view. World War I was simply the final stage of capitalist imperialism. But the war did not arise out of imperialist conflicts on the colonial peripheries as Lenin had expected. In 1898, Britain and France confronted each other at Fashoda in the Sudan as the British tried to complete a north-south line from South Africa to Egypt, while the French tried to create an east-west line of colonies in Africa. If war had occurred then, it might have fit Lenin's explanation. But, in fact, the war broke out 16 years later in Europe, and the bankers' activity on the eve of World War I strongly resisted it. Bankers believed the war would be bad for business. Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign minister, thought he had to follow Eyre Crowe's advice and that Britain had to prevent Germany from gaining mastery of the European balance of power, but Grey worried about getting the London bankers to go along with declaring war.

We can reject the Leninist explanation, but there are two other domestic causes that need to be taken more seriously. One was the internal crisis of the declining Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires; the other was the domestic political situation in Germany.

Both Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Turkey were multinational empires and were therefore threatened by the rise of nationalism. In addition, the Ottoman government was very weak, very corrupt, and an easy target for nationalist groups in the Balkans that wanted to free themselves from centuries of Turkish rule. The Balkan wars of 1912 pushed the Turks out, but in the next year the Balkan states then fell to war among themselves in dividing the spoils. The war whetted the appetite of some Balkan states to fight Austria: If the Turks could be pushed out, then why not the Austrians too?

Serbia took the lead among the Balkan states. Austria feared disintegration from this nationalist pressure and worried about the loss of status that would result. In the end, Austria went to war against Serbia not because a Serb assassinated its Archduke Franz Ferdinand, but because Austria wanted to weaken Serbia and prevent it from becoming a magnet for nationalism among the Balkan Slavs. General Conrad, the Austrian chief of staff, exposed his motives very clearly: "For this reason, and not as vengeance for the assassination, Austria-Hungary must draw the sword against Serbia... 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." Disintegration of an empire because of nationalism was the more profound cause of the war; the slain Franz Ferdinand was a pretext.

Another important domestic-level explanation lay in the domestic politics of Germany. German historian Fritz Fischer and his followers argue that Germany's social problems were a key cause of the war. According to Fischer, Germany's efforts toward world hegemony were an attempt by German elites to distract attention from the poor domestic integration of German society. According to this school of thought, Germany was ruled by a domestic coalition of landed aristocrats and some very large industrial capitalists, called the Coalition of Rye and Iron. This ruling coalition used expansionist policies to provide foreign adventures instead of domestic reform, circuses in place of bread. Expansionism was an alternative to social democracy. This is not sufficient to explain World War I, but it does help to explain the source of the pressure that Germany put on the international system after 1890.
What about the first level of analysis, the role of individuals? What distinguished the leadership on the eve of World War I was its mediocrity. The Austro-Hungarian emperor, Franz Josef, was a tired old man who was putty in the hands of General Conrad and Count Berchtold, the duplicitous foreign minister. Ironically, Franz Ferdinand, the crown prince who was assassinated at Sarajevo, would have been a restraining force, for the potential heir had liberal political views. In Russia, Czar Nicholas II was an isolated autocrat who spent most of his time resisting change at home. He was served by incompetent foreign and defense ministers and was strongly influenced by his sickly and neurotic wife. Most important was the Kaiser, who had a great sense of inferiority. He was a blusterer, a weak man who was extremely emotional. He led Germany into a risky policy without any skill or consistency. To quote von Bülow:

William II did not want war, if only because he did not trust his nerved not to give way under the strain of any really critical situation. The moment there was danger, his majesty would become uncomfortably conscious that he could never lead an army into battle. He was well aware that he was neurasthenic. His more menacing jingo speeches were intended to give the foreigner the impression that here was another Frederick the Great or Napoleon.6

Personality did make a difference. There was something about the leaders, the Kaiser in particular, that made them significant contributory causes of the war. The relationship among some of the systemic, societal, and individual causes are illustrated in Figure 3.2.

Was War Inevitable?

When there are several causes, each of which could be sufficient, we call a situation overdetermined. If World War I was overdetermined, does that mean it was inevitable? The answer is no, war was not inevitable until it actually broke out in August 1914. And even then it was not inevitable that four years of carnage had to follow.

