

“Military Doomsday Machine”? The Decisions for War 1914

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On 28 June 1914 the heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne was assassinated. The Austrian government alleged official Serbian involvement, issued an ultimatum, and, rejecting negotiation, began hostilities on 29 July with a bombardment of Belgrade. In a linked series of decisions, four other major European powers—Germany, Russia, France, and Britain—joined the struggle. Ultimately, twenty-nine nations, including Japan and the Ottoman Empire, would be involved. In all instances, the decision makers recognized the inherent hazards. They knew their choices could enlarge the conflict and significantly escalate the dimensions of the struggle.

Most university-level history and social science courses and books that consider the causes of the Great War focus on “big” events, processes, or structures. Many begin with the alliance system and continue with discussions of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. All of these “big” factors are said to have had “powerful” impacts. Thus, they are treated as acceptable causes. Accounts focused on individuals such as Emperor Franz Joseph, Kaiser Wilhelm II, or Tsar Nicholas II, and on their outlooks, whims, and fancies, and on those of their closest advisors, are viewed as “small” factors.

In a recent collection of essays¹ that I edited with Richard F. Hamilton of The Ohio State University, eleven international scholars argued for a research focused

¹ Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds., *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge:

approach. Their conclusions ran counter to the popular “big” factors line of explanations. First, World War I resulted from the decisions taken by the leaders of the powers they analyzed. Second, in each of the nations the decision to go to war was made by a coterie of five, eight, or perhaps ten persons, including input from the chiefs of staff and ministers of war. Third, explanations for the decision to go to war centered on the considerations that moved those decision makers. Fourth, all countries studied had procedures, formal and informal, that specified who would participate in the decision to go to war (the so-called “war powers”). And by making the case for contingency, the authors suggested that misinformation, weak nerves, egos, misjudgment of intentions, ignorance of consequences, and difficulties in timing were imbedded in the various processes. Put differently, diverse choices are easy to imagine. In the midst of the crisis, two monarchs, Nicholas II and Wilhelm II, did say “no” to war. But both men were then convinced by others in their coterie to reverse those decisions.

To be sure, the “big” factors contributed toward forming the *mentalité*, the assumptions (both spoken and unspoken²) of the decision makers of 1914. Unquestionably, they all gave some consideration to imperialism, nationalism, mass opinion, and military strategy. But it does the “men of 1914” little justice to depict them as mere agents of some grand, unfathomable, impersonal design. For the actual decisions to “let slip the dogs of war” were a matrix of extemporizations, of choices based on assessments of recent events, of alliance needs, of power and prestige, of immediate opportunities, and of survival.

So, who made the decision to go to war—in terms of both nations and coterie? Without trudging through the myriad titles on “The Origins of World War I,” some of which I am guilty of having let loose on the world, we do need to understand how and why nations and their leaders decided on war in 1914. The dominant explanation, written into Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty, was intentionalist: Germany was to blame for the catastrophe. But revisionist views came quickly. Sidney Bradshaw Fay in *The Origins of the World War* (1928) identified five “underlying” causes—the system of

Cambridge University Press, 2003).

² See James Joll, *1914: The Unspoken Assumptions* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968).

secret alliances, militarism, nationalism, economic imperialism, and the press.³ Many accounts add other causes, such as social Darwinism, “domestic unrest,” and unintentional “slide.”

A first point with regard to the “alliance system” argument: none of the decisions for war was mandated by treaty obligations.⁴ Germany was obliged by treaty to aid Austria-Hungary only if one or more of the *entente* powers engaged in unprovoked aggression. The Dual Monarchy’s move against Serbia, accordingly, did not in any way obligate Germany. Italy’s leaders recognized that move against Serbia as a provocation and, citing the terms of the Triple Alliance, declared their country’s neutrality. Only the Franco-Russian alliance was unambiguous: both powers agreed to mobilize their forces in case one or more of the Triple Alliance powers mobilized. In almost all cases, the civilian ministers chose not to share the state’s diplomatic arrangements with the military, in some cases regarding the latter as incompetent simpletons.

