

## Reflections on the Great War

Frank C. Zagare<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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As the one hundredth anniversary of the First World War grew near, scholarly interest in its origins intensified. The renewed focus on the causes of World War I is reflected in the literatures of interstate conflict, peace science and, especially, diplomatic history. In the run-up to the war's anniversary, new documents were discovered (Mombauer, 2013) and, as one might expect, the consensus understanding of the July crisis shifted (Otte, 2014a; Vasquez, 2014; Williamson, 2014). This paper explores three of the foundational questions about the Great War in light of these discoveries: 1) who was to blame; 2) was the war inevitable; and 3) was it an accident? It argues that the answers to these questions that were reached in my book *The Games of July* are more than consistent with the most recent historiographical research. Standing up less well is the accidental war thesis, the war was inevitable argument, the cult of the offensive hypothesis, and any explanation that singles out Germany, Austria, Russia, Britain, or France as the causal villain.

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**Key Words:** First World War, accidental war, cult of the offensive

### Introduction

A little over one hundred years ago, the First World War began when Germany declared war, first on Russia and, two days later, on France. The genesis of the war, of course, goes back much further. How much further, however, is an open question. Some historians trace the origins of the war to the time of Charlemagne (i.e., Fay, 1966 [1928]), others to Bismarck's era or shortly thereafter (i.e., Craig, 1978), but most point to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian empire, on June 28, 1914 as the moment at which the slide to war began.

One might think that in the interim the debate about the Great War's causes, its expansion, and its consequences would have been settled. But the controversies continue, important new discoveries remain to be uncovered, and scholarly inquiry into these questions constantly improves. Williamson's (2014: 35) view is that there is an emerging consensus among historians about the origins of the war. But Röhl (2014: xiv) claims that the so-called "slithering" into the First World War thesis that Williamson refers to rests on "the deliberate omission or marginalization of much well-known, cast-iron evidence to the contrary."<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the debate has not subsided and, most likely, never will.

That said, in the last few years several noteworthy additions to the literature surrounding the Great War have appeared. In no particular order the following stand out:

- William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War*. Cambridge, 2010,

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY 14260 USA.

[FCZagare@Buffalo.edu](mailto:FCZagare@Buffalo.edu), 716 645 8442

<sup>2</sup> See also, Röhl (2015).

- Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*. Harper, 2012,
- T. G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 2014*. Cambridge, 2015, and
- Sean McMeekin, *July 1914*. Basic Books, 2013.

There are, of course, several other innovative and well-researched works. But I wouldn't include either Margaret MacMillian's *The War that Ended Peace* (2013) or Max Hastings' *Catastrophe 1914* (2013) in that list, MacMillian's because it breaks no new ground and Hastings' because it is long on speculation and short on analysis. Both, however, are well-written and provide a cogent narrative. Unfortunately, I did not have access to any of these and other well-researched books (e.g., Martel, 2014) before my own book, *The Games of July*, was published by the University of Michigan Press in early 2011. It is therefore natural to ask how the conclusions of that book stand up in light of recent historiography, what would I change, and what have we learned from our colleagues in diplomatic history? My comments are organized around three central questions:

- Who was to blame?
- Was the war inevitable?
- Was it an accident?

### **The Blame Game**

The blame game actually started prior to the outbreak of hostilities as each of the major powers and a few of the minor powers released a highly selective collection of official documents—some of which were fraudulent and many of which were intentionally misleading—and all of which were designed to deflect culpability for the war. After the war, the game continued and, not surprisingly, all five of the European powers were fingered. Both the Kaiser and the Russian Foreign Minister blamed the British, as does Niall Ferguson (1998). Many historians, including Fritz Fischer (1967, 1975), Annika Mombauer (2013), Max Hastings (2013), John Röhl (2014), and political scientist Dale Copeland (2000) point to the Germans. The important work of Samuel Williamson (1990), however, clearly shows that many of “the steps that pushed Europe toward war were taken in Vienna.” At the same time Christopher Clark's book demonstrates convincingly that the French were more highly involved than is generally understood. And Sean McMeekin's (2011) penetrating analysis of the *Russian Origins of the First World War* most certainly implicates the Russians. So who is to blame? From the point of view of *The Games of July*, all of these answers and none of these answers are correct. In the *Sleepwalkers*, Christopher Clark assiduously tried to avoid answering this question. In the end, however, his conclusion about the conflict, I believe, is the most incisive: Clark characterized the July crisis as “genuinely interactive” (p. 561). In other words, had the policies and decisions of any of the five major powers and of Serbia been other than what they were, the nature of the war would have been much different. Indeed, the war might not have occurred at all. This is a conclusion that I reach in *The Games of July*. I believe that in light of the most recent scholarship it holds up well.

