.

¹³⁸ See, for example, all the evidence in Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914," *Central European History*, vol. 6, no. 1 (March 1973), p. 38n. Fischer's contrary argument on this point is laid out most extensively in his "The Miscalculation of English Neutrality" (see n. 25). But the evidence he presents here shows only that the Germans were hoping for British neutrality in a European war, not that they were counting on it. At one point, Fischer even quotes Bethmann, evidently without

ing the crisis itself, moreover, he was repeatedly warned by Lichnowsky that Britain would not stay out of any war in which France was involved.¹³⁹

While the German government certainly would have been delighted if Britain remained neutral, and did what it could to maximize the probability that Britain would stay out of the war, it is going much too far to say that the hope of British neutrality was the basis of German political or military calculations. Grey's warning was of course a blow to Bethmann, but not quite as severe a blow as is often argued, since there had been many earlier indications that Britain would probably not stand by and allow France to be crushed.

It seems rather that it was the news from Russia about partial mobilization that played the key role in bringing about the shift in Bethmann's attitude. The evidence strongly suggests that the decisive change took place *before* the Chancellor learned of Grey's warning, but *after* he had found out about Russia's partial mobilization. The authorities in Berlin became aware of Russia's move at about 5 p.m. on the 29th; the telegram containing Grey's warning was received there at 9:12 p.m. The first of the telegrams reflecting Bethmann's newly found eagerness for a negotiated settlement was dispatched from Berlin at 10:18 p.m.¹⁴⁰ Given how long it generally took for a dispatch to be deciphered, delivered and read, for a new dispatch to be thought out, composed, sent over for coding, and then encoded and transmitted, it is very hard to believe that all this could have been done in barely more than an hour.¹⁴¹ And yet this would have had to be the case for the telegram received at 9:12 to have led directly to the telegram sent out at 10:18—that is, for the news from London to have

realizing how this contradicts his basic argument, as writing to a friend in December 1912 that "Britain continues to uphold the policy of the balance of power and that it will therefore stand up for France if in a war the latter runs the risk of being destroyed by us" (p. 374). This has to be interpreted in the light of the fact that Bethmann at this point understood that the main goal of the Schlieffen Plan was indeed to crush France.

¹³⁹ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 432, 442, 501. During the crisis, Bethmann and Jagow did occasionally predict—to the French ambassador, for example, and to the emperor—that Britain would remain neutral, at least at the start of the war, but the aim here was probably tactical in nature: to convince the French of German resolve, or to dissuade the emperor from calling a halt to the tough policy the government was pursuing. The Berlin authorities, moreover, may have viewed Lichnowsky as "soft," and thus might have discounted his opinions; but his reports of British thinking could not be dismissed out of hand, and Bethmann and Jagow were too experienced to think they could count confidently on British neutrality without hard evidence—and no really satisfactory indicators were forthcoming during the crisis. Indeed, the amount of attention the Germans gave to Britain and the important efforts they made to influence British policy show in themselves that British neutrality was not simply taken for granted.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 498, 504, 520.

¹⁴¹ For a brief discussion of these sorts of delays, see *ibid.*, p. 525 n. 6.

brought about the dramatic shift in Bethmann's position. It is much more likely that the information about Russia's partial mobilization had led to this change in policy. Albertini himself recognizes the importance of the news from Russia in bringing about this shift on Bethmann's part, and he says explicitly that even before receiving the message containing Grey's warning, "the Chancellor was clutching at the idea"—the Kaiser's proposal for a peaceful settlement that Bethmann had tried to sabotage the previous day—"like a shipwrecked man at a lifebuoy."¹⁴²

Thus, far from leading inevitably to German counter-measures which would have brought on a war, the Russian decision to order partial mobilization actually led to a *softening* of German policy, breaking the deadlock and at least in theory opening the way to a political settlement.

The Final Hours

So Bethmann now wanted to head off a European war. So did the Entente powers. Austria by herself could not have stood in their way. How then was war possible? Many assume there is only one answer to the riddle: the political process that should normally have brought about a negotiated settlement was overwhelmed in those momentous final hours of the crisis by forces welling up from within the military sphere, by generals "pounding the table for the signal to move lest their opponents gain an hour's head start."¹⁴³ The validity of the whole "inadvertent war" thesis, therefore, turns on a close analysis of the events of those fourteen fateful hours, the period from Bethmann's dramatic dispatch to Austria sent out at 3 a.m. on July 30, to the Russian order for general mobilization, issued at 5 p.m. that afternoon.