A second point: nationalism did indeed gain in importance in the nineteenth century, as did the influence of the popular press, but we have no serious evidence on their influence on decision makers in 1914. In fact, most papers were manipulated, both in terms of information and of finances, by their governments and hardly “influenced” national policy.⁵ A third point: it is generally accepted that the “men of 1914” were smitten with the notion that Charles Darwin’s theories of “natural selection” could be transferred to the development of human society. Additionally, a great many banking, business, labor, and political leaders firmly believed that unchecked “militarism” of necessity had to result in war. But did these “background factors” lead to the decisions of August 1914? And what were the mechanisms linking these ideologies and the decisions?

³ Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (2 vols., New York: Macmillan, 1928).

⁴ The various treaties have been translated and excerpted in Ralph R. Menning, *The Art of the Possible: Documents on Great Power Diplomacy, 1814-1914* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996).

⁵ We still lack an analysis of the European press along the lines of the older study by Oron J. Hale, *Publicity and Diplomacy, With Special Reference to England and Germany, 1890-1914* (New York and London: A. Appleton-Century, 1940).

A fifth point: the “imperialism” argument requires further analysis.⁶ To be sure, most countries had advocacy groups—Britain’s Empire League, France’s Union coloniale française, Germany’s Kolonialverein, and the Italian Nationalist Association come to mind—and, obviously, the decision makers of most of the powers were driven to some degree by imperialist concerns. That interest often proved an astonishing mistake since the colonies, on the whole, were not profitable. The returns, typically, were limited and the costs of policing, administration and defense often enormous. The value of Imperial Germany’s commerce with its colonies between 1894 and 1913 remained less than what was spent on them. Russia’s investments in Manchuria, despite all efforts to “secure a captive market” there, were limited to two factories—“distilleries that produced liquor mainly for the Russian army of occupation.”⁷

The argument of domestic causes is a late entry in the field, and it basically suggests that the conservative elites, faced with serious internal threats, chose “preventive war abroad” over “armed repression at home” to save their privileged political and societal positions. Research subsequent to Arno J. Mayer’s original discourses on the topic⁸ has found little support for this position. Most political leaders knew the hazards involved.

A seventh point: the accident or “slide” thesis sees the Great War as the unintended consequence of decisions aiming for some other outcomes. The most famous statement of this argument came from David Lloyd George, when in December 1920 he claimed that “no one at the head of affairs quite meant war” in July 1914. “It was something into which [the statesmen] glided, or rather staggered and stumbled.”⁹ Later, in his postwar memoirs, Britain’s wartime prime minister reiterated this argument of inadvertence: “How was it that the world was so unexpectedly plunged into this terrible conflict? Who was responsible?” His reply became the classic statement of innocence for July 1914: “The nations slithered over the brink into the boiling

⁶ The “imperialism-as-cause” argument is made most strenuously by John H. Morrow, Jr., *The Great War: An Imperial History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁷ William C. Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 374.

⁸ Arno J. Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870-1956: An Analytical Framework* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); and *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

⁹ Cited in Jonathan French Scott, *Five Weeks: The Surge of Public Opinion on the Eve of the Great War* (New York: John Day, 1927), p. 11.

cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay." The theme is then summarized under the heading: "Nobody Wanted War."¹⁰ In 1976 Henry Kissinger repeated Lloyd George's "slide" argument: "Nation after nation slid into a war whose causes they did not understand but from which they could not extricate themselves."¹¹ In his book, *Diplomacy*, Richard Nixon's "Metternich" changed the emphasis slightly, and now put the blame for war on the existence in 1914 of both a political and a military "doomsday machine."¹²

I argue strongly that the notions of "inevitability" or of unintended "slide" stand sharply opposed to the evidence available. Furthermore, the argument relativizes, making King George V as culpable as Wilhelm II, Sir Edward Grey as culpable as Count Leopold von Berchtold. And it is a digression. It thereby avoids the essence of decision making: namely, that human beings made the choices. Historian Hew Strachan provides a useful summary: "What remains striking about those hot July weeks is the role, not of collective forces nor of long-range factors, but of the individual."¹³

In the end, Hamilton and I argued another "cause": that the decision makers of the major powers sought to save, maintain, or enhance the power and prestige of the nation. We referred to this as the strategic argument. Since we published our anthology, we have been chastised by our dear friend, political scientist Ned Lebow, who suggests that in what he calls our "realist international relations" approach, we overlooked the powerful influence of honor, closely linked to "the continuing power of the aristocracy everywhere in continental Europe." Honor, Lebow argues by referring his work to the Greek classics, "foregrounds the spirit."¹⁴ There is merit in a modest argument concerning the role of honor in the "hierarchies" of 1914. But once more, we agree with historian Strachan: "By July 1914 each power, conscious in a self-absorbed way of its

¹⁰ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George* (6 vols., London: I. Nicholson and Watson, 1933-1936), Vol. 1, pp. 49, 52.

