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World War I as an Inadvertent War: 1882-1914

World War I was “a war that everyone was willing to risk but that no one truly wanted” (Sagan 151). Europe before World War I was a multipolar system balanced through the buildup of “alliances among equals”, namely the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance (Waltz 1988, 621). The mechanism of alliances led to the “need for offensive capabilities to provide support for allies” (Sagan 1988, 163). This made the situation unstable such that any one power’s actions could set off a chain of events that plunged the system into war. None of the major powers wanted a continental war, but each power was willing to risk it and felt it had to because of its allies. Through a series of boundedly rational actions, there was an escalation of the crisis which led to inadvertent war.

In 1914, the major powers were Germany, Russia, France, Austria-Hungary, and Britain. Fromkin states that “Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and Russia dominated Europe, Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and even substantial parts of the Western Hemisphere” (Fromkin 2004 in Reilly, 921). Britain was “wealthiest, most powerful, and largest”, Germany “commanded the most powerful land army”, Russia “turned itself around by industrializing and arming with financial backing from France”, France “backed Russia as a counterweight to Teutonic power”, “The Dual-Monarchy of Austria-Hungary ruled a variety of nationalities who were restless and often in conflict”, and Italy “hungered to be treated as an equal” (Fromkin 2004 in Reilly, 922).

The major powers formed into two alliances: the Triple Entente formed in 1907 and consisted of Britain, France, and Russia; and the Triple Alliance formed in 1882 and consisted of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. These alliances grew stronger through other crises. “By 1912, the Triple Entente and Triple Alliance had been consolidated by the Bosnian crises of 1908-1909 and the Moroccan tensions of 1911” (Williamson 1988, 227). In addition to these major alliances, there were other connections between states. Serbia was not formally aligned with Russia, but their relations were close. “St Petersburg had played mid-wife to the Balkan League, a pact signed in the spring of 1912 and directed against both the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg monarchy” (Williamson 1998, 228). This sphere of influence was close enough that it could in effect be considered an alliance. Russia wasn’t the only country with other connections; Britain also was “obligated to defend neutral Belgium by the terms of a 75-year old treaty” (Duffy 2009). These alliances led actors to specific strategic calculations.

Since the powers in the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance were equal, they were interdependent, and their military strategies reflected this. “Because the defeat or the defection of a major ally would have shaken the balance, each state was constrained to adjust its strategy and the use of its forces to the aims and fears of its partners” (Waltz 1988). Another factor which affected the military strategy of states was geography. These states were separated geographically in a checkerboard pattern of alliances. This meant the possibility of facing a war on two sides, which meant that each country would need to attack to defend its allies. In 1892, the French and Russians agreed on a military strategy that exemplifies this system. “If France is attacked by Germany or by Italy with Germany’s support, Russia will bring all her available forces to bear against Germany. If Russia is attacked by Germany or by Austria with Germany’s support, France will bring all her available forces to bear against Germany… These troops will proceed to launch a vigorous and determined offensive, so that Germany will be forced to give battle in the East and West simultaneously” (quoted in in Sagan 1986, 164). Germany also realized this issue, as the Grand General Staff said to the Imperial Chancellor in 1914: “If Germany is not to be false to her word and permit her ally to suffer annihilation at the hands of Russian superiority, she, too, must mobilize. And that would bring about the mobilization of the rest of Russia’s military districts as a result” (quoted in Sagan 1986). Each country had its own motives for being willing to risk a continental war but not wanting it.