One can begin with the case of Germany, the most militaristic of the European powers, the state whose whole strategy was most strongly based on the idea of swift offensive action: if there is anything to the argument about the importance of preemption in 1914, surely here is where the evidence will be found. Yet as one studies the German case, one is struck by the unwillingness of that government to force the pace of the crisis in those final days, its preference for leaving the initiative in the hands of others. A basic goal, shared by the political and the military leadership, was that Germany not appear the aggressor. Germany would, of course, have to *react* quickly if Russia or France mobilized first; but the more rapidly Germany could respond, the less incentive there would be for her adversaries to make the first move.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 500–502, 522.

¹⁴³ Tuchman, *Guns of August*, p. 72.

The Germans, in fact, were reluctant to take even the sort of pre-mobilization measures that they knew the Russians (and eventually even the French and the British) were taking. On the 29th, but before the news of Russia's partial mobilization had reached them, the top German leaders met at Potsdam. General Erich von Falkenhayn, the war minister, called for the pre-mobilization regime to be put into effect—for the proclamation of the "Kriegsgefahrzustand," the declaration of "threatening danger of war"—but Moltke was opposed even to that and Falkenhayn deferred to the chief of staff.¹⁴⁴ Later that evening, the new situation resulting from the partial mobilization was discussed. "Against slight, very, very slight opposition from Moltke," Bethmann ruled out German mobilization as a response; this would have to wait until Russia actually unleashed a war, "because otherwise we should not have public opinion with us either at home or in England." As for Falkenhayn, he was by no means pressing for preemptive action. There was no need, he thought, to be the first to move, because "our mobilization, even if two or three days later than that of Russia and Austria, would be more rapid than theirs."¹⁴⁵

The following afternoon, Moltke began to call for a tougher policy, probably because new information had been received about the seriousness of Russian military preparations.¹⁴⁶ He and Falkenhayn now asked for the proclamation of the "Kriegsgefahrzustand." Bethmann refused to agree to it then and there (even though this would by no means have made mobilization, and therefore war, automatic), and simply promised that the generals would get an answer by noon the next day.¹⁴⁷ By that point, the news of Russia's general mobilization had reached Berlin, so the issue had been overtaken by events. But some new evidence on Moltke's reaction to this information hardly supports the image of a general "pounding the table for the signal to move." Moltke reacted to the first report of general mobilization "with some skepticism" and wondered whether the evidence had been misinterpreted. When he was told that the report had been "very specific" and that "similar information had just arrived" from

¹⁴⁴ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 495–97, 499–500 (for the chronology).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 502.

¹⁴⁶ Trumpener, "War Premeditated?" p. 79.

¹⁴⁷ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, pp. 10, 18; on the issue of the "Kriegsgefahrzustand," see *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 491, 599. When defending his decision not to proclaim the "Kriegsgefahrzustand," Bethmann did claim that it meant mobilization and therefore war, but this can scarcely be taken at face value. See *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 15. An Army document also strongly suggests that war was not viewed as following automatically from the proclamation of the Kriegsgefahrzustand. See the extract from the "Protokoll der Chefkonferenz in Frankfurt a. M. am 21. Januar 1914," in W. Knoll and H. Rahne, "Bedeutung und Aufgaben der Konferenz der Generalstabschefs der Armeekorps in Frankfurt a. M. am 21. Januar 1914," *Militärgeschichte* vol. 25, no. 1 (1986), p. 58: "The Corps should not allow their hands to be tied" by a proclamation of threatening danger of war, "for example, by buying horses."

two other intelligence posts, he "turned toward the window, took a deep breath, and said: 'It can't be helped then; we'll have to mobilize too.'"¹⁴⁸

