

# 2

## WORLD WAR I

### World on Fire

World War I was a catastrophe. More than fifteen million people died. The world had not experienced such a level of butchery at least since the Thirty Years' War, which ravaged Europe in the seventeenth century. How did this disaster occur? We still do not know; historians and scholars disagree. Undoubtedly there were many causes. Perhaps it was a "perfect storm," with multiple causes coming together at the same time. But which causes were more important than others? That, we will see, is a matter of perspective and level of analysis.

#### EUROPE IN 1914

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On June 28, 1914, the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated while on a visit to Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina, then provinces of Austria. This incident touched off World War I. But if you think history has only one outcome, consider the tragic comedy of the assassination itself. A bomb-wielding Serbian nationalist agent had attempted earlier that morning to kill the archduke. The attempt failed, but several people were wounded, including an army officer in the car trailing the archduke. The archduke went on to City Hall, where he was welcomed, and then later he set out to visit the wounded officer in the hospital. His driver made a wrong turn and stopped the vehicle in front of a shopping area. There, by coincidence, another one of the seven agents involved in the earlier plot was standing. Given an unexpected second chance, this agent stepped forward and succeeded in killing the archduke. So a good counterfactual question is this: What if the assassination had never occurred?

Austria considered Serbia responsible for the attack and felt it had to retaliate. One month later, on the morning of July 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. But over the next three days, before the fighting actually began and before Russia, Germany, Britain, and France joined the hostilities, the monarchs of Germany and Russia exchanged frantic telegrams. The two monarchs were cousins. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany was the son of Victoria Adelaide Mary Louise, the first child of Queen Victoria of Great Britain. Victoria Adelaide had married Prince Frederick, the son of Kaiser Wilhelm I. The second daughter of Queen Victoria, Alice, had married the German duke of Hesse-Darmstadt. Their daughter, Alix, went on to marry Nicholas II, the czar of Russia, in 1914. (She became the famous czarina who had a hemophilic son, befriended the mad monk Rasputin, and was subsequently killed with Nicholas and her five children by Bolshevik executioners in 1918.) So, by marriage, Czar Nicholas and Kaiser Wilhelm, known to each other as Nicky and Willy, were cousins. Their frantic exchanges

became known as the “Willy–Nicky telegrams.” George V, the king of England in 1914 and another grandson of Queen Victoria, was also a cousin. These family members were about to declare war on one another. (And you thought your family had problems?)

Russia had vital interests at stake in Serbia and had pledged to come to its aid in the event of war, so Nicholas II was under great pressure to mobilize Russian forces to support Serbia. His last chance was to get Germany, an ally of Austria, to pull Austria back from its declaration of war against Serbia. On July 29, he telegraphed Willy, “An ignoble war has been declared on a weak country. . . . I beg you in the name of our old friendship to do what you can to stop your allies from going too far.” In reply, Willy warned his cousin that “military measures on the part of Russia, which would be looked upon by Austria as threatening, would precipitate a calamity.” For three days, Willy and Nicky talked past one another—in English, which was their common language—and on August 1 the world plunged into the abyss of total war.<sup>4</sup>

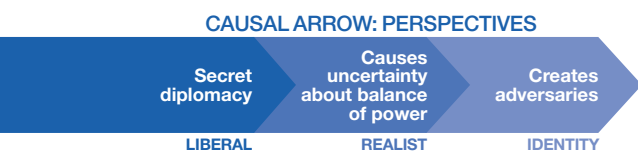


Could the cousins have changed the course of history even if they had wanted to? Many students of history would say no. Applying levels-of-analysis tools, they would argue (as the causal arrow shows) that systemic forces overwhelmed domestic and individual factors. Germany felt encircled by its neighbors and built up its military capabilities to break out of this encirclement before Russia became too powerful. Balance of power and military battle plans controlled events. In these circumstances monarchs had little choice. They no longer exercised absolutist power and like Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm did not fully control the military. But when, then, did events veer out of control? Here the three principal perspectives on international affairs offer different answers. Let’s summarize the answers and then explore them in more detail.



Realist perspectives argue that the crucial event was the unification of Germany in 1871. As the causal arrow suggests, German unification created a new power in the heart of Europe that had a larger population and, in short order, a more powerful economy than any other European power. Such a central power inevitably threatened its neighbors, so these neighbors, in response, allied against Germany. Now surrounded by enemies, Germany felt even more threatened.

Notice here the security dilemma at work. How could Germany be sure that its neighbors intended only to defend themselves, and how could its neighbors be sure that Germany would not use its dominance to attack them? No country was being particularly aggressive. The problem, as realist perspectives see it, “was Germany’s growing economic and military power, not its aggressive behavior.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the problem could be resolved only through the reduction of German power, which the victors attempted to accomplish after World War I, or the integration of German power into western Europe and then into the whole of Europe, which was done after World War II and the Cold War. History, realist perspectives argue, bears out the fact that a freestanding Germany in the center of the European balance of power is destabilizing. Europe is stable today only because a united and once again powerful Germany is part of a new supranational actor known as the European Union.



Liberal perspectives see it differently. It was not a shift of power due to German unification that made countries insecure; rather, it was the lack of adequate institutions and diplomacy to make commitments openly and to develop information about who was complying with those commitments and who was not. As the causal arrow suggests, it was the secrecy and manipulation of European diplomacy that caused

uncertainty about the balance of power and created the distrust of adversaries. Notice here the problems of inadequate information, miscommunication, and lack of institutions to enforce compliance that liberal perspectives emphasize. Interestingly, European diplomacy and institutions failed just as powerful new forces of economic and political interdependence emerged that might have overcome distrust. Industrialization was creating new linkages among banks and corporations that opposed war. International institutions, such as the Hague Conferences started in 1899, were being set up to reduce arms and regulate other relationships. When the war ended, liberal perspectives proposed an entirely new system of collective security to manage international military relations. The League of Nations was their hope to replace the balance of power.

Identity perspectives focus on yet another primary force leading to World War I—that of shared and competitive identities. Nationalism, ignited by the French Revolution, grew out of different cultures and, in its most virulent form, was associated with different races. Different cultures and races struggled to survive in world politics, much as different species struggle to survive in the natural world. Social Darwinism, drawn from Charles Darwin's new theory of natural evolution, became the shared mind-set among European nations and drove

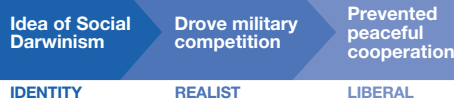
them to conflict and war. As the causal arrow illustrates, it emphasized the survival of the fittest and constructed a particularly virulent form of identity, which drove nations apart and eventually proved a stronger force than diplomatic and economic move-

ments, such as the Hague Conferences and trade, which brought nations together. European countries raced off into the inferno of World War I eager to prove that their culture was the superior one. Notice here how ideas, which identity perspectives emphasize, shaped conflicting identities that, in turn, generated military competition and overrode the cooperative opportunities offered by common institutions and trade.

Let's take a deeper look at these three explanations of World War I and then assess their relative validity. As we go along, we take special note in the text's margins of the way the causal arrows work from the different perspectives or levels of analysis, pointing out explicitly in which direction causality runs. We also then summarize in matrix tables the explanations from each perspective at the different levels of analysis. Finally, Parallel Timeline 2-1 will help you remember key historical events and sort them out according to which perspective might emphasize them. Remember, historical events always involve all three principal causes of international behavior—ideas, institutions, and power. But realist perspectives highlight the power struggles underlying events, liberal perspectives the interdependence factors, and identity perspectives the ideas.

If you still doubt that this history has much relevance today, consider the many similarities between the world before 1914 and the world today. A dominant power existed (Great Britain then, the United States today), a rising power threatened the status quo (Germany then, China today), failed states proliferated (Balkan states and Turkey then, Somalia, Yemen, Mali, Syria, and Afghanistan today), competition over trade and resources intensified (colonial territories then, commodities and high-tech trade today), and anti-Western doctrines inspired militants (Marxism and anarchists then, jihadism and terrorists today). There are, of course, also many differences; the existence of nuclear weapons is but one of them. But we cannot know what is the same or what is different about today unless we know about the past.

#### CAUSAL ARROW: PERSPECTIVES



## PARALLEL TIMELINE 2-1 ■ Events Leading to World War I from Different Perspectives

Realist	Liberal	Identity
		Nationalism unleashed by French Revolution 1790s
		Liberal nationalism in Britain, France, and United States 1800s
	Prussian Zollverein (economic customs union) 1830s	
	Demise of Concert of Europe 1860s–1870s	Militant nationalism in Germany 1860s
German unification by war 1864–1871		Marxist socialism 1870s
	Three Emperors' League 1873	
	Berlin Conference 1878	
German–Austro–Hungarian secret alliance 1879		
German–Italian alliance, creating Triple Alliance 1882	German–Russian Reinsurance Treaty (not renewed in 1890) 1887	
		Social Darwinism 1890s
Franco–Russian alliance 1894	Krüger telegram 1895	
	Hague Conferences 1899 and 1907	
German–British naval rivalry 1900s		Cult of the offensive 1900
French–British Entente Cordiale 1904		
Russo–Japanese War 1905	Moroccan crises 1905 and 1911	
Triple Entente 1907		
	Balkan crises 1908–1909 and 1912–1913	
Schlieffen Plan 1913		
German naval program completed 1914	“Blank check” of July 5, 1914	

## REALIST EXPLANATIONS

From a systemic structural level of analysis, Germany's unification in 1871 significantly altered the balance of power in Europe. Germany, as well as Italy, had been divided for more than a thousand years. The central part of Europe, known as the Holy Roman Empire (the weak successor to the Roman Empire, nominally under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church), contained more than three thousand separate units at the time of Charlemagne in 800 C.E., three hundred or so at the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, and still more than thirty at the

Congress of Vienna in 1815. As Map 2-1 shows, this fragmentation provided a kind of buffer as other great powers emerged and contended for power in Europe. At times, the European balance of power functioned in two parts, a major rivalry between France and Great Britain in the west and another among Prussia, Austria, and Russia in the east. And even though western and eastern powers participated in wars across the continent—for example, Russia’s role in the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s or Britain’s role in the Crimean War in the 1850s—their key interests remained somewhat separate. Britain was concerned primarily with the Low Countries of Belgium and the Netherlands, Russia with the countries of Prussia and Austria-Hungary, and France with keeping central Europe divided.<sup>6</sup> Once Germany was united, the European balance of power was no longer divided into east and west, and it was more likely now that a disruption in one part would trigger a wider war among all great powers. This was especially true because Germany occupied the northern plains of Europe, which offered few geographic obstacles to invasion. As the topography of Map 2-2 shows, the northern plains were flat and easily traversed, while the southern regions were mountainous and inaccessible. A united country in this part of Europe would feel vulnerable, just as Poland, which also occupies the northern plains, was historically vulnerable and indeed subject to repeated partition. Geography matters, a realist perspective would point out; a united Germany would have to be either very strong and threaten its neighbors or become the potential prey of its neighbors.

