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# The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War

Stephen Van Evera

**D**uring the decades before the First World War a phenomenon which may be called a "cult of the offensive" swept through Europe. Militaries glorified the offensive and adopted offensive military doctrines, while civilian elites and publics assumed that the offense had the advantage in warfare, and that offensive solutions to security problems were the most effective.

This article will argue that the cult of the offensive was a principal cause of the First World War, creating or magnifying many of the dangers which historians blame for causing the July crisis and rendering it uncontrollable. The following section will first outline the growth of the cult of the offensive in Europe in the years before the war, and then sketch the consequences which international relations theory suggests should follow from it. The second section will outline consequences which the cult produced in 1914, and the final section will suggest conclusions and implications for current American policy.

## *The Cult of the Offensive and International Relations Theory*

### THE GROWTH OF THE CULT

The gulf between myth and the realities of warfare has never been greater than in the years before World War I. Despite the large and growing advantage which defenders gained against attackers as a result of the invention of rifled and repeating small arms, the machine gun, barbed wire, and the development of railroads, Europeans increasingly believed that attackers would hold the advantage on the battlefield, and that wars would be short and "decisive"—a "brief storm," in the words of the German Chancellor,

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Bethmann Hollweg.<sup>1</sup> They largely overlooked the lessons of the American Civil War, the Russo–Turkish War of 1877–78, the Boer War, and the Russo–Japanese War, which had demonstrated the power of the new defensive technologies. Instead, Europeans embraced a set of political and military myths which obscured both the defender’s advantages and the obstacles an aggressor would confront. This mindset helped to mold the offensive military doctrines which every European power adopted during the period 1892–1913.<sup>2</sup>

In Germany, the military glorified the offense in strident terms, and inculcated German society with similar views. General Alfred von Schlieffen, author of the 1914 German war plan, declared that “Attack is the best defense,” while the popular publicist Friedrich von Bernhardi proclaimed that “the offensive mode of action is by far superior to the defensive mode,” and that “the superiority of offensive warfare under modern conditions is greater than formerly.”<sup>3</sup> German Chief of Staff General Helmuth von Moltke also endorsed “the principle that the offensive is the best defense,” while General August von Keim, founder of the Army League, argued that “Germany ought to be armed for attack,” since “the offensive is the only way of insuring victory.”<sup>4</sup> These assumptions guided the Schlieffen Plan, which envisaged rapid and decisive attacks on Belgium, France, and Russia.

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1. Quoted in L.L. Farrar, Jr., “The Short War Illusion: The Syndrome of German Strategy, August–December 1914,” *Militaergeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, No. 2 (1972), p. 40.

2. On the origins of the cult of the offensive, see Jack Lewis Snyder, “Defending the Offensive: Biases in French, German, and Russian War Planning, 1870–1914” (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1981), forthcoming as a book from Cornell University Press in 1984; Snyder’s essay in this issue; and my “Causes of War” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1984), chapter 7. On the failure of Europeans to learn defensive lessons from the wars of 1860–1914, see Jay Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War: The European Inheritance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); and T.H.E. Travers, “Technology, Tactics, and Morale: Jean de Bloch, the Boer War, and British Military Theory, 1900–1914,” *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 51 (June 1979), pp. 264–286. Also relevant is Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 42–52.

A related work which explores the sources of offensive and defensive doctrines before World War II is Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 47–51, 67–74, and *passim*.

3. Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, trans. Andrew and Eva Wilson, with a Foreword by B.H. Liddell Hart (London: Oswald Wolff, 1958; reprint ed., Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 100; and Friedrich von Bernhardi, *How Germany Makes War* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1914), pp. 153, 155.

4. Imanuel Geiss, ed., *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War: Selected Documents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), p. 357; and Wallace Notestein and Elmer E. Stoll, eds., *Conquest and Kultur: Aims of the Germans in Their Own Words* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1917), p. 43. Similar ideas developed in the German navy; see Holger H. Herwig, *Politics*

In France, the army became "Obsessed with the virtues of the offensive," in the words of B.H. Liddell Hart, an obsession which also spread to French civilians.<sup>5</sup> The French army, declared Chief of Staff Joffre, "no longer knows any other law than the offensive. . . . Any other conception ought to be rejected as contrary to the very nature of war,"<sup>6</sup> while the President of the French Republic, Clément Fallières, announced that "The offensive alone is suited to the temperament of French soldiers. . . . We are determined to march straight against the enemy without hesitation."<sup>7</sup> Emile Driant, a member of the French chamber of deputies, summarized the common view: "The first great battle will decide the whole war, and wars will be short. The idea of the offense must penetrate the spirit of our nation."<sup>8</sup> French military doctrine reflected these offensive biases.<sup>9</sup> In Marshall Foch's words, the French army adopted "a single formula for success, a single combat doctrine, namely, the decisive power of offensive action undertaken with the resolute determination to march on the enemy, reach and destroy him."<sup>10</sup>

Other European states displayed milder symptoms of the same virus. The British military resolutely rejected defensive strategies despite their experience in the Boer War which demonstrated the power of entrenched defenders against exposed attackers. General W.G. Knox wrote, "The defensive is never an acceptable role to the Briton, and he makes little or no study of it," and General R.C.B. Haking argued that the offensive "will win as sure as there is a sun in the heavens."<sup>11</sup> The Russian Minister of War, General V.A. Sukhomlinov, observed that Russia's enemies were directing their armies "towards guaranteeing the possibility of dealing rapid and decisive blows.

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of Frustration: *The United States in German Naval Planning, 1889-1941* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1976), pp. 42-66.

5. B.H. Liddell Hart, *Through the Fog of War* (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 57.

6. In 1912, quoted in John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), pp. 53-54.

7. Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 51.

8. In 1912, quoted in John M. Cairns, "International Politics and the Military Mind: The Case of the French Republic, 1911-1914," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (September 1953), p. 282.

9. On the offensive in French prewar thought, see B.H. Liddell Hart, "French Military Ideas before the First World War," in Martin Gilbert, ed., *A Century of Conflict, 1850-1950* (London: Hamilton Hamish, 1966), pp. 135-148.

10. Richard D. Challener, *The French Theory of the Nation in Arms, 1866-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 81. Likewise, Joffre later explained that Plan XVII, his battle plan for 1914, was less a plan for battle than merely a plan of "concentration. . . . I adopted no preconceived idea, other than a full determination to take the offensive with all my forces assembled." Theodore Ropp, *War in the Modern World*, rev. ed. (New York: Collier, 1962), p. 229.