Nor did Bethmann, contrary to what both Craig and Albertini argue, "capitulate" to the generals during the crisis. It is amazing how common this notion is, given how little evidence there is to back it up. Moltke was not able to get Bethmann to agree even to the Kriegsgefahrzustand until after news of the Russian general mobilization reached Berlin. The chief of staff, to be sure, went behind Bethmann's back on the afternoon of the 30th and urged Austria to mobilize against Russia and reject mediation.¹⁴⁹ But this is hardly proof that Bethmann was capitulating to the military, or even that Moltke was overstepping his own authority, since the Kaiser may have authorized his messages to the Austrians.¹⁵⁰ In any case, the move could hardly be viewed as a cause of the war, since, as Gerhard Ritter, for example, once pointed out, Moltke's messages were submitted to the ministers in Vienna "only on the morning of July 31," after the Austrian decision for general mobilization had been made, and thus had no "practical effect."¹⁵¹

Finally, there is the episode late that evening of Telegram 200, which Albertini treats as decisive. In this dispatch, Bethmann called on Austria once again to accept mediation. His language was not as strong as it had been the previous night, but even so the instruction contained in the tele-

¹⁴⁸ Trumpener, "War Premeditated?" p. 82.

¹⁴⁹ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, p. 11.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–13; Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, vol. 2, p. 198. In *War of Illusions*, Fischer does not take a consistent line on this issue. In trying to prove that Germany was to blame for the war, he naturally has to argue that other powers were not responsible and that in particular Russia should not be blamed for ordering general mobilization, since the Germans would have started the war in early August even if the Russians had not made this move. This conclusion he reaches after making the following series of claims. First he says (pp. 493–94) that there was a sharp conflict between the German military, thinking "exclusively in terms of keeping strictly to the strategic time-table," and thus pushing for war as early as July 29, and the political leadership, which calculated that for political reasons Russia had to be the one to take the first crucial step by ordering a full mobilization before Germany did. Just two pages later, and without explanation, he takes the opposite line and argues that the military and the political leadership were "unanimous in their demand that Austria should in no circumstances appear as the aggressor but that it must be left to Russia to take the decisive step which would lead to war" (p. 496). Two pages after that he reverts to the original line and has Bethmann giving in to the military and agreeing that the Kriegsgefahrzustand would be proclaimed the next day, a step which he incorrectly claims would inevitably have led to mobilization and thus to war, and that, in so doing, "Berlin had fixed the beginning of the war for the first days of August even without the government being driven to this by Russia's general mobilization" (p. 498). In reality, all Bethmann had promised was that a decision would be made the next morning. See Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 491, 496, 502, and vol. 3, pp. 7, 10, 18, and also n. 147 above.

¹⁵¹ Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, vol. 2 (Coral Gables, Fla., 1970), p. 258.

gram was suspended soon after it was dispatched. The telegram ordering the suspension referred to information from the General Staff about "the military preparations of our neighbors, especially in the east." Albertini interprets this suspension as a "capitulation" and says that the "Chief of Staff was no longer allowing the political leadership to waste time in attempts to save the peace and compose the conflict."¹⁵² But again, this conclusion hardly follows from the evidence. The fact that Bethmann agreed with, or was convinced by, arguments and information coming from the military scarcely proves that he was surrendering to their will. In fact, Albertini himself suggests that information was being received in Berlin that evening indicating that the Russian general mobilization, which indeed had been decided upon at 5 p.m. that afternoon, might be imminent.¹⁵³ If that were the case, and war was about to break out, what was the point of irritating Germany's only ally with a *démarche* which would almost certainly do no good anyway? If this, as seems likely, was Bethmann's calculation, the cancellation of Telegram 200 can hardly be interpreted as a "capitulation," and in fact there is no real evidence supporting the argument that by this time the military had effectively taken over control of German policy.

The real problem was not that the civilians had lost control, but rather that Germany's political strategy and her military strategy were pulling in opposite directions. The demands of the Schlieffen Plan implied that Germany had to act quickly, but this meant that Germany would be the first to cross borders. Germany would have to invade Belgium and attack France, but one of Bethmann's basic goals was for Germany to avoid coming across as the aggressor and to make it appear that Russia was responsible for the war. "The fact is," says Albertini, "that Bethmann, who had made every effort to cast the blame on Russia, failed to see that his endeavours would be defeated by the very demands of the Schlieffen Plan."¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, important military measures had been delayed for political reasons, and given Germany's military strategy, even short delays might have had serious consequences. The two sides of their policy were working at cross purposes, but this particular difficulty did not actually help bring on the war. It should have had the opposite effect of pushing Germany toward a peaceful settlement. If the German leadership had faced up to the problem, which was to some extent rooted in an astonishing lack of coordination between the political and the military authorities,¹⁵⁵ they would have recognized that this was a major source