### **Was The War Inevitable?**

In light of the above it should be clear that I also continue to hold that the crisis did not have to escalate to the level of general war. Here, William Mulligan's book is the most persuasive argument to that effect. As Mulligan shows, and as I argue in *The Games of July*, there were so many points at which things could have unfolded differently. Consider counterfactually what would have occurred if, *inter alia*:

- The Serbians had been less strategic in their response to the Austrian ultimatum and capitulated entirely;
- The Russians had backed off of their support of Serbia;
- The French had not stood by the Russians;
- The Germans had been able to convince the Austrians not to invade Serbia;
- The Austrians had been less demanding of the Serbs;
- The British had early on made clear to the Germans their commitment to France;
- The Germans had avoided violating Belgium's neutrality;
- The Czar had not inadvertently revealed to the Kaiser that Russia was in the process of mobilizing; and
- The British offer of neutrality was not rescinded at the last moment.

Clearly this short list could go on and on. In the end, therefore, it is very hard to agree with William Thompson (2003) and several others who see the war as inevitable. I believe that my conclusion in *The Games of July* is more than consistent with recent scholarship that runs counter to Thompson's argument.

### **Was the War An Accident?**

The answer to this question depends on how one defines "accident." Students in driver improvement courses are now being told that the word "accident" is frowned on. The term that is used to describe most events that require the intervention of insurance agents is a "crash." The rationale is as follows: if I drive at high speeds and like to text or talk on the phone, I may nevertheless arrive safely at my designation. But if I do this frequently it is highly likely that I will not do this with a 100% success rate. Do I want to call the first such failure an accident?

Europe went through a number of crisis before the Great War. General war was a very real possibility in 1875, 1878, 1885, 1887, 1898, 1906, 1908, 1911 and 1912 (Seaman, 1963). But in 1914 it actually occurred. Why would anyone have been surprised? Eventually, things did not turn out well and a multi-nation crash took place. This was not an accident; rather, it was a predictable consequence of high speed diplomatic texting. Still, this is not to say that the war was inevitable. To mix metaphors, those at the helm of the ships of state could have steered their ships more defensively.

### **Revealed Preferences**

In this context it might be useful to comment on the technique of revealed preference that is relied on by many analysts of the Great War. It is understandable and quite natural that inferences about preferences have been drawn from observations about action choices. Indeed, the procedure is generally defensible at the end point of a sequence of decisions when "either/or" choices such as war or no-war are being made, but even here some caution is in order. For one thing, at a game's terminal node, a particular choice may reflect indifference rather than a strict preference between two or more choices. As well, the observed choice may be part of a mixed strategy and, if so, does not necessarily reveal a strict preference relationship. And finally, and this is especially true when a choice is made mid-game, a choice for one option over another may be the consequence of a strategic calculation. It is oftentimes the case that, strategically speaking, a rational actor will make a choice that runs counter to the one that is implied by a strict reading of its preference function (Hausman, 2011).

### **Explanations That Do Not Hold Up**

In summary, I believe that the conclusions I reach in *The Games of July* withstand recent historical research on the origins of World War I. In fact, I believe that my conclusions are reinforced by current scholarship. But there are several explanations that are undermined by the most recent historiography including:

- Barbara Tuckman's (1962) accidental war thesis which reappears in a slightly different guise in the work of Thomas Schelling (1960, 1966) and a few other rational choice theorists of the early 1960s.
- The related black swan argument of Bernadotte Schmitt (1944) and Richard Ned Lebow (1981) that the war was the result of a highly unlikely singular event (i.e., the assassination of the archduke).
- The war is inevitable hypothesis of William Thompson (2003), Paul Schroder (1972, 2007) and several others.
- The argument of nuclear realists like Kenneth Waltz (1993) that the war occurred because its perceived costs were too low. Stig Förster's (1999) work is most pertinent here.
- The cult of the offensive argument (Van Evera, 1999) that falls apart logically and empirically.
- Any explanation that singles out either Germany, Austria, Russia, France, or Great Britain as the causal villain.

### **Coda**

The First World War was clearly the seminal event of the last century. Had it not occurred, the history of the past one hundred years would undoubtedly have been much different. For that reason alone it will continue to attract the attention of diplomatic historians and peace researchers.

But it is also important to keep in mind that the accumulated understanding of its genesis provided the intellectual foundation for contemporary realist theories of the causes of war including modern deterrence theory (Trachtenberg, 1991). In other words, the Great War has theoretical significance that extends beyond its enormous historical impact. In the past ten years or so, scholarship on its origins has advanced considerably. It would be more than surprising if these positive developments do not continue well into the current century as old rivalries and long lasting geopolitical conflicts resurface in Europe and elsewhere. And when they do they are likely to take as their starting place not only the most recent scholarship but also Levy's (1990/1991) summary explanation that locates the cause of the war in those "economic, military, diplomatic, political, and social forces [that] shaped the policy preferences of statesmen and the strategic and political constraints within which they had to make extraordinarily difficult decisions." In other words, the key to understanding the initiation, escalation, and termination of both intra- and interstate conflict lies in human agency and not impersonal systematic forces that are oftentimes thought to dictate war and peace decisions.

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