11. In 1913 and 1914, quoted in Travers, "Technology, Tactics, and Morale," p. 275.

. . . We also must follow this example."<sup>12</sup> Even in Belgium the offensive found proponents: under the influence of French ideas, some Belgian officers favored an offensive strategy, proposing the remarkable argument that "To ensure against our being ignored it was essential that we should attack," and declaring that "We must hit them where it hurts."<sup>13</sup>

Mythical or mystical arguments obscured the technical dominion of the defense, giving this faith in the offense aspects of a cult, or a mystique, as Marshall Joffre remarked in his memoirs.<sup>14</sup> For instance, Foch mistakenly argued that the machine gun actually strengthened the offense: "Any improvement of firearms is ultimately bound to add strength to the offensive. . . . Nothing is easier than to give a mathematical demonstration of that truth." If two thousand men attacked one thousand, each man in both groups firing his rifle once a minute, he explained, the "balance in favor of the attack" was one thousand bullets per minute. But if both sides could fire ten times per minute, the "balance in favor of the attacker" would increase to ten thousand, giving the attack the overall advantage.<sup>15</sup> With equally forced logic, Bernhardt wrote that the larger the army the longer defensive measures would take to execute, owing to "the difficulty of moving masses"; hence, he argued, as armies grew, so would the relative power of the offense.<sup>16</sup>

British and French officers suggested that superior morale on the attacking side could overcome superior defensive firepower, and that this superiority in morale could be achieved simply by assuming the role of attacker, since offense was a morale-building activity. One French officer contended that "the offensive doubles the energy of the troops" and "concentrates the thoughts of the commander on a single objective,"<sup>17</sup> while British officers declared that "Modern [war] conditions have enormously increased the value of moral quality," and "the moral attributes [are] the primary causes of all great success."<sup>18</sup> In short, mind would prevail over matter; morale would triumph over machine guns.

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12. In 1909, quoted in D.C.B. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p. 113.

13. See Tuchman, *Guns of August*, pp. 127–131.

14. Marshall Joffre, *Mémoires du Maréchal Joffre* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1932), p. 33. Joffre speaks of "le culte de l'offensive" and "d'une 'mystique de l'offensive'" of "le caractère un peu irraisonné."

15. Ropp, *War in the Modern World*, p. 218.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 203. See also Bernhardt, *How Germany Makes War*, p. 154.

17. Captain Georges Gilbert, quoted in Snyder, "Defending the Offensive," pp. 80–81.

18. The *Field Service Regulations* of 1909 and Colonel Kiggell, quoted in Travers, "Technology, Tactics, and Morale," pp. 273, 276–277.

Even when European officers recognized the new tactical power of the defense, they often

Europeans also tended to discount the power of political factors which would favor defenders. Many Germans believed that “bandwagoning” with a powerful state rather than “balancing” against it was the guiding principle in international alliance-formation.<sup>19</sup> Aggressors would gather momentum as they gained power, because opponents would be intimidated into acquiescence and neutrals would rally to the stronger side. Such thinking led German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg to hope that “Germany’s growing strength . . . might force England to realize that [the balance of power] principle had become untenable and impracticable and to opt for a peaceful settlement with Germany,”<sup>20</sup> and German Secretary of State Gottlieb von Jagow to forecast British neutrality in a future European war: “We have not built our fleet in vain,” and “people in England will seriously ask themselves whether it will be just that simple and without danger to play the role of France’s guardian angel against us.”<sup>21</sup> German leaders also thought they might frighten Belgium into surrender: during the July crisis Moltke was “counting on the possibility of being able to come to an understanding [with Belgium] when the Belgian Government realizes the seriousness of the situation.”<sup>22</sup> This ill-founded belief in bandwagoning reinforced the general belief that conquest was relatively easy.

The belief in easy conquest eventually pervaded public images of international politics, manifesting itself most prominently in the widespread application of Darwinist notions to international affairs. In this image, states competed in a decisive struggle for survival which weeded out the weak and ended in the triumph of stronger states and races—an image which assumed a powerful offense. “In the struggle between nationalities,” wrote former

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resisted the conclusion that the defender would also hold the strategic advantage. Thus Bernhardt wrote that while “the defense as a form of fighting is stronger than the attack,” it remained true that “in the conduct of war as a whole the offensive mode of action is by far superior to the defensive mode, especially under modern conditions.” Bernhardt, *How Germany Makes War*, p. 155. See also Snyder, “Defending the Offensive,” pp. 152–154, 253–254; and Travers, “Technology, Tactics, and Morale,” *passim*.

19. On these concepts, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 125–127; and Stephen M. Walt, “The Origins of Alliances” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1983).

20. December 2, 1914, quoted in Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914*, trans. Marian Jackson, with a Foreword by Alan Bullock (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), p. 69.

21. February 1914, quoted in Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 25. For more examples, see Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 133, 227; and Wayne C. Thompson, *In the Eye of the Storm: Kurt Riezler and the Crises of Modern Germany* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1980), p. 120.

22. August 3, quoted in Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *The Coming of the War: 1914*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1930), Vol. 2, p. 390n.

German Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, "one nation is the hammer and the other the anvil; one is the victor and the other the vanquished. . . . it is a law of life and development in history that where two national civilisations meet they fight for ascendancy."<sup>23</sup> A writer in the London *Saturday Review* portrayed the Anglo-German competition as "the first great racial struggle of the future: here are two growing nations pressing against each other . . . all over the world. One or the other has to go; one or the other will go."<sup>24</sup> This Darwinist foreign policy thought reflected and rested upon the implicit assumption that the offense was strong, since "grow or die" dynamics would be impeded in a defense-dominant world where growth could be stopped and death prevented by self-defense.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF OFFENSE-DOMINANCE

Recent theoretical writing in international relations emphasizes the dangers that arise when the offense is strong relative to the defense.<sup>25</sup> If the theory outlined in these writings is valid, it follows that the cult of the offensive was a reason for the outbreak of the war.

Five major dangers relevant to the 1914 case may develop when the offense is strong, according to this recent writing. First, states adopt more aggressive

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23. Prince Bernhard von Bülow, *Imperial Germany*, trans. Marie A. Lewenz (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1915), p. 291. On international social Darwinism, see also H.W. Koch, "Social Imperialism as a Factor in the 'New Imperialism,'" in H.W. Koch, ed., *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 329-354.

24. Joachim Remak, *The Origins of World War I, 1871-1914* (Hinsdale, Ill.: Dryden Press, 1967), p. 85. Likewise the British Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, declared that "the tendency of the time is to throw all power into the hands of the greater empires," while the "minor kingdoms" seemed "destined to fall into a secondary and subordinate place. . . ." In 1897, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 35.

25. See Robert Jervis's pathbreaking article, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167-214; and Chapter 3 of my "Causes of War." Also relevant are George H. Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977); John Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (January 1950), pp. 157, 163; and Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1950), pp. 19-20. Applications and elaborations include: Shai Feldman, *Israeli Nuclear Deterrence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); idem, "Superpower Security Guarantees in the 1980's," in *Third World Conflict and International Security, Part II*, Adelphi Paper No. 167 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981), pp. 34-44; Barry R. Posen, "Inadvertent Nuclear War? Escalation and NATO's Northern Flank," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 1982), pp. 28-54; Jack Lewis Snyder, "Perceptions of the Security Dilemma in 1914," in Robert Jervis and Richard Ned Lebow, eds., *Perceptions and Deterrence*, forthcoming in 1985; and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*, Adelphi Paper No. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981). Of related interest is John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

foreign policies, both to exploit new opportunities and to avert new dangers which appear when the offense is strong. Expansion is more tempting, because the cost of aggression declines when the offense has the advantage. States are also driven to expand by the need to control assets and create the conditions they require to secure themselves against aggressors, because security becomes a scarcer asset. Alliances widen and tighten as states grow more dependent on one another for security, a circumstance which fosters the spreading of local conflicts. Moreover, each state is more likely to be menaced by aggressive neighbors who are governed by the same logic, creating an even more competitive atmosphere and giving states further reason to seek security in alliances and expansion.