Let us distinguish three types of causes in terms of their proximity in time to the event we are studying. The most remote are deep causes, then come intermediate causes, and those immediately before the event are precipitating causes. By analogy, ask how the lights came to be on in your room. The precipitating cause is that you flicked the switch, the intermediate cause is that someone wired the building, and the deep cause is that Thomas Edison discovered how to deliver electricity. Another analogy is building a fire: The logs are the deep cause, the kindling and paper are the immediate cause, and the actual striking of the match is the precipitating cause.

In World War I, the deep causes were changes in the structure of the balance of power and certain aspects of the domestic political systems. Especially important reasons were the rise of German strength, the development of a bipolar alliance system, the rise of nationalism and the resultant destruction of two declining empires, and German politics. The intermediate causes were German policy, the rise in complacency about peace, and the personal idiosyncrasies of the leaders. The precipitating cause was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo by a Serbian terrorist.

Looking back, things always look inevitable. Indeed, we might say that if it had not been the assassination, it would have been some other incident. Some say precipitating events are like buses—they come along every ten minutes. Thus the specific event at Sarajevo was not all that important; some incident would probably have occurred sooner or later. This type of argument can be tested by counterfactual history. We can ask “what if” and “what might have been” as we look carefully at the history of the period. What if there had been no assassination in Sarajevo? What if the Social Democrats had come to power in Germany? There is also the issue of probability. Given the deep and intermediate causes, there was a high probability of war, but a high probability is not the same as inevitability. Using the metaphor of the fire again, logs and kindling may sit for a long time and never be lit. Indeed, if it rains before somebody comes along with a match, they may not catch fire even when a Sarajevo occurs.

Suppose there had been no Sarajevo in 1914, and no crisis occurred until 1916; what might have happened? One possibility is that the growth in Russian strength might have deterred Germany from recklessly backing Austria. In 1914, General von Moltke and Foreign Secretary Jagow; two of the German leaders who were most influential in precipitating the war, believed that war with Russia was inevitable. They knew Germany would have a problem fighting a war on two fronts and would have to knock out one side before fighting the other. Russia, although larger, was technologically backward and had a poor transportation system, so it could be put off for the second strike. Germany ought first to rush westward to knock out the French. After victory in the west, Germany could turn east and take its time to beat the Russians. Indeed, that was the Schlieffen Plan, the war plan of the German general staff, which called for a rapid sweep through Belgium (violating Belgian neutrality in the process) to knock out France quickly, and then to turn east.
strength would have continued to grow. Ironically, without war, the British historian A.J.P. Taylor has speculated, Germany might have won mastery over Europe. Germany might have become so strong that France and Britain would have been deterred.

We can also raise counterfactuals about what might have happened in Britain's internal affairs if two more years had passed without war. In The Strange Death of Liberal England, historian George Dangerfield tells of Britain's domestic turmoil. The Liberal Party was committed to getting out of Ireland while the Conservatives, particularly in Northern Ireland, were bitterly opposed. There was a prospect of mutiny in the British army. If the Ulster Revolt had developed, it is quite plausible that Britain would have been so internally preoccupied that it would not have been able to join the coalition with France and Russia. Certainly many historically significant changes could have occurred in two more years of peace.

What Kind of War?

Another set of counterfactuals raises questions about what kind of war would have occurred rather than whether some war would have occurred. It is true that Germany's policies frightened its neighbors and that Germany in turn was afraid of being encircled by the Triple Entente, so it is reasonable to assume that some war was more likely than not. But what kind of war? The war did not have to be what we now remember as World War I. Counterfactually, four other wars were possible.

One was a simple local war. Initially, the Kaiser expected a replay of the Bosnian crisis of 1908–1909 when the Germans backed the Austrians, and Austria was therefore able to make Russia stand down in the Balkans. On July 5, 1914, the Kaiser promised full support to Austria-Hungary. And with that, he went on vacation. When the Kaiser returned from his cruise, he found that the Austrians had filled in the blank check he left them by issuing an ultimatum to Serbia. When he realized that, the Kaiser made great efforts to keep the war from escalating, thus the Nicky-Willie telegrams referred to earlier. If his efforts had been successful, we might today recall not World War I, but merely a little Austrian-Serbian War of August 1914.

A second counterfactual possibility was a one-front war. When the Russians mobilized their troops, the Germans also mobilized. The Kaiser asked General von Moltke whether he could limit the preparations to just the eastern front. Von Moltke replied that it was impossible because any change in the timetables for assembling the troops and supplies would create a logistical nightmare. He told the Kaiser that if he tried to change the plans, he would have a disorganized mass instead of an army. However, after the war, General von Staab of the railway division of the German army admitted that it might have been possible after all to have altered the mobilization schedules successfully. Had the Kaiser known that and insisted, there might have been a one-front war.