¹¹ Speech of 11 March 1976, reported in the *New York Times* (12 March 1976), p. 4.

¹² Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), chs. 7 and 8. The notion of a "doomsday machine" that automatically set off nuclear "mutually assured destruction" was satirized by Stanley Kubrick in his 1964 black comedy film, "Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb."

¹³ Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. 1, *To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 101.

¹⁴ Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), especially pp. 340-48.

own potential weaknesses, felt it was on its mettle that its status as a great power would be forfeit if it failed to act.”¹⁵ If we can reach consensus that in each of these settings, a small coterie of no more than a dozen elite leaders made the decision for war, then we can move on to who the decision makers were.

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All the major countries, save Britain, had written constitutions in 1914. We are trained to think of constitutions as indicators of progress, as steps setting limits to authoritarian rule. While this is generally true, in the critical areas of the “war powers” most of the European constitutions were not as “progressive” as one might think. Nor did many leading decision makers adhere to the letter or the spirit of the law in July 1914. A brief synopsis of the constitutions in effect in 1914 will clarify the decision-making process that led to war.

The “Constitution of the German Empire” (6 April 1871) specified in Article 11 that the Kaiser had the “duty” to conclude “treaties with foreign countries” and “to declare war and to conclude peace.” His decisions in either case required only “the consent of the Bundesrat,” the Upper House staffed with the ambassadors of the federal states, as well as the “countersignature of the Imperial Chancellor.”¹⁶ Article 63 clearly defined the Emperor’s “command” authority, stating that the Reich’s armed forces were directly “under the command of the Emperor.” The Reichstag had the authority to say “no” to the war budget. It is one of the great “what ifs” of history: what if a majority had voted “no” on the issue of war credits on 4 August?

The 1914 decision first for mobilization and then for war was made by a small inner circle around the Kaiser: Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, War Minister Erich von Falkenhayn, and Chief of the General Staff Helmuth von Moltke, the Younger. Secretary of Foreign Affairs Gottlieb von Jagow and Secretary of the Navy Office Alfred von Tirpitz were temporarily absent from the capital early in July. The German crisis management team was beset by doubts, fears, shifts, and incompetence. But it decided for war after a full course of analysis, convinced that time was running

¹⁵ Strachan, *The First World War*, Vol. 1, p. 101.

¹⁶ Walter Farleigh Dodd, *Modern Constitutions: A Collection of the Fundamental Laws of Twenty-Two of the Most Important Countries of the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909), Vol. 1, pp. 330-31.

against Berlin and that only war would allow the Reich to maintain its position as a great power. As General von Falkenhayn put it on 4 August 1914: “Even if we go under as a result of this, still it was beautiful.”¹⁷ No “inadvertence”; no “slide” into war.

In Austria-Hungary’s complex and complicated “Law Concerning the Affairs Common to all of the Countries of the Austrian Monarchy” (21 December 1867), Kaiser Franz Joseph was “sacred, inviolable and unaccountable.” Still, Section I of the Law stated that the Emperor formally required the consent of both Austria and Hungary in “foreign affairs” as well as in “military and naval affairs.”¹⁸ Article 14 provided the Kaiser with an “emergency paragraph” to rule autocratically in case of external or internal danger. The two “halves” of the Dual Monarchy acted through a Common Ministerial Council, composed of the foreign minister, the finance minister, the war minister, and the Austrian and Hungarian minister-presidents; if need be, the Council could call on Chief of the General Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf for technical counsel. Thus, the decision for war in July 1914 was made by a small coterie of no more than eight to ten persons—led by Foreign Minister von Berchtold and a group of “Young Turks” in the Foreign Ministry.¹⁹