Austria started a Balkan war, but it didn’t want a continental war. As one Habsburg statesman notes, Austria-Hungary was “eight nations, seventeen countries, twenty parliamentary groups, twenty-seven parties” - in short, it was a combination of many different ethnic, political, and religious groups (quoted in Fromkin 2004, 925). In 1912, the Balkan wars “pushed the Turks out”, and then the Balkan states “fell to war among themselves while dividing the spoils” (Nye and Welch 2011, 103). This inspired more nationalistic movements. In particular, a group of Serbian nationalists called the Black Hand assassinated the Archduke of Ferdinand. Austria responded by issuing an ultimatum. Serbia accepted most of the demands that Austria asked for except that Serbia wanted sovereignty. However, because Austria Hungary wanted to stop the nationalist movement in the Balkans, it still declared war on Serbia. The Austrian chief of staff in 1914 explained his motive: “The monarchy had been seized by the throat and had to choose between allowing itself to be strangled, and making a last effort to prevent its destruction” (quoted in Nye and Welch 2011, 104). Austria’s main concern was stopping the nationalist movement. Austria started a Balkan war, and it was other states’ actions that led to the continuation of the loss of control that led to war.

Britain did not want to go to war. This is shown by the fact that it waited until the last possible minute. The British foreign minister explained that while Britain needed to defend its ally France, in Britain there was not much public or domestic support for the war: “[If] war came, the interest of Britain required that we should not stand aside, while France fought alone in the West, but must support her. I knew it to be very doubtful whether the cabinet, Parliament, and country would take this view on the outbreak of war, and through the whole of this week I had to view the probable contingency that at we should not decide at the critical moment to support France” (quoted in Sagan 1986, 170). Britain didn’t mobilize until August 1, and it didn’t declare war until August 4, after German troops marched into Belgium (Nye and Welch 114). Britain had to support its ally France and it also had an alliance with Belgium, so when Germany went into Belgium, Britain had to respond. “Given Britain's commitment to Belgium, her enduring interest in the balance of power on the continent, her prior support of France in two crises with Germany and the obvious political reasons that constrained her from speaking out, it should have been apparent to all but the most unsophisticated observer of British politics that no inferences about British intentions could be drawn from her reluctance to commit herself publicly to the defense of France” (quoted in Sagan 169). Britain’s alliance with France and its commitment to Belgium dragged it into the war.

France didn’t want a war. France avoided the offensive for as long as possible. On July 30, “Russia and Austria ordered general mobilization; French troops withdraw ten kilometers from German border” (Nye and Welch 2011, 113). Were it not for France’s alliance with Russia and understanding that war was a definite possibility, France would not have had to have troops at the border at all.

Russia was willing to risk a Balkan war but didn’t want a continental war. Russia “was technologically backward and had a poor transportation system”, which meant that it would take a long time to mobilize (Nye and Welch 2011, 106). This meant that Russia had to make a decision quickly or risk being defeated or unable to help its allies. Russia had to protect Serbia. Russia decided that it needed to mobilize early so that if war did happen, Russia would be prepared. Russia began partial mobilization as early as July 25, before knowing Serbia’s response to the ultimatum. “France’s ambassador added in his 25 July report that “meanwhile secret [Russian military] preparations will begin today”” (quoted in McMeekin 2011, 68). France knew that Russia was taking action and so it also had to be prepared for war. Russia’s quick action led to the chain of events that turned the war from a Balkan war into a continental war. Russia mobilized slowly, which meant that other states could not be certain of its intentions and realize what was going on. After the ultimatum, “a partial mobilization was impossible because the steps St. Petersburg had ordered after July 25 were effectively already those of a partial mobilization” (Williamson 244). Russia therefore had to mobilize all the way to actually go to war. This was a rational calculation that then led to war.

