



Why 1914 but Not Before? A Comparative Study of the July Crisis and Its Precursors

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ABSTRACT

Why did the July 1914 crisis—but not crises in 1905, 1908–9, 1911, and 1912–13—escalate to great-power war despite occurring under similar international and domestic conditions? Explanations based on underlying and slowly changing structural, social, or cultural variables cannot answer this question. Examining three Balkan crises of 1912–13 and the July Crisis, we refine realist explanations based on power, alliances, and reputational interests by incorporating the impact of changing power distributions and alliances in the Balkans on the great-power security system. A more complete answer to the why-1914-but-not-before question, however, requires the incorporation of Franz Ferdinand's assassination, which went beyond a pretext for war. It eliminated the most powerful and effective proponent for peace in Vienna and fundamentally changed the nature of the decision-making process in Austria-Hungary. Counterfactually, we argue that a hypothetical crisis with Franz Ferdinand present would probably have ended differently.

After a century of debate about the causes of World War I and after new research motivated by the centenary of the war, scholars remain deeply divided on the war's origins.¹ Many suggest that some combination of underlying structural causes, social forces, and cultural attitudes destabilized the European system, making a great-power war highly likely or even inevitable.² Lists of long-term causes include hegemonic ambition and the

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¹For a review, see Annika Mombauer, "Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I," *Central European History* 48, no. 4 (December 2015): 541–64.

²The distinction between underlying and immediate or proximate causes originates with Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, in *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Free Press, 1996). On applications to World War I, see Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, vol. 1, *Before Sarajevo: The Underlying Causes of the War* (New York: Free Press, 1928), 32–49. Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2013), xxix, distinguishes "remote and categorical causes." T. G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer*

balance of power,³ power transitions and preventive motivations,⁴ a polarized alliance system,⁵ rivalries and arms races,⁶ territorial conflicts,⁷ offensive military doctrines,⁸ militaristic strategic cultures and national identity,⁹ status concerns,¹⁰ class conflict and imperialism,¹¹ parochial economic pressures,¹² nationalism,¹³ the press,¹⁴ domestic sociopolitical

1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), xi, differentiates impersonal forces vs. the actions of leaders. Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. 1, *To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), highlights long-range vs. individual factors. Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, "World Wars: Definitions and Causes," in Hamilton and Herwig, ed. *The Origins of World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16–38, emphasizes "big" causes.

³Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (1961; repr., trans., New York: W. W. Norton; London: Chatto & Windus, 1967); Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance: Four Centuries of the European Power Struggle*, trans. Charles Fullman (New York: Vintage, 1962), chap. 4; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 181–90.

⁴Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Jack S. Levy, "The Sources of Preventive Logic in German Decision-Making in 1914," in *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making*, ed. Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 139–66; Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), chap. 4.

⁵Jürgen Angelow, *Kalkül und Prestige: Der Zweibund am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges [Calculation and Prestige: The Dual Alliance on the Eve of World War I]* (Cologne: Bohlau, 2000); Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 137–68.

⁶William R. Thompson, "Powderkegs, Sparks and World War I," in *Explaining War and Peace: Case Studies and Necessary Condition Counterfactuals*, ed. Gary Goertz and Jack S. Levy (New York: Routledge, 2007), 113–45; Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980); David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 159–63; Thomas Mahnken, Joseph Maiolo, and David Stevenson, eds., *Arms Races in International Politics: From the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pt. 1.

⁷John A. Vasquez, *Contagion and War: Lessons from the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁸Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1984): 58–107; Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, trans. Andrew Wilson and Eva Wilson (New York: Praeger, 1958); Paul M. Kennedy, ed., *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914* (Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1979); Hans Ehlert, Michael Epkenhans, and Gerhard P. Gross, eds., *Der Schlieffenplan: Analysen und Dokumente [The Schlieffen Plan: Analyses and Documents]* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006).

⁹Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Jan Vermeiren, *The First World War and German National Identity: The Dual Alliance at War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁰Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), chaps. 6–7; Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), chaps. 4–5.

¹¹Sönke Neitzel, *Weltmacht oder Untergang: Die Weltreichslehre im Zeitalter des Imperialismus [World Power or Downfall: World Empire Theory in the Age of Imperialism]* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000); Alexander Anievas, ed., *Cataclysm 1914: The First World War and the Making of Modern World Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

¹²Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); H. E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Steven E. Lobell, "Politics and National Security: The Battles for Britain," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 21, no. 4 (September 2004): 269–86; Etel Solingen, "Domestic Coalitions, Internationalization, and War: Then and Now," *International Security* 39, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 44–70.

¹³Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Imperial Germany, 1867–1918: Politics, Culture, and Society in an Authoritarian State*, trans. Richard Deveson (London: Arnold, 1995); Bertrand Joly, *Déroulède: L'inventeur du nationalisme français [Déroulède: The Inventor of French Nationalism]* (Paris: Perrin, 1998).

¹⁴Dominik Geppert, *Pressekriege: Öffentlichkeit und Diplomatie in den deutsch-britischen Beziehungen, 1896–1912 [Press Wars: The Public Sphere and Diplomacy in Anglo-German Relations, 1896–1912]* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007).

unrest,¹⁵ “unspoken assumptions” of European diplomatic culture,¹⁶ conceptions of honor and masculinity,¹⁷ and divided and dysfunctional political systems.¹⁸ Many of these mutually reinforcing *forces profondes*¹⁹ are key variables in theoretical models that political scientists test on this case and others.²⁰ Historians and political scientists debate which of these underlying factors carried the greatest causal weight. They also debate the relative importance of underlying and immediate causes, including the role of individuals, contingency, and inadvertence.²¹

One common feature of all interpretations emphasizing the underlying causes of World War I is that few if any of their primary causal variables changed significantly since the 1912–13 Balkan Wars. Many of these variables had not substantially changed during the seven years prior—a period that included the First Moroccan Crisis (1905), the Bosnian Crisis (1908–9), and the Second Moroccan Crisis (1911). There were few significant changes in the distribution of military power among the leading states, in the structure of great-power alliances, in the global economy, or in states’ domestic political systems. The same monarchs, presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers who successfully defused the risk of great-power war during the Balkan Wars were, with a couple of exceptions, in power in July 1914.²² The domestic coalitions that supported those leaders remained relatively unchanged. Yet only the July Crisis escalated to a general war. If underlying factors were the primary causes of World War I, why did those same factors not lead to a great-power war during the Balkan Wars or perhaps during one of the earlier crises, when conditions and political leaders were similar?

The absence of significant variation in hypothesized “deep causes” over the ten-year period leading up to 1914, and particularly over the period

¹⁵Arno J. Mayer, “Internal Causes and Purposes of War in Europe, 1870–1956: A Research Assignment,” *Journal of Modern History* 41, no. 3 (September 1969): 291–303; Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918*, trans. Kim Traynor (Leamington Spa, UK: Berg, 1985).

¹⁶James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Longman, 1984), chap. 8.

¹⁷Ute Frevert, “Honor, Gender, and Power: The Politics of Satisfaction in Pre-War Europe,” in *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914*, ed. Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 233–55; Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 358–61.

¹⁸Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, chap. 4; V. R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1973); Douglas Newton, *The Darkest Days: The Truth behind Britain’s Rush to War, 1914* (London: Verso, 2015).

¹⁹Pierre Renouvin and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Introduction à l’histoire des relations internationales [Introduction to the History of International Relations]* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1964).

²⁰Formal models include Frank C. Zagare, *The Games of July: Explaining the Great War* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2011); Scott Wolford, *The Politics of the First World War: A Course in Game Theory and International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

²¹Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, xxix, describes his narrative as “saturated with agency.” Otte, *July Crisis*, xi, emphasizes the “doings of men.” An inadvertent war is one no actor wanted or expected at the beginning of the crisis. Alexander L. George, ed., *Avoiding War: Problems of Crisis Management* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), xi. In a classic statement of inadvertence, David Lloyd George wrote that “The nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay . . . not one of them wanted war; certainly not on this scale.” George, *War Memoirs* (London: Odhams, 1938), 1:32–34.

²²As Clark argues in *Sleepwalkers*, 183, early twentieth-century monarchs had a “relatively modest impact on actual policy.”

between the outbreak of the Balkan Wars in October 1912 and the July Crisis, is a puzzle for explanations based on these variables. This puzzle prevents us from explaining variations in war and peace in the period prior to the war. It also detracts from the integrity of explanations for the outbreak of World War I itself. Any satisfactory explanation of the outbreak of a general European war in 1914 must be able to explain why the earlier crises did not escalate despite occurring under similar conditions. What was different about 1914?

Although many historians incorporate the Balkan Wars into their narratives of World War I, and in the process explain how earlier outcomes altered underlying conditions and leaders' perceptions, few, if any, engage in the kind of systematic comparisons that might satisfy political scientists.²³ International relations scholars, though trained to think comparatively, rarely undertake these kinds of studies. International relations scholars include the World War I case in some comparative studies, but these are generally cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, juxtaposing the 1914 case against other historical cases but rarely against the immediate pre-1914 crises.²⁴

We aim to take an important step toward answering the why-1914-but-not-before question by highlighting the puzzle, identifying a small number of key causal variables that changed from earlier crises to the July Crisis, explaining those changes, and demonstrating their impact on the outcome. We limit our comparison to the Balkan crises of 1912–13 and the July Crisis for several reasons. First, the greater temporal proximity maximizes the number of causal variables that remained constant over the two sets of cases, facilitating a focus on what changed and fitting the logic of a “most similar case” design.²⁵ Second, the Balkan Wars had a higher probability of escalating to a great-power war than did the earlier crises.²⁶ Third, the lessons decision makers drew from the crises of 1912–13 significantly shaped their judgments and decisions in 1914.

After a theoretical discussion of possible relationships between underlying and immediate variables, we provide a summary of the Balkan Wars and the issues that triggered several great-power crises. We briefly survey

²³Fay, *Origins of the World War*, vol. 1; Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols., trans. Isabella M. Massey (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1952–57); Strachan, *First World War*, vol. 1; Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Clark, *Sleepwalkers*; Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora's Box: A History of the First World War*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

²⁴Ole R. Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972); Snyder, *Myths of Empire*; Timothy W. Crawford, *Pivotal Deterrence: Third-Party Statecraft and the Pursuit of Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

²⁵Alexander L. George, and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Jack S. Levy, “Case Studies: Types, Designs, and Logics of Inference,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 1–18, esp. 10.

²⁶In 1908–9 Russia was unprepared for war. In 1912 Russian and Austro-Hungarian mobilizations created enormous risks.

historiographical and international relations studies that directly or indirectly engage the why-1914-but-not-before question.²⁷ We strengthen standard realist explanations based on shifting power and rigid European alliances by incorporating the impact of the Balkan regional system on the European great-power system, with changing power distributions and alliances in the Balkans significantly exacerbating the security dilemmas Austria-Hungary and Germany faced and shortening leaders' time horizons. We also highlight reputational interests. We argue, however, that this more nuanced realist explanation cannot adequately explain the outbreak of war in 1914. One must go beyond power and alliances to incorporate changes in key personnel, particularly the assassination of the archduke, and its impact on decision-making processes. We argue that without the assassination, which eliminated the leading and most powerful advocate for peace in Vienna, it is unlikely, though not impossible, that war would have occurred, at least in 1914.