“The Fundamental Laws of the Russian Empire” (6 May 1906) was the most authoritarian constitution in Europe. Article 4 left no room for debate: “The Emperor wields the supreme autocratic power.” The next Article further declared, “The person of the Emperor is sacred and inviolable.” Under Article 12, the Tsar exercised “supreme control of all relations of the Russian Empire with foreign powers.” Article 13 clarified that he alone “declares war and concludes peace, as well as other treaties with foreign powers.” Article 14 reminded lawmakers that the Tsar “is the supreme chief of the Russian army and navy.” And Article 15 confirmed that the Tsar alone “declares localities to be in a state of war.”²⁰ Unsurprisingly, Nicholas II reached his fateful decision for general mobilization (war) on the advice of a similarly small cadre of advisors: Foreign Minister S. D. Sazonov, Chief of the General Staff N. N. Ianushkevich,

¹⁷ Cited in Holger H. Herwig, “Germany,” in Hamilton and Herwig, eds., *Origins of World War I*, p. 150.

¹⁸ Dodd, *Modern Constitutions*, Vol. 1, pp. 114-15.

¹⁹ Graydon A. Tunstall, Jr., “Austria-Hungary,” in Hamilton and Herwig, eds., *Origins of World War I*, pp. 114-15.

²⁰ Dodd, *Modern Constitutions*, Vol. 2, pp. 182-84.

Minister of War V. A. Sukhomlinov, and (somewhat of a surprise) Agricultural Minister Alexander Krivoshein.²¹

In republican France, the “Constitutional Law on the Relations of the Public Powers” (16 July 1875) was, without question, the most “progressive.” While under Article 8 the president had the power to “negotiate and ratify treaties . . . of peace and of commerce,” this required the approval of both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies for ratification. The “Constitutional Law” was also precise on the matter of the war powers: “The President of the Republic shall not declare war without the previous consent of the two chambers.”²² But, as July 1914 revealed, the decision for war was largely the work of President Raymond Poincaré and, to a much lesser extent, Premier René Viviani. Moreover, the required consent of the two chambers was finessed with the argument that France had been attacked and hence the government did not need a formal vote for war; and by the fact that the Chamber of Deputies was under summer recess and its members thus absent from the capital.²³

Britain was a “constitutional monarchy” with cabinet government but without a written constitution. Under the doctrine known as the “sovereignty of Parliament,” the House of Commons and the House of Lords had virtually unlimited political and legal power. Specifically, the “war powers” rested in the hands of Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith and the Cabinet (fifteen or twenty of his appointees). The decision for war in August 1914 required a majority vote in Cabinet, and a “resolute minority” led by Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Sir Edward Grey generated a “reluctant majority” to bring about that decision.²⁴ Again, a decision for war by a small coterie of perhaps a dozen ministers.

The “Constitution of Italy” (4 March 1848) contained language quite similar to that later adopted by both Austria-Hungary and Russia. Article 4 read, “The person of the King is sacred and inviolable.” The monarch “alone” exercised executive power. Article 5 of the Sardinian constitution was clear on this: “He is the supreme head of the state; commands all land and naval forces; makes treaties of peace, alliance, commerce,

²¹ David Alan Rich, “Russia,” in Hamilton and Herwig, eds., *Origins of World War I*, pp. 195, 225.

²² Dodd, *Modern Constitutions*, vol. 1, pp. 292-93.

²³ Eugenia C. Kiesling, “France,” in Hamilton and Herwig, eds., *Origins of World War I*, pp. 228-29.

²⁴ J. Paul Harris, “Great Britain,” in *ibid.*, pp. 274-75, 294.

and other treaties. . . .”²⁵ But in 1914 Vittorio Emanuele III was psychologically unable to play the heavy role accorded him by the *Statuto*. Thus, the decision of July not to enter the war on the side of its allies, Austria-Hungary and Germany, was made mainly by Foreign Minister Antonio di San Giuliano, and, to a lesser degree, by Prime Minister Antonio Salandra. The Chief of the General Staff, Alberto Pollio, had not even been informed of Italy’s treaty obligations and as late as April 1914 had offered the Austrians Italian military forces in case of war with Russia and Serbia.²⁶ When Italy entered the war via the Pact of London in April 1915, it was not the result of any “inadvertency” or “slide,” but rather of courting the highest bidder (*sacro egoismo*, as Salandra termed it).

