

Pearson New International Edition

Understanding Global Conflict & Cooperation: Intro to Theory & History Joseph S. Nye Jr. David A. Welch Ninth Edition

strategies involving sudden flanking movements of armies or dramatic break-through assaults, and freewheeling tactics of maneuver. In fact, as we have seen, the prevailing military technology of the day did not favor the offense, but European leaders believed that it did (a phenomenon we can explain at the individual level of analysis by noting that generals frequently expect the next war to look like the last, and the most recent large-scale European war—the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871—was indeed a freewheeling affair). Once the July crisis hit, leaders felt enormous pressure to get in the first blow. Of course, this particular explanation does not help us understand why Europe sat on a powderkeg. It does, however, help us understand why the spark in the Balkans traveled so quickly along the fuse.

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 Joseph (1830–1916), was a tired old man who was putty in the hands of General Conrad and Count Leopold von Berchtold, his 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, Tsar 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 Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941), 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. As political scientist Richard Ned Lebow puts it:

[Wilhelm] II did not want war, if only because he did not trust his nerves 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. ¹⁰

It did not help the kaiser to make sound decisions, either, that sycophantic German diplomats were filing overly rosy reports from most other great power capitals to please their vindictive superiors in the foreign ministry.

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 relationships among some of the systemic, societal, and individual causes are illustrated in Figure 2.

Was War Inevitable?

When several causes exist, each of which is sufficient, we call a situation *over-determined*. 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.

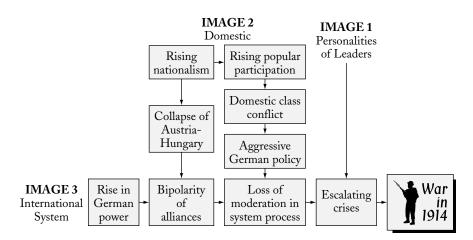


FIGURE 2
Causes of World War I

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 distribute electricity. Another analogy is building a fire: The logs are the deep cause, the kindling and paper are the intermediate cause, and the actual striking of the match is the precipitating cause.

In World War I, the deep causes were changes in 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 and its rapid escalation owing to acute crisis-instability.

Looking back, things always look inevitable. Indeed, we might say that if the assassination had not occurred, some other precipitating incident would have caused the war. 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. The deep and intermediate causes suggested 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 assassination in 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 Helmuth von Moltke and Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von 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. They reasoned that 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 defeat the Russians. Indeed, that was the Schlieffen Plan (Figure 3), 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.

But this strategy might have become obsolete by 1916 because Russia was using French money to build railroads. In the 1890s it would have taken the Russians two or three months before they could have transported all their troops to the German front, giving Germany ample time to fight France first. By 1910, that time had shrunk to eighteen days, and the German planners knew they no longer had a large margin of safety. By 1916, the margin would have been gone and Germany might have had to drop its two-front strategy. Consequently, some German leaders thought that a war in 1914 was better than a war later. They wanted to seize the crisis to wage and win a preventive war.

If no assassination and crisis had occurred in 1914, and the world had made it to 1916 without a war, it is possible the Germans might have felt deterred, unable to risk a two-front war. They might have been more careful before giving Austria a blank check to deal with Serbia as it liked. Or they might have dropped the Schlieffen Plan and concentrated on a war in the east only. Or they might have come to terms with Great Britain or changed their view that the offense had the advantage in warfare. In summary, in another two years, a variety of changes related to Russian strength might have prevented the war. Without war, German industrial 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 withdrawing British troops from 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* a 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 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



Britain's King George V visits his cousin Kaiser Wilhelm II at Potsdam for a wedding a little more than a year before the outbreak of World War I

the Austrians had filled in the blank check he left them by issuing an ultimatum to Serbia. When he realized that, the kaiser made efforts to keep the war from escalating; hence the Willie-Nicky telegrams referred to earlier. If his efforts had been successful, we might today recall not World War I, but merely a relatively minor Austro-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. 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 Hermann von Staab of the railway division of the German army admitted that it might have been possible, after all, to alter the mobilization schedules successfully. Had the kaiser known that and insisted, there might have been a one-front war.

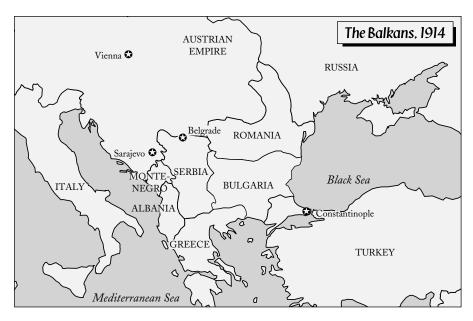
A third counterfactual is to imagine a two-front war without Britain: Germany and Austria versus France and Russia. If the British had not been there to make the difference, Germany might well have won. It is possible that Britain might not have joined if Germany had not invaded Belgium, although Belgium 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 prowar 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 Zimmermann telegram, instructing its embassy in Mexico to approach the Mexican government regarding an alliance against the United States. Washington regarded these intercepted instructions 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



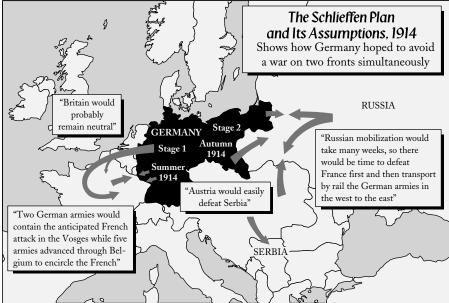


FIGURE 3
Flawed Thinking on the Eve of War

(see Figure 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