Our primary aim is to explain the historical puzzle of why the July Crisis but not earlier crises erupted into a great-power war, not to develop new theory. We make no claim that our interpretive argument is generalizable to all crises. However, we believe our arguments about the need for a more nuanced conception of power and alliances, the interaction of regional and great-power systems, and the interaction of underlying and immediate variables carry important theoretical implications that are generalizable. We also believe the why-now-but-not-before question is itself generalizable, as the analysis of many wars' causes could benefit from longitudinal comparisons with temporally proximate crises. Finally, World War I has had a disproportionate role in the development and illustration of many of our leading theories of international conflict. It is important that we get it right, or at least eliminate or refine inadequate explanations. Although we do not explicitly test our argument against all leading explanations of World War I, our central argument is that explanations based solely or largely on underlying structural, social, and cultural variables that did not change significantly since 1912 are unviable. We also engage other explanations throughout the article through comparisons and with references to the historiography of the war.

Interactions between Underlying and Immediate Variables

Our argument that many key structural and social forces remained unchanged from the earlier crises to the July Crisis does not imply that

²⁷We raise the issue ourselves in Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, "Introduction: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Causes of the First World War," in Levy and Vasquez, *Outbreak of the First World War*, 3–29, esp. 8; and William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 211.

these variables were unimportant causes of World War I, only that scholars often underspecify their causal effects. There are several ways that relatively unchanging *forces profundes* might have contributed to the Great War. The most obvious possibility is that they interacted with other causal factors that varied between earlier crises and the July Crisis. Some combination of underlying causes may have created a powder keg (or window of opportunity) that required a spark (or catalyst) to ignite.²⁸ Richard Ned Lebow, for example, identifies three interacting causal chains in the period leading up to 1914 and describes them as “dry kindling waiting for a spark,” which the assassination provided.²⁹ In this model, the underlying variables (usually structural) are necessary but not sufficient for war, the spark was necessary (but presumably not by itself sufficient), and the powder keg and the spark were jointly sufficient for war.

Though the powder keg and spark are each necessary conditions for war in powder-keg models, it is important to note that these explanations do not always give equal causal weight to structure and spark. William R. Thompson, for example, accepts the metaphor of kindling and spark but minimizes the causal importance of the latter by arguing that sparks are like streetcars because they frequently appear, even if a prior one is missed.³⁰ Without the assassination, another spark would have arisen to light the structurally induced powder keg, which carries most of the causal weight. Historians make similar arguments. F. H. Hinsley contends that “if the Sarajevo crisis had not precipitated a particular great war, some other crisis would have precipitated a great war at no distant date. This other war would have been essentially the same war as that which in fact broke out.”³¹

This implicit model of causation suggests the powder keg remained constant throughout the several crises, and what changed was the emergence of a spark. Realist interpretations acknowledge some changes in the powder keg with the growing power of Russia but generally neglect other important changes in the structure of power and alliances over the twenty months after the beginning of the Balkan Wars. We treat power and alliances as

²⁸On window-of-opportunity and powder-keg models, see Gary Goertz and Jack S. Levy, “Causal Explanation, Necessary Conditions, and Case Studies,” in Goertz and Levy, *Explaining War and Peace*, 9–45, esp. 34–39.

²⁹Richard Ned Lebow, “Contingency, Catalysts, and Nonlinear Change: The Origins of World War I,” in Goertz and Levy, *Explaining War and Peace*, 95.

³⁰Thompson, “Powderkegs, Sparks and World War I.” The streetcar metaphor reflects McGeorge Bundy’s response to the argument that traces US escalation in the Vietnam War to the Vietcong attack on the US military base at Pleiku: “Pleikus are like streetcars; if you miss one, another will come along shortly.” Quoted in James G. Blight, Janet M. Lang, and David A. Welch, *Virtual JFK: Vietnam if Kennedy Had Lived* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 171.

³¹F. H. Hinsley, “Introduction: The Origins of the First World War,” in *Decisions for War, 1914*, ed. Keith Wilson (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995), 4. Presumably, some international powder kegs are more likely than others to induce sparks and thus carry a higher prior probability of war. It is conceivable, however, that the prior probability of war is high and constant and that the spark capable of igniting it is random. This situation fits Erik Gartzke, “War Is in the Error Term,” *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 567–87.

multidimensional concepts, incorporating some components that remained relatively constant from crisis to crisis while other components changed, contributing significantly to the different crisis outcomes. For example, although the formal alliance structure did not change from the 1908–9 annexation crisis to the July Crisis, the conditions under which political leaders were willing to come to the aid of their allies and the confidence each state had in its ally changed dramatically. Similarly, too many studies of the impact of power or changing power on the road to war in 1914—particularly in political science—neglect the Balkan Wars’ consequences. By disaggregating power and alliances, we point to shifts in power distributions and alliance relationships as key changes from the Balkan crises to the July Crisis. These changes led decision makers in Vienna and Berlin to perceive increased security threats and rapidly narrowing windows of opportunity in which to deal with them.

Historical Background: The Balkan Wars and Great-Power Crises

If Europe before 1914 can be described as a powder keg waiting for a spark, the same is true for the Balkans in 1912. Driven by nationalist aspirations, the relatively new Balkan states were eager to incorporate their ethnic brethren still living under Ottoman rule in Europe. The catalyst was the Italo-Turkish War (1911–12), which significantly weakened the Ottoman Empire and provided the Balkan states the opportunity to expand.³² In the First Balkan War (October 1912–April 1913), the Balkan League of Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Greece seized most of the Ottoman territories in Europe save those around Constantinople. The Treaty of London ended the First Balkan War, divided Ottoman territories among the Balkan states, and established the Albanian state. Dissatisfaction with the Treaty of London led to the Second Balkan War (late June and July 1913), in which a diplomatically isolated Bulgaria was easily defeated by a combination of its former allies, the Ottoman Empire, and Romania. The Treaty of Bucharest formally ended the war in August 1913.

The Balkan Wars generated three distinct great-power crises, each of which could easily have escalated to a great-power war.³³ These crises centered on Serbian and Montenegrin expansions, particularly their claims to

³²Russian diplomacy helped overcome intra-Balkan rivalries and facilitated the formation of the Balkan League. Andrew Rossos, *Russia and the Balkans: Inter-Balkan Rivalries and Russian Foreign Policy, 1908–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

³³On the Balkan Wars and crises, see Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The Diplomacy of the Balkan Wars, 1912–13* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938); Albertini, *Origins of the War of 1914*, 1: chaps. 7–8; Samuel R. Williamson Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1991), chaps. 7–8; Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars, 1912–13: Prelude to the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2000); Dominic Lieven, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War, and the End of the Tsarist Empire* (London: Penguin, 2015), chap. 5; Andrew Thomas Park, “International Commissions, the Birth of Albania, and Sir Edward Grey’s Preventive Diplomacy during the Balkan Wars, 1912–1913,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 31, no. 1 (2020): 22–43.

territory in Albania, and Serbian demands for a port on the Adriatic. Austro-Hungarian leaders perceived the expansion of Serbia as a military threat, Serbian nationalist aims as a political threat to the integrity of the Austro-Hungarian multinational empire, and a Serbian port as an opening for the Russian navy and expanded Russian influence.³⁴ They insisted that Albania be an independent state and that Serbia be denied direct access to the Adriatic.³⁵ Russian diplomatic and potential military support for Serbia accentuated these crises' stakes. There is little doubt about the risks of escalation. Andrew Thomas Park argues that the great powers came "perilously close to war." Samuel R. Williamson Jr. argues that in each of the three Balkan crises "another day, one more event, a different argument could have tilted the decision toward war rather than hesitation and peace."³⁶

The first and most serious crisis was the "mobilization crisis" (or "winter crisis") of November–December 1912. Russia initiated a "trial mobilization" in late September. Austria-Hungary did not respond with their own buildup until mid-November, after repeated Ottoman defeats and after the Serbian army reached the Adriatic coast. It then mobilized against both Serbia and Russia.³⁷ When the Russian military demanded a partial mobilization against Austria-Hungary, Tsar Nicholas was favorably inclined but backed down when Prime Minister Vladimir Kokovtsov, supported by Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov, persuaded him that partial mobilization would lead to German mobilization and a likely war.³⁸ Russia then abandoned Serbia on the port issue.

Meanwhile, the Austro-Hungarian military won over the normally cautious Archduke Franz Ferdinand to a plan for military action. Conrad von Hötzendorf, sacked the previous year for his advocacy of preventive war against Italy, returned as chief of staff and pressed Emperor Franz Joseph I and Foreign Minister Leopold Berchtold for war against Serbia. After Germany provided only lukewarm support with a series of mixed signals, Berchtold, who opposed war with Russia, persuaded Franz Joseph to accept

³⁴Alma Hannig, "Austro-Hungarian Foreign Policy and the Balkan Wars," in *The Wars before the Great War: Conflict and International Politics before the Outbreak of the First World War*, ed. Dominik Geppert, William Mulligan, and Andreas Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 235–37.

³⁵Williamson, *Austria-Hungary*, 124–25.

³⁶Park, "International Commissions," 23; Samuel R. Williamson Jr., "Theories of Organizational Process and Foreign Policy Outcomes," in *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy*, ed. Paul Gordon Lauren (New York: Free Press, 1979), 143.

³⁷Austria-Hungary mobilized over 600,000 troops along its borders with Serbia and Russia. Williamson, "Theories of Organizational Process," 143; Helmreich, *Balkan Wars*, 461–62; Bruce W. Menning, "The Mobilization Crises of 1912 and 1914 in Russian Perspective: Overlooked and Neglected Linkages," in *Bid for World Power? New Research on the Outbreak of the First World War*, ed. Andreas Gestrich and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 223–62.

³⁸Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 264–71; David MacLaren McDonald, *United Government and Foreign Policy in Russia, 1900–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 183–87; Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 24–25.

British foreign secretary Edward Grey's proposal for a great-power conference. In early 1913, the Hohenlohe mission to St. Petersburg eased tensions between Austria-Hungary and Russia, allowing both sides to demobilize and draw back from militarized confrontation.³⁹

After the near miss of a great-power war, tensions between Serbia and Austria-Hungary remained high. Two subsequent crises occurred relating to Serbian expansion into Albania and particularly to the strategic implications of Serbian access to the Adriatic. The April–May 1913 “Scutari crisis” emerged from the ongoing Montenegrin siege of the northern Albanian town of Scutari (Shkodër), supported by Serbian forces. Austro-Hungarian pressure led to the withdrawal of Serbian but not Montenegrin forces, which captured Scutari in April. Vienna's military threats, backed by Berlin and coupled with a great-power flotilla off the Adriatic coast, forced a Montenegrin withdrawal, ending the crisis and avoiding a likely military conflict.⁴⁰ Another crisis emerged in October 1913 when Serbia refused to turn over territory to Albania as specified by the Treaty of London. Austria-Hungary issued an ultimatum, and Serbia, unable to secure Russian support, withdrew.