The “Constitution of Japan” (11 February 1889), while archaic in its description of a “line of emperors unbroken for ages eternal” in Article 1, nevertheless had texts that paralleled those of the West. As was the case with the constitutions of Austria-Hungary, Italy and Russia, Article 3 of the Japanese document read: “The Emperor is sacred and inviolable.” Under Articles 11 and 13 of the so-called “Meiji” constitution, the Emperor alone exercised “the supreme command of the army and navy,” and he alone “declares war, makes peace, and concludes treaties.”²⁷ In 1914 Japan was not obligated to enter the “European War” by its alliance with Great Britain. That it nevertheless did so was the work of one man: Foreign Minister Katō Takaaki. In what one scholar has described as a “complete usurpation of the foreign policy prerogative,” Katō consulted only a few close advisors in the Foreign Ministry before springing the decision to join the fray on the *genrō*, or elder statesmen. The Imperial Cabinet, Privy Council, Imperial Courts, Imperial Diet, and the two Service heads seem not to have been brought into the decision-making process. Again, there was no “slide” into war. Katō and his elite circle reached their decision on careful analysis of the opportunities offered by the “European War” in terms of possible territorial expansion and domestic consolidation of their power.²⁸

²⁵ Dodd, *Modern Constitutions*, Vol. 2, p. 5. See also Albert P. Blaustein and Gisbert H. Flanz, eds., *Constitutions of the Countries of the World: Italy* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1987), pp. 1-10.

²⁶ John Gooch, “Italy,” in Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds., *War Planning 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 216-24.

²⁷ Dodd, *Modern Constitutions*, Vol. 2, pp. 24-25.

²⁸ Frederick R. Dickinson, “Japan,” in Hamilton and Herwig, eds., *Origins of World War I*, pp. 306-08.

“The Constitution of the United States” (17 September 1787) is the most specific on the sharing of the “war powers” between the executive and legislative branches of government. Article I, Section 8 states: “The Congress shall have power . . . to declare war, grant letters of marque and reprisal, and make rules concerning captures on land and water. . . .” Article II, Section 2, identifies the president as “commander-in-chief of the army and navy of the United States, and of the militia of the several States.” It also gives the president the power “to make treaties,” but only with “the advice and consent of the Senate . . . provided two thirds of the Senators present concur. . . .”²⁹ In theory, any vote to join the Great War in Europe had to pass both houses; in effect, several hundred men and women had to share in the decision to go to war. But in reality, the decision in April 1917 was largely the work of one man, Woodrow Wilson. The president, in the words of his official biographer, Arthur S. Link, “exercised almost absolute personal control” over foreign affairs. He “often bypassed the State Department via private agents and advisers,” and he at times “conducted negotiations behind the backs of his Secretaries of State.” Overall, Link concluded, Wilson “acted like a divine-right monarch in the conduct of foreign relations.”³⁰ On 6 April 1917 the President’s war resolution was constitutionally passed by both the Senate (with six dissenting votes) and the House (fifty dissenting votes).

Last but not least, constitutional matters were most murky in the Ottoman Empire. The Constitutional Document of 23 December 1876, promulgated under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, was more times neglected or simply set aside than it was used in conducting the state’s affairs. The Constitutional Document stressed the “dominant role of the Executive.” Article 3 identified the Sultan as the secular head of state, while Article 4 elevated him to the role of Guardian of Islam. His position has often been compared to that of the Tsar of all the Russias.³¹ Of course, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, in part against the Sultan’s suspension of parliament, made constitutional matters redundant as politics were conducted by assassination and intrigue.

²⁹ Dodd, *Modern Constitutions*, Vol. 2, pp. 298, 302.

³⁰ Arthur S. Link, *The Higher Realism of Woodrow Wilson and Other Essays* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), p. 83.

³¹ Blaustein and Flanz, eds., *Constitutions of the Countries of the World: Turkey*, pp. 1-2.

Unsurprisingly, then, the Ottoman decision for war in 1914 was made by a small, largely military elite, with the support of the Central Committee of the Committee of Union and Progress. Grand Vizier Prince Said Halim Pasha, Minister of the Interior Mehmed Talât Bey, Minister of the Navy Ahmed Cemal Pasha, and Minister of War Enver Bey conducted negotiations for Turkey's entry into the war with both the Allies and the Central Powers. They decided on the latter for purely altruistic reasons: Berlin offered an end to the Porte's financial "capitulations" to the western powers, a "loan" of 5 million Turkish pounds in gold, territorial expansion into Transcaucasia and the Caspian region, and the incorporation of the German battle cruiser *Goeben* and the light cruiser *Breslau* into the Ottoman navy.³² Again, there is no hint of a "slide" into war on the part of the Ottoman Empire.