Germany was willing to risk a Balkan war but didn’t want a continental war. It had to go to war because of its alliances. Germany knew that if Austria Hungary attacked Serbia, Serbia would respond and might weaken Austria Hungary. Germany also knew that if Austria Hungary attacked Serbia, Russia would attack Austria Hungary. This fear was not unfounded. In March 1914, Russia had “conducted menacing military exercises on the Austrian border. By April 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm himself was concerned, passing on to Bethmann Hollweg a rumor he had picked up "from an authentic source" that Russian cavalry officers had just bought up 30,000 horses in Hungary. The kaiser's fear was that Russia would use Serbia or Montenegro as anti-Austrian proxies to ensnare Germany in a European war” (McMeekin 2011, 50). Because Austria Hungary was Germany’s ally, Germany could not afford to let Austria Hungary be weakened. Therefore Germany issued a blank check so that Austria Hungary would be able to take the action it needed against Serbia and so that Germany would still be able to protect its allies. Because of Russia’s slow mobilization, Germany thought it could defeat France first and then move on to Russia so that it could avoid having to attack on both fronts. “Offenses were required to support Austria-Hungary, albeit an offensive against France first, to be followed by the combined attack against Russia” (Sagan 1986, 165). Germany saw Russia mobilizing and decided it needed to put the Schlieffen plan into action by going through Belgium. “The German threat to Russia-that it would soon be forced to mobilize, which meant war, which meant the Schlieffen Plan's offensive, if Russia did not stop the partial mobilization against Austria-Hungary--underscores the importance of the alliance commitment in Berlin's calculations” (Sagan 1986, 165).

The lessons learned from the tragedy of the outbreak of World War I can be applied to the future. When powers in alliances are roughly equal, that means that they are dependent upon each other and this can lead to war. States should be careful about making alliances. States should remember that while alliances have benefits, there is a cost in that there is an increase in interdependence and in the likelihood of miscalculation. Alliances can lead to greater crisis instability. This means that when choosing states to ally with, states should also consider how difficult it will be to deal with and understand conflicts of interests and coordinate military strategies. States should not be lulled into a false sense of security simply because they have allies. The alliance system can itself lead to instability, which means that political leaders must be vigilant to avoid letting crises escalate into war. They should be thinking ahead and considering potential problems and communicating well with their allies. Thus the alliance system is something that should be considered carefully.

While it is possible to explain the origins of World War I using social science theory of realism, historians seek to problematize and explore other possibilities. Fromkin argues that “None of the European Great Powers believed that anyone of the others was about to launch a war of aggression against it-at least not in the immediate future” (Fromkin 2004, 14). However, he points out that there were many underlying causes, noting in particular imperialism, class conflicts, and nationalism. He argues that by the time Germany was interested in expanding, it could “no longer win an empire on a scale proportioned to its position as the greatest military power in Europe” because all the continents had been taken already by the other major powers, so the only way for Germany to expand was “by taking overseas territories away from other European countries” (Fromkin 2004, 922-923). In addition, industrialization led to economic disparity between the upper class and the working class, which led to political conflicts as the socialist party grew. Fromkin argues that Germany’s leaders may have wanted “to pursue an aggressive foreign policy in order to distract attention from problems at home” (Fromkin 2004, 923). Nationalism was also an issue in that “Europe was rapidly becoming a continent of nation-states”, which threatened Austria Hungary’s power and made other countries antagonistic towards each other (Fromkin 2004, 925). His argument about which country started World War I is this: “the government of Austria-Hungary started its local war with Serbia, while Germany's military leaders started the worldwide war against France and Russia that became known as the First World War or the Great War” (quoted in McMeekin 2011, 43).

McMeekin disagrees with Fromkin about who the aggressor was that started the continental war. “The war of 1914 was Russia's war even more than it was Germany's” (McMeekin 2011, 5). He argues that Russia knew that its actions would lead to continental war, but it chose to go to war anyway. He argues that “Sazonov had done his job in arranging the most favorable belligerent coalition possible and giving Russia a head start” (McMeekin 75). These historiographical debates show that there are many causes of World War I, and that there are different interpretations of countries’ motivations. It can be difficult to interpret a country’s motivation.

History seeks to complicate events and look at the different causes, whereas social science seeks to simplify events by using theories and patterns for parsimonious explanations. An interdisciplinary approach allows for greater understanding of a complicated event such as World War I.

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