Second, the size of the advantage accruing to the side mobilizing or striking first increases, raising the risk of preemptive war.<sup>26</sup> When the offense is strong, smaller shifts in ratios of forces between states create greater shifts in their relative capacity to conquer territory. As a result states have greater incentive to mobilize first or strike first, if they can change the force ratio in their favor by doing so. This incentive leads states to mobilize or attack to

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26. In a "preemptive" war, either side gains by moving first; hence, one side moves to exploit the advantage of moving first, or to prevent the other side from doing so. By contrast, in a "preventive" war, one side foresees an adverse shift in the balance of power, and attacks to avoid a more difficult fight later.

"Moving first" in a preemptive war can consist of striking first or mobilizing first, if mobilization sets in train events which cause war, as in 1914. Thus a war is preemptive if statesmen attack because they believe that it pays to strike first; or if they mobilize because they believe that it pays to mobilize first, even if they do not also believe that it pays to strike first, if mobilizations open "windows" which spur attacks for "preventive" reasons, or if they produce other effects which cause war. Under such circumstances war is caused by preemptive actions which are not acts of war, but which are their equivalent since they produce conditions which cause war.

A preemptive war could also involve an attack by one side and mobilization by the other—for instance, one side might mobilize to forestall an attack, or might attack to forestall a mobilization, as the Germans apparently attacked Liège to forestall Belgian preparations to defend it (see below). Thus four classes of preemption are possible: an attack to forestall an attack, an attack to forestall a mobilization, a mobilization to forestall an attack, or a mobilization to forestall a mobilization (such as the Russian mobilizations in 1914).

The size of the incentive to preempt is a function of three factors: the degree of secrecy with which each side could mobilize its forces or mount an attack; the change in the ratio of forces which a secret mobilization or attack would produce; and the size and value of the additional territory which this changed ratio would allow the attacker to conquer or defend. If secret action is impossible, or if it would not change force ratios in favor of the side moving first, or if changes in force ratios would not change relative ability to conquer territory, then there is no first-strike or first-mobilization advantage. Otherwise, states have some inducement to move first.

On preemption, see Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 221–259; and idem, *Strategy of Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 207–254.

seize the initiative or deny it to adversaries, and to conceal plans, demands, and grievances to avoid setting off such a strike by their enemies, with deleterious effects on diplomacy.

Third, “windows” of opportunity and vulnerability open wider, forcing faster diplomacy and raising the risk of preventive war. Since smaller shifts in force ratios have larger effects on relative capacity to conquer territory, smaller prospective shifts in force ratios cause greater hope and alarm, open bigger windows of opportunity and vulnerability, and enhance the attractiveness of exploiting a window by launching a preventive attack.

Fourth, states adopt more competitive styles of diplomacy—brinkmanship and presenting opponents with *faits accomplis*, for instance—since the gains promised by such tactics can more easily justify the risks they entail. At the same time, however, the risks of adopting such strategies also increase, because they tend to threaten the vital interests of other states more directly. Because the security of states is more precarious and more tightly interdependent, threatening actions force stronger and faster reactions, and the political ripple effects of *faits accomplis* are larger and harder to control.

Fifth, states enforce tighter political and military secrecy, since national security is threatened more directly if enemies win the contest for information. As with all security assets, the marginal utility of information is magnified when the offense is strong; hence states compete harder to gain the advantage and avoid the disadvantage of disclosure, leading states to conceal their political and military planning and decision-making more carefully.

The following section suggests that many of the proximate causes of the war of 1914 represent various guises of these consequences of offense-dominance: either they were generated or exacerbated by the assumption that the offense was strong, or their effects were rendered more dangerous by this assumption. These causes include: German and Austrian expansionism; the belief that the side which mobilized or struck first would have the advantage; the German and Austrian belief that they faced “windows of vulnerability”; the nature and inflexibility of the Russian and German war plans and the tight nature of the European alliance system, both of which spread the war from the Balkans to the rest of Europe; the imperative that “mobilization meant war” for Germany; the failure of Britain to take effective measures to deter Germany; the uncommon number of blunders and mistakes committed by statesmen during the July crisis; and the ability of the Central powers to evade blame for the war. Without the cult of the offensive these problems probably would have been less acute, and their effects would

have posed smaller risks. Thus the cult of the offensive was a mainspring driving many of the mechanisms which brought about the First World War.

*The Cult of the Offensive and the Causes of the War*

GERMAN EXPANSION AND ENTENTE RESISTANCE

Before 1914 Germany sought a wider sphere of influence or empire, and the war grew largely from the political collision between expansionist Germany and a resistant Europe. Germans differed on whether their empire should be formal or informal, whether they should seek it in Europe or overseas, and whether they should try to acquire it peacefully or by violence, but a broad consensus favored expansion of some kind. The logic behind this expansionism, in turn, rested on two widespread beliefs which reflected the cult of the offensive: first, that German security required a wider empire; and second, that such an empire was readily attainable, either by coercion or conquest. Thus German expansionism reflected the assumption that conquest would be easy both for Germany and for its enemies.

Prewar statements by German leaders and intellectuals reflected a pervasive belief that German independence was threatened unless Germany won changes in the status quo. Kaiser Wilhelm foresaw a "battle of Germans against the Russo-Gauls for their very existence," which would decide "the existence or non-existence of the Germanic race in Europe,"<sup>27</sup> declaring: "The question for Germany is to be or not to be."<sup>28</sup> His Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, wondered aloud if there were any purpose in planting new trees at his estate at Hohenfinow, near Berlin, since "in a few years the Russians would be here anyway."<sup>29</sup> The historian Heinrich von Treitschke forecast that "in the long run the small states of central Europe can not maintain themselves,"<sup>30</sup> while other Germans warned, "If Germany does not rule the world . . . it will disappear from the map; it is a question of either or," and "Germany will be a world power or nothing."<sup>31</sup> Similarly, German military officers predicted that "without colonial possessions [Germany] will suffocate in her small territory or else will be crushed by the great world powers" and

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27. In 1912, quoted in Thompson, *Eye of the Storm*, p. 42.