### The Rise of German Power

As it turned out, a united Germany was going to be very strong. Already in the 1830s, Prussia had created the **Zollverein**, a customs union with other German states that lowered barriers to trade and ignited rapid industrial development. Through this trade community, which a liberal perspective might emphasize, Prussia between 1850 and 1870 increased sixfold the number of steam engines driving its industry and tripled its railway capacity. Germany was changing so fast that Karl Marx, visiting Berlin in 1859, said, “Whoever last saw Berlin ten years ago would not

**Zollverein** a customs union created by Prussia involving other German states that lowered barriers to trade and ignited rapid industrial development beginning in the 1830s.

MAP 2-1 ■ Europe prior to German Unification in 1871



recognize it again.”<sup>7</sup> (Many visitors see the same rapid change today in the cities of China.) By 1870, Prussia/Germany had pulled ahead of France in both population and gross national product (GNP, the total value of all goods and services produced in a country in a given year) and had eight times the relative wealth of Russia. And by 1900, Germany had pulled even with Great Britain, the preeminent power in Europe, and was three times wealthier than France or Russia. In 1913, one year before the war broke out, German wealth exceeded that of Great Britain by 40 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Germany was also able to convert its wealth into military power. Countries do this with differing degrees of efficiency, and power conversion becomes one of the factors complicating the assessment of power in balance-of-power politics. Remember from Chapter 1 how realist perspectives include political competence and stability as measures of power capabilities—not something we can touch but clearly something vital for mobilizing and converting resources into military arms. Russia, for example, had substantial wealth, particularly in natural resources. But it did not have an efficient bureaucracy and could not support its military the way Germany did. By 1900, Germany, with less than half the population of Russia, had an army (including reserves) bigger than Russia’s and was building a navy to challenge British dominance on the high seas.<sup>9</sup> During World War I itself, Germany massively outproduced Russia across the whole range of military equipment: airplanes, machine guns, artillery pieces, and rifles.<sup>10</sup> This administrative capacity to convert wealth into military power was also one of the strengths displayed by the United States as it rose to the status of a great power around the time of World War I.<sup>11</sup>

Power conversion reflects one of the ways in which the levels of analysis interact in the realist perspective and in international affairs more generally. As the causal arrow shows, different *domestic* capacities to convert resources into power affect the relative *systemic structural* balance of power that in turn influences decision making by government elites. Germany and earlier Poland were both affected by vulnerable strategic positions. The one survived while the other succumbed, in part because of different

#### CAUSAL ARROW: LEVELS OF ANALYSIS



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MAP 2-2 Europe and Germany in 1914



domestic capacities to generate power to defend their security. Germany went on to threaten the whole of Europe, while Poland was partitioned by Prussia, Austria, and Russia in the late eighteenth century and not reconstituted until after World War I.

### Power Balancing: Triple Entente and Triple Alliance

What was Europe going to do with this efficient colossus sitting across the strategic northern plains? Balance it, the realist perspective says. And that's exactly what Germany's neighbors proceeded to do. For a while, through the masterful but secretive diplomacy of Otto von Bismarck, Germany was able to reassure its weaker neighbors and keep them from aligning against Germany's greater power. But in 1894, four years after Bismarck left the scene, the two countries most directly affected by Germany's power, France and Russia, formed an alliance. Now Germany had potential adversaries on both borders. As Map 2-2 shows, Poland did not exist at the time, so Germany and Russia shared a border. A lot now depended on what Great Britain did.

For two decades prior to World War I, Britain and Germany had flirted with the idea of alliance. Remember that Kaiser Wilhelm's uncle, Edward VII, and cousin, George V, were the English monarchs during this period. In the 1890s, Willy spent his summer vacations in England participating in yacht races with his relatives and admiring the British naval fleet. A British–German alliance might have avoided the encirclement that Germany feared from France and Russia. From a realist perspective and systemic level of analysis, alliances tend to develop in a checkerboard rather than a domino pattern. Threatened countries leapfrog their neighbors when seeking allies to counterbalance bordering rivals. An alliance with Great Britain might have offset the threat from France and made sense for Britain as well. By 1900, the United States had surpassed Great Britain in total wealth and power. Britain and the United States did not share a border, but they competed increasingly on the high seas. The American navy was expanding rapidly under the influence of Admiral Alfred Mahan and the leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt. Thus, Germany and Britain might have acted to check the growing specter of American power. But geography matters as well as total power, realist perspectives argue, and Germany was closer to Great Britain and hence a more proximate threat than the United States. Great Britain had long defended the neutrality of the Low Countries of Belgium and the Netherlands, and Germany's new power potentially threatened

these countries, just as French power had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the causal arrow shows, proximate threats shaped alliance relations that created distrust and adversarial identities.

Observe that, from the realist perspective, it does not matter that the United States and Britain shared similar cultural and political systems. They were forced together by balance-of-power considerations. Some identity-oriented analysts see it differently. They attribute the eventual alliance between the United States and Great Britain primarily to the shared Anglo-Saxon culture of the two countries.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to realist analysts, they conclude that domestic forces of culture and democracy ultimately overrode the systemic structural-level forces of power competition.

Thus, in 1904, Britain chose to counterbalance Germany, not align with it against the United States. Britain and France signed the **Entente Cordiale**, an agreement that settled colonial disputes between them and ended a century of “splendid isolation” for British policy, during which it had avoided specific commitments on the continent. Though the

#### CAUSAL ARROW: PERSPECTIVES



#### Entente Cordiale:

an agreement signed in 1904 between Great Britain and France that settled colonial disputes between them and ended a century of British isolation from conflicts on the continent.

Entente Cordiale was not explicitly directed against Germany, it became evident within a few years that that was its broader purpose. In 1905, Russia suffered a major naval defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. Japan was another rising power in Russia's neighborhood. Worried that Russia was now seriously weakened vis-à-vis Germany, Great Britain and France expanded their alliance in 1907 to include Russia. The Entente Cordiale became the **Triple Entente**.

#### Triple Entente

an agreement signed in 1907 in which Great Britain and France expanded the Entente Cordiale to include Russia.

Sir Eyre Crowe, permanent secretary of the British foreign office, wrote a famous memorandum in 1907 that summed up the realist logic driving British policy. He noted that Germany might have two intentions, dominance ("aiming at a general political hegemony and maritime ascendancy") or equilibrium ("thinking for the present merely of using her legitimate position and influence as one of the leading Powers in the council of nations.") However, as he noted, "there is no actual necessity for a British government to determine definitely which of the two theories of German policy it will accept." Either way, "the position thereby accruing to Germany would obviously constitute . . . a menace to the rest of the world."<sup>13</sup> Regardless of German intentions, Crowe concluded, German power had to be balanced.

And the balance of power seemed to be working. Many scholars estimate that German power reached its peak around 1905. Just as it did so, Germany's major neighbors came together in the Entente Cordiale and Triple Entente to check that power. In 1913, the Triple Entente had about 50 percent of European wealth. The other 50 percent was accounted for by the **Triple Alliance**, a coalition first formed between Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1879, then joined by Italy in 1882. In 1914, the two alliances offered a near-perfect offset.<sup>14</sup> According to the power balancing school of realism, equilibrium existed and should have prevented war. What went wrong?

**Triple Alliance** an alliance first formed between Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1879, then joined by Italy in 1882, that accounted for 50 percent of all European wealth in the early twentieth century.

Here realist perspectives split in explaining the breakdown of the balance of power. Some argue that the offsetting alliances became too rigid and converted a flexible multipolar balance of power into a rigid bipolar balance. This tense standoff eventually precipitated a preemptive war, an attack by one country on another because the second country is getting ready to attack the first. Others argue, as observed in Chapter 1, that a bipolar distribution is the most stable and that the problem was not the current balance of power but the potential future balance of power. By this account, Germany saw Russia as a rising power in the future and therefore launched a preventive war to avoid Germany's decline later. Still others argue that hegemony or unipolarity is the most stable configuration of power and that Britain, whose hegemony ensured the long peace of nineteenth-century Europe, was now a declining power, leading to a multipolar scramble to decide which country would be the next hegemon. Let's look further at each of these realist arguments.