¹⁵² Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, pp. 21–24.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 27.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 249. See also the discussion of this issue in *ibid.*, pp. 186–87.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 250. Nor was there any serious coordination between the Army and Navy general staffs. Admiral Tirpitz claimed that he "was never even informed of the invasion of

of weakness, and, as Albertini argues, this should have made them move energetically to settle the dispute.¹⁵⁶ But instead events were allowed to take their course.

The most striking thing, in fact, about German policy on the 30th is that Bethmann did seem to resign himself to the situation and gave up trying to prevent war. On the night of July 29–30, he had begun to move energetically to head off a war, but by the following morning—that is, even before Moltke's shift that afternoon—the effort had ended. The pressure on Austria subsided, and Bethmann certainly did not do the one thing he would have had to do if he had really wanted to prevent war. His first priority, in that case, would have been to keep the Russians from ordering general mobilization, and to do this, he would have had to make it clear to them that war was not inevitable, that a political settlement was within reach, that Austria could be led to moderate her demands on Serbia, but that he needed a little time to bring her around. And to increase the pressure on Russia to hold back, he could have approached the western powers, explaining why a political settlement was within sight, and asking them to do what they could to keep Russia from resorting to general mobilization and thus setting off the avalanche. But Bethmann made none of these moves. The Russians ordered general mobilization that afternoon, and the great war could no longer be prevented.

Had the war come because, as Bethmann himself said at the time, "control had been lost"? The "stone had started rolling," he declared; war was being unleashed "by elemental forces."¹⁵⁷ But there had been no "loss of control," only an abdication of control. Bethmann had chosen not to act. He had decided to let events take their course—and thus to take his "leap into the dark."¹⁵⁸ If war had to come—and if the Russians were not going to give way this time when they were relatively weak, a conflict with them was probably unavoidable in the long run—then maybe the generals were right, maybe it was better to have it now rather than later. His hands were clean—more or less. He had not set out to provoke a great war with this

Belgium." Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs* (New York, 1919), vol. 1, p. 346. Similarly, the lack of military coordination with Austria is astounding. Although some loose agreements covering this matter had been reached in 1909, more precise arrangements were not worked out during the crisis, and it was only at the last minute that Moltke asked Austria "to employ her main strength against Russia and not disperse it by a simultaneous offensive against Serbia." But this the Austrians refused to do. Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, pp. 45–46; N. Stone, "Moltke and Conrad." This hardly fits in with the picture of a German government carefully and systematically plotting a war of aggression. For a similar point based on a study of German intelligence operations during the crisis, see Trumpener, "War Premeditated?" pp. 83–85.

¹⁵⁶ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, p. 249.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

¹⁵⁸ Erdmann, *Riezler*, entry for July 14, 1914, p. 185.

calculation in mind. He had even made a certain effort to get the Austrians to pull back. But war was almost bound to come eventually, so he would just stand aside and let it come now. The preventive war argument, which had not been powerful enough to dictate German policy at the beginning of the crisis, now proved decisive. It might have been difficult, if only for moral reasons, for the German leadership to set out deliberately to provoke a great war. It was much easier just to let the war come—to not “hide behind the fence,” as Jagow put it.¹⁵⁹ Bethmann probably had something of this sort in mind when he later admitted that “in a certain sense, it was a preventive war.”¹⁶⁰

This, however, has nothing to do with preemption: there had been no “loss of control” resulting from the pressure to mobilize first. Indeed, as far as the German side is concerned, the argument about preemption carries surprisingly little weight. With the Russian mobilization the die had been cast: after that point, any specific incentive to move quickly that the Germans may have felt could do little more than affect the exact timing of the German attack: from that point on, it was extremely unlikely that war itself could be avoided.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Jagow to Lichnowsky, July 18, 1914, in Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 123.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted, for example, in Konrad Jarausch, “The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg’s Calculated Risk, July 1914,” *Central European History*, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 1969), p. 48.