With the Balkan Wars serving as a trial run for the July Crisis, to what extent have historians and political scientists attempted to explain what was different about the latter?

Narrative and Comparison in the Historiography and International Relations

Historians' narratives of the road to World War I invariably include discussions of earlier crises, often with attention to how international and domestic conditions changed from one crisis to the next. Historians aim to explain particular historical episodes and highlight their unique features, and part of what makes historical events unique is previous events' influence. The actors themselves are sensitive to earlier events and try to draw lessons from them, and their judgments and responses become part of the historical narrative. Historians generally set the July Crisis within a narrative, rather than comparative, framework.

Historian Paul W. Schroeder explicitly raises the why-1914-but-not-before question. He traces the war to a systemic crisis that had been intensifying due to structural changes in the international system resulting primarily from imperial competition, the militarization of diplomacy, and the growing conception of international politics as a zero-sum game.⁴¹

³⁹Hannig, “Austro-Hungarian Foreign Policy,” 235–37; Williamson, *Austria-Hungary*, 134.

⁴⁰Williamson, *Austria-Hungary*, 142.

⁴¹Paul W. Schroeder, “World War I as Galloping Gertie: A Reply to Joachim Remak,” *Journal of Modern History* 44, no. 3 (September 1972): 319–45; Jost Dülffer, Martin Kröger, and Rolf-Harald Wippich, *Vermiedene Kriege:*

Schroeder emphasizes the deterioration of Austria's position and the failure of European leaders to recognize threats to Austria's security and integrity. Austria's decline was particularly dangerous for the system because it created a window of opportunity and the temptation for Austria-Hungary, and perhaps Germany, to launch a preventive war.⁴² Schroeder argues that the system was prone to war, and that if a general war had not occurred in 1914 it would have occurred soon thereafter. This logic leads Schroeder to argue that the key question is not "Why World War I?" but "Why not?" Why was the war postponed so long? Schroeder concludes that "the wars that did not occur ... [are] harder to explain than the one that did." This is an important argument, though in the end Schroeder does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question of what was different in 1914.⁴³

Sean McMeekin agrees that structural systemic factors were necessary conditions for World War I and emphasizes that they were present during the earlier crises without leading to war.⁴⁴ He identifies the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand as the key difference in the July Crisis and argues that in its absence it is unlikely (but not impossible) that a great-power war would have erupted. This is a classic powder-keg explanation and a fairly common response to deterministic arguments about the origins of World War I, though most of its proponents are not as explicit as McMeekin in linking the assassination to the question of why 1914 but not before.

Political scientists have also conducted some qualitative comparisons bearing on this puzzle. Charles Lockhart examines hypotheses of crisis bargaining and crisis management over several crises (but not the Balkan crises) and concludes that crisis tactics, not structure, better explain the variation in outcomes.⁴⁵ Robert F. Trager analyzes the impact of signaling

Deeskalation von Konflikten der Grossmächte zwischen Krimkrieg und Erstem Weltkrieg, 1865–1914 [Avoided Wars: The De-Escalation of Great-Power Conflicts between the Crimean War and World War I, 1865–1914] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1997); Neitzel, *Weltmacht oder Untergang [World Power or Downfall]*.

⁴²On Austria's preventive logic, see Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, vol. 2, *The European Powers and the Wilhelminian Empire, 1890–1914*, trans. Heinz Norden (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1970), 227–38.

⁴³Schroeder, "World War I as Galloping Gertie," 322–23.

⁴⁴After stating that "a number of long-term structural factors made the catastrophe of 1914 possible," McMeekin argues that

none of this structural background, however, is sufficient to explain what happened in 1914. Mass conscription and the arms race were not less advanced during the First Bosnian Crisis of 1908–1909 and the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. France and Russia were just as free to determine whether or not to go to war in 1914 as in all previous years of their military alliance dating back to 1894. Austria had just as much interest in cutting Serbia down to size in 1912 and 1913 as she did in 1914; the Germans had no particular interest in the Balkans in any of these years. Russia could have found cause to go to war over Serbia—or the Straits—in 1908, 1909, 1912–1913, or the winter of 1913–1914, during the Liman von Sanders crisis. Britain, having decisively won her naval race with Germany by 1914, could easily have stayed out of this Balkan imbroglio, as she had in all previous ones.

McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (New York: Basic, 2013), 384–85.

⁴⁵Charles Lockhart, "Conflict Actions and Outcomes: Long-Term Impacts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 22, no. 4 (December 1978): 565–98.

and perception in the 1912 Balkan crisis on calculations in the July Crisis. He concludes that lessons of 1912 generated fears in Vienna that Germany's blank check might constitute a closing window of opportunity of support they needed for war.⁴⁶ Dale C. Copeland⁴⁷ argues that preventive logic based on Germany's fear of the rising power of Russia can explain the variation in outcomes, but that alternative explanations based on the spiral model, domestic imperatives, and the chain-ganging tendencies of alliances in multipolarity cannot do so.⁴⁸

Some changes between the Balkan crisis and the July Crisis were more important than others. We begin by focusing on power and alliances but go beyond standard realist accounts by emphasizing the impact of shifts in the Balkan distribution of power and alliances on great-power security dilemmas and alliance relationships. In contrast to the common emphasis on a fixed and rigid alliance structure, we emphasize the changing confidence of great powers that their allies would support them—positive for France and Russia but negative for Austria-Hungary and Germany—along with the effects of Anglo-German *détente*. Closely linked to both power and alliances were reputational concerns, especially for Russia in the Balkans.⁴⁹ We emphasize perceptions of closing windows of opportunity for both Austria-Hungary and Germany, which in each case the Balkan Wars' outcome significantly affected. We conclude, however, that although changes in power distributions, threat perception, alliance relationships, and reputational concerns increased the likelihood of war from the Balkan crises to the July Crisis, they still fail to provide a fully adequate explanation of the outbreak of war in 1914. A more complete but still reasonably parsimonious explanation must incorporate the assassination of the archduke, which provided an important trigger and pretext for war and significantly changed the dynamics of decision making in Austria-Hungary by eliminating its leading advocate for peace.

⁴⁶Robert F. Trager, *Diplomacy: Communication and the Origins of International Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), chap. 7.

⁴⁷Dale C. Copeland, "International Relations Theory and the Three Great Puzzles of the First World War," in Levy and Vasquez, *Outbreak of the First World War*, 167–98.

⁴⁸Political scientists also employ quantitative methods to examine structural change in the international or European systems in the years or decades before 1914. Thompson, "Powderkegs, Sparks and World War I," applies his model to the 1815–1913 period and finds an increase in the predicted probability of war in the late nineteenth century, but cannot explain the differences between the crises of 1912–13 and July 1914. Other studies are illuminating but fail to provide sufficiently precise measurements of key variables to capture structural changes in the European system from the earlier crises to the July Crisis. See Nazli Choucri and Robert C. North, *Nations in Conflict: National Growth and International Violence* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1975); Alan Ned Sabrosky, "From Bosnia to Sarajevo: A Comparative Discussion of Interstate Crises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 19, no. 1 (March 1975): 3–24; Charles F. Doran, *Systems in Crisis: New Imperatives of High Politics at Century's End* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). John A. Vasquez et al., "The ConflictSpace of Cataclysm: The International System and the Spread of War 1914–1917," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 2 (April 2011): 143–68, applies a social network analysis.

⁴⁹Gregory D. Miller, *The Shadow of the Past: Reputation and Military Alliances before the First World War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

Other variables changed between late 1912 and July 1914 but had a secondary causal impact. One was the increased racialization of European politics, particularly in Germany, where social Darwinism was influential.⁵⁰ For the kaiser, Chancellor Theobald Bethmann-Hollweg, Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow, and other German leaders with exaggerated views of a “Slav peril,” Serbian expansion in the Balkan Wars compounded their fears of Germany’s declining power relative to Russia.⁵¹ The Balkan crises also influenced beliefs about the efficacy of the Concert of Europe in managing great-power crises. Some foreign policy elites (especially in Vienna) became increasingly pessimistic about the viability of great-power diplomacy,⁵² whereas others (especially in London) entered the July Crisis with misplaced confidence, thinking the same strategies that had worked in 1912–13 would help resolve the 1914 crisis.⁵³ A third factor was the dismissal of Kokovtsov as prime minister and chairman of the Council of Ministers in Russia. Kokovtsov strongly opposed war and had argued persuasively against mobilization in 1912.⁵⁴ Other causal factors often said to be important—imperial rivalries, nationalist public opinion, economic conditions and domestic interests, constitutional arrangements, especially civil-military relations—remained relatively constant from 1912–13 to July 1914.⁵⁵

From the Balkan Wars to the July Crisis: What Changed?

The European great-power system was highly sensitive to the distribution of power and alliance relationships in the Balkan regional system. By radically upending the regional system, the Balkan Wars further destabilized the European system and increased great-power security concerns.

⁵⁰Thomas Lindemann, *Les Doctrines Darwiniennes et la Guerre de 1914* [*Darwinian Doctrines and the War of 1914*] (Paris: Economica, 2001).

⁵¹Thomas Lindemann, *Die Macht der Perzeptionen und die Perzeptionen von Macht* [*The Power of Perceptions and the Perceptions of Power*] (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2000), 141–230; Patrick Bormann, “German Foreign Policy and the Balkan Wars, 1912–1914,” in Geppert, Mulligan, and Rose, *Wars before the Great War*, 249–63; Vermeiren, *First World War*, 32–44.

⁵²This is linked to their declining trust and confidence in their German ally and to the perceived success of Vienna’s coercive diplomacy in 1912–13. Williamson, *Austria-Hungary*, chap. 7; Günther Kronenbitter, “Austria-Hungary’s Decision for War in 1914,” in Gestrich and Pogge von Strandmann, *Bid for World Power?*, 155; William Mulligan, “Die Balkankriege, die Veränderung diplomatischer Normen und der Weg in den Weltkrieg” [“The Balkan Wars, the Change of Diplomatic Norms and the Path to the World War”] *Historische Zeitschrift* (forthcoming).

⁵³Friedrich Kießling, *Gegen den “Großen Krieg”? Entspannung in den internationalen Beziehungen 1911–1914* [*Against the “Great War”? Détente in International Relations, 1911–1914*] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2002); Holger Afflerbach, “The Topos of Improbable War in Europe before 1914,” in Afflerbach and Stevenson, *Improbable War?*, 161–82.

⁵⁴Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 112–15. Kokovtsov’s demise led to the increasing influence of Alexander Krivoshein, who had supported mobilization in 1912.

⁵⁵Given space constraints, we save a full justification of this claim for another time. On the dual impact of economic interdependence during the 1871–1914 period, facilitating great-power cooperation for most of the period but creating destabilizing conditions after 1911, see William Mulligan and Jack S. Levy, “Rethinking Power Politics in an Interdependent World, 1871–1914,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 49, no. 4 (Spring 2019): 611–40.