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The secondary and tertiary themes of this conference can be dealt with in straightforward fashion. The "men of 1914" went to war after carefully weighing available options, and then making what German Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg famously called a "leap into the dark"³³ in the firm belief that war was their only option to remain a great power. Fear was dominant in every decision-making council. Austria-Hungary acted out of a deep suspicion that if the regicide at Sarajevo was not countered with strong military action, it, like the Ottoman Empire, would rush into irreversible decline. Germany feared that time was running against it, with Russia's "Great Program" of rearmament maturing by roughly 1917. To stand still meant to decline. Its "encirclement" by the *entente* could only be broken by a powerful but short war, first in the West and then in the East. Russia feared that if it failed to back the "little Slav brother" in Belgrade, its prestige would plummet and it would cease to be a great power. France, with a stagnant birth rate, an old industry falling behind its rivals in relative terms, and mortally afraid of facing another war with Germany alone, feared simply not meeting its alliance commitment to Russia. Italy, Japan and the Ottoman Empire played a waiting game, seeking the right suitor. Britain eventually chose war for

³² Ulrich Trumpener, "The Ottoman Empire," in Hamilton and Herwig, eds., *Origins of World War I*, pp. 341-2347-55.

³³ Kurt Riezler, *Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente* ed. Karl Dietrich Erdmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), p. 185. Entry of 14 July 1914.

fear that a German victory (read, ports in the Channel and along the Bay of Biscay) was not in its national interest. We know today with the 20/20 vision of historical hindsight that the policies decided on in 1914 were the worst possible, that almost any negotiated resolution of the July Crisis would have been preferable to the war that eventuated. But in 1914, the possibilities offered by war were too enticing to be ignored, the costs hardly fathomable.

It must be pointed out yet again, that the argument that the war was caused by “military timetables,” so frequently enunciated by historians,³⁴ is specious. It puts the cart before the horse. Of course, mobilization was critical. Any General Staff that relaxed its mobilization schedule would find itself at a disadvantage. As the French chief of staff, General Joseph Joffre, warned the Cabinet on 31 July 1914, every twenty-four-hour delay in mobilization translated into the loss of fifteen to twenty kilometers of territory.³⁵ In Vienna, Chief of the General Staff Conrad von Hötzendorf for years had pushed the military option, only to be rebuffed year after year for his “war, war, war” mentality.³⁶ In Berlin, Generals von Falkenhayn and von Moltke likewise advised both Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg on speedy mobilization during the July Crisis. In St. Petersburg, War Minister Sukhomlinov and Chief of the General Staff Ianushkevich also pressed their case for mobilization (and war)—but, again, the final decision was made by the politicians, Tsar Nicholas II and his Council of Ministers. Put differently, the generals’ entreaties remained without result, until the politicians had decided on war. This simple, and yet well documented, fact seems all too often to elude writers on the Great War. Evidence, it seems, should not interfere with prejudice.

Sidney Fay’s shopping list of “big” causes for the war has not survived closer scrutiny. We have all the documents for the July Crisis (save Serbia) that we need to make the claim that in none of the capitals of any of the major power were the issues of alliances, imperialism, militarism, nationalism, or “inadvertence” critically raised. Nor were financial matters—either the eventual cost of mobilization and war, or the shift

³⁴ Most famously A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963), p. 15. “The First World War [was] imposed on the statesmen of Europe by railway timetables.”

³⁵ Joseph Joffre, *Mémoires du maréchal Joffre (1910-1917)* (Paris: Plon, 1932), Vol. 1, p. 222.

³⁶ Berchtold’s summary of Conrad’s position during the July Crisis. See Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers: Österreich-Ungarn und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Graz: Styria, 1993), pp. 67-70.

from a peacetime to a war economy—brought into any of the discussions. The arguments by what everywhere was a small coterie of less than a dozen elite decision makers were almost uniformly in line with the “strategic argument” that Hamilton and I have suggested. There was no “doomsday machine” that hurled either politicians or general and admirals inexorably and irrevocably into war. To be sure, the leaders of especially the great powers acted with a set of beliefs, with a set of assumptions, both spoken and unspoken, in reaching their decisions. They couched their discussions in terms of vital strategic interests, great-power status, honor, prestige, and on occasion alliance commitments. But, as King Vittorio Emanuele III brutally put it in 1908, “The only real strength lies in bayonets and cannon.”³⁷