¹⁶¹ The Germans’ need to seize Liège quickly is often cited as a major source of such pressure for preemption. But while the German general staff was certainly concerned with the Liège situation at the end of July, there is little evidence that this factor contributed in any major way to the German decision for war. Ritter, for example, blamed the Liège problem for Germany’s “unbelievable haste” in declaring war on Russia on August 1, and Churchill thought that if it were not for Liège, the armies might have mobilized without crossing frontiers while a peace settlement was worked out. Snyder, on the other hand, says that “Moltke’s attitude was not decisively influenced by this incentive to preempt.” There is much about the Liège issue that remains obscure. It is not clear exactly when German troops would have begun their attack and crossed the Belgian frontier if the earlier plan had not been altered in 1911 to include the Liège operation as one of its vital elements. Given the basic philosophy of the Schlieffen strategy, which even in its original form of a one-front war against France “depended,” as Ritter says, “on the speed and surprise of the German advance through Belgium,” Germany could not hold off for long after the Russian general mobilization had begun. If it were not for Liège, would Germany have postponed her declaration of war for a brief period after ordering mobilization? The answer is by no means obvious, but even if a certain delay was possible, the argument that the Liège factor played a key role in bringing on the war would turn on the claim that there was a real chance of saving the peace during those extra few days while Germany was still mobilizing, but before war absolutely had to be declared. There is, however, little basis for this assumption. It is not as though serious negotiations had been going on that might have led to a settlement if they had not been cut off by the declarations of war. Gerhard Ritter, “Der Anteil der Militärs an der Kriegskatastrophe von 1914,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 193, no. 1 (August 1961), pp. 89–90; Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, p. 90; Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis: The*

It remains to be seen, however, whether preemption was a more compelling factor on the Entente side. To begin with France: the chief of staff and the war minister did urge Russia to move against Germany as soon as possible after war broke out, which of course was exactly what the prewar military arrangements had called for. Turner argues that this was pressure “calculated to drive the Russian General Staff into demanding general mobilization.”¹⁶² Perhaps so, but the evidence presented is hardly sufficient in itself to warrant this conclusion, and there is really no indication in the Russian sources of pressure from French military authorities making any important difference.

It is therefore on Russian policy that an analysis of the preemption question in 1914 must focus. In this case it does turn out to have some substance. It clearly mattered a great deal to the Russian authorities whether Germany or Russia was the first to mobilize. This is the only way to make sense of the constant allusions to the great risks of delaying a general mobilization that one finds in the records of the meetings where these mobilization decisions were made. On July 30, for example, the chief of staff “pleaded” with Sazonov to convince the Tsar “to consent to a general mobilization in view of the extreme danger that would result for us if we were not ready for war with Germany.” Sazonov did precisely that. Since “war was becoming inevitable,” he told the Tsar when he saw him that afternoon, “it was necessary to put away any fears that our war-like preparations would bring about a war and to continue these preparations carefully, rather than by reason of such fears to be taken unawares by war.” The Tsar “agreed that in the existing circumstances it would be very dangerous not to make timely preparations for what was apparently an inevitable war, and therefore gave his decision in favour of a general mobilization.”¹⁶³ The mobilization decision was thus based on a political assessment: there was a diplomatic deadlock, Austria was beginning to move against Serbia, the issue could no longer be avoided. It is important to note that the Russian mobilization was not precipitated by the fear that Germany was about to act. In the key meetings at which the mobilization decisions were made, the argument was that it was war itself, and not a German mobilization as such, that was imminent.

Did “pressure from the Russian generals” cause the political leadership

Eastern Front (London, 1931), p. 93, quoted in Turner, “Significance of the Schlieffen Plan,” in Kennedy, *War Plans*, p. 213; Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations,” p. 113.

¹⁶² Turner, *Origins*, p. 104. See also his “The Role of the General Staffs in July 1914,” pp. 320–21. The sort of attitude to which Turner refers was evidently not limited to French military circles: see, for example, Doumergue’s comments quoted in Maurice Paléologue, *Au Quai d’Orsay à la veille de la tourmente. Journal 1913–1914* (Paris, 1947), p. 269.