### Rigid Alliances and Preemptive War

How could countries balance against German power and still preserve flexibility? As we have noted, if Germany had aligned with Britain to avoid encirclement, it would have created an even more powerful grouping, accounting for about two-thirds of Europe's wealth in 1913. And France and Russia would have felt even more threatened. So the balance of power required Britain to align against Germany. In that sense, encirclement and confrontation of the two alliance arrangements may have been unavoidable. It was a consequence of Germany's superior power *and* its position at the center of the European continent. It was, in short, an outgrowth of the security dilemma. Any effort to counterbalance Germany within Europe necessarily created a threat of encirclement, and encirclement meant that Germany would have to plan to fight a war on two fronts.



This logic led Germany as early as the 1890s to consider a **preemptive war**, a lightning strike or *Blitzkrieg*, against one neighbor so that German forces could then turn and concentrate against the other neighbor. The **Schlieffen Plan**, named for General Alfred von Schlieffen who first developed it, called for an attack on France first by way of Belgium, undoubtedly bringing Britain into the war, followed next by an attack on Russia. It became official policy in 1913.

**preemptive war** an attack by one country against another because the second country is preparing to attack the first.

**Schlieffen Plan** Germany's mobilization plan that called for an attack on France first, by way of Belgium, followed by an attack on Russia.

#### CAUSAL ARROW: PERSPECTIVES



Notice that in the realist argument, as the causal arrow illustrates, the strategic situation or geopolitics dictated the country's military strategy and created the anticipation of war. Other scholars emphasize more specific factors at the foreign policy,

domestic, and individual levels of analysis. They advance liberal arguments, examined later in this chapter, that bureaucratic factors, such as military and mobilization plans, not strategic imperatives, such as geopolitics, were the primary cause of war.

But why must bipolarity of alliances be unstable? The common argument is that each side is supersensitive to any gains by the other side because there are no other allies to turn to for balancing. But a counterargument is that the two powers have only one another to consider and therefore should be able to focus like a laser on each other so that neither side can gain advantage. Perhaps the bipolar balance in 1914 was unstable because both sides believed that military technology favored offensive strategies—machine guns, motorized vehicles, and other attack weapons. In a balanced bipolar situation, offensive technology would give the advantage to the attacker and therefore place a premium on preemption. As it turned out, however, technology actually favored defensive strategies; World War I was a stalemate for most of its duration, involving stagnant trench warfare.

However, explanations that hinge on whether weapons are offensive or defensive slide into liberal and identity explanations of the outbreak of World War I (see the subsequent discussion). Such explanations depend on bureaucratic and cognitive factors that influence perceptions and cause misperceptions. Military leaders had incorrect information about the offensive and defensive nature of weapons (an argument from the liberal perspective and individual level of analysis) or saw only the facts they wanted to see based on their beliefs in Darwinist competition (an argument from the identity perspective and domestic level of analysis). From a strictly realist perspective, however, bureaucratic and cognitive factors are not primary variables. Power realities speak for themselves regardless of perceptions.

### Future Balances and Preventive War

A more consistent realist argument is that the balance ultimately broke down not because of current imbalances but because of fears of future imbalances. This argument hinges on Germany's fear of Russian power and whether that fear was reasonable. The fear was reasonable if it was consistent with balance-of-power realities; it was not reasonable if liberal or identity factors distorted the perception of material balances. According to this argument, Germany feared that Russia would surpass Germany in military and industrial power by 1916–1917. Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, the German chancellor, visited Russia in 1912 and observed “Russia's rising industrial power, which will grow to overwhelming proportions.”<sup>15</sup> Russia was rapidly developing a railroad network that would permit it to move forces more quickly to the front. This would give Germany less time to deal with France before it would have to turn and confront Russian forces.

**preventive war** a war by one country against another that is not preparing to attack the first country but is growing in power and may attack in the future.

But why then didn't Germany attack before 1914? Its power peaked in 1905, when Russia was weak after the disastrous naval defeat by Japan and when Britain and France had just concluded the Entente Cordiale, which was not yet a rigid alliance against Germany. From 1905 on, there were plenty of occasions for war. Germany and other European powers were involved in a series of diplomatic crises in Morocco (1905 and 1911) and the Balkans (1908–1909 and 1912–1913) that were at least as serious as the assassination of the Austrian archduke in June 1914.<sup>16</sup> One answer to why Germany waited is that its naval program was not completed until July 1914, and Germany expected this program to either deter Great Britain from entering the war or hold it at bay while Germany attacked France. Thus, all the pieces for a **preventive war** were in place by the July crisis. Germany knew that Russia was not getting ready to attack it. Hence, the war was not preemptive—that is, it was not initiated in anticipation of an imminent Russian attack. In fact, Germany had to goad Russia into war. Now foreign policy–level factors came into play. According to this interpretation, Bethmann-Hollweg and military leaders such as Helmuth von Moltke, the German army chief of staff, used diplomacy “with Machiavellian dexterity” to provoke Russian mobilization and bring about a war to unite domestic groups, even delaying for twelve hours the transmission of the kaiser’s instructions to settle the dispute peacefully so that Austria had more time to declare war (see more discussion later).<sup>17</sup> Notice how at the foreign policy level of analysis individuals become the nexus where systemic (preventive war) and domestic (social unity) factors meet to cause outcomes. The individuals themselves are caught between larger forces at the domestic level beneath them and the systemic level above them. They maneuver among these forces but do not control them.

#### CAUSAL ARROW: PERSPECTIVES



In this realist account, notice, as the causal arrow shows, that diplomacy plays a role, but as a dependent, not independent, variable. The projection of future Russian predominance drives the diplomacy, not the other way around. But was this projection accurate?

At the time, some believed it was.<sup>18</sup> But in retrospect, Russia was no match for German military forces. Russia eventually capitulated in 1917 to a German force that represented only half of Germany’s capabilities (the other half of the German force was fighting against France). And Russia disintegrated into civil war in 1917 and did not emerge to play a role in European politics for the next fifteen years. So, perhaps, identity and bureaucratic factors distorted German perceptions of future Russian power.



In this 1916 photograph from the Battle of the Somme in northern France, British troops are treated by the Red Cross in a trench that marks one side of no man’s land, the devastated landscape between battle lines that changed little during World War I.

Historica Graphica Collection/Heritage Images/Getty Images

### Power Transition and Hegemonic Decline

A final realist perspective is that World War I was caused not by the rising power of Germany or the projected future dominance of Russia but by the declining hegemony of Great Britain. According to this version, it is not present or future balances that produce stability but hegemony. The dominant power has interests that span the system as a whole and, therefore, more than any other country, looks to maintain the balance of power. Britain played this role during the Pax Britannica, the long century of peace in the nineteenth century. It exercised naval superiority around the globe and kept watch on the European continent so that no power gained ascendance. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Britain no longer had

that kind of power. The United States had surpassed Britain, but the United States was not yet powerful enough to play a global role. It was only beginning to assert its foreign policy presence and did not see its interests affected yet by the larger system or balance of power in Europe.

Thus, in the early twentieth century, the world experienced a dangerous interregnum in which Germany faced no leading power to temper rivalries. British diplomacy was not specifically at fault because it was a product of British power, and British power was simply declining. The same was true for the United States, but for the opposite reason: its diplomacy was not at fault because the United States was not yet powerful enough to direct events in Europe. Notice that, in this explanation from the systemic structural level of analysis, diplomacy again is an intervening, not independent, variable. As the causal arrow shows,



structural power shifted away from hegemony precluding the mediation of British diplomacy and allowing distrust to grow.

The absence of a hegemonic power to stabilize the situation draws from the power transition school of realism, which alerts us to the danger inherent in periods of transition when a declining power falls and a challenging power closes in. Moving toward balance from this school's perspective is viewed as destabilizing, whereas moving toward balance from the power balancing perspective is viewed as stabilizing. This difference stems in part from a focus on different actors and different assumptions about goals. Power transition perspectives focus on the declining power and assume that it seeks to preserve the status quo. Thus, the loss of hegemony threatens stability. Power balancing perspectives focus on the rising power and assume that it would like to change the status quo. Hence, the emergence of hegemony threatens stability.