The Balance of Power

As a result of the Balkan Wars, Serbian territory nearly doubled and its population increased by half; Serbia's army, traditionally disrespected by Vienna, demonstrated its military prowess.⁵⁶ With Russia prioritizing Serbia, Bulgaria shifted away from Russia toward the Triple Alliance, leaving Serbia as Russia's only partner in the Balkans. Romania's intervention against Bulgaria in the Second Balkan War raised questions about its reliability within the Alliance. Conrad estimated that Romania's neutrality would result in a loss of 400,000 men, and double that if Romania joined the Triple Entente.⁵⁷ The defection of Romania would also pose a threat to the Habsburg province of Transylvania, as Hungarian prime minister István Tisza repeatedly emphasized. Italy's future intentions were increasingly uncertain, the strengthening of Montenegro reinforced its Serbian ally's power facing Austria in the Balkans, and the weakening of Bulgaria undermined its role as a counter to Belgrade.⁵⁸ The value of the Ottoman Empire as a counterweight in the Balkans declined. In addition, Serbian expansion increased the attractiveness of Serbia to the South Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, adding an internal dimension to the growing external threat perceived by the Dual Monarchy.

These structural changes in the Balkan regional system significantly affected perceptions and calculations in Vienna, where political and military leaders anticipated the Dual Monarchy's continuing decline, both internally and externally, and saw war as a possible solution to both sets of problems.⁵⁹ Conrad, who had advocated preventive war against Italy in 1907 and again in 1911–12, and against Serbia in the 1908–9 annexation crisis and during the Balkan Wars, subsequently intensified his demands for preventive war in 1914.⁶⁰ The deteriorating balance of power made political leaders, most prominently Berchtold and Franz Joseph, more receptive to his arguments.

These regional changes had important and immediately recognized implications for the Central European balance of power and for German security concerns. The increased Serbian military threat required Austria-Hungary to devote more troops to its southeastern border and to reinforce the border with Romania in any war against Serbia and Montenegro. This would divert Austrian troops away from the Russian front, significantly

⁵⁶Günther Kronenbitter, "The Perception of the 'Wars before the War' in Austria-Hungary," in Geppert, Mulligan, and Rose, *Wars before the Great War*, 197–99.

⁵⁷Ritter, *Sword and Scepter*, 238.

⁵⁸Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, 144–45.

⁵⁹Günther Kronenbitter, "Krieg im Frieden": *Die Führung der k. u. k. Armee und die Großmachtspolitik Österreich-Ungarns 1906–1914* ["War in Peace": *The Leadership of the Royal and Imperial Army and Austro-Hungary's Great-Power Policy, 1906–1914*] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003).

⁶⁰Ritter, *Sword and Scepter*, 227–39.

reducing Austria-Hungary's ability to assist Germany in a war against Russia and leaving Germany more isolated in a two-front war against both Russia and France. The scale of these changes was substantial. German military planners calculated in late 1912—before the full extent of Serbia's gains was evident—that the collapse of Ottoman power would enable Russia to shift 317,000 troops to fight against Germany and Austria-Hungary.⁶¹ The significance of this change is suggested by a comparison with the 1913 German Army Law's effects, which raised the size of the peacetime army by 117,000 infantry, 15,000 noncommissioned officers, and 4,000 officers.⁶²

All of this had serious implications for Germany's Schlieffen Plan, which had little margin for error.⁶³ The plan assumed that a slowly mobilizing Russian army would give Germany time to quickly defeat France in the west and redirect its armies to the east before the Russian "steamroller" gathered steam.⁶⁴ Reduced Austrian help with Russia in Galicia would heighten the direct Russian threat to Germany from the east, increasing pressure on the Schlieffen Plan to defeat France quickly before Russia fully mobilized. This significantly intensified Germany's security dilemma and shortened its time horizons, especially in the context of the ongoing growth in Russian power.

Russia's military and economic strength grew enormously after its low point in 1905. In terms of peacetime strength, the numerical advantage of the combined Franco-Russian armies over the German and Austro-Hungarian armies increased from 261,000 in 1904 to 1,000,000 in 1914. Together, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Serbia, and Belgium could mobilize about 5.4 million troops, compared to 2.1 million for Germany and another 1.4 million for Austria-Hungary.⁶⁵ The combination of the rise

⁶¹These calculations assumed Romania would stay close to the Triple Alliance. Romania's move toward Russia in spring 1914 would have increased this number. Denkschrift über die militärpolitische Lage und die sich aus ihr ergehenden Forderungen für weiterer Ausgestaltung der deutschen Wehrkraft vom 21. Dezember 1912 [Memorandum on the Military-Political Situation and the Resulting Demands for the Further Development of German Military Force, 21 December 1912], Bl. 4, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, PH 3/445. French military leaders made similar calculations about how an Austro-Serbian war would tie down between a half and two-thirds of Austrian forces, thus freeing up Russian forces for action against Germany and reducing pressure on France. Christopher Clark, "The Balkan Inception Scenario: Serbia and the Coming of War in 1914," in Gestrinch and Pogge von Strandmann, *Bid for World Power?*, 271.

⁶²Oliver Stein, *Die deutsche Heeresrüstungspolitik, 1890–1914: Das Militär und der Primat der Politik* [*The German Army Armaments Policy, 1890–1914: The Military and the Primacy of Politics*] (Paderborn: Schöningh Verlag, 2007), 344–45.

⁶³Stig Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871–1914," in *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914*, ed. Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1999), 343–76.

⁶⁴Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, chaps. 4–5; William C. Fuller Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600–1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 423–33; Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War*, 159–63.

⁶⁵Niall Ferguson, "Public Finance and National Security: The Domestic Origins of the First World War Revisited," *Past & Present* 142 (February 1994): 147–48. For more detailed data on army and navy strength, military expenditures, and economic data, see Paul M. Kennedy, "The First World War and the International Power System," *International Security* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1984): 7–40; David Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the*

of Russian power in Europe, the increasing threat to Austria-Hungary in the Balkans, and the Schlieffen Plan's needs led to the German Army Law of April 1913. This was the largest peacetime increase in German history, though only 40 percent of what Helmuth von Moltke requested.⁶⁶ The German law was a major motivation for France's three-year service law, passed in August 1913, further accelerating the arms race.⁶⁷

Of particular concern to Moltke, the German General Staff, and many civilian leaders was Russia's Great Programme of army reform, passed by the Duma in June 1914. This called for a 40 percent increase in Russia's army size and substantial increases in artillery by 1917.⁶⁸ In addition, the expansion of Russian strategic railway system in Poland, initiated in 1913 and supported by French loans, would accelerate Russian mobilization. This further eroded the assumptions upon which the Schlieffen Plan was based and shortened the time horizons of German military and political leaders. They feared that by 1917 the German army would no longer be able to defeat Russian and French armies in a two-front war.⁶⁹ The impending military threat to Germany was much more serious than in the earlier Balkan crises. The result was to increase pressure for a strategy of preventive war based on better-now-than-later logic.⁷⁰ Many political, and most military, leaders in Berlin shared this view.⁷¹

Making of the First World War (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), appendices; Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War*, 1–8.

⁶⁶Herrmann, *Arming of Europe*, 190–91; Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, 174.

⁶⁷The German bill called for immediate increases in both manpower and weaponry, whereas planned French increases involved only manpower and would be delayed until 1915–16 (large military equipment was added in a July 1914 bill). This magnified Germany's temporary window of opportunity. Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War*, 304–15.

⁶⁸D. C. B. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 111; Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia*, 437.

⁶⁹Russian increases were real, but German leaders' exaggeration of Russian strength compounded their fears. William C. Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance," *World Politics* 39, no. 3 (April 1987): 353–81.

⁷⁰Fischer, *Germany's Aims*; Copeland, *Origins of Major Wars*, chaps. 3–4; Levy, "Preventive Logic." Pressures for preventive war had been present in Germany throughout the decade before 1914, but its proponents among the General Staff had few allies among political leaders. Otto von Bismarck's aversion to preventive war went back to the 1870s and 1880s. Critics could always argue that the threat was a distant one, that there was time for alternative remedies to Germany's security dilemma. That counterargument was much less viable in 1914. On the decline of earlier normative restraints on war, and on later perceptions of missed opportunities for preventive war in 1904–6 by Bethmann-Hollweg and by Alfred von Schlieffen, see William Mulligan, "Restraints on Preventive War before 1914," in Levy and Vasquez, *Outbreak of the First World War*, 115–38.

⁷¹Attributing preventive logic to Moltke but not to the kaiser, with Bethmann-Hollweg in the middle, is John A. Vasquez, "Was the First World War a Preventive War? Concepts, Criteria, and Evidence," in Levy and Vasquez, *Outbreak of the First World War*, 208–17. Annika Mombauer argues that Moltke did not begin to think seriously about preventive war until after the German army bill in 1913. See Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, 108. Noting Moltke's vacillation and giving more weight to Bethmann-Hollweg is Stig Förster, "Russian Horses: The New German Army Leadership and the July Crisis of 1914," in Gestrich and Pogge von Strandmann, *Bid for World Power?*, 127–48. Bethmann-Hollweg worried in early July 1914 that "the future belongs to Russia," and that "after the completion of their strategic railroads in Poland our position [will be] untenable." In 1918 he conceded, "Lord yes, in a certain sense it was a preventive war." Quoted in Konrad H. Jarausch, "The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's Calculated Risk, July 1914," *Central European History* 2, no. 1 (March 1969): 57, 48.

Growing concerns among the German military and some political leaders that Germany would not be able to keep pace with Russia in an arms race reinforced its preventive logic. That belief was based on Russia's demographic and economic advantages, the relative absence of internal fiscal constraints on Russian armaments, generous French loans to Russia, and serious economic, institutional, and political limits on the German Reich's ability to tax or borrow.⁷² Niall Ferguson concludes that "the decisive factor in 1914 which pushed the German Reich over the brink into war was the conviction of both military and civilian leaders that Germany could not win the arms race against its continental neighbors."⁷³ By 29 July this preventive logic was reinforced by preemptive pressures to seize first-mover advantages arising from Russia's "period preparatory to war" (25 July), Belgium's defensive measures on 29 July, and Russia's partial and then general mobilization (29–30 July).⁷⁴

Closely linked to the Balkan Wars' consequences for the balance of power in the Balkans and in Central Europe were reputational interests, which are tied to future power and influence.⁷⁵ Concerns about reputation for resolve played a significant role in the decision making of many of the leading European states in the July Crisis, largely due to their behavior and its perceived effects in the earlier crises. As Williamson argues with respect to Austria-Hungary, "Prestige politics, that most dangerous and self-fulfilling of all diplomatic pursuits, had replaced interest politics."⁷⁶

Reputational concerns were even greater in St. Petersburg. Russia had suffered a humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 and was then outmaneuvered and humiliated by Austria-Hungary in the Bosnian Crisis of 1908–9. Although the Balkan Wars as a whole produced a favorable outcome for Russia, Russian leaders perceived that they had made substantial concessions to Austria-Hungary in the winter crisis of 1912–13 while receiving only modest concessions from Vienna. They had also failed to support Serbia's demand for an Adriatic port. The disjunction between the expected gains and the perceived outcome of the Balkan Wars

⁷²Jennifer Siegel, *For Peace and Money: French and British Finance in the Service of Tsars and Commissars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); David Stevenson, "War by Timetable? The Railway Race before 1914," *Past & Present* 162 (February 1999): 187; Patrick J. McDonald, *The Invisible Hand of Peace: Capitalism, The War Machine, and International Relations Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chap. 7; Levy, "Preventive Logic," 152–56; Adam Tooze and Ted Fertik, "The World Economy and the Great War," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 40 (April–June 2014): 214–38, esp. 218–19.