¹⁶³ Schilling, *How the War Began*, pp. 64–66.

to “lose control” of the situation?¹⁶⁴ The generals’ main argument was that “in resorting to partial mobilization, there was a big risk of upsetting plans for general mobilization.”¹⁶⁵ Albertini, who blames pressure from the generals for helping push Europe into war, thinks that the generals were correct in this assessment: a partial mobilization, he says, would “have been a blunder,” since if war came Russia would have to face both Austria and Germany.¹⁶⁶ But could the generals be blamed for exercising undue influence if they had simply given an accurate assessment of the situation? As long as they limited themselves to a purely military judgment, only one conclusion followed: partial mobilization was out of the question, so the choice had to be between “general mobilization and none at all.”¹⁶⁷ Their preference for general mobilization was based on political considerations, and especially on the belief that it would be impossible to abandon Serbia, that the Central Powers were intent on crushing the Serbs, and that war could therefore not be avoided.¹⁶⁸ If the political leadership had held more moderate views, and especially if the generals rationalized their preference for general mobilization with spurious military arguments, there would be some basis for the argument that pressure from the generals was a major cause of the war. But the striking thing here is that Sazonov shared their assessment of the probability of war. It was not as though he tried to resist the generals’ views and only reluctantly gave way. On July 28, he was, according to General Dobrorolski, “penetrated by the thought that a general war is unavoidable,” and even went so far as to express his astonishment to the chief of staff that full mobilization had not been begun earlier.¹⁶⁹

Had Sazonov, however, been trapped by his own ignorance and impulsiveness? The argument is that he had blindly ordered a partial mobilization without any real understanding of the problems it would cause; but having ordered it, he had no answer for the technical arguments the generals raised against it. He therefore had to choose between revoking the partial mobilization order or escalating to general mobilization. To cancel the partial mobilization order would be taken as a sign of weakness; Sazonov was therefore led, however reluctantly, to opt for a full mobilization.¹⁷⁰ But again this theory cannot withstand the simple test of chronology. Sazonov had accepted the generals’ argument about the dangers

¹⁶⁴ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 539–45.

¹⁶⁵ General Yuri Danilov, the Quartermaster-General, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 542.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 543.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Dobrorolski is commonly viewed as a reliable source; his account is quoted in *ibid.*, p. 540.

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, Van Evera, “Why Cooperation Failed in 1914,” p. 104.

of partial mobilization on July 28—that is, before the partial mobilization had actually begun, probably before the decision to order it had even been made, and certainly long before the Germans learned of the order.¹⁷¹ The real puzzle here is that Sazonov opted for partial mobilization even though he had already been persuaded by the arguments against it. One possible answer is that he calculated that a partial mobilization would be a bridge to the general mobilization he had by that point come to view as necessary: once partial mobilization was ordered, the Tsar could more easily be brought to accept a full mobilization against both Germany and Austria. Sazonov had not been trapped by his own ignorance, nor had he been overwhelmed by pressure from the generals. He had made his choices with his eyes open; he had not been stampeded into them.

So to sum up: although preemption evidently was a factor in 1914, its importance is greatly exaggerated in much of the literature. It played a role on the Russian side in the final hours of the crisis, and even then only because the political judgment had been made that war was inevitable. Its role was quite marginal in comparison with all those factors that had given rise to this judgment in the first place. On the German side, its role was minimal. The Germans wanted Russia to be the first to order mobilization, and they would have been delighted if, after mobilization, France had been the first to attack.¹⁷² Their strategy was not preemptive but reactive: for political reasons, they were conceding the first move to their adversaries. In contemporary terms, this was more like a “second strike” than a “first strike” strategy, and thus in this respect can hardly be considered “destabilizing.”

CONCLUSION

The aim here was not to offer yet another interpretation of the coming of the First World War. This was instead meant mainly as an exercise in intellectual housekeeping. There are many claims about the origins of the war that have been accepted more or less uncritically, and the goal here was to test some of the more important ones against the evidence. What was at stake was not simply our historical understanding of this particular episode. It was really because so much of our thinking today about issues of strategy and foreign policy rests in such large measure on a specific interpretation of the July Crisis that an effort of this sort was worth undertaking.

¹⁷¹ Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 540–45.

¹⁷² “For about forty-eight hours after the issue of the respective mobilization orders the [French and German] armies stood face to face, each waiting and hoping that the other would be the first to open hostilities.” Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, p. 204.