### Cartelized Domestic Politics and German Aggression

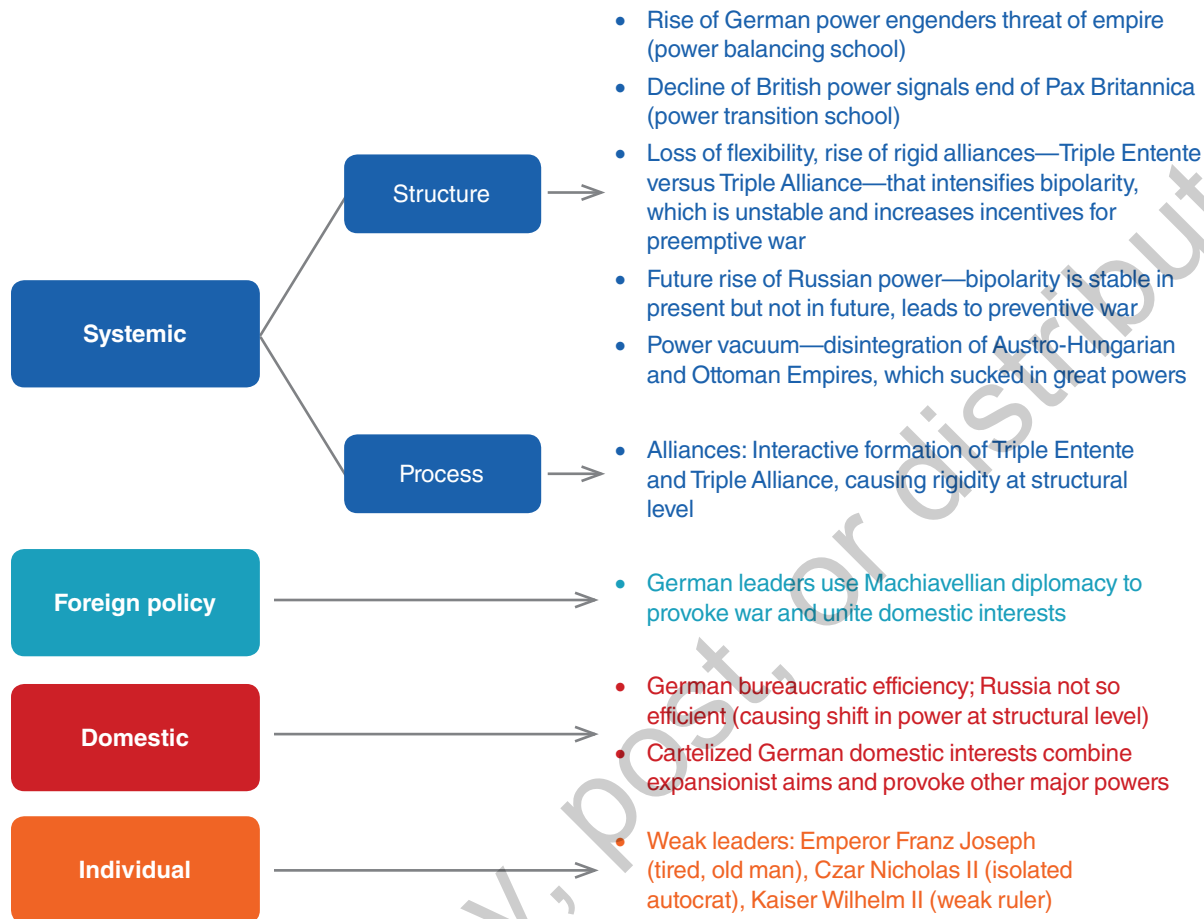
Realist explanations of World War I also operate at the domestic level of analysis. One domestic-level explanation argues that World War I was caused by German aggression and that German aggression, in turn, was caused by German domestic politics. According to this explanation, Germany's domestic politics was cartelized or united among various elite groups, all of which had independent interests in one or another aspect of German belligerence and expansion. The agricultural landowners of large estates in East Prussia, or Junkers, were interested in high tariffs to protect grain prices; military elites were interested in offensive war plans and military weaponry; and industrial leaders advocated high tariffs to develop industry and military arms, including a naval fleet. As political scientist Jack Snyder explains, "These groups logrolled, or combined, their interests, producing a policy outcome that was more expansionist and overcommitted than any group desired individually."<sup>19</sup> The grain tariffs antagonized Russia, a large grain exporter; heavy industry and naval plans antagonized Great Britain; and military leaders and their offensive war plans alienated France and Russia. These cartelized domestic interests "embroiled Germany simultaneously with all of Europe's major powers."<sup>20</sup> Snyder does not ignore international factors: "International circumstances did affect German expansionist



policy, but only by influencing the domestic political strength of imperialist groups."<sup>21</sup> As the causal arrow suggests, he simply judges that domestic logrolling factors had a greater influence in generating an expansionist foreign

policy than systemic factors that accommodated but did not cause domestic cartels.

Figure 2-1 summarizes realist explanations for the causes of World War I.

**FIGURE 2-1 ■ The Causes of World War I: The Realist Perspective and Levels of Analysis**


## LIBERAL EXPLANATIONS

Liberal accounts of World War I focus on diplomatic miscalculations and institutional deficiencies, both in the international system and in the domestic politics of key players such as Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire.

International diplomacy had been developing since the Congress of Vienna, which ended the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, toward a more multilateral and open system for settling disputes. The Concert of Europe, created at Vienna, convened numerous international conferences during the nineteenth century and for the most part preserved peace among the great powers. But Bismarck's diplomacy to unite Germany dealt this emerging liberal systemic structure a damaging blow. Although Bismarck tried to replace the Concert of Europe with an intricate series of offsetting alliances, his secretive style of diplomacy bred suspicion. Once Bismarck was gone, Kaiser

## CAUSAL ARROW: LEVELS OF ANALYSIS



Wilhelm II proved less capable at navigating the system. Notice here, as the causal arrow shows, the primacy of the individual level of analysis—Bismarck was able to offset domestic and systemic factors to make diplomacy work to preserve peace; the kaiser was not.

As the liberal perspective sees it, the kaiser blundered his way into a naval competition with Great Britain and military strategies toward France and Russia that ultimately produced rigid alliances and self-initiating mobilization plans. The explanation thus far emphasizes diplomatic mistakes at the individual level of analysis. Wilhelm was not being pressured to do what he did by domestic or systemic forces. But then, in the crisis of July 1914, German and European diplomacy got caught up in a spiral of action and reaction, compounding the march to war. Each decision narrowed the options of the next decision in what liberal perspectives call path dependence. Eventually, the only choice remaining seemed to be war, the

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so-called last move of the prisoner's dilemma discussed in Chapter 1. Now, as the causal arrow suggests, the explanation draws on the interactive or systemic process level of crisis diplomacy that narrows options at the systemic structural level and drives domestic

and decision-making behavior toward war. Meanwhile, other liberal causes at the systemic structural level, such as expanding trade and the Hague Conferences called in 1899 and 1907 to resolve disputes peacefully through multilateral consensus, proved too weak to head off war.

Diplomatic miscalculations were abetted by domestic institutional weaknesses in most of the major continental powers. At the domestic level of analysis, Germany's political system was sharply divided between royalist and socialist factions, and its parliament, the Reichstag, had only weak controls over military plans and spending. The czar in Russia was a weak leader with a crumbling imperial administration, and nationalism was eating away at the vital organs of the once mighty Austrian (after 1867, Austro-Hungarian) and Ottoman (remnant of the Golden Age of Islam) Empires. A closer look at these diplomatic and institutional developments illustrates how liberal perspectives emphasize interactions and institutions, rather than power balancing or ideologies, as the primary causes of war and peace.

### Secret Diplomacy: Bismarck

After weakening, if not effectively destroying, the Concert of Europe system through wars with Austria and France, Bismarck in 1873 created the Three Emperors' League, an alliance between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia, all of which were still led by traditional monarchs. Unlike the emerging constitutional monarchs in Britain and France, they resisted liberal politics and pledged to oppose rebellion in other countries. The Three Emperors' League was immediately tested in the Balkans, a region that produced most of the crises after 1870 and eventually war in 1914. In 1876, Bulgaria, which for centuries had been under Turkish rule, revolted. In subsequent struggles, Russia supported its Christian Orthodox religious brethren in Bulgaria and declared war against Turkey. The czar was either genuinely motivated to protect Christians in the Balkans or used this identity factor for realist expansionist aims. Austria-Hungary and Great Britain suspected the latter—suspicions that had led them earlier to block Russia's advance toward the Balkans in the Crimean War in the 1850s. Britain feared Russia's dominance of the Dardanelles, the strategic straits connecting the Mediterranean

and Black Seas, as well as its relentless push through central Asia toward India, then Britain's prize colonial territory. Thus, when Russian and Bulgarian forces reached the gates of Constantinople in 1878 and announced the Treaty of San Stefano, creating a Bulgarian state and drastically weakening Turkey, Bismarck with British support called a conference. The Berlin Conference proved to be the last major conference of the Concert of Europe era. Britain and Russia solved the most contentious issues before the conference, leading to significant Russian concessions. The sequence of events left a bad taste in the mouth of the Russians, and Russia thereafter blamed Germany.

Over the next fifteen years, Germany and Russia grew apart, creating one of the fault lines that contributed to World War I. In 1879, Bismarck concluded a secret alliance with Austria-Hungary against Russia. Austria, in turn, gave Germany veto power over its policies in the Balkans. This was the basis for the crucial role that Germany played in Austrian diplomacy in 1914 (see the following discussion). Bismarck renewed the Three Emperors' League in 1881, but its purpose was now purely defensive. Each country pledged to remain neutral if one of them went to war against a fourth country. For instance, Russia would stay out of a war between Germany and France, and Austria-Hungary would stay out of a war between Russia and Great Britain. In 1882, Bismarck concluded still another alliance with Italy. This one pledged Italian assistance to Germany against a French attack and to Austria-Hungary against a Russian attack. One of the rigid alliances, the Triple Alliance—Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy—was now in place. Another Bulgarian crisis in 1885 shattered the Three Emperors' League for good. Bismarck made one final effort to maintain ties with Russia, the Reinsurance Treaty of 1887. But when Bismarck left office—essentially fired—in 1890, Kaiser Wilhelm II did not renew the treaty.

Although Germany rose rapidly in power from 1870 to 1890, Bismarck's diplomacy pre-

served the peace. Could his successors have replicated that virtuoso performance? Some prominent realists think so.<sup>22</sup> As the causal arrow shows, they judge that systemic factors were driving Bismarck's policy, not domestic- or individual-level factors. Hence, someone else as adept as Bismarck might have been able to continue his success. But other analysts might argue that that is expecting too much

from any individual. Even by realist logic, Bismarck's performance was lacking. For example, he did relatively little to reassure France except to avoid rivalry in colonial disputes. Instead, he was the principal architect of annexing Alsace-Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 (the last of three wars leading to the unification of Germany), even though he knew this policy would poison French-German relations for decades thereafter. He did it, he said, to weaken France: "An enemy, whose honest friendship can never be won, must at least be rendered somewhat less harmful."<sup>23</sup> Bismarck committed the cardinal realist sin of considering France as a permanent enemy, injecting rigid identity labels into the realist logic of a flexible balance of power. Realist logic calls for countries never to regard one another as either a permanent enemy or a permanent friend but to remain flexible to align with any country, regardless of friendship or animosity, to counter greater power. Even if Bismarck had followed that rule, however, could he have reassured France any more than he was able to reassure Russia? After all, Russia made the first alliance with France relatively soon (four years) after Bismarck left office. Would that not have happened eventually, whoever succeeded Bismarck? From realist perspectives, diplomacy can do only what the balance of power allows. And from the liberal and identity perspectives, the balance of power in Europe before World War I was flawed either because it relied too much on secrecy and manipulation or because it demanded perfect—we

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might say angelic—statesmanship, which even Bismarck was unable to deliver. Thus, realist perspectives enthrone Bismarck as the master statesman, while liberal and identity perspectives counter that only a godlike statesman could have pulled it off.