⁷³Ferguson, "Public Finance," 143.

⁷⁴Ulrich Trampener, "War Premeditated? German Intelligence Operations in July 1914," *Central European History* 9, no. 1 (March 1976): 58–85. On the distinction between preventive and preemptive logic, and on the transition in German emphasis from the former to the latter late in the July Crisis, see Levy, "Preventive Logic," 141–42, 156–59.

⁷⁵A reputation is a "belief about a trait or behavioral tendency of an actor, based on that actor's past behavior." A reputation for resolve refers to a "reputation for not backing down in a certain class of disputes." Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 372.

⁷⁶Williamson, *Austria-Hungary*, 155.

heightened Russian leaders' sensitivities to future decline. Growing German influence in the Ottoman Empire exacerbated Russian concerns.⁷⁷

This image of humiliation and inadequately reciprocated concessions was uppermost in Russian leaders' minds in the July Crisis. Sazonov made this clear at the 24 July Council of Ministers meeting, called immediately after St. Petersburg learned the details of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia. Sazonov, by then the tsar's most influential foreign policy advisor,⁷⁸ said that during the last decade Russia had behaved moderately and made many concessions to Germany, but that "Germany had looked upon our concessions as so many proofs of our weakness." Regarding Serbia, Sazonov argued that Russia had made "immense sacrifices" to advance the independence of the Slavic peoples. If Russia abandoned "her historic mission" in the face of Austrian and German threats, "she would be considered a decadent state and would henceforth have to take second place among the powers." Russia would lose "all her authority" and as a result "Russian prestige in the Balkans" would "collapse utterly." Sazonov went on to say that concessions would be futile and would do nothing to stop Germany from making further demands.⁷⁹

Russian leaders' reputational concerns reflected the interconnections between the Balkans and great-power politics.⁸⁰ Russian decision makers feared their failure to take a firm stand in the ultimatum crisis would result in either a complete Serbian capitulation to Austro-Hungarian demands or an overwhelming military defeat of Serbia. Either outcome would leave Serbia subservient to Austria-Hungary, severely harm Russian credibility and influence, undercut pro-Russian opinion and interests in the Balkans, and force Balkan leaders to seek other sources of security. As a result, Russia would lose what its leaders perceived as its fragile diplomatic gains from the Balkan Wars. That would free Austria-Hungary from major security concerns on its southeastern border and enable it to shift significant military forces to Galicia in the northeast, increasing the threat to Russia. The threat was magnified by Russian military leaders' recognition, from the mobilization crisis of late 1912, that a key railway line for Russian military deployments was extremely vulnerable to Austro-Hungarian preemption.⁸¹

⁷⁷Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 337–49.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 297.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 141–42.

⁸⁰Some scholars interpret Sazonov's mention of "prestige" as representing a concern with symbolic aspects of status. See Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, chap. 7. For the argument that Russia's concern reputation was based primarily on power, see Stephen Schröder, *Die englisch-russische Marinekonvention: Das deutsche Reich und die Flottenverhandlungen der Tripleentente am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges [The Anglo-Russian Naval Convention: The German Empire and the Naval Negotiations of the Triple Entente on the Eve of World War I]* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 137–54; Jack S. Levy and William Mulligan, "Shifting Power, Preventive Logic, and the Response of the Target: Germany, Russia, and the First World War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 5 (2017): 731–69, esp. 757–58.

⁸¹Menning, "Mobilization Crises," 228–32.

Russian officials also feared that diplomatic or military defeat of Serbia would open the Balkans to German penetration. Of particular concern was access to Constantinople and the Turkish Straits through the western Balkan states. Although few accept McMeekin's argument that Russia wanted a war to help them gain control of the Straits,⁸² Russian leaders insisted that no one else control that critical strategic location and historic Russian objective.⁸³ The Bulgarian army's approach toward the Straits in late 1912 greatly concerned Russian leaders (despite Bulgaria being a close partner) and further sensitized them to other threats to the Straits. Russian leaders feared an Austro-Hungarian diplomatic or military victory might win over Bulgaria to the Central Powers by offering them Serbian territory, which would put further pressure on Romania. Already alarmed by the Berlin-to-Baghdad railway and Otto Liman von Sanders's mission, Russian leaders feared the increasing opportunities for German influence over the Ottoman Empire and the Straits.⁸⁴

In sum, regional shifts and changes in alignments between the small powers and their great-power sponsors had immediate and significant repercussions for the European balance of power. Leaders in Vienna, Berlin, and St. Petersburg perceived significantly greater and more immediate security threats in 1914 than in the earlier Balkan crises.

Relationships among Allies

The image of a rigid and polarized alliance system is central to most structural explanations of the origins of World War I, with the Franco-Russian alliance of 1894, the Anglo-French Entente Cordiale of 1904, and the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 solidifying the Triple Entente against the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. In this conventional view, the two-bloc system generated zero-sum conceptions of European politics and forced states to support their alliance partners regardless of the riskiness and aggressiveness of their policies. This exacerbated each state's security dilemma, accelerated the conflict spiral that escalated to war, and guaranteed that any local war would expand into a European war.

Holger Afflerbach's study of the Triple Alliance challenges this traditional view of the prewar alliance system.⁸⁵ He argues that the alliances provided

⁸²McMeekin, *Russian Origins of the First World War*.

⁸³Ronald P. Bobroff, *Roads to Glory: Late Imperial Russia and the Turkish Straits* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

⁸⁴Reinforcing these concerns was the dependence of Russia's agricultural economy on the Straits, which carried 43% of Russian exports, exports that generated foreign exchange necessary to support Russia's economic development. The closing of the Straits during the Balkan Wars was quite harmful to the Russian economy. Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 74–75, 331; Levy and Mulligan, "Shifting Power."

⁸⁵Holger Afflerbach, *Der Dreibund: Europäische Großmacht- und Allianzpolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg [The Triple Alliance: European Great-Power Politics and Alliance Policy before World War I]* (Vienna: Bohlau, 2002).

a modicum of security to its members, that allies successfully restrained their partners from their wilder aims, and that alliance ties did not prevent the great powers from resolving myriad disputes before 1914.⁸⁶ Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the tightness of alliances waxed and waned. In the crises leading up to World War I, Britain supported France in the two Moroccan crises, but France failed to support Russia in the Bosnian annexation crisis. In the 1912–13 Balkan crises, German leaders provided only lukewarm support to Vienna, guaranteeing Austro-Hungarian territorial integrity but blocking a move against Serbia.⁸⁷ Britain (and to a lesser extent France) also restrained Russia, and Sazonov withdrew his support for Serbian claims for an Adriatic port, which he feared would provoke Austrian military action.⁸⁸

The restraining actions of Britain and Germany laid the basis for the London Conference, where leaders sought to manage the Balkan crises through a revival of Concert diplomacy. The Anglo-German détente, already underway following the 1911 Moroccan Crisis, played a central role.⁸⁹ The naval race was effectively over by this point due to Britain's commanding lead and Germany making a "retreat to the European continent" to develop its army.⁹⁰ Détente reversed more than a decade of Anglo-German antagonism and created an atmosphere of trust between the two most powerful states in their respective power blocs. For Bethmann-Hollweg, the Anglo-German détente became a crucial pillar of German diplomacy. He expected Britain would restrain its Entente partners in any crisis.⁹¹ Likewise, Grey believed he could count on Berlin to reel in the most aggressive aims of Austrian leaders.⁹² Grey's confidence in the great powers' ability to manage crises among them, stemming from their successes in the Balkan Wars, helps explain his slow response to the July Crisis.⁹³

The Anglo-German détente was viewed differently in Paris, St. Petersburg, and Vienna.⁹⁴ At worst, leaders there feared Britain and

⁸⁶On alliances as instruments for restraining allies, see Paul W. Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815–1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management," in Paul W. Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe*, ed. David Wetzel, Robert Jervis, and Jack S. Levy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 195–222.

⁸⁷Hannig, "Austro-Hungarian Foreign Policy," 235–37.

⁸⁸Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar: British Policy and Russia, 1894–1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 277.

⁸⁹Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Détente and Deterrence: Anglo-German Relations, 1911–1914," *International Security* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 121–50.

⁹⁰Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War*, chap. 7.

⁹¹The expectation of continued improvement in ties with Britain was, for Bethmann-Hollweg, an additional argument for preventing the Balkan Wars from expanding into a European war. The conditions for any such war would be more favorable later with the increased prospects of British neutrality. Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 262.

⁹²Kießling, *Gegen den "Großen Krieg"? [Against the "Great War"?)*, 307–9.

⁹³Park, "International Commissions."

⁹⁴Stephan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Außenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Ausbruchs des Ersten Weltkrieges [France's Foreign Policy in the July Crisis 1914: A Contribution to the History of the Outbreak of*

Germany might defect from the Entente or the Alliance, respectively, leaving the jilted partner easy prey for its enemies. At best, French and especially Russian and Austro-Hungarian leaders believed they were compelled to compromise on their vital interests at the behest of their respective allies. French leaders feared Britain's commitment to the Entente was lessening at the very moment Germany had begun to increase the size of its army. Russian leaders worried about French loyalty to the Franco-Russian alliance, due in part to the growth of antimilitarism in France and in part to ambiguities in the Franco-Russian military convention.⁹⁵ French leaders worried the growth of Russian power would leave St. Petersburg less dependent on France and possibly even tempted by the possibility of a closer relationship with Germany.⁹⁶

The paradoxical outcome of greater flexibility in European politics due to the Anglo-German détente was that other states doubled their efforts to bolster and tighten their alliances.⁹⁷ In one of the most consequential actions, French prime minister Raymond Poincaré reassured Russian leaders in 1912 (as he did later as president) that France would support Russia in any war arising from an Austro-Serbian dispute in the Balkans. Christopher Clark calls this the “Balkan inception scenario,” which constructed “a geopolitical trigger along the Austro-Serbian frontier” and significantly increased the likelihood that a war in the Balkans would escalate to a general European war.⁹⁸ At this point, General Staff talks renewed the common military planning, which had been at the alliance's core since 1894.

Sazonov, frustrated by what he perceived as a lack of adequate British support in the Balkan Wars and over disputes with the Ottoman Empire, launched an initiative to convert the Triple Entente into a formal alliance. Like Poincaré, Sazonov saw an alliance between Russia, France, and Britain as a pillar of peace—though a peace based on dictating to Germany and Austria-Hungary the future direction of European politics. Each believed Germany would not dare risk a war if it were certain that Britain would enter on the side of Russia and France. Throughout spring 1914, Sazonov pressed for the transformation of the Entente into an alliance, but it soon became clear that Grey would not commit. In part, this reflected the

World War I] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009), 272–77; Lieven, *Towards the Flame*; Angelow, *Kalkül und Prestige [Calculation and Prestige]*, 307–17.