28. In 1912, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 161.

29. V.R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 186.

30. In 1897, quoted in Notestein and Stoll, *Conquest and Kultur*, p. 21.

31. Houston Chamberlain and Ernest Hasse, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 30, 36.

foresaw a "supreme struggle, in which the existence of Germany will be at stake. . . ." <sup>32</sup>

Germans also widely believed that expansion could solve their insecurity: "Room; they must make room. The western and southern Slavs—or we! . . . Only by growth can a people save itself." <sup>33</sup> German expansionists complained that German borders were constricted and indefensible, picturing a Germany "badly protected by its unfavorable geographic frontiers. . . ." <sup>34</sup> Expansion was the suggested remedy: "Our frontiers are too narrow. We must become land-hungry, must acquire new regions for settlement. . . ." <sup>35</sup> Expanded borders would provide more defensible frontiers and new areas for settlement and economic growth, which in turn would strengthen the German race against its competitors: "the continental expansion of German territory [and] the multiplication on the continent of the German peasantry . . . would form a sure barrier against the advance of our enemies. . . ." <sup>36</sup> Such utterances came chiefly from the hawkish end of the German political spectrum, but they reflected widely held assumptions.

Many Germans also failed to see the military and political obstacles to expansion. The Kaiser told departing troops in early August, "You will be home before the leaves have fallen from the trees," <sup>37</sup> and one of his generals predicted that the German army would sweep through Europe like a bus full of tourists: "In two weeks we shall defeat France, then we shall turn round, defeat Russia and then we shall march to the Balkans and establish order there." <sup>38</sup> During the July crisis a British observer noted the mood of "supreme confidence" in Berlin military circles, and a German observer reported that the German General Staff "looks ahead to war with France with great confidence, expects to defeat France within four weeks. . . ." <sup>39</sup> While some

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32. *Nauticus*, in 1900, quoted in Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914*, p. 29; and Colmar von der Goltz, quoted in Notestein and Stoll, *Conquest and Kultur*, p. 119.

33. Otto Richard Tannenbergh, in 1911, quoted in Notestein and Stoll, *Conquest and Kultur*, p. 53.

34. Crown Prince Wilhelm, in 1913, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 44. Likewise Walter Rathenau complained of German "frontiers which are too long and devoid of natural protection, surrounded and hemmed in by rivals, with a short coastline. . . ." In July 1914, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 450.

35. Hermann Vietinghoff-Scheel, in 1912, quoted in William Archer, ed., *501 Gems of German Thought* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1916), p. 46.

36. Albrecht Wirth, in 1901, quoted in Notestein and Stoll, *Conquest and Kultur*, p. 52.

37. Quoted in Tuchman, *Guns of August*, p. 142.

38. Von Loebell, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 543.

39. The English Military Attaché, quoted in Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols., trans. and ed. Isabella M. Massey (London: Oxford University Press, 1952–57; reprint ed.,

German military planners recognized the tactical advantage which defenders would hold on the battlefield, most German officers and civilians believed they could win a spectacular, decisive victory if they struck at the right moment.

Bandwagon logic fed hopes that British and Belgian opposition to German expansion could be overcome. General Moltke believed that "Britain is peace loving" because in an Anglo-German war "Britain will lose its domination at sea which will pass forever to America"<sup>40</sup>; hence Britain would be intimidated into neutrality. Furthermore, he warned the Belgians, "Small countries, such as Belgium, would be well advised to rally to the side of the strong if they wished to retain their independence," expecting Belgium to follow this advice if Germany applied enough pressure.<sup>41</sup>

Victory, moreover, would be decisive and final. In Bülow's words, a defeat could render Russia "incapable of attacking us for at least a generation" and "unable to stand up for twenty-five years," leaving it "lastingly weakened,"<sup>42</sup> while Bernhardt proposed that France "must be annihilated once and for all as a great power."<sup>43</sup>

Thus, as Robert Jervis notes: "Because of the perceived advantage of the offense, war was seen as the best route both to gaining expansion and to avoiding drastic loss of influence. There seemed to be no way for Germany merely to retain and safeguard her existing position."<sup>44</sup> The presumed power of the offense made empire appear both feasible and necessary. Had Germans recognized the real power of the defense, the notion of gaining wider empire would have lost both its urgency and its plausibility.

Security was not Germany's only concern, nor was it always a genuine one. In Germany, as elsewhere, security sometimes served as a pretext for expansion undertaken for other reasons. Thus proponents of the "social imperialism" theory of German expansion note that German elites endorsed imperialism, often using security arguments, partly to strengthen their do-

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Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), Vol. 3, p. 171; and Lerchenfeld, the Bavarian ambassador in Berlin, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 503.

40. In 1913, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 227.

41. In 1913, quoted in Albertini, *Origins of the War*, Vol. 3, p. 441. See also Bernhardt's dismissal of the balance of power, in Friedrich von Bernhardt, *Germany and the Next War*, trans. Allen H. Powles (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1914), p. 21.

42. In 1887, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 45.

43. In 1911, quoted in Tuchman, *Guns of August*, p. 26.

44. Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," p. 191.

mestic political and social position.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, spokesmen for the German military establishment exaggerated the threat to Germany and the benefits of empire for organizationally self-serving reasons. Indeed, members of the German elite sometimes privately acknowledged that Germany was under less threat than the public was being told. For example, the Secretary of State in the Foreign Office, Kiderlen-Wächter, admitted, "If we do not conjure up a war into being, no one else certainly will do so," since "The Republican government of France is certainly peace-minded. The British do not want war. They will never give cause for it. . . ."<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, the German public believed that German security was precarious, and security arguments formed the core of the public case for expansion. Moreover, these arguments proved persuasive, and the chauvinist public climate which they created enabled the elite to pursue expansion, whatever elite motivation might actually have been. Indeed, some members of the German government eventually felt pushed into reckless action by an extreme chauvinist public opinion which they felt powerless to resist. Admiral von Müller later explained that Germany pursued a bellicose policy during the July crisis because "The government, already weakened by domestic disunity, found itself inevitably under pressure from a great part of the German people which had been whipped into a high-grade chauvinism by Navalists and Pan-Germans."<sup>47</sup> Bethmann Hollweg felt his hands tied by an expansionist public climate: "With these idiots [the Pan-Germans] one cannot conduct a foreign policy—on the contrary. Together with other factors they will eventually make any reasonable course impossible for us."<sup>48</sup> Thus the search for security was a fundamental cause of German conduct, whether or not the elite was motivated by security concerns, because the elite was

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45. Examples are: Arno Mayer, "Domestic Causes of the First World War," in Leonard Krieger and Fritz Stern, eds., *The Responsibility of Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 286–300; Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War*; Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 257–258; and Imanuel Geiss, *German Foreign Policy, 1871–1914* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976). A criticism is Marc Trachtenberg, "The Social Interpretation of Foreign Policy," *Review of Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (July 1978), pp. 341–350.

46. In 1910, quoted in Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, p. 126.

47. Admiral von Müller, quoted in Fritz Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), p. 94.

48. In 1909, quoted in Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor: Bethmann Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 119. See also *ibid.*, p. 152; and Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, pp. 135–137. As Jules Cambon, French ambassador to Germany, perceptively remarked: "It is false that in Germany the nation is peaceful and the government bellicose—the exact opposite is true." In 1911, quoted in Jarausch, *Enigmatic Chancellor*, p. 125.

allowed or even compelled to adopt expansionist policies by a German public which found security arguments persuasive.