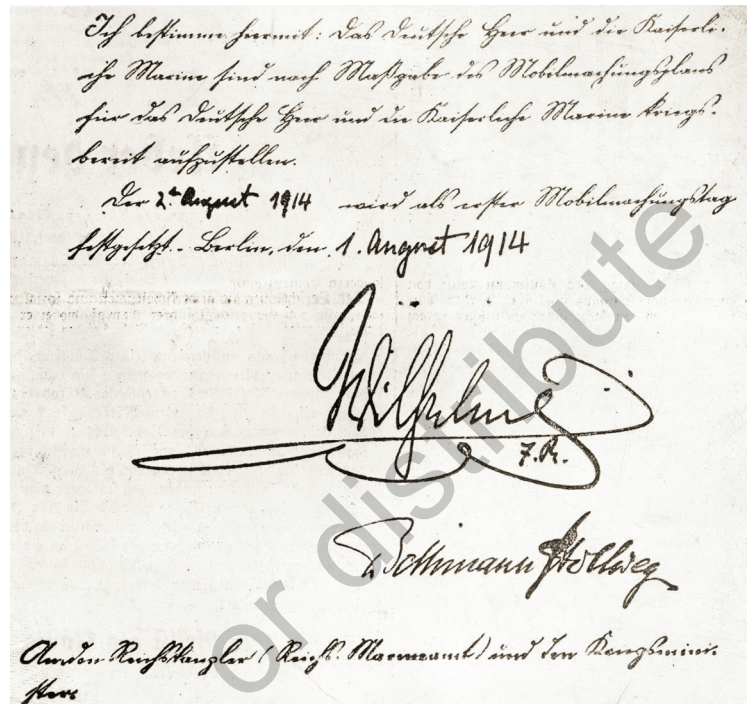
### Clumsy Diplomacy: Wilhelm II

From a liberal perspective, Kaiser Wilhelm II was clearly a less capable diplomat than Bismarck and quickly stoked further antagonism between Germany and Russia, contributing to the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1894. He also initiated a colonial and naval rivalry with Great Britain, something that Bismarck had astutely avoided. In 1895, the kaiser sent a famous telegram to President Paul Krüger of the independent Boer states, settled by Germans in the South African Transvaal. Krüger's army had just defeated a raid into the Transvaal by forces from neighboring British colonies. The so-called Krüger telegram congratulated the Boer leader for the victory. It was a gratuitous slap at the British. The kaiser carried the insult further and launched a major shipbuilding program to challenge British naval supremacy. Envious of the British ships he saw on his summer vacations in England, he launched an arms race that witnessed the production of more and bigger battleships known as Dreadnoughts.<sup>24</sup> The secret and rapid buildup of the German navy under the determined leadership of Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz was a key factor contributing to growing rivalries before World War I.

Other colonial conflicts followed. German and French interests clashed in the Moroccan crises in 1905 and 1911. Russia and Austria-Hungary almost went to war in a Balkan crisis in 1908–1909 after Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina (where Sarajevo is located, the site of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, which triggered World War I). Balkan wars broke out again in 1912–1913. In October 1912, Montenegro, another small Balkan state, declared war on Turkey and was quickly supported by Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece. After this crisis was settled, Bulgaria attacked Serbia and Greece in June 1913. In both crises, Austria and Russia stood eyeball to eyeball, fearing that the other might gain an advantage. Germany supported Austria and had significant influence over Austrian policy, as called for by the German-Austro-Hungarian alliance of 1879. Great Britain, which sent its war minister, Richard Haldane, to Berlin in 1912, sought to ensure that Germany would not threaten Belgium. Suspicions were mounting for the final drama of war.

### Misperceptions and Mobilization Plans

Why did war break out in 1914 and not in 1912 or 1913? From a liberal perspective, diplomacy had prevented war in earlier crises. Why didn't diplomacy do so again in 1914? For three reasons, liberal accounts suggest. First, to Germany's surprise, Britain did not remain neutral



Kaiser Wilhelm II signed this mobilization order, which amounted to a German declaration of war against Russia, in August 1914. Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg countersigned the document. Liberal views fault Wilhelm II's diplomatic failures for the onset of war. FPG/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

in 1914 as it had in previous crises, which foreclosed the possibility of a local settlement. Second, mobilization plans—such as the Schlieffen Plan—were finalized in 1913 that called for an automatic escalation to war. Now the slightest spark could ignite a firestorm. And third, civilian institutions in various countries broke down, contributing to a last-move situation, when the only choice remaining is to go to war. Notice that all these factors are contingent on interactive factors (misperceptions, bureaucratic plans, and policy failures); they are not consequences of unbalanced alliances (power) or conflicting identities (ideas). A primary focus on interrelationships is typical of liberal explanations of international events.

On July 5, a week after the assassination of the archduke, the kaiser met the Austrian ambassador in Germany and told him that Germany would back Austria against Serbia “whatever Austria’s decision.” The German chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, confirmed this commitment the next day in what became known as a “blank check,” giving Austria a free hand to start a war.<sup>25</sup> The kaiser did not expect Russia, Serbia’s ally, to go to war and did not even discuss the possibility that Britain might intervene. Kaiser Wilhelm left town for his regular summer North Sea cruise. Austria sent an ultimatum to Serbia on July 23. The Serbs replied on July 27 and appeared to concede to Austria’s demands. The kaiser, who had just returned from his cruise, ordered negotiations, proposing that Austria “halt in Belgrade”—meaning occupy Belgrade temporarily—until Serbia met other demands. But the kaiser’s instructions did not arrive in Vienna until July 28, after Austria had declared war against Serbia—perhaps deliberately delayed, according to some realist accounts, to start a preventive war.

Now the issue hinged on whether the war could be localized between Austria and Serbia without involving their allies, Germany and Russia. British neutrality was key. If Britain did not support Russia, an ally under the Triple Entente, a wider war might be avoided. As already noted, some German officials did not expect Britain to intervene. But on the evening of July 29, a telegram from London warned firmly that Britain would support Russia if war occurred. Germany now tried to rein in its Austrian ally. Early in the morning of July 30, Bethmann-Hollweg fired off his famous “world on fire” telegrams urging Vienna to implement the kaiser’s instructions of July 28 to stop the slide to war. But now historians debate: was this a serious proposal or just a smoke screen to shift the blame for war onto Russia?

Military plans and mobilization, however, now made diplomacy difficult. War plans were based on quick strikes, and Germany’s Schlieffen Plan, as we have noted, called for an attack first on France and then on Russia. Military plans relied on precise timetables and the complex movements of troops. In response to Austria’s declaration of war against Serbia, Russia had already partially mobilized on July 29, and the czar actually ordered full mobilization that same evening but canceled the order two hours later when he received another telegram from his cousin Willy. Under intense pressure from his generals, however, Nicholas went ahead the next day with full mobilization. In response, Germany sent an ultimatum to Russia on July 31 and declared war on August 1. When the kaiser met with his generals to order them to limit the war to Russia and not attack France, von Moltke, the German army chief of staff, protested:

Your Majesty, it cannot be done. The deployment of millions cannot be improvised. If Your Majesty insists on leading the whole army to the East, it will not be an army ready for battle but a disorganized mob. . . . These arrangements took a whole year of intricate labor to complete and once settled they cannot be altered.<sup>26</sup>

### The Last Move

Interestingly, the kaiser won the argument, and German troops in the west set to invade France were pulled back. Although a German infantry unit had already crossed into Luxembourg,



another unit went in and, following the kaiser's instruction, ordered the first unit out.<sup>27</sup> France mobilized the same day, though it positioned its troops ten kilometers from the border to avoid accidents. Nevertheless, German military and political leaders doubted that France would stay out of the war, and on August 3, Germany declared war on France. The next day, German troops invaded Belgium, and Britain entered the war. A general European war was now under way.<sup>28</sup>

From the liberal perspective, no one sought a general war, but rational behavior ultimately led to it. Why? The process of interaction broke down. In iterative game theory—illustrated by the example of the prisoners interacting regularly in the prison yard in Chapter 1—actors count on being able to play the game again tomorrow. This expectation, or shadow of the future, encourages cooperation. But if they come to believe that they are playing the game for the last time, the so-called last move, they face the static prisoner's dilemma (or realist situation) and defect. In a sense, liberal accounts argue, this is what happened to ignite World War I. Consider the conclusions of political scientist Marc Trachtenberg: “[Bethmann-Hollweg] had not set out to provoke a great war. . . . He had made a certain effort to get the Austrians to pull back. But war was almost bound to come eventually, so he would just stand aside and let it come now.”<sup>29</sup>



No one wanted war, but as the causal arrow suggests, a process of action and reaction set in motion a spiral of suspicion and distrust that eventually resulted in war.

Notice the language of the impending last move (“almost bound to come eventually”). Under these circumstances, it was rational for Bethmann-Hollweg to behave the way he did. Now compare this argument to the previous, realist one that Germany sought a general war to avoid the future dominance of Russia. In the realist argument, Germany always intended war because it was necessary to head off Russian dominance. In the liberal argument, Germany did not reach that conclusion until late in the process of diplomatic action and reaction. In the realist case, relative power projections at the systemic structural level caused the war; in the liberal case, negotiating dynamics at the systemic process level brought it about. Observe that in neither argument are Germany's intentions the primary cause of the war. Germany's intentions are the result of either power requirements (realist) or interactive factors (liberal).