⁹⁵Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 293; Bruce W. Menning, “The Russian Threat Calculation, 1910–1914,” in Geppert, Mulligan, and Rose, *Wars before the Great War*, 156.

⁹⁶Schmidt, *Frankreichs Außenpolitik [France's Foreign Policy]*, Marc Trachtenberg, “French Foreign Policy in the July Crisis, 1914: A Review Article,” *H-Diplo/ISSF Essays*, no. 3 (26 November 2010): 1–11. <https://issforum.org/essays/3-french-foreign-policy-in-the-july-crisis-1914>.

⁹⁷Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 113, notes this link between flexibility and rigidity.

⁹⁸Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 293–97, 349–50.

dominant Liberal Party's distaste for the tsarist regime in Russia. It also stemmed from Grey's belief that maintaining uncertainty about Britain's intentions would induce caution and restraint in both St. Petersburg and Berlin.⁹⁹

Nonetheless, Grey, confident about the stability of improved Anglo-German relations following their cooperation in managing the Balkan crises, and under pressure to reassure Russia of Britain's continued adhesion to the Triple Entente, accepted the Russian and French proposal for naval conversations between London and St. Petersburg to coordinate naval strategy. Officials in the two capitals understood these naval conversations in very different ways. Russian leaders believed these conversations were an affirmation of Britain's commitment to the Triple Entente and hoped they might develop, as Anglo-French military and naval conversations had, into an unspoken commitment of British support in any European war. British leaders attached no such meaning to the conversations, but they did see some value in signaling to Russia their adherence to the Entente, particularly following the Anglo-German *détente* and growing irritation between London and St. Petersburg over Persia.¹⁰⁰

This was a relatively cheap ploy from the British perspective, but the political agreement to coordinate naval strategy had more costly consequences. Through a spy in the Russian embassy in London, Germany learned of these conversations in May–June 1914. Bethmann-Hollweg was particularly perturbed by the agreement that in the event of war the Royal Navy would support the landing of Russian forces in Pomerania.¹⁰¹ The chancellor's concerns heightened when Grey misled the House of Commons over Anglo-Russian relations. For Bethmann-Hollweg, the naval conversations marked the end of the Anglo-German *détente* and the strategy of relying upon Britain to restrain Russia (and to a lesser extent France). He concluded, days before the 28 June assassination, that German security required strengthening the alliance with Austria, which had loosened during the Balkan Wars.¹⁰² Grey was unaware of the impact the proposed Anglo-Russian naval conversations had had on Berlin. His attempt to repeat his successful 1912 crisis-management strategy during the July Crisis failed because he had inadvertently undercut the basis for that strategy by reviving German fears of encirclement by the Triple Entente.

The Anglo-Russian naval conversations were important because they demonstrated the constantly shifting alliance system and the different

⁹⁹Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 332–34; Stephen Schröder, *Marinekonvention [Naval Convention]*, 137–54.

¹⁰⁰Schröder, *Marinekonvention [Naval Convention]*, 654–61.

¹⁰¹Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 421.

¹⁰²Schröder, *Marinekonvention [Naval Convention]*, 654–61. The war intervened before the admiralties in London or St. Petersburg could meet to discuss the implementation of the agreement.

meanings that different actors attached to these shifts. Some alliances were tightening, some were loosening, and political leaders were uncertain as to the degree of commitment inherent in adversaries' alliances—or even their own. Germany could not be certain whether Britain would intervene in a continental war, but neither could Russia and France.¹⁰³ The rapid shifts within and between the two blocs between 1912 and 1914 significantly increased systemic uncertainty and risk.¹⁰⁴ As Clark argues, “Had the fabric of the alliance seemed more dependable and enduring, the key decision-makers might have felt less under pressure to act as they did.”¹⁰⁵ In retrospect, 1913 clearly marked a turning point with respect to alliances. Georges-Henri Soutou argues that “until then alliances had a braking effect in a crisis, with less directly involved partners calming down their more militant Allies,” but after 1913 “the priority became to keep alliances functioning, and supporting an ally to the hilt.”¹⁰⁶

Our argument is reinforced by the uncertainty within the Dual Alliance, particularly in Austro-Hungarian expectations of German support, which fluctuated significantly in the crises of 1912–13 and 1914. Vienna's confidence varied over time as a function of varying German behavior. Berlin strongly supported Vienna in the 1908–9 Bosnian annexation crisis, though German confidence that Russia was unprepared for war reduced the risk of that policy. Austria-Hungary was disappointed by Germany's support of Italy's 1911–12 war against Turkey, despite the war's potentially destabilizing consequences for the Balkans and for the augmentation of Italian power, each a threat to Austria-Hungary.

In the late 1912 winter crisis, and again in the crises of May and October 1913, German leaders signaled their readiness to support Austria-Hungary against any attack, but they also warned Vienna that the alliance was a defensive one; they would not support an Austrian attack on Serbia.¹⁰⁷ Political and military leaders in Vienna found particularly troubling the kaiser's belief that Serbia's aim for an Adriatic port was reasonable and that it did not pose a threat to Austria-Hungary. In late February 1913 William II made it clear that Germany would not go to war over “a few Albanian towns.” Conrad complained that “Berlin has warned us off again.”¹⁰⁸ Austro-Hungarian leaders were convinced that a Serbian port on

¹⁰³On the distinction between a localized war in the Balkans, a European-wide continental war, and a world war defined by British intervention, see Jack S. Levy, “Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914,” *International Security* 15, no. 3 (Winter 1990/91): 151–86, esp. 162.

¹⁰⁴Schröder, *Marinekonvention [Naval Convention]*, 430–46.

¹⁰⁵Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 364.

¹⁰⁶Georges-Henri Soutou, “French War Aims and Strategy,” in *The Purpose of the First World War: War Aims and Military Strategies*, ed. Holger Afflerbach (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2015), 29–30.

¹⁰⁷Dülffer, Kröger, and Wippich, *Vermiedene Kriege [Avoided Wars]*, 651–53.

¹⁰⁸John C. G. Röhl, *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile, 1900–1941*, trans. Sheila de Bellaigue and Roy Bridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 923.

the Adriatic would likely lead to a Russia naval base, undercut Austro-Hungarian dominance in the Adriatic, and constitute an existential threat to the Dual Monarchy. Vienna's decision to issue an ultimatum to Serbia in October 1913 without first consulting with Berlin was a sign of the growing distance between the two capitals, and of the loosening of the alliance. When Austria-Hungary demanded modifications to the Peace of Bucharest to support a Bulgarian counterweight to Serbia, Germany refused, hoping to maintain Romanian support. Austro-Hungarian leaders' failure to take any further initiative was an early sign that German support was a necessary condition for an Austro-Hungarian war against Serbia.¹⁰⁹

Closely related to Austro-Hungarian frustrations with the absence of strong and consistent German support were their concerns about both the general failure of European powers to acknowledge threats to the viability of the Dual Monarchy and the specific failures of the Concert to protect Austro-Hungarian interest in the Balkan crises.¹¹⁰ The Conference of London called for Serbia and Montenegro to evacuate Scutari; when that did not happen the Concert, paralyzed by disagreements among the great powers, failed to act. It took Austro-Hungarian ultimatums, motivated by Berchtold's frustrations with the Concert's delayed actions, to induce the withdrawals from Scutari.¹¹¹

Whereas Grey and Bethmann-Hollweg each attributed the peaceful settlement of the winter crisis to the successful operation of Concert diplomacy and drew positive lessons for managing any future crisis,¹¹² Austro-Hungarian leaders learned a different set of lessons.¹¹³ They learned that the Dual Monarchy faced both increasing threats and increasing diplomatic isolation, that they could not always count on German support, and, based on the success of their ultimatums to Montenegro and to Serbia, that military threats remained a viable and potentially effective policy instrument.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914," 156; Albertini, *Origins of the War of 1914*, 2:162; Kronenbitter, "Krieg im Frieden" ["War in Peace"], 405–13; McMeekin, *Russian Origins of the First World War*, 41–48; Samuel R. Williamson Jr., "July 1914 Revisited and Revised: The Erosion of the German Paradigm," in Levy and Vasquez, *Outbreak of the First World War*, 42; Otte, *July Crisis*, 61, 102–3.

¹¹⁰Paul W. Schroeder, "Stealing Horses to Great Applause: Austria-Hungary's Decision in 1914 in Systemic Perspective," in Afflerbach and Stevenson, *An Improbable War?*, 17–42. European leaders actively utilized the Concert of Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. After a period of abeyance in the 1850s and 1860s they revived Concert diplomacy in the 1870s onward with the Treaty of London (1871), the Congress of Berlin (1878), and the Conference of Berlin (1884–85). Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹¹¹Hugo Hantsch, *Leopold Graf Berchtold: Grandseigneur und Staatsmann* [Count Leopold Berchtold: Grand Seigneur and Statesman], vol. 2 (Graz: Styria Verlag, 1963), 486–503; Konrad Canis, *Die bedrängte Großmacht: Österreich-Ungarn und das europäische Mächtesystem 1866/67–1914* [The Pressured Great Power: Austria-Hungary and the European System of Powers, 1866/67–1914] (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2016).

¹¹²Kießling, *Gegen den "Großen Krieg"?* [Against the "Great War"?]; Afflerbach, "Topos of Improbable War."

¹¹³Kießling, *Gegen den "Großen Krieg"?* [Against the "Great War"?], 177–92. On the psychology of learning from history, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), chap. 6; Jack S. Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield," *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 279–312.

¹¹⁴The Treaty of Bucharest was based on the principle of nationality, further weakening the position of Austria-Hungary, whose *raison d'être* was to demonstrate how a multiethnic empire offered a more effective and stable solution for different communities to coexist in Europe.

Berchtold and others increasingly thought of war as the only possible way of dealing with the rivalry with Serbia.¹¹⁵ Berchtold's views were critical, because his opposition would probably have dissuaded the emperor from authorizing war against Serbia in 1914.¹¹⁶

In the previous section, we argued that the changing balance of power in the Balkans, perceptions of an increasingly powerful and aggressive Russia, and continued domestic problems led many in Vienna to argue that they faced a closing window of opportunity to deal with their deteriorating position. Conrad and others argued that a preventive war against Serbia might be the only way to avert further decline. Changes in alliance relationships reinforced these calculations. Conrad expected, perhaps with excessive confidence, that Austria-Hungary would have Italian and Romanian support in 1914, but maybe not for long.¹¹⁷ More important—given our argument that since the 1908–9 annexation crisis German support was a necessary condition for an Austro-Hungarian war against Serbia—were Vienna's perceptions of attitudes in Berlin toward a possible offensive war against Serbia. Berlin's support had varied over time. It was strong in the 1908–9 Bosnian Crisis and in the first phases of the winter mobilization crisis, but grew much more cautious.¹¹⁸ German restraints on Austria-Hungary are a leading explanation for the nonescalation of the April–May and October 1913 Balkan crises.¹¹⁹ Austria-Hungary's doubts about German support persisted. In April 1914 their ambassador to St. Petersburg summarized German policy over the last few years as the “sacrifice of Austria-Hungary's Balkan interests.”¹²⁰

One of the most significant differences in the July 1914 crisis was Vienna's success in securing a “blank check” from Berlin to initiate a war against Serbia.¹²¹ It removed the primary external constraint on Austro-Hungarian military action, and in doing so made it possible for Berchtold and Conrad to persuade Tisza to abandon his opposition to armed conflict, which was a necessary condition for war.¹²² The question for Austro-Hungarian leaders was: How long would the window of opportunity stay open? After the emotions of the assassination passed, or once the volatile

¹¹⁵Kronenbitter, “*Krieg im Frieden*” [“*War in Peace*”], 392–413.