A third counterfactual is to imagine a two-front war without Britain: Germany and Austria versus France and Russia. If the British had not been there to make the difference, Germany might well have won. It is possible that Britain might not have
joined if Germany had not invaded Belgium, although Belgium was not the main cause of Britain entering the war. For some people, like Sir Edward Grey and the Foreign Office, the main reason for entering the war was the danger of German control of the Continent. But Britain was a democracy, and the Liberal Party in the Cabinet was split. The left Liberals opposed war, but when Germany swept through Belgium and violated Belgian neutrality, it allowed the pro-war Liberals to overcome the reluctance of the antiwar Liberals and to repair the split in the British Cabinet.

Finally, a fourth counterfactual is a war without the United States. By early 1918, Germany might have won the war if the United States had not tipped the military balance by its entry in 1917. One of the reasons the United States became involved was the German submarine campaign against Allied and American shipping. There was also some German clumsiness: Germany sent a message, now known as the Zimmerman telegram, instructing its embassy in Mexico to stir up trouble against Americans there, and the United States regarded this as a hostile act. These factors ensured that the United States would enter the war.

Our counterfactual analysis first suggests ways in which the war might not have occurred in 1914, and second, ways in which the war that occurred did not have to become four years of carnage, which destroyed Europe as the heart of the global balance of power. It suggests that World War I was probable, but not inevitable. Human choices mattered.

The Funnel of Choices

History is path-dependent. Events close in over time, degrees of freedom are lost, and the probability of war increases. But the funnel of choices available to leaders might open up again, and degrees of freedom could be regained (see Figure 3.4). If we start in 1898 and ask what was the most likely war in Europe, the answer would have been war between France and Britain, which were eyeball-to-eyeball in a colonial dispute in Africa. But after the British and French formed the Entente in 1904, a Franco-British war looked less likely. The first Moroccan crisis in 1905 and the Bosnian crisis in 1908 made war with Germany look more likely. But some interesting events occurred in 1910. Bethmann Hollweg, the German chancellor, sought détente with Britain. Britain implied that it would remain neutral in any European
war if Germany would limit its navy. At that same time, it looked as if renewed colonial friction between Britain and Russia in Asia and between the British and the French threatened a collapse or erosion of the Triple Entente. In other words, in 1910 the funnel of choices started to widen again.

But the funnel closed once more in 1911 with the second Moroccan crisis. When France sent troops to help the Sultan of Morocco, Germany demanded compensation in the French Congo and sent a gunboat to Agadir on the coast of Morocco. Britain prepared its fleet. French and German bankers lobbied against war, and the Kaiser pulled back. But these events deeply affected public opinion and raised fears about German intentions.

Although the Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913 and the increased pressure on Austria set the scene for 1914, there was also a renewed effort at détente in 1912. Britain sent Lord Haldane to Berlin, and the British and Germans agreed on a number of the issues. Also, by this time it was clear that Britain had won the naval arms race. Perhaps the funnel would open up again.

In June 1914, the feeling that relations were improving was strong enough for Britain to send four of its great Dreadnought battleships to Kiel, Germany, for a state visit. If Britain had thought war was about to occur, the last thing it would have done was put four of its prime battleships in an enemy harbor. Clearly, the British were not thinking about war at that point. In fact, on June 28, British and German sailors were walking together along the quay in Kiel when they heard the news that a Serbian terrorist had shot an Austrian archduke in a faraway place called Sarajevo. History has its surprises, and once again, "probable" is not the same as "inevitable."

Lessons of History Again

Are there any lessons we can draw from this history? We must be careful about lessons. Analogies can mislead, and many myths have been created about World War I. For example, some say World War I was an accidental war. World War I was not purely accidental. Austria went to war deliberately. And if there was to be a war, Germany preferred a war in 1914 to a war later. There were miscalculations over the length and depth of the war, but that is not the same as an accidental war.

It is also said that the war was caused by the arms race in Europe. But by 1912, the naval arms race was over, and Britain had won. While there was concern in Europe about the growing strength of the armies, the view that the war was precipitated directly by the arms race is too simple.