Yet the debate goes on. Professor Kier Lieber sees a larger role for intentions and identity factors.<sup>30</sup> Based on new materials obtained from former East German archives after the Cold War ended, he concludes that the war was neither unintended, a consequence of inevitable structural forces as power balancing (defensive) realists might argue, nor a consequence of diplomatic blunders, as liberal accounts might suggest. Rather, “German leaders went to war in 1914

with their eyes wide open.”<sup>31</sup> In short, they intended to go to war. For Lieber, the causal arrow runs from the premeditated idea of war to attempts to increase Germany's hegemonic power to the diplomatic crisis and war that followed. He is a proponent of the offensive realist school, which assumes that countries always seek more power to dominate, not just enough power to balance. For other analysts, the intention to go to war may derive from domestic ideational or identity factors such as Germany's heroic self-image or militant ideology, as we examine below in the section on identity perspectives.

### Weak Domestic Institutions

The last-move argument assumes that diplomats are in control of institutions, especially the military, and act rationally. But other liberal explanations suggest that diplomats may not be in



with their eyes wide open.”<sup>31</sup> In short, they intended to go to war. For Lieber, the causal arrow runs from the premeditated idea of war to attempts to increase Germany's hegemonic power to the diplomatic crisis and war that followed. He is a proponent of

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**iron and rye coalition**

a domestic coalition of military and agricultural interests that dominated German politics before World War I.

control and that institutions malfunction. In the case of World War I, as the causal arrow shows, institutional weaknesses contributed to fragmentation and faulty diplomacy, which made war more likely. German diplomacy, for example, was weakened by “an astonishing lack of coordination between the political and the military authorities.”<sup>32</sup> Political interests that sought to avoid war, or at least to shift the blame for war, worked at cross-purposes with military strategies that counted on starting war early on one front to achieve victory later on a second front.

German domestic institutions were also divided. The conservative coalition that ran the German government consisted of landed agricultural interests (rye) and industrial leaders (iron). Known as the **iron and rye coalition**, it excluded for the most part the growing working class and its socialist leaders who held the majority in the Reichstag. One way to overcome this division was to go to war. A policy of war diverted resources to the military, which the kaiser not the Reichstag controlled, and co-opted working-class opponents through appeals to patriotism and nationalism. As one historian concludes, reflecting a foreign policy level of analysis, Germany “sought to consolidate the position of the ruling classes with a successful imperialist foreign policy.”<sup>33</sup>

Domestic cleavages were even wider in the other monarchies. Austria-Hungary was disintegrating from within, the Russian czar was in a precarious position, and the Ottoman Empire was barely surviving. Within four years of the outbreak of war, all three of these institutions would cease to exist.

Elsewhere domestic institutions were becoming more popularly based and representative. Democratic politics made it more difficult to conduct foreign policy in a timely and coherent way. The United States entered the war very late. President Woodrow Wilson campaigned for reelection in 1916 on a promise to keep the United States out of war; nevertheless, by April 1917, Germany resumed its policy of unlimited submarine warfare, which earlier in 1915 sank the American ship *Lusitania*. America now declared war, and its role may have been decisive. Germany defeated Russia in early 1918 and moved its forces to the western front. Without the arrival of the American doughboys, Germany may have broken through on the western front. For some historians, these events raise the question of whether more decisive domestic institutions in the United States might have prevented or at least ameliorated the war.

### Insufficient Interdependence: Trade and the Hague Conferences

International commerce and banking had expanded dramatically in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Not only colonial trade but also trade among the industrial powers reached levels before World War I that would not be achieved again until the 1970s. Britain had led an effort to liberalize trade unilaterally, and some countries followed, such as France. But there were no effective multilateral institutions to coordinate and expand this effort, and other countries, such as Germany and the United States, did not liberalize their trade policies. Still, the growing numbers of bankers and merchants opposed war and called for the peaceful resolution of political disputes. A best-selling book published just two years before the outbreak of World War I proclaimed that war was a “great illusion” because the costs of war from the breakup of lucrative trade and investment now far exceeded its benefits. War had

become obsolete, its author, Norman Angell, declared.<sup>34</sup> As the causal arrow suggests, multilateral diplomacy and trade offered better ways to reduce the distrust between adversaries and replace alliances with peaceful settlement of disputes. The Hague Conferences, convened in 1899 and 1907 on the initiative of the Russian czar, brought small

## CAUSAL ARROW: PERSPECTIVES



as well as large states into the diplomatic process (twenty-six states in 1899, forty-four in 1907). Although these conferences solved no major issues, they reformed the rules and methods of diplomacy and started discussions to reduce secrecy and control arms races.

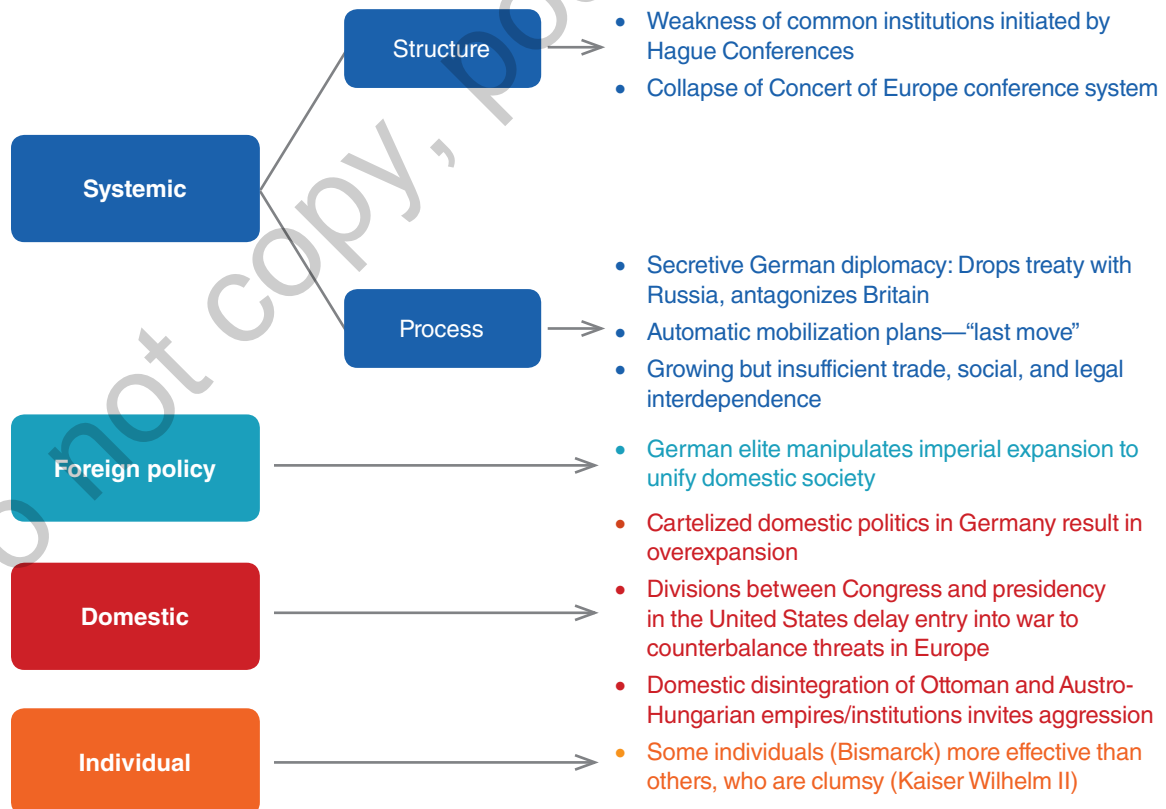
From the liberal perspective, trade and law were becoming more important aspects of international affairs than power and secret diplomacy. William Gladstone, who became British prime minister in 1880, foresaw this development and observed that

a new law of nations is gradually taking hold of the mind, and coming to sway the practice, of the world; a law which recognizes independence, which frowns upon aggression, which favours the pacific, not the bloody settlement of disputes, which aims at permanent not temporary adjustments: above all, which recognizes, as a tribunal of paramount authority, the general judgement of civilized mankind.<sup>35</sup>

Notice Gladstone's emphasis on classic liberal themes—law, practice, pacific settlement of disputes, permanent solutions, and universal participation—which he terms the “general judgement of civilized mankind.” Gladstone's insights became the banner of another great statesman in the next century. U.S. president Woodrow Wilson championed worldviews that emphasized open markets, the rule of law, and collective rather than national security. From the liberal point of view, these factors were too weak to head off World War I. But after the war, they formed the edifice of a whole new approach to managing military relations in international politics, which we discuss more fully in the next chapter.

Figure 2-2 summarizes liberal explanations of the causes of World War I.

**FIGURE 2-2** ■ The Causes of World War I: The Liberal Perspective and Levels of Analysis



## IDENTITY EXPLANATIONS

Identity perspectives on World War I emphasize the ideas and norms that motivate prewar diplomacy and military rivalries. These ideas are both shared and autonomous, rational and psychological. The dominant ideology in prewar Europe was nationalism. Three broad varieties emerged in the nineteenth century. **Militant nationalism** focused on cultural and ultimately racial differences and advocated a kind of aggressive, heroic approach to international relations. **Liberal nationalism** focused on political ideologies and called for wider participation and the rule of law in both domestic and international politics. **Socialist nationalism** sought greater economic equality and social justice, especially among social classes and with colonial territories. Each variety of nationalism also had an international or collectivist dimension. Militant nationalism, for example, embraced Social Darwinism, a collectivist norm of political and military struggle to preserve and promote cultural superiority. Liberal nationalism supported the Hague legal process and later collective security arrangements under the League of Nations, while socialist nationalism embraced a series of international meetings known as the Second International, which advocated the solidarity of the working classes across nations. Let's look more closely at these different types of nationalism.