¹¹⁶Samuel R. Williamson Jr., “Leopold Count Berchtold: The Man Who Could Have Prevented the Great War,” in *From Empire to Republic: Post-World War I Austria*, ed. Günter Bischof, Fritz Plasser, and Peter Berger (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2010), 24–51.

¹¹⁷Otte, *July Crisis*, 46–47.

¹¹⁸In addition, German leaders opposed Conrad's call for Austro-Hungarian intervention against Italy in the Italo-Turkish War of 1911–12.

¹¹⁹The absence of German support was less decisive in the early stages of the mobilization crisis. See Helmreich, *Balkan Wars*, 182.

¹²⁰Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 290; Trager, *Diplomacy*, 190.

¹²¹Vienna's care in organizing the Hoyos mission to Berlin on 5–6 July, which secured the “blank check,” suggests their uncertainty about German backing.

¹²²Hungarian support was both constitutionally necessary for a decision for war and important in the emperor's decision making. See Otte, *July Crisis*, 103, 113, 159–60.

William II changed his mind, as he had frequently done in the past, would Berlin once again revert to the pattern of restraint it exhibited throughout most of the Balkan crises? Could this be the last opportunity for the preventive war for which Conrad had long advocated?¹²³ This is an interesting case of anticipated decline of relative power, of alliance support, and of internal state capacity combining to magnify incentives for preventive war.

This is not to say that the Austrian military was confident of an easy victory. Conrad recognized that conditions were less favorable than in 1908–9 or even 1912–13, but he was willing to take the risk as long as he had German support.¹²⁴ Conrad's perception of changing risks over time is reflected in his statement immediately after the assassination: "In the years 1908–9 it would have been a game in which we could see all the cards (*'ein Spiel mit aufgelegten Karten'*), in 1912–13 it would have been a game with some chances of success (*'ein Spiel mit Chancen'*), now it is a sheer gamble (*'ein va banque-Spiel'*)."¹²⁵

Although changes in power and alliance relationships in both the Balkans and in Central Europe provide the core of an explanation for why the 1914 July Crisis, but not the 1912–13 Balkan crises, escalated to great-power war, one additional difference in the two sets of crises also played a critical role: the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Personnel changes in other states—including the removal of Kokovtsov as prime minister and chairman of the Council of Ministers in Russia in February 1914,¹²⁶ and Jagow's rise to the position of secretary of state for the German Foreign Office in January 1913—were notable but had less of an impact.¹²⁷ The gain in explanatory power from the inclusion of the

¹²³In conjunction with other factors in place on 6 July 1914, the blank check may also have been nearly sufficient for an Austro-Serbian war. Austrian leaders feared the consequences for the alliance of not acting. As Austrian prime minister Karl von Stürgkh argued on 7 July 1914, "If we pursue a weak and hesitating policy we may not be able to count on German support in the future." Quoted in McMeekin, *Russian Origins of the First World War*, 111.

¹²⁴Trager, *Diplomacy*, chap. 7. Moltke and other German military leaders also recognized that a European war would be long and carry substantial risks. See Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares."

¹²⁵Albertini, *Origins of the War of 1914*, 2:122.

¹²⁶Kokovtsov was a leading voice for peace in Russia and a vocal opponent of escalation in the Balkan crises and the Liman von Sanders crisis. See V. N. Kokovtsov, *Out of My Past: The Memoirs of Count Kokovtsov*, ed. H. H. Fisher, trans. Laura Matveev (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1935), 346–49; Mikhail Pokrowski, *Drei Konferenzen: Zur Vorgeschichte des Krieges [Three Conferences: On the Pre-History of the War]*, (n.p.: Redaktion Russische Korrespondenz, 1920), 44. In addition, Kokovtsov possessed the stature to stand up to the Russian military. His presence in 1914 would have moderated Russian policy and reduced the probability of war, though by how much is hard to say. Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 114–15. But the tsar dismissed Kokovtsov for a reason, so causality rests primarily with the changing attitudes and politics in Russia that led the tsar to make the change. This personnel change contrasts with that of the archduke, whose assassination is a "minimal-rewrite counterfactual" that permits the attribution of causality to the personnel change and its impact on decision making in Vienna. On the contingency of the successful assassination, see Vladimir Dedijer, *The Road to Sarajevo* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966); Lebow, "Contingency, Catalysts, and Nonlinear Change," 99–101. On minimal-rewrite counterfactuals, see Jack S. Levy, "Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (July–September 2015): 378–402, esp. 389–94.

¹²⁷Jagow's racial attitudes made him more resistant than other German leaders to accept Austria-Hungary's efforts to win over Bulgaria as an ally, and some argue that he was too weak to stand up to the generals. See Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Random House, 2013), 510.

assassination and its impact on decision making in Vienna clearly outweighs the loss of parsimony involved in moving beyond a modified realist explanation based on power and alliances.¹²⁸ Our argument that an elaborated realist account does not provide an adequate explanation for the outbreak of World War I, and that the archduke's assassination played a critical role, rests primarily on the counterfactual that the presence of Franz Ferdinand likely would have led to a different outcome.¹²⁹

The Assassination of Franz Ferdinand

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand contributed to the outbreak of World War I in several ways. It added new reputational concerns to Austria-Hungary's preexisting motivations for war by requiring a response. Critically, the assassination provided a plausible justification for military action in the eyes of leaders in Vienna and Berlin. The assassination was not simply a "streetcar" that would eventually come by and provide the necessary catalyst for war.¹³⁰ The most recent streetcar came by in October 1913, and Serbian leaders helped derail it. The increasing stabilization of Balkan politics following the wars of 1912–13 reduced the likelihood of subsequent sparks.

The assassination provided additional ammunition to Conrad in his longstanding campaign for a preventive war against Serbia. It also removed an important constraint on Austria-Hungary by significantly increasing the probability of German support in several ways. It raised the principle of monarchical solidarity. The assassination also struck an emotional chord in William II, given his growing fondness for the archduke after their meeting only two weeks before, and it invoked his longstanding racial attitudes toward the Slavs. In addition, the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum in response to the assassination triggered strong Russian support of Serbia, including mobilization measures, which helped create a narrative in which Germany and its Austrian ally were on the defensive, a narrative that Moltke, as well as William II and Bethmann-Hollweg, believed to be necessary to mobilize

Still, Jagow's position in the second and third Balkan crises was not significantly different than that of his predecessor in the first crisis, Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, so this personnel change does not capture the differences with the July Crisis.

¹²⁸In addition to changes in personnel, the Balkan Wars hardened the attitudes of individual leaders. In Russia, for example, both Sazonov and the powerful Minister of Agriculture Krivoshein adopted more hardline attitudes after the Balkan Wars and then again in December 1913 after the Liman von Sanders crisis with Germany. See Ronald P. Bobroff, "War Accepted but Unsought: Russia's Growing Militancy and the July Crisis, 1914," in Levy and Vasquez, *Outbreak of the First World War*, 232–35.

¹²⁹The logic is that one of the best ways to demonstrate that *X* is not sufficient for *Y* is to demonstrate that something else comes close to being necessary for *Y*, which takes us directly to the counterfactual. On counterfactual methodology, see Levy, "Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis."

¹³⁰David Stevenson, "Was a Peaceful Outcome Thinkable? The European Land Armaments Race before 1914," in Afflerbach and Stevenson, *Improbable War*, 140.

domestic support for war, especially among the Social Democrats in the Reichstag. These considerations are fairly well known. We focus on another effect of the assassination—on the decision-making process in the Dual Monarchy. The assassination eliminated both the leading advocate for peace in Vienna and the military chancellor that reinforced his influence. As Williamson argues, Franz Ferdinand's death was not only "the pretext and occasion for war"; it also "dramatically altered the political structure in Vienna in ways that virtually insured military action against Serbia."¹³¹

Franz Ferdinand's influence on Austro-Hungarian decision making was based on rights and duties associated with his position as heir to the throne, and on the archduke's personal relationships with the emperor and the foreign minister, which improved significantly after Berchtold replaced Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal in February 1912. The archduke's influence was reinforced by the informal military chancellor that Franz Joseph created in 1906 for him to lead, and he began 1913 in his new position of inspector general of the armed forces. Franz Ferdinand used the chancellor effectively to access information about military plans and to broaden his political role.¹³² With respect to military (but not political) matters, Franz Ferdinand was now second behind the emperor. He had access to military information and the authority to question the strategies and plans of Conrad and the General Staff and to raise new issues. Scholars debate the extent of Ferdinand's influence, but the comment of a senior Austrian official is telling: "We not only have two parliaments, we also have two emperors."¹³³

The archduke strongly promoted cautious policies throughout most of the Balkan crises, with one brief but notable exception. After advocating restraint and siding with Berchtold against Conrad's demands for mobilization measures at the beginning of the First Balkan War in October 1912, Franz Ferdinand shifted his position in early November after Serbian forces had routed the Ottomans. Persuaded by the military's argument that Serbia was now free to act against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he supported precautionary military measures in Galicia and joined a mission to Berlin that secured German support. In early December he persuaded Franz Joseph to reinstate Conrad as chief of the General Staff. He then tried but failed to persuade Berchtold and the emperor to initiate a military confrontation.¹³⁴

After this "momentary lapse,"¹³⁵ Franz Ferdinand suddenly reversed course, embraced Berchtold's search for a diplomatic solution, and split

¹³¹Williamson, "Theories of Organizational Process," 142.

¹³²Williamson, "Theories of Organizational Process"; Samuel R. Williamson Jr., "Influence, Power, and the Policy Process: The Case of Franz Ferdinand, 1906–1914," *Historical Journal* 17, no. 2 (June 1974): 418–20.

¹³³Quoted in Williamson, "Influence, Power, and the Policy Process," 418.

¹³⁴Williamson, "Influence, Power, and the Policy Process," 428–29.

¹³⁵Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 291.

with Conrad. By the end of January 1913 he was emphasizing the risks of war with Russia and reacting strongly against Conrad's continuing push for preventive war.¹³⁶ He urged Berchtold to oppose Conrad's demands for war against Serbia in the May and October 1913 crises over Albania and instead to cooperate with Russia. Franz Ferdinand recognized Russia's military strength, worried about Russian intervention in a Balkan crisis and about the reliability of Italy, and he feared the risk of nationalist and social revolutionary upheaval for the empire resulting from a general European war. Well aware of Austria-Hungary's dependence on Germany, he worried any military campaign in the Balkans, regardless of its outcome, would increase that dependence.¹³⁷ Franz Ferdinand was also the leading proponent of internal reform within the Dual Monarchy and feared war would make major reforms impossible.¹³⁸ As Williamson argues, "By late 1913 the archduke's caution and aversion to military action was well established."¹³⁹

The assassination removed Franz Ferdinand's restraining hand from deliberations in Vienna, eliminating the one person who might have pressed both Berchtold and Franz Joseph for more cautious policies. It also eliminated an institutional center that provided legitimacy for those with more moderate views to access military information, question the emperor's own normally bellicose military chancellery, and challenge Conrad himself.¹⁴⁰ Given Franz Ferdinand's good relationship with William II, the assassination also eliminated a potentially valuable dynastic communication channel with Germany at a time of poor communication between Vienna and Berlin on both diplomatic and military matters.