On the other hand, there are some valid warnings we can draw from such as the long slide into World War I. One lesson is to pay attention to the process of a balance of power system as well as to its structure or distribution of power. Here the constructivists add an important part that some realists miss. Moderation comes from the process. Stability is not assured by the distribution of power alone. Another useful lesson is to beware of complacency about peace or believing that the next crisis is going to fit the same pattern as the last crisis: 1914 was supposed to be a repeat of the Bosnian crisis of 1908, though clearly it was not. In addition, the experience of World War I suggests it is important to have military forces that are stable in crisis, without any feeling that one must use them or lose them. The railway timetables were not the major determinants of World War I, but they did make it more difficult for political leaders to buy time for diplomacy.

The world at the dawning of the twenty-first century is different from the world in 1914 in two important ways: One is that nuclear weapons have made large-scale wars more dangerous, and the other, as constructivists note, is that the ideology of war, the acceptance of war, is much weaker. In 1914, war was thought to be inevitable, a fatalistic view compounded by social Darwinism's argument that war should be welcome because it would clear the air like a good fresh storm. On the eve of World War I that was indeed the mood. Winston Churchill's book, _The World in Crisis_, captures this feeling very well:

> There was a strange temper in the air. Unsatisfied by material prosperity, the nations turned fiercely toward strife, internal or external. National passions, unduly exalted in the decline of religion, burned beneath the surface of nearly every land with fierce, if shrouded, fires. Almost one might think the world wished to suffer. Certainly men were everywhere eager to dare.7

They dared and they lost, and that is the lesson of 1914.

**Chronology: The Road to World War I**

1905-1906  First Moroccan crisis: Kaiser visits Tangier as Germany attempts to supplant France; settled to France's satisfaction at the Algeciras conference
1908  Austria proclaims annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slavic territories it had administered since 1878; Serbia threatens war but is powerless without Russian backing; Germany supports Austria-Hungary, deterring Russia
1911  Second Moroccan crisis: German gunboat Panther appears at Agadir in attempt to force France into colonial concessions in other areas in return for German recognition of French claims in Morocco
1912  First Balkan War: Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece defeat Turkey and gain Thrace and Salonika; Austria-Hungary helps create Albania as check to Serbian power
1913  Second Balkan War: Serbia, Greece, and Romania defeat Bulgaria and gain territory at the latter's expense
1914  June 28  Assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife at Sarajevo
July 5  Austria seeks and obtains German backing against Serbia
July 23  Austria sends harsh ultimatum to Serbia
July 25  Serbia rejects some terms of ultimatum; seeks Russian support
July 26  British Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey proposes conference to resolve the crisis; Germany and Austria reject proposal
July 28  Austria declares war on Serbia
July 29  Austrian forces bombard Belgrade; Russia mobilizes against Austria
CHAPTER 3  Balance of Power and World War I

July 30  Russia and Austria order general mobilization; French troops withdraw 10 kilometers from German border

July 31  Germany delivers ultimatum to Russia, demanding demobilization; Russia does not reply

August 1  Germany declares war on Russia; British fleet mobilizes; France mobilizes as German forces invade Luxembourg

August 2  Germany demands unimpeded passage through Belgium

August 3  Belgium rejects German ultimatum; Germany declares war on France

August 4  German troops march into Belgium; Britain declares war on Germany

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Was World War I inevitable? If so, why and when? If not, when and how could it have been avoided?
2. How might you apply Waltz’s images to the origins of World War I?
3. Which of the following factors do you consider most significant in explaining the outbreak of World War I?
   a. alliance system
   b. public opinion
   c. military doctrine or military leadership (specify countries)
   d. political leadership (specify countries)
   e. economic pressures or forces
   f. misperception
   g. other
4. Thucydides argues that the underlying cause of the Peloponnesian War was the “growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.” To what extent was World War I caused by the growth of German power and the fear this caused in Britain? Or the growth of Russian power and the fear this caused in Germany?
5. To what extent, if any, was World War I “accidental”? Does it make sense to talk about “accidental” wars? What about “unintended” ones?
6. What do realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches add to our understanding of the origins of World War I?
7. What are some “lessons” from 1914 that might help policy-makers avoid war today?

NOTES


Further Readings


SELECTED READINGS


Further Readings


Fischer, Fritz, World Power or Decline: The Controversy over Germany’s Aims in the First World War (New York: Norton, 1974).


CHAPTER 4
The Failure of Collective Security and World War II

Victorious Allied leaders Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Wilson shortly before the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, 1919

THE RISE AND FALL OF COLLECTIVE SECURITY

World War I caused enormous social disruption and shock waves of revulsion at the senseless slaughter. Balance of power politics was widely blamed for the war. Woodrow Wilson, the American president during World War I, was a classic