Did the war come because statesmen in 1914 were overwhelmed by forces they could not control, and, for the most part, scarcely even understood? Was Europe carried into war by the rigidity of its military plans, and by the premium they placed on preemption? Was the problem rooted in the fact that military planning had taken place in a political vacuum, that the soldiers were apolitical technicians, that the political leadership had been kept in the dark? During the crisis, were the political leaders stampeded into war by the generals and by the system the military had created? Did the political authorities surrender to the generals, who eventually took control of policy and made the crucial decisions that led to the war?

The answer in every case is essentially no. The military plans were not based on purely technical considerations; the generals had strong political views of their own, which were certainly reflected in the strategies they adopted. The political leaders were well aware of the basic thrust of the war plans, and they understood what they meant—not to the last detail of course, but they did understand the basic logic of the situation that these plans had created. There was, moreover, no “capitulation” to the generals; the military had in no real sense taken control of policy.

The First World War did not come about because statesmen had “lost control” of events; preemption was not nearly as important in 1914 as is commonly assumed. Instead of generals “pounding the table for the signal to move,” one finds Falkenhayn saying on the 29th that it would not matter much if Germany mobilized two or three days after Russia, and Moltke that same day not even supporting the proclamation of the “Kriegsgefahrzustand.” On the afternoon of the 30th, Moltke did begin to press for military measures, but this was very probably in reaction to what the Russians were doing in this area. As long as German policy was reactive, it can hardly be considered a source of “instability” in the contemporary sense of the term.

The Russian generals, on the other hand, did press for early mobilization. But this was only because they thought that war was unavoidable, a view that the civilian government also shared. A decision for general mobilization was a decision for war: it was not that Sazonov and the political leadership as a whole were trying desperately to preserve the peace, but were drawn into the abyss by the “pull of military schedules.” It hardly makes sense, therefore, to see the Russian decision to seize the military advantages of the first mobilization as proof that “control had been lost” or that war had come “inadvertently.” In 1941, the Japanese government attacked American forces at Pearl Harbor and in the Philippines after becoming convinced that war with the United States could not be avoided. Even if this judgment had been mistaken—even if one assumes that President Roosevelt could not have taken the country into war if the Japanese

had avoided contact with American forces and limited their attack to the Dutch East Indies—no one would say that the fact that the Japanese chose to seize the first strike advantage by launching a surprise attack against vulnerable American forces means that the War in the Pacific was essentially an “inadvertent” conflict. The same point, however, applies to 1914.

The idea that the First World War came about because statesmen were overwhelmed by military imperatives and thus “lost control” of the situation came to be accepted for essentially political reasons, and not because it was the product of careful and disinterested historical analysis. It was hardly an accident that the first to propagate this idea were the statesmen whose policies in 1914 had led directly to the conflict—that is, the very people who had the greatest interest in avoiding responsibility for the catastrophe. On the very eve of the disaster—on July 31, 1914—Bethmann was already arguing along these lines.¹⁷³

After the war, it became apparent that the Germans would never accept a peace settlement based on the notion that they had been responsible for the conflict. If a true peace of reconciliation was to take shape, it was important to move toward a new theory of the origins of the war, and the easiest thing was to assume that no one had really been responsible for it. The conflict could be readily blamed on great impersonal forces—on the alliance system, on the arms race and on the military system that had evolved before 1914. On their uncomplaining shoulders the burden of guilt could be safely placed. For many people, it thus became an article of faith that military factors, and especially the arms competition, had led directly to the catastrophe. “Great armaments,” Grey, for example, wrote in his memoirs, “lead inevitably to war.” This, he said, was the obvious moral to be drawn from a study of the pre-1914 period.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