The same mixture of insecurity and perceived opportunity stiffened resistance to German expansion and fuelled a milder expansionism elsewhere in Europe, intensifying the conflict between Germany and its neighbors. In France the nationalist revival and French endorsement of a firm Russian policy in the Balkans were inspired partly by a growing fear of the German threat after 1911,<sup>49</sup> partly by an associated concern that Austrian expansion in the Balkans could shift the European balance of power in favor of the Central Powers and thereby threaten French security, and partly by belief that a war could create opportunities for French expansion. The stiffer French "new attitude" on Balkan questions in 1912 was ascribed to the French belief that "a territorial acquisition on the part of Austria would affect the general balance of power in Europe and as a result touch the particular interests of France"—a belief which assumed that the power balance was relatively precarious, which in turn assumed a world of relatively strong offense.<sup>50</sup> At the same time some Frenchmen looked forward to "a beautiful war which will deliver all the captives of Germanism,"<sup>51</sup> inspired by a faith in the power of the offensive that was typified by the enthusiasm of Joffre's deputy, General de Castelnau: "Give me 700,000 men and I will conquer Europe!"<sup>52</sup>

Russian policy in the Balkans was driven both by fear that Austrian expansion could threaten Russian security and by hopes that Russia could destroy its enemies if war developed under the right conditions. Sazonov saw a German–Austrian Balkan program to "deliver the Slavonic East, bound hand and foot, into the power of Austria–Hungary," followed by the German seizure of Constantinople, which would gravely threaten Russian security by placing all of Southern Russia at the mercy of German power.<sup>53</sup> Eventually a "German Khalifate" would be established, "extending from the banks of the Rhine to the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates," which would reduce

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49. See Eugen Weber, *The Nationalist Revival in France, 1905–1914* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), passim; and Snyder, "Defending the Offensive," pp. 32–33.

50. By the Russian ambassador to Paris, A.P. Izvolsky, quoted in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, p. 21.

51. *La France Militaire*, in 1913, quoted in Weber, *Nationalist Revival in France*, p. 127.

52. In 1913, quoted in L.C.F. Turner, *Origins of the First World War* (London: Edward Arnold, 1970), p. 53.

53. Serge Sazonov, *Fateful Years, 1909–1916* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 179. See also Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, p. 87.

"Russia to a pitiful dependence upon the arbitrary will of the Central Powers."<sup>54</sup> At the same time some Russians believed these threats could be addressed by offensive action: Russian leaders spoke of the day when "the moment for the downfall of Austria-Hungary arrives,"<sup>55</sup> and the occasion when "The Austro-Hungarian ulcer, which today is not yet so ripe as the Turkish, may be cut up."<sup>56</sup> Russian military officers contended that "the Austrian army represents a serious force. . . . But on the occasion of the first great defeats all of this multi-national and artificially united mass ought to disintegrate."<sup>57</sup>

In short, the belief that conquest was easy and security scarce was an important source of German-Entente conflict. Without it, both sides could have adopted less aggressive and more accommodative policies.

#### THE INCENTIVE TO PREEMPT

American strategists have long assumed that World War I was a preemptive war, but they have not clarified whether or how this was true.<sup>58</sup> Hence two questions should be resolved to assess the consequences of the cult of the offensive: did the states of Europe perceive an incentive to move first in 1914, which helped spur them to mobilize or attack? If so, did the cult of the offensive help to give rise to this perception?

The question of whether the war was preemptive reduces to the question of why five principal actions in the July crisis were taken. These actions are: the Russian preliminary mobilization ordered on July 25-26; the partial Russian mobilization against Austria-Hungary ordered on July 29; the Russian

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54. Sazonov, *Fateful Years*, pp. 191, 204.

55. Izvolsky, in 1909, quoted in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, p. 129.

56. Sazonov, in 1913, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 135.

57. *Sbornik glavnogo upravleniia general'nogo shtaba*, the secret magazine of the Russian general staff, in 1913, quoted in William C. Fuller, "The Russian Empire and Its Potential Enemies" (manuscript, 1980), p. 21.

British resistance was also driven by security concerns: during the July crisis the London *Times* warned that "the ruin of France or the Low Countries would be the prelude to our own," while other interventionists warned that Antwerp in German hands would be a "pistol pointed at the heart of England," and that the German threat to France and the Low Countries created "a deadly peril for ourselves." The *Times* on August 4, quoted in Geoffrey Marcus, *Before the Lamps Went Out* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), p. 305; and the *Pall Mall Gazette* and James Gavin, on July 29 and August 2, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 243, 268.

58. Suggesting that World War I was preemptive are: Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1969), pp. 359-362; Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, pp. 223-224; Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," pp. 191-192; Quester, *Offense and Defense*, pp. 110-111; Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 238-242.

full mobilization ordered on July 30; French preliminary mobilization measures ordered during July 25–30; and the German attack on the Belgian fortress at Liège at the beginning of the war. The war was preemptive if Russia and France mobilized preemptively, since these mobilizations spurred German and Austrian mobilization, opening windows which helped cause war. Thus while the mobilizations were not acts of war, they caused effects which caused war. The war was also preemptive if Germany struck Liège preemptively, since the imperative to strike Liège was one reason why “mobilization meant war” to Germany.

The motives for these acts cannot be determined with finality; testimony by the actors is spotty and other direct evidence is scarce. Instead, motives must be surmised from preexisting beliefs, deduced from circumstances, and inferred from clues which may by themselves be inconclusive. However, three pieces of evidence suggest that important preemptive incentives existed, and helped to shape conduct. First, most European leaders apparently believed that mobilization by either side which was not answered within a very few days, or even hours, could affect the outcome of the war. This judgment is reflected both in the length of time which officials assumed would constitute a militarily significant delay between mobilization and offsetting counter-mobilization, and in the severity of the consequences which they assumed would follow if they mobilized later than their opponents.

Second, many officials apparently assumed that significant mobilization measures and preparations to attack could be kept secret for a brief but significant period. Since most officials also believed that a brief unanswered mobilization could be decisive, they concluded that the side which mobilized first would have the upper hand.

Third, governments carried out some of their mobilization measures in secrecy, suggesting that they believed secret measures were feasible and worthwhile.

**THE PERCEIVED SIGNIFICANCE OF SHORT DELAYS.** Before and during the July crisis European leaders used language suggesting that they believed a lead in ordering mobilization of roughly one to three days would be significant. In Austria, General Conrad believed that “every day was of far-reaching importance,” since “any delay might leave the [Austrian] forces now assembling in Galicia open to being struck by the full weight of a Russian offensive in the midst of their deployment.”<sup>59</sup> In France, Marshall Joffre warned the

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59. July 29, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 670.