### **militant nationalism**

a form of nineteenth-century nationalism that focused on cultural and racial differences and advocated an aggressive, heroic approach to international relations.

### **liberal nationalism**

a form of nineteenth-century nationalism that focused on political ideologies and called for wider participation and the rule of law in both domestic and international politics.

### **socialist nationalism**

a form of nineteenth-century nationalism that sought greater economic equality and social justice, especially in class and colonial relationships.

### **Militant and Racist Nationalism**

Rising nationalism in the nineteenth century weakened the solidarity or collective identity of the European conference system, the Concert of Europe. Bismarck contended that there was no higher principle or purpose than service to one's country. This kind of nationalism exalted the culture and language of each nation, which were rooted in the past and could not be shared easily with other nations.

It was a short step from this type of cultural nationalism to the virulent militarist and racist doctrines that spread in Europe in the late nineteenth century. Militarism reflected the imperative to organize and train a citizen army, often including extensive reserves. Prior to the eighteenth century, armies consisted mostly of nobles, peasants recruited for each campaign, and mercenaries. Wars were fought among tens of thousands, not millions, and direct casualties were relatively low (most deaths were caused by diseases). In the eighteenth century, Prussia began to change this model for armies by introducing "limited military conscription, intensive tactical training, efficient artillery barrages, and skillful generalship." Napoleon accelerated these developments. As Robert Osgood and Robert Tucker write, he "created a 'nation in arms' . . . [and] transformed warfare into a national crusade, involving not just tactical maneuver and attrition of the enemy's supply lines but annihilation of the enemy's forces, occupation of his territory, and even political conversion of his people."<sup>36</sup> War now had the objective of regime change. The industrial revolution completed this transformation. It created not only new technologies of military power but also a whole new arms industry that promoted and thrived on accelerating arms races, such as the race for larger battleships mentioned earlier.

Military technological changes contributed to a widespread belief among European military establishments that offensive strategies would hold the advantage in the next war. This belief led to the need for rapid mobilization plans and secret military planning. In this way, World War I was caused by the ideas that created the mobilization spiral, not the mobilization process itself, which liberal perspectives emphasize. A militarist mentality created the **cult of the offensive**.<sup>37</sup> This belief in the advantage of using military power offensively was the reason rapid mobilization plans were developed in the first place; the mobilization plans and their interaction at the end of July 1914 were

**cult of the offensive** a belief in the advantage of using military power offensively.

## CAUSAL ARROW: PERSPECTIVES



simply a consequence. Notice again how arguments are differentiated depending on the way the causal arrow runs. In this case, ideas of the cult of the offensive drove mobilization plans that shifted relative military power.

## Liberal Nationalism

The second type of nationalism that emerged in the nineteenth century was more ideological and political than racial. It too emphasized culture and military struggle. But it offered political rather than racial visions of the way the world was unfolding. Liberal nationalism saw a trend toward increased individual freedom, fundamental human rights, and the rule of law. It emphasized equality of opportunity, especially the possibility of education and participation of all members of society in the political life and institutions of the country.

The United States and Great Britain led the development of liberal nationalism. By 1830, the United States had enfranchised all white male citizens. Through two major reform laws in 1832 and 1867, Great Britain also extended the franchise. Britain first and then the United States, after a bloody civil war, eliminated slavery, although political and economic, as opposed to legal, emancipation of black citizens took another century or more to achieve. Women too waited another century. Still, these countries planted the seed of expanding individual freedom and developed some of the early international movements for human rights and international law—for example, the British campaign against the international slave trade in the early nineteenth century.

More utopian versions of liberal ideology proclaimed universal peace. Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth-century German philosopher, wrote *Idea for a Universal History and Perpetual Peace*, in which he predicted that democracy would spread and lead to a federation of peaceful states.<sup>38</sup> This type of thinking may have contributed to a complacency before World War I that war was increasingly obsolete and that international organizations, law, and trade could resolve

disputes, as Gladstone and Angell had envisioned. As the causal arrow suggests, it also laid out for the first time the logic of the democratic peace whereby liberal nationalism cultivates the peaceful settlement of disputes that overcomes anarchy.

## CAUSAL ARROW: PERSPECTIVES



## Socialist Nationalism

Socialist nationalism emphasized the social and economic equality of individuals and advocated state institutions and programs to redistribute wealth from the capitalist to the working classes. While communism, a more radical version of socialism, did not yield political fruit until 1917,



Across Europe, World War I was greeted with nationalistic enthusiasm. Here German citizens rally in late July 1914 in front of the kaiser's palace (right) in Berlin.

Ullstein Bild/The Granger Collection, New York

when Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (who went by the alias Lenin) installed it in Russia, many European and other societies—for example, India—adopted socialist programs well before World War I.

Socialist parties sharpened conflicts with liberal and conservative parties. Socialist parties met in international conferences in 1907, 1910, and 1912 and denounced militarism and war. They too, as the causal arrow suggests, sought internationalist solutions, but in this case they called for working classes to unite across nations and end capitalism and war. Ultimately, however, nationalism proved stronger than internationalism.

Although Social Democrats, representing the interests of the working class, held the majority in the German parliament on August 4, 1914, they voted unanimously for war. In the 1860s, Bismarck had used war to co-opt the liberal nationalists and unify Germany. Now in 1914, conservatives in Germany, Russia, and other countries used war to co-opt the social nationalists and forge ideological unity through conservative and militant nationalism.

CAUSAL ARROW: PERSPECTIVES



Social Darwinism

As noted earlier, each nationalism had its own separate version of internationalism or how the world worked. The most potent set of ideas at the international or systemic level was **Social Darwinism**. Charles Darwin, an English scientist, published in 1859 his theory of evolution titled *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin identified a process of competition and natural selection that accounted for the evolution and survival of biological species. In *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, Darwin applied his theory to the origins of human beings. Foreign policy leaders seized on these ideas to define a worldview that exalted competition and war as the means for the survival and evolution of human societies and, indeed, nation-states. Bismarck, for example, said that “without struggle there can be no life and, if we wish to continue living, we must also be reconciled to further struggle.”<sup>39</sup> President Teddy Roosevelt once famously mused, “Unless we keep the barbarian virtues, the civilized ones will be of little avail.”<sup>40</sup> Thus was born the idea of a struggle among nations for the survival of the fittest. Only strong nations survived, and the strength of a nation involved its military power and its cultural cohesion.

**Social Darwinism**  
a nineteenth-century worldview that saw a struggle among nations for survival of the fittest.

Race inevitably became a measure of cultural cohesion. It linked culture to biology and seemed to follow from Darwinist logic. It affected all countries during this period. The United States openly discriminated against Chinese immigrants and continued to disenfranchise black Americans. But German leaders were particularly blunt about race. Kaiser Wilhelm II suggested on more than one occasion that the issue for him was race: “Now comes . . . the Germanic peoples’ fight for their existence against Russo-Gallia [Russia and France]. No further conference can smooth this over, for it is not a question of high politics but of race . . . for what is at stake is whether the Germanic race is to be or not to be in Europe.”<sup>41</sup> His army chief of staff, von Moltke, agreed: “A European war is bound to come sooner or later, and then it will be, in the last resort, a struggle between Teuton and Slav.” And so did his foreign minister, Gottlieb von Jagow: “The struggle between Teuton and Slav was bound to come.”<sup>42</sup>

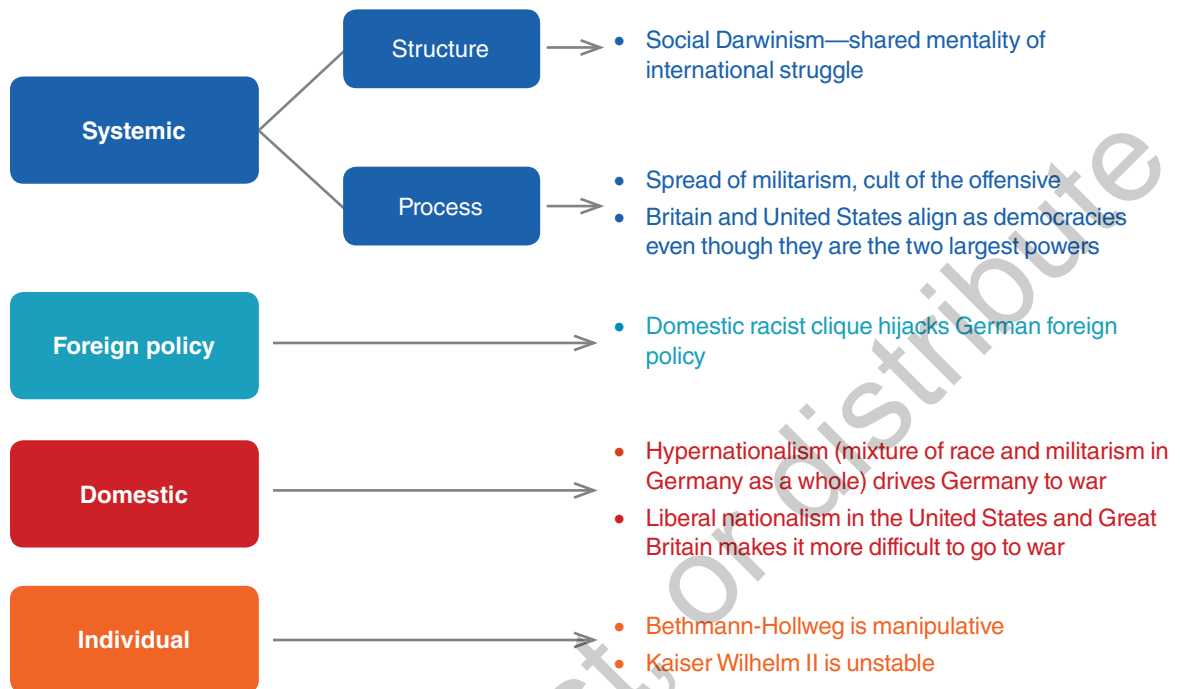
CAUSAL ARROW: PERSPECTIVES



As the causal arrow illustrates, racial competition made communications difficult and conferences ineffective; great powers could not engage in “high politics” to manage peace and stability if the issue was differing races, which could not be resolved through talk. Note the use of the language of the last move by Moltke and Jagow, that “war is bound to come sooner or later.” In each case, ideas are driving

diplomacy and conflict, not the other way around.