¹⁷⁴ Viscount Grey of Fallodon, *Twenty-Five Years* (New York, 1925), vol. 1, pp. 89–90. Arguments of this sort rarely take cognizance of even the basic figures on the defense burden, which in fact throw a very different light on this whole issue. In Germany, for example, defense spending as a proportion of national income had been somewhat higher at the end of the Bismarckian period in 1889 and 1890 than it was on the eve of the war. Indeed, for most of the immediate prewar period, defense spending as a percent of GNP had been in decline, going from 2.98 percent in 1901 down to 2.46 percent in 1912, before rising back to 3.02 percent in 1913. (The corresponding figure for 1890 had been 3.47 percent.) If this was a race, Germany obviously was not running very hard: these figures are of course quite low by contemporary standards. The percentages were computed from the national income figures in B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics 1750–1970*, abridged edition (New York, 1978), table J1, and from the figures for defense spending in W. G. Hoffmann, *Das Wachstum der deutschen Wirtschaft seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1965), table 199, col. 6. Contemporary equivalents are conveniently summarized in the statistical tables in United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *World Military Expenditures and*

With the resurgence of German power, and particularly during the period of Hitler's successes in the late 1930s, the great war itself came to be widely regarded in the West as a terrible mistake—as something which had been quite literally pointless—which could only be explained if it was assumed that the political leaders had stumbled into it blindly, pulled along by their military advisers, or trapped by military arrangements whose implications they had never really understood. The argument was sometimes carried to extremes. David Lloyd George, for example, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in July 1914 and Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922, in March 1936—the month of Hitler's coup in the Rhineland—blamed the prewar military plan worked out by the British and French general staffs for landing Britain in the war. "Had it not been," he said, "for the professional zeal and haste with which the military staffs set in motion the plans which had already been agreed between them the negotiations between the governments, which at that time had hardly begun, might well have continued, and war could, and probably would, have been averted." This claim, as Albertini says (and as Duff Cooper said at the time) is certainly false: it was not the eagerness of the British military authorities to implement their war plan that prevented a negotiated solution from being worked out; a peaceful settlement had been ruled out by events on the continent, culminating in the movement of German armies into Belgium on August 4.¹⁷⁵ But given prevailing beliefs about the role that the military system had played in bringing on the war, even such extreme claims were taken seriously.

By the 1950s and 1960s, these ideas had taken on a life of their own. During this period, American strategists developed a way of thinking about issues of war and peace that placed an extraordinary emphasis on military factors—especially on preemption and the "reciprocal fear of surprise attack." In such an environment, the notion that the First World War was a product of the military system in place in 1914 had an obvious appeal. This interpretation seemed to provide an important degree of empirical support for conclusions reached through an essentially abstract process of analysis.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the environment shifted once more, but the theory, which by now had been around long enough to become part of the conventional wisdom, was again able to find a new niche. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and even more with the fading of the Cold War in the 1980s, the "Munich analogy" was discredited as a basic paradigm for foreign policy. The "Sarajevo analogy" was drawn into the

Arms Transfers, an annual publication available from ACDA's Defense Program and Analysis Division.

¹⁷⁵ Note especially the Lloyd George-Duff Cooper exchange, summarized and commented on in Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 3, pp. 524–25.

vacuum. In an age which took the stability of great power political relations for granted, it was particularly important—the argument now ran—to remember what had happened in 1914. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, for example, pointed out in 1976 that the lesson of the July Crisis was that one could have a war "without any conscious decision to overturn the international structure." War could come about because "a crisis much like any other went out of control. Nation after nation slid into a war whose causes they did not understand but from which they could not extricate themselves."¹⁷⁶

It was in fact commonly assumed that even in the nuclear age there was a real danger that the world might slip into war in this way. Today, in a world where all of the major powers obviously want very much to avoid a new world war, the only real fear is that the great nations might somehow stumble into one more or less inadvertently. The "inadvertent war" interpretation of the events of 1914 gives focus and substance to this fear and thus appeals particularly to those in the defense and arms control communities who have a professional interest in taking the risk of great power war seriously.

During this whole process, this interpretation was accepted because it was what people wanted to believe. It is important, however, that our basic thinking about issues of war and peace not be allowed to rest on what are in the final analysis simply myths about the past. The conventional wisdom does not have to be accepted on faith alone: claims about the past can always be translated into historically testable propositions. In this case, when one actually tests these propositions against the empirical evidence, which for the July Crisis is both abundant and accessible, one is struck by how weak most of the arguments turn out to be. The most remarkable thing about all these claims that support the conclusion about events moving "out of control" in 1914 is how little basis in fact they actually have.

¹⁷⁶ Speech of March 11, 1976, *New York Times*, March 12, 1976, p. 4.