French cabinet that “any delay of twenty-four hours in calling up our reservists” once German preparations began would cost France “ten to twelve miles for each day of delay; in other words, the initial abandonment of much of our territory.”<sup>60</sup> In Britain, one official believed that France “cannot possibly delay her own mobilization for even the fraction of a day” once Germany began to mobilize.<sup>61</sup>

In Germany, one analyst wrote that “A delay of a single day . . . can scarcely ever be rectified.”<sup>62</sup> Likewise Moltke, on receiving reports of preparations in France and Russia during the July crisis, warned that “the military situation is becoming from day to day more unfavorable for us,” and would “lead to fateful consequences for us” if Germany did not respond.<sup>63</sup> On July 30 he encouraged Austria to mobilize, warning that “every hour of delay makes the situation worse, for Russia gains a start.”<sup>64</sup> On August 1, the Prussian ministry of war was reportedly “very indignant over the day lost for the mobilization” by the German failure to mobilize on July 30.<sup>65</sup> The German press drove home the point that if mobilization by the adversary went unanswered even briefly, the result could be fatal, one German newspaper warning that “Every delay [in mobilizing] would cost us an endless amount of blood” if Germany’s enemies gained the initiative; hence “it would be disastrous if we let ourselves be moved by words not to carry on our preparations so quickly. . . .”<sup>66</sup>

60. July 29, from Marshall Joffre, *The Personal Memoirs of Marshall Joffre*, 2 vols., trans. T. Bentley Mott (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), Vol. 1, p. 125.

61. Eyre Crowe, on July 27, quoted in Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 251.

62. Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, in 1898, quoted in Ropp, *War in the Modern World*, p. 203.

63. To Bethmann Hollweg, on July 29, quoted in Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 284.

64. Quoted in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 196.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 265n.

66. The *Reinisch-Westfälische Zeitung*, July 31, quoted in Jonathan French Scott, *The Five Weeks* (New York: John Day Co., 1927), p. 146.

Likewise after the war General von Kluck, who commanded the right wing of the German army in the march on Paris, claimed that if the German army had been mobilized and deployed “three days earlier, a more sweeping victory and decisive result would probably have been gained” against France, and Admiral Tirpitz complained that German diplomats had given Britain and Belgium several crucial days warning of the German attack on July 29, which “had an extraordinarily unfavorable influence on the whole course of the war.” A delay of “only a few days” in the preparation of the British expeditionary force “might have been of the greatest importance to us.” Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 148n.; and Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 242n.

A more relaxed opinion was expressed by the Prussian war minister, General Falkenhayn, who seemed to feel that it would be acceptable if German mobilization “follows two or three days later than the Russian and Austrian,” since it “will still be completed more quickly than theirs.” Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 147. However, he also expressed himself in favor

Thus time was measured in small units: “three days,” “day to day,” “a single day,” “the fraction of a day,” or even “every hour.” Moreover, the consequences of conceding the initiative to the adversary were thought to be extreme. The Russian Minister of Agriculture, Alexander Krivoshein, warned that if Russia delayed its mobilization “we should be marching toward a certain catastrophe,”<sup>67</sup> and General Janushkevich warned the Russian foreign minister that “we were in danger of losing [the war] before we had time to unsheath our sword” by failing to mobilize promptly against Germany.<sup>68</sup> General Joffre feared that France would find itself “in an irreparable state of inferiority” if it were outstripped by German mobilization.<sup>69</sup> And in Germany, officials foresaw dire consequences if Germany conceded the initiative either in the East or the West. Bethmann Hollweg explained to one of his ambassadors that if German mobilization failed to keep pace with the Russian, Germany would suffer large territorial losses: “East Prussia, West Prussia, and perhaps also Posen and Silesia [would be] at the mercy of the Russians.”<sup>70</sup> Such inaction would be “a crime against the safety of our fatherland.”<sup>71</sup>

Germans also placed a high value on gaining the initiative at Liège, since Liège controlled a vital Belgian railroad junction, and German forces could not seize Liège with its tunnels and bridges intact unless they surprised the Belgians. As Moltke wrote before the war, the advance through Belgium “will hardly be possible unless Liège is in our hands . . . the possession of Liège is the *sine qua non* of our advance.” But seizing Liège would require “meticulous preparation and surprise” and “is only possible if the attack is made at once, before the areas between the forts are fortified,” “immediately” after the declaration of war.<sup>72</sup> In short, the entire German war plan would be ruined if Germany allowed Belgium to prepare the defense of Liège.

This belief that brief unanswered preparations and actions could be decisive reflected the implicit assumption that the offense had the advantage. Late mobilization would cost Germany control of East and West Prussia only

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of preemption at other junctures. See *ibid.*, p. 297; and Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War*, p. 203.

67. To Sazonov, July 30, quoted in Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 311.

68. To Sazonov, July 30, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 566.

69. August 1, Poincaré reporting Joffre’s view, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 100.

70. August 1, quoted in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 264.

71. August 1, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 167.

72. Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 166. On the Liège attack, see also Snyder, “Defending the Offensive,” pp. 203, 285–287.

if Russian offensive power were strong, and German defensive power were weak; mobilizing late could only be a "crime against the safety" of Germany if numerically superior enemies could destroy it; lateness could only confront Russia with "certain catastrophe" or leave it in danger of "losing before we have time to unsheath our sword" if Germany could develop a powerful offensive with the material advantage it would gain by preparing first; and lateness could only condemn France to "irreparable inferiority" if small material inferiority translated into large territorial losses. Had statesmen understood that in reality the defense had the advantage, they also would have known that the possession of the initiative could not be decisive, and could have conceded it more easily.

WAS SECRET PREPARATION BELIEVED FEASIBLE? The belief that delay could be fatal would have created no impulse to go first had European leaders believed that they could detect and offset their opponents' preparations immediately. However, many officials believed that secret action for a short time was possible. Russian officials apparently lacked confidence in their own ability to detect German or Austrian mobilization, and their decisions to mobilize seem to have been motivated partly by the desire to forestall surprise preparation by their adversaries. Sazonov reportedly requested full mobilization on July 30 partly from fear that otherwise Germany would "gain time to complete her preparations in secret."<sup>73</sup> Sazonov offers confirmation in his memoirs, explaining that he had advised mobilization believing that "The perfection of the German military organization made it possible by means of personal notices to the reservists to accomplish a great part of the work quietly." Germany could then "complete the mobilization in a very short time. This circumstance gave a tremendous advantage to Germany, but we could counteract it to a certain extent by taking measures for our own mobilization in good time."<sup>74</sup>

Similar reasoning contributed to the Russian decision to mobilize against Austria on July 29. Sazonov explains that the mobilization was undertaken in part "so as to avoid the danger of being taken unawares by the Austrian

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73. Paleologue's diary, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 619.