Figure 2-3 summarizes identity explanations of the causes of World War I.

**FIGURE 2-3** ■ The Causes of World War I: The Identity Perspective and Levels of Analysis

## CRITICAL THEORY EXPLANATIONS

Lenin saw World War I as a product of capitalist dynamics. The capitalist countries would fight one another for markets, and the communist countries would pick up the pieces. As soon as Lenin seized control in Russia in 1917, he pulled Russian forces out of the capitalist war between Germany and the west. He concentrated on building communism in a single country, believing that the historical dialectic of class conflict was on his side. Critical theories, such as Marxism, emphasize the deeper material forces propelling history toward its predetermined end. In the case of Marxism, the predetermined end is communism; in other cases of critical theory, it might be emancipation of marginalized voices or simply deconstruction of all power relationships. Critical theories remind us that attempts to understand history through perspectives are always selective and therefore biased. Social forces are holistic. Scholars themselves are caught up in these forces even as they try to study them.

Critical theories are skeptical of rationalist explanations. Lord Palmerston, a British prime minister in the nineteenth century, once said, “We have no eternal allies and no permanent enemies.” This statement became realism’s mantra—countries should align with one another not based on domestic ideological sentiments but, instead, solely on the basis of relative power considerations to confront the greater power. Yet Lord Palmerston also said that “the independence of constitutional states . . . never can be a matter of indifference to the British parliament, or, I should hope, to the British public. Constitutional states I would consider to be the natural allies of this country.”<sup>43</sup> Now Palmerston is saying that in making foreign

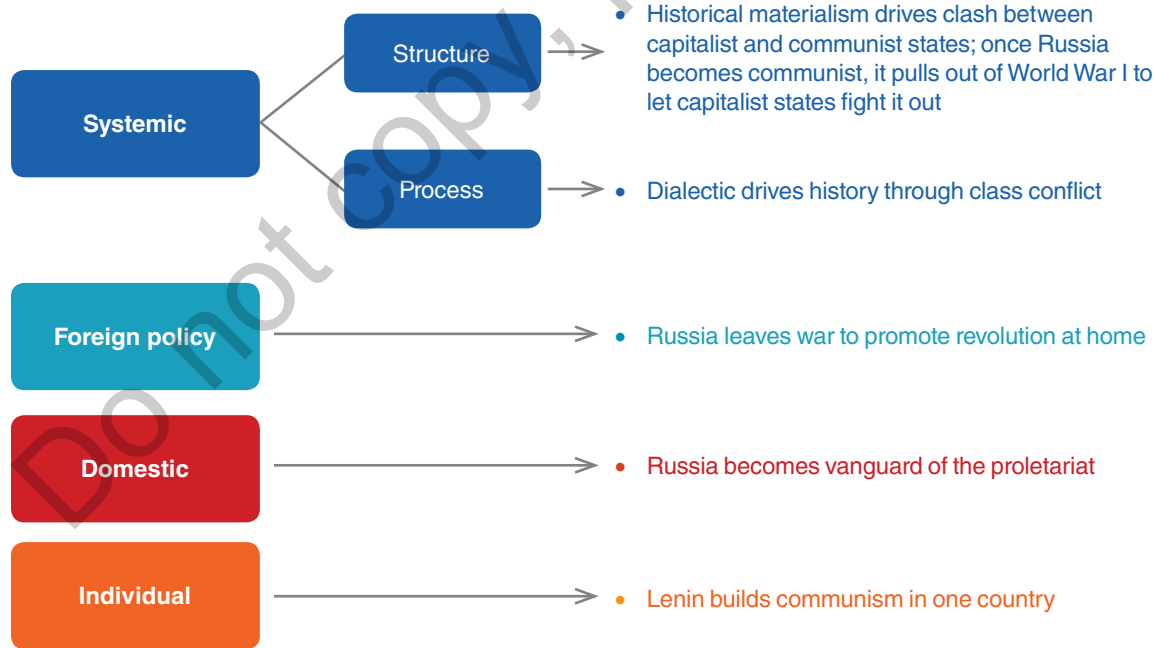
policy, the domestic political identities of countries matter more than the countries' relative power. He is hinting at the tendency of democracies (he calls them constitutional states) to align and not go to war with one another, thereby creating the "democratic peace." Which statement is correct?

Critical theories make us skeptical of all these efforts to select and emphasize specific factors to understand international relations, whether power or identity factors. Realist scholars writing about the past do not tell the whole story, not because they are devious but because they can't. Neither, of course, can scholars writing from liberal or identity perspectives. No single perspective or level of analysis suffices. Reality is holistic, not fragmented or capable of being decomposed piece by piece.

Critical theories recognize this but face a comparable limitation. Even though they insist on studying history as a whole, not by selecting and focusing on specific hypotheses, they have to concede that they can never tell us the whole story of history. History is too gargantuan, which is why mainstream scholars turn to selective perspectives in the first place. Critical theory can tell us the story of history only from the social vantage point of a particular critical theory scholar. The social vantage point that critical theorists often select is that of the poor, oppressed, and disenfranchised peoples of the world, whose interests, in these theorists' view, are systematically de-emphasized in mainstream perspectives.

Figure 2-4 summarizes critical theory explanations of the causes of World War I. Bear in mind, however, that critical theories do not actually distinguish among the various levels of analysis for causal purposes.

**FIGURE 2-4** ■ The Causes of World War I: The Critical Theory Perspective and Levels of Analysis



*Note:* Remember that factors identified at the various levels of analysis are not distinct causes but parts of a holistic explanation.



## SUMMARY

Our discussion of World War I shows how the concepts emphasized by each perspective play out in the actual course of historical events. Realist perspectives emphasize material factors such as anarchy and the security dilemma (self-help), rising (Germany) and declining (Great Britain) states, power conversion through more and less efficient bureaucracies, imperialistic domestic interest groups (cartelized politics in Germany), and weak leaders (Czar Nicholas II and Kaiser Wilhelm II). Liberal perspectives emphasize the absence or demise of common international institutions (Concert of Europe), the depth or shallowness of interdependence (the Hague Conferences), the misperceptions and accidents of diplomacy (secret diplomacy and path dependence, leading to the last move), and the breakdown of domestic policy coordination and institutions. Identity perspectives emphasize the variety of nationalist ideologies and their accompanying international discourses. Militant nationalism glorifies the cult of the offensive, liberal nationalism the agenda of democracy, and socialist discourses the spread of communism.

The principal perspectives emphasize these concepts from different levels of analysis. The kaiser may have been a uniquely weak leader (individual level), Germany an aggressive militarist state (domestic level), the leadership manipulative in using war to overcome domestic fissures (foreign policy level), or Germany just too powerful to contain (systemic level).

Critical theories weave all these causal factors from different perspectives and levels of analysis into a single historical drama, such as dialectical materialism in the case of Marxist theories. This drama is driven by factors beyond the control of theorists and thus not subject to rational manipulation. We cannot understand or shape the future by testing propositions from the past because the past is sodden with Western imperialism.

The variety of explanations is bewildering. But our analytical tools help us distinguish and organize them. Then, as scholars and students, we keep testing and evaluating the explanations. We have all of the facts about World War I, but we may never obtain definitive answers. The best we can do is understand how and why we disagree.

## KEY CONCEPTS

cult of the offensive, 90  
Entente Cordiale, 77  
iron and rye coalition, 88  
liberal nationalism, 90  
militant nationalism, 90

preemptive war, 79  
preventive war, 80  
Schlieffen Plan, 79  
Social Darwinism, 92  
socialist nationalism, 90

Triple Alliance, 78  
Triple Entente, 78  
Zollverein, 75

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe that the two cousins, Willy and Nicky, could have prevented World War I? What level of analysis does your answer reflect?
2. Why is Bismarck's diplomacy, which included the Berlin Conference in 1878, considered to be realist rather than liberal?
3. What are the differences among the following domestic-level explanations of World War I: imperialistic cartels, poorly coordinated military and political institutions, and nationalist political ideologies?
4. Can you give three explanations, one from each perspective, of why World War I started in 1914 and not earlier?
5. Which perspective is reflected and which rejected in the following argument about World War I from John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*? Explain your conclusion. "Even if Bismarck had remained in power past 1890, it is unlikely that he could have forestalled the Franco-Russian alliance with clever diplomacy. . . . France and Russia came together because they were scared of Germany's

growing power, not because Germany behaved aggressively or foolishly.”<sup>44</sup>

6. What level of analysis is Professor Jack Levy emphasizing when he writes, “It is certainly plausible that the July crisis might have ended differently if other individuals had been in positions of power at the beginning of July 1914”?<sup>45</sup>
7. What level of analysis is Professor Jack Snyder using when he concludes that the argument that “Germany’s expansionism was compelled by its position in the international system . . . is fundamentally unconvincing [because] even a cursory look at Germany’s international position will show that the nation’s vulnerability and insecurity were caused by its own aggressive policies”?<sup>46</sup>



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