These arguments raise the counterfactual of what would have happened if the assassination had failed or not been attempted.¹⁴¹ We consider the harder case of a failed assassination attempt. It would have triggered a crisis and invoked some reputational concerns and a more limited pretext for some kind of military action, but it would have left Franz Ferdinand involved in decision making. We will never know the outcome with certainty, and a more thorough and systematic counterfactual analysis is

¹³⁶Otte, *July Crisis*, 49–50.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 48.

¹³⁸John Leslie, "The Antecedents of Austria-Hungary's War Aims: Policies and Policy-Makers in Vienna and Budapest before and during 1914," in *Archiv und Forschung: Das Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv in seiner Bedeutung für die Geschichte Österreichs und Europas* [*Archive and Research: The House, Court and State Archive and Its Significance for the History of Austria and Europe*], ed. Elisabeth Springer and Leopold Kammerhofer (Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 1993), 308–10.

¹³⁹Williamson, "Theories of Organizational Process," 144.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 145. In addition, government officials associated with Franz Ferdinand were excluded from decision making in the July Crisis.

¹⁴¹Most discussions of the assassination counterfactual miss this important distinction between the absence of an assassination attempt and a failed attempt. The absence of an assassination attempt on 28 June 1914 would have increased the probability of a peaceful outcome by eliminating the pretext and its reputational consequences for Vienna. However, it would not be a minimal-rewrite counterfactual, as deeply rooted conspiratorial activities in Serbia would have made a subsequent assassination attempt likely. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, chap. 1.

necessary, but many leading historians have argued both that Franz Ferdinand would have opposed war and that his views probably would have prevailed in turning Franz Joseph against war.¹⁴² Alexander von Hoyos, a leading proponent of war in Vienna, said of Franz Ferdinand that “through his death, he has helped us to the decision, which he would never have taken, as long as he lived.”¹⁴³ Williamson concludes that “alive, Franz Ferdinand had acted as a brake upon the pressures for military action; dead, he became the pretext for war.”¹⁴⁴

The removal of Franz Ferdinand from Austro-Hungarian decision making during the July Crisis went beyond creating a pretext. It left Hungarian prime minister Tisza the only top official to press Franz Joseph for caution immediately after the assassination. It also left Berchtold, hawkish but a weak personality and one open to persuasion,¹⁴⁵ alone to face Conrad and the generals. Williamson and Russel Van Wyk argue that “Berchtold probably would have remained committed to a policy of military, threatening diplomacy, everything short of actual war, an approach he had used during the Balkan Wars.”¹⁴⁶ With Franz Ferdinand and Tisza urging restraint, and with Conrad and the generals applying the primary pressure for war, there is a very good chance the emperor would not have authorized military action. War would not have occurred, as no other country had incentives to start a war in 1914.¹⁴⁷

This argument, if correct, raises the complicated question of whether a great-power peace would have endured, and for how long. We leave a more detailed exploration of this question for another time, but make four points here. First, additional personnel changes were both likely to occur and likely to work against war. Most historians agree that in the absence of the assassination, Conrad, whose influence had been waning, would have been dismissed fairly soon, eliminating the leading advocate for war in Vienna.¹⁴⁸ Second, assuming Franz Joseph would have still passed away in late 1916, Franz Ferdinand would have ascended to the throne. Third, the durability of Triple Entente was open to question, primarily due to the Anglo-Russian conflict of interests in Central Asia but also due to French concerns about St. Petersburg’s commitment to the alliance as Russia grew

¹⁴²Otte, *July Crisis*, 61; Alma Hannig, *Franz Ferdinand: Die Biographie [Franz Ferdinand: The Biography]* (Vienna: Amalthea, 2014).

¹⁴³Quoted in Mulligan, *Origins of the First World War*, 212.

¹⁴⁴Williamson, “Influence, Power, and the Policy Process,” 434.

¹⁴⁵Canis, *Bedrängte Großmacht [Pressured Great Power]*, 391–92; Lebow, “Contingency, Catalysts, and Nonlinear Change,” 97.

¹⁴⁶Samuel R. Williamson Jr. and Russel Van Wyk, *July 1914: Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Coming of the Great War: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 65.

¹⁴⁷Lebow, “Contingency, Catalysts, and Nonlinear Change,” 101. For a debate as to whether other states saw 1914 as an optimal year for war, see Jack S. Levy and Jack Snyder, Correspondence: “Everyone’s Favored Year for War—or Not?” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 208–17.

¹⁴⁸Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 115–17, 395; Williamson, “Influence, Power, and the Policy Process,” 426.

stronger.¹⁴⁹ In addition, Grey was hoping to deepen the Anglo-German détente, and had arranged a clandestine mission to Berlin for his private secretary.¹⁵⁰ Finally, the more difficult question is what would have happened with the continued growth of Russian power over the next two to three years. Is Lebow correct that German leaders would have been forced to abandon their risky policies and become more conciliatory?¹⁵¹ Or would German leaders have gambled on a preventive war to avert impending doom?¹⁵² If the latter, would they still have needed a pretext, and could they find one?¹⁵³ Would that have been “essentially the same war”¹⁵⁴ or a very different one?

Implications for Theory and Method

Interpretations of the outbreak of World War I that emphasize the role of underlying international and domestic structures and cultural and social forces cannot explain why the July 1914 crisis, but not earlier crises that occurred under similar structural and domestic conditions, escalated into a general European war. What was different in July 1914? Any satisfactory explanation of the origins of World War I must provide an answer. Few, if any, political scientists fully engage this question, whereas historians’ narratives, while examining the effects of one crisis upon perceptions and actions during subsequent crises, fall short of systematic comparisons. We narrow our empirical study to the question of what changed from the three great-power crises during the 1912–13 Balkan Wars to the July Crisis. We focus on a limited number of critical changes and attempt to strike a balance between a reasonably parsimonious and reasonably complete explanation.

We supplement standard realist explanations based on power and alliances among the European great powers, which cannot adequately answer the why-1914-but-not-before question, by incorporating the impact of changing power distributions and alliances in the Balkan regional system resulting from the wars of 1912–13. The enormous expansion of Serbia increased the threat to Austria-Hungary, which increasingly prioritized that threat, reduced its military presence in Galicia, and in the process limited its ability to assist Germany against Russia in a European war. In

¹⁴⁹Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 325; Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*; Jennifer Siegel, *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002); Schmidt, *Frankreichs Außenpolitik [France’s Foreign Policy]*.

¹⁵⁰T. G. Otte, “Détente 1914: Sir William Tyrrell’s Secret Mission to Germany,” *Historical Journal*, 56, no. 1 (March 2013): 175–204.

¹⁵¹Lebow, “Contingency, Catalysts, and Nonlinear Change.”

¹⁵²Levy, “Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis,” 400.

¹⁵³Stevenson, “Was a Peaceful Outcome Thinkable?” 140, emphasizes both the primacy of underlying causes and Germany’s requirement for a good pretext.

¹⁵⁴Hinsley, “Introduction,” 4.

conjunction with the ongoing growth of Russian power, this threatened the viability of the Schlieffen Plan, shortened German time horizons, and increased Berlin's incentives to support an Austro-Hungarian military move against Serbia—and possibly a preventive war against Russia—while the opportunity still remained. Changing alliance relationships within a relatively static formal alliance structure were also critical. The German blank check to Austria-Hungary, occurring after the collapse of the emerging Anglo-German *détente*, removed earlier German restraints on an Austro-Hungarian offensive war against Serbia. It created a window of opportunity for a war against Serbia that leaders in Vienna believed could minimize both external and internal threats to the viability of the Dual Monarchy. But they feared that window might be temporary based on German restraint and vacillation during the Balkan Wars. Others drew different lessons from the Balkan crises. In London, the successful management of these crises, combined with the ongoing Anglo-German *détente*, generated excessive confidence in the great powers' ability to manage any subsequent crisis. Russian leaders emerged from the earlier crises with greater concerns for their country's reputation and influence in the Balkans, while Russia's preliminary steps toward coordinating naval strategy with Britain, mishandled in Britain, contributed to increasing suspicions and fears in Berlin.

Our emphasis on the impact of changes in the Balkan regional system on power, alliances, and security fears in the European great-power system enhances the explanatory power of conventional realist explanations of World War I and facilitates the identification of some significant differences between the 1912–13 Balkan crises and the July Crisis. Still, that explanation is not fully adequate. Although the absence of German support for Austria-Hungarian military action against Serbia and/or Montenegro played a major role in preventing the escalation of the Balkan crises of spring and fall 1913, the restraining role of Franz Ferdinand in the policymaking process in Vienna also played a significant role. Franz Ferdinand would have almost certainly opposed war in late summer 1914, and there is a good chance his arguments would have been successful. His assassination engaged Austro-Hungarian reputational interests, horrified the kaiser, invoked the principle of monarchical solidarity, and removed the German restraint that had blocked war in the Balkan crises. It also eliminated both the strongest individual advocate for peace in Vienna and the military chancellery that provided an institutionalized basis for Franz Ferdinand's influence and for a check on Conrad and the General Staff.

Our comparative historical study has broader theoretical implications. It suggests that many structural explanations for war are underspecified. Standard models generally neglect the impact of power dynamics and

alliance relationships in regional systems on the larger great-power system with which they interact. Standard treatments of alliance structures fail to capture crucial differences in relationships among allies and the confidence of each in the reliability of the other. Our study also suggests that models positing a powder keg or dry kindling waiting for a spark may not sufficiently capture the path to many wars. The system of power and alliances may have constituted a powder keg in the years leading up to 1914, but the powder keg itself changed in subtle but important ways during that period. Nor is it clear what constitutes a spark, as there were several possible sparks in the 1912–13 great-power crises. We cannot test powder-keg models without providing an *ex ante* definition of a spark.

Our why-1914-but-not-before question is itself generalizable. No explanation of any particular war based on slowly changing structural, cultural, or socioeconomic variables is complete if those variables would have predicted war a few years before. We must ask the why-not-before question of all wars preceded by earlier crises. No single methodology exists for answering that question, but our study is reminder that longitudinal controlled comparisons can be a valuable research tool for that purpose. However, in applying this—or any—method to successive crises, we need to acknowledge that the cases being analyzed are not fully independent. Both the outcome of one case and the processes through which it came about can have a direct impact on a range of variables that characterize the next case, and small changes sometimes have large effects. This suggests that an important component of a longitudinal comparison is to go beyond a static comparison to include an analysis of what changes, through what mechanisms, and with what effects. This dynamic dimension is often captured by historians' narratives, but without the theoretical guidance sought by political scientists. Scholars can be more creative in combining the two.

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