74. Sazonov, *Fateful Years*, pp. 202–203. The memorandum of the day of the Russian foreign ministry for July 29 records that Russian officials had considered whether Germany seriously sought peace, or whether its diplomacy "was only intended to lull us to sleep and so to postpone the Russian mobilization and thus gain time wherein to make corresponding preparations." Quoted in Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 296–297.

preparations."<sup>75</sup> Moreover, recent experience had fuelled Russian fears of an Austrian surprise: during the Balkan crisis of 1912, the Russian army had been horrified to discover that Austria had secretly mobilized in Galicia, without detection by Russian intelligence; and this experience resolved the Russian command not to be caught napping again. In one observer's opinion, "the experience of 1912 . . . was not without influence as regards Russia's unwillingness to put off her mobilization in the July days of 1914."<sup>76</sup>

Top Russian officials also apparently believed that Russia could itself mobilize secretly, and some historians ascribe the Russian decision to mobilize partly to this erroneous belief. Luigi Albertini writes that Sazonov did not realize that the mobilization order would be posted publicly and that, accordingly, he "thought Russia could mobilize without Germany's knowing of it immediately."<sup>77</sup> Albertini reports that the German ambassador caused "real stupefaction" by appearing at the Russian ministry for foreign affairs with a red mobilization poster on the morning of mobilization,<sup>78</sup> and concludes that the "belief that it was possible to proceed to general mobilization without making it public may well have made Sazonov more inclined to order it."<sup>79</sup>

Contemporary accounts confirm that the Russian leadership believed in their own ability to mobilize in secret. The memorandum of the Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs records that Sazonov sought to "proceed to the general mobilization as far as possible secretly and without making any public announcement concerning it," in order "To avoid rendering more acute our relations with Germany."<sup>80</sup> And in informing his government of Russian preliminary mobilization measures which began on July 26, the French ambassador indicated Russian hopes that they could maintain secrecy: "Secret preparations will, however, commence already today,"<sup>81</sup> and "the military districts of Warsaw, Vilna and St. Petersburg are secretly making preparations."<sup>82</sup> His telegram informing Paris of Russian general mobilization ex-

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75. Sazonov, *Fateful Years*, p. 188.

76. A.M. Zayonchovsky, quoted in Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*, p. 149.

77. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 624.

78. *Ibid.*, quoting Taube who quoted Nolde.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 573. See also p. 584, suggesting that "Sazonov was such a greenhorn in military matters as to imagine the thing could be done, and was only convinced of the contrary when on 31 July he saw the red notices, calling up reservists, posted up in the streets of St. Petersburg." This point "provides the key to many mysteries" (p. 624).

80. For July 31, in Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 326.

81. Paleologue, July 25, in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 591.

82. Paleologue, July 26, in *ibid.*, p. 592.

plained that “the Russian government has decided to proceed secretly to the first measures of general mobilization.”<sup>83</sup>

Like their Russian counterparts, top French officials also apparently feared that Germany might mobilize in secret, which spurred the French to their own measures. Thus during the July crisis General Joffre spoke of “the concealments [of mobilization] which are possible in Germany,”<sup>84</sup> and referred to “information from excellent sources [which] led us to fear that on the Russian front a sort of secret mobilization was taking place [in Germany].”<sup>85</sup> In his memoirs, Joffre quotes a German military planning document acquired by the French government before the July crisis, which he apparently took to indicate German capabilities, and which suggested that Germany could take “quiet measures . . . in preparation for mobilization,” including “a discreet assembly of complementary personnel and materiel” which would “assure us advantages very difficult for other armies to realize in the same degree.”<sup>86</sup> The French ambassador to Berlin, Jules Cambon, also apparently believed that Germany could conduct preliminary mobilization measures in secret, became persuaded during the July crisis that it had in fact done this, and so informed Paris: “In view of German habits, [preliminary measures] can be taken without exciting the population or causing indiscretions to be committed. . . .”<sup>87</sup> For their part the Germans apparently did not believe that they or their enemies could mobilize secretly, but they did speak in terms suggesting that Germany could surprise the Belgians: German planners referred to the “*coup de main*” at Liège and the need for “meticulous preparation and surprise.”<sup>88</sup>

To sum up, then, French policymakers feared that Germany could mobilize secretly; Russians feared secret mobilization by Germany or Austria, and hoped Russian mobilization could be secret; while Central Powers planners

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83. *Ibid.*, p. 620.

84. August 1, quoted in Joffre, *Personal Memoirs*, p. 128.

85. July 29, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 120.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

87. Cambon dispatch to Paris, July 21, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 119. Joffre records that Cambon’s telegram, which mysteriously did not arrive in Paris until July 28, convinced him that “for seven days at least the Germans had been putting into effect the plan devised for periods of political tension and that our normal methods of investigation had not revealed this fact to us. Our adversaries could thus reach a condition of mobilization that was almost complete,” reflecting Joffre’s assumption that secret German measures were possible.

88. Moltke, quoted in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 166.

saw less possibility for preemptive mobilization by either side, but hoped to mount a surprise attack on Belgium.<sup>89</sup>

DID STATESMEN ACT SECRETLY? During the July crisis European statesmen sometimes informed their opponents before they took military measures, but on other occasions they acted secretly, suggesting that they believed the initiative was both attainable and worth attaining, and indicating that the desire to seize the initiative may have entered into their decisions to mobilize. German leaders warned the French of their preliminary measures taken on July 29,<sup>90</sup> and their pre-mobilization and mobilization measures taken on July 31,<sup>91</sup> and they openly warned the Russians on July 29 that they would mobilize if Russia conducted a partial mobilization.<sup>92</sup> Russia openly warned Austria on July 27 that it would mobilize if Austria crossed the Serbian frontier,<sup>93</sup> and then on July 28 and July 29 openly announced to Germany and Austria its partial mobilization of July 29,<sup>94</sup> and France delayed full mobilization until after Germany had taken the onus on itself by issuing ultimatums to Russia and France. However, Russia, France, and Germany tried

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89. During the July crisis, adversaries actually detected signs of most major secret mobilization activity in roughly 6–18 hours, and took responsive decisions in 1–2 days. Accordingly, the maximum “first mobilization advantage” which a state could gain by forestalling an adversary who otherwise would have begun mobilizing first was roughly 2–4 days. Orders for Russian preliminary mobilization measures were issued in sequential telegrams transmitted between 4:00 p.m. on July 25 and 3:26 a.m. on July 26; Berlin received its first reports of these measures early on July 26; and at 4:00 p.m. on July 27 the German intelligence board concluded that Russian pre-mobilization had in fact begun, for a lag of roughly one and one-half to two days between the issuance of orders and their definite detection. Sidney B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (New York: Free Press, 1966), Vol. 2, pp. 310–315; and Ulrich Trumppener, “War Premeditated? German Intelligence Operations in July 1914,” *Central European History*, Vol. 9 (1976), pp. 67–70. Full Russian mobilization was ordered at 6:00 p.m. on July 30, first rumors reached Berlin very late on July 30, more definite but inconclusive information was received around 7:00 a.m. July 31, reliable confirmation was received at 11:45 a.m., and German preliminary mobilization was ordered at 1:00 p.m., for a lag of roughly 20 hours. Fay, *Origins of the World War*, Vol. 2, p. 473; Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, pp. 211–212, 262–265; and Trumppener, “War Premeditated?,” pp. 80–83. French preliminary measures were begun on July 25, expanded on July 26, further expanded on July 27, and remained substantially undetected on July 28. Secondary sources do not clarify when Germany detected French preliminary measures, but it seems that German discovery lagged roughly two days behind French actions. Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, pp. 17–19; Joffre, *Personal Memoirs*, pp. 115–118; and Trumppener, “War Premeditated?,” pp. 71–73. As for Liège, it was not captured as quickly as German planners had hoped, but was not properly defended when the Germans arrived, and was taken in time to allow the advance into France.

90. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 491.

91. Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, pp. 267–268.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

93. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 529.

94. *Ibid.*, pp. 549, 551; and Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 262, 278, 299.

to conceal four of the five major preemptive actions of the crisis: the Russians hid both their preliminary measures of July 25–26 and their general mobilization of July 30, the French attempted to conceal their preliminary mobilization measures of July 25–29, and the Germans took great care to conceal their planned *coup de main* against Liège. Thus states sometimes conceded the initiative, but sought it at critical junctures.

Overall, evidence suggests that European leaders saw some advantage to moving first in 1914: the lags which they believed significant lay in the same range as the lags they believed they could gain or forestall by mobilizing first. These perceptions probably helped spur French and Russian decisions to mobilize, which in turn helped set in train the German mobilization, which in turn meant war partly because the Germans were determined to preempt Liège. Hence the war was in some modest measure preemptive.

If so, the cult of the offensive bears some responsibility. Without it, statesmen would not have thought that secret mobilization or preemptive attack could be decisive. The cult was not the sole cause of the perceived incentive to preempt; rather, three causes acted together, the others being the belief that mobilization could briefly be conducted secretly, and the systems of reserve manpower mobilization which enabled armies to multiply their strength in two weeks. The cult had its effect by magnifying the importance of these other factors in the minds of statesmen, which magnified the incentive to preempt which these factors caused them to perceive. The danger that Germany might gain time to complete preparations in secret could only alarm France and Russia if Germany could follow up these preparations with an effective offensive; otherwise, early secret mobilization could *not* give “a tremendous advantage” to Germany, and such a prospect would not require a forestalling response. Sazonov could have been tempted to mobilize secretly only if early Russian mobilization would forestall important German gains, or could provide important gains for Russia, as could only have happened if the offense were powerful.

#### “WINDOWS” AND PREVENTIVE WAR

Germany and Austria pursued bellicose policies in 1914 partly to shut the looming “windows” of vulnerability which they envisioned lying ahead, and partly to exploit the brief window of opportunity which they thought the summer crisis opened. This window logic, in turn, grew partly from the cult of the offensive, since it depended upon the implicit assumption that the offense was strong. The shifts in the relative sizes of armies, economies, and

alliances which fascinated and frightened statesmen in 1914 could have cast such a long shadow only in a world where material advantage promised decisive results in warfare, as it could only in an offense-dominant world.

The official communications of German leaders are filled with warnings that German power was in relative decline, and that Germany was doomed unless it took drastic action—such as provoking and winning a great crisis which would shatter the Entente, or directly instigating a “great liquidation” (as one general put it).<sup>95</sup> German officials repeatedly warned that Russian military power would expand rapidly between 1914 and 1917, as Russia carried out its 1913–1914 Great Program, and that in the long run Russian power would further outstrip German power because Russian resources were greater.<sup>96</sup> In German eyes this threat forced Germany to act. Secretary of State Jagow summarized a view common in Germany in a telegram to one of his ambassadors just before the July crisis broke:

Russia will be ready to fight in a few years. Then she will crush us by the number of her soldiers; then she will have built her Baltic fleet and her strategic railways. Our group in the meantime will have become steadily weaker. . . . I do not desire a preventive war, but if the conflict should offer itself, we ought not to shirk it.<sup>97</sup>

Similarly, shortly before Sarajevo the Kaiser reportedly believed that “the big Russian railway constructions were . . . preparations for a great war which could start in 1916” and wondered “whether it might not be better to attack than to wait.”<sup>98</sup> At about the same time Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg declared bleakly, “The future belongs to Russia which grows and grows and becomes an even greater nightmare to us,”<sup>99</sup> warning that “After the completion of their strategic railroads in Poland our position [will be] untenable.”<sup>100</sup> During the war, Bethmann confessed that the “window” argument

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95. Von Plessen, quoted in Isabell V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888–1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 261. Thus Bethmann summarized German thinking when he suggested on July 8 that the Sarajevo assassination provided an opportunity either for a war which “we have the prospect of winning” or a crisis in which “we still certainly have the prospect of maneuvering the Entente apart. . . .” Thompson, *In the Eye of the Storm*, p. 75.

96. The Russian program planned a 40 percent increase in the size of the peacetime Russian army and a 29 percent increase in the number of officers over four years. Lieven, *Russia & the Origins of the First World War*, p. 111.

97. July 18, quoted in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, p. 321.

98. June 21, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 471, quoting Max Warburg.

99. July 7, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 224, quoting Riezler.

100. July 7, quoted in Jarausch, “The Illusion of Limited War,” p. 57. Likewise on July 20, he expressed terror at Russia’s “growing demands and colossal explosive power. In a few years

had driven German policy in 1914: "Lord yes, in a certain sense it was a preventive war," motivated by "the constant threat of attack, the greater likelihood of its inevitability in the future, and by the military's claim: today war is still possible without defeat, but not in two years!"<sup>101</sup>

Window logic was especially prevalent among the German military officers, many of whom openly argued for preventive war during the years before the July crisis. General Moltke declared, "I believe a war to be unavoidable and: the sooner the better" at the infamous "war council" of December 8, 1912,<sup>102</sup> and he expressed similar views to his Austrian counterpart, General Conrad, in May 1914: "to wait any longer meant a diminishing of our chances; as far as manpower is concerned, one cannot enter into a competition with Russia,"<sup>103</sup> and "We [the German Army] are ready, the sooner the better for us."<sup>104</sup> During the July crisis Moltke remarked that "we shall never hit it again so well as we do now with France's and Russia's expansion of their armies incomplete," and argued that "the singularly favorable situation be exploited for military action."<sup>105</sup> After the war Jagow recalled a conversation with Moltke in May 1914, in which Moltke had spelled out his reasoning:

In two–three years Russia would have completed her armaments. The military superiority of our enemies would then be so great that he did not know how we could overcome them. Today we would still be a match for them. In his opinion there was no alternative to making preventive war in order to defeat the enemy while we still had a chance of victory. The Chief of General Staff therefore proposed that I should conduct a policy with the aim of provoking a war in the near future.<sup>106</sup>

Other members of the German military shared Moltke's views, pressing for preventive war because "conditions and prospects would never become

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she would be supreme—and Germany her first lonely victim." Quoted in Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, p. 258n.

101. Jarausch, "The Illusion of Limited War," p. 48. Likewise Friedrich Thimme quoted Bethmann during the war: "He also admits that our military are quite convinced that they could still be victorious in the war, but that in a few years time, say in 1916 after the completion of Russia's railway network, they could not. This, of course, also affected the way in which the Serbian question was dealt with." Quoted in Volker R. Berghahn and Martin Kitchen, eds., *Germany in the Age of Total War* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1981), p. 45.

102. Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 162.

103. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War*, p. 171.

104. Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, p. 149.

105. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War*, p. 203.

106. Quoted in J.C.G. Röhl, ed., *From Bismarck to Hitler: The Problem of