A word on the so-called “merchants of death.” In the 1930s, after a decade of disillusionment with the Great War, much was made of the role of big business in general and of munitions makers in particular in “forcing” war for profit on unsuspecting governments.³⁸ While an in-depth multinational study of banking and business and war in 1914 still has not been done, anecdotal evidence suggests that “Big Business” was hardly united in a pro-war crusade. In fact, one of Germany’s most eminent Ruhr industrialists, Hugo Stinnes, just before the outbreak of war urged peace on the saber-rattling Heinrich Claß, head of the Pan-German League. “Let things develop quietly for three or four years and Germany will be the uncontested economic ruler of Europe.”³⁹ Similarly, the Hamburg banker, Max Warburg, urged caution on a bellicose Wilhelm II just one week before the Sarajevo assassination. There was no need to draw the sword, Warburg advised the Kaiser, even given the possibility that Russia would complete its “Great Program” of rearmament on schedule. “Germany becomes stronger with every year of peace. We can only gather rewards by biding our time.”⁴⁰ In Vienna, financiers were “profoundly pacifist” and opposed to “every warlike enterprise.” Their world of *la grande bourgeoisie bancaire* was one of fiscal calm and long-

³⁷ Cited in William A. Renzi, “Italy’s Neutrality and Entrance into the Great War: A Reexamination,” *American Historical Review* 73 (1968): 1414.

³⁸ Most radically, H. C. Engelbrecht and F. C. Hanighen, *Merchants of Death: A Study of the International Armaments Industry* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1934).

³⁹ Cited in Gerald D. Feldman, “Hugo Stinnes and the Prospect of War before 1914,” in Manfred Boemeke, Roger Chickering, Stig Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 81.

⁴⁰ Max. M. Warburg, *Aus meinen Aufzeichnungen* (Glückstadt: Privatdruck, 1952), p. 29.

term investment. In 1914, an eminent banking historian has argued, only the “aristocratic Ministry of Foreign Affairs” and the equally “aristocratic” General Staff, “a world totally foreign to the banking universe,” wanted war.⁴¹ And in London, one of the “hawks” in Prime Minister Asquith’s Cabinet, Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George, reported a call on 1 August from the Governor of the Bank of England, “to inform me . . . that the financial and trading interests in the City of London were totally opposed to our intervening in the War.”⁴²

Last but not least, how did the decisions for war (and the military plans) of 1914 affect the common soldier? This is a most difficult topic to assess with any accuracy, given that the war affected six major European powers, countless separate militaries within those nations, and millions of men with wildly disparate socio-economic backgrounds. For most, war, as always, meant danger, possible death or mutilation, as well as time away from home, work, job training, and sowing or harvest season. Given the prevailing “short-war illusion” of most General Staff planners, common soldiers (save in Great Britain) could expect to be called up from the first day of mobilization, either in the active or in the reserve armies. There would be no initial engagements followed by gradual escalation. It would be a come-as-you-are war, with a violent confrontation somewhere in Belgium or Northern France, Austrian or Russian Poland, resulting in massive casualties due to the lethality of not only artillery, but also of small-arms fire. Most planners feared a prolonged war, unsure whether millions of men suddenly taken from farms and factories would endure hardships over time or would be radicalized by sustained combat and death. Simply put, the “grunt” was expected to do what he had always done: do and die.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that leaders in every capital in 1914 in making their “leap into the dark” blithely ignored virtually all of Carl von Clausewitz’s “irrational” factors: interaction, escalation, friction, chance, and the proverbial “fog of uncertainty.” A young Winston Churchill had experienced this “fog” during the Boer War (1899-1902) as the British Empire became “a slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events.” A decade later, as one of the “hawks” in Prime Minister Asquith’s Cabinet, he

⁴¹ Bernard Michel, *Banques et banquiers en autriche au début du 20e siècle* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1976), pp. 363-64.

⁴² Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, Vol. 1, p. 61.

ignored his earlier mental note to himself: "Always remember, however sure you are that you can easily win, that there would not be a war if the other man did not think he also had a chance."⁴³

⁴³ Winston Churchill, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (New York: Touchstone, 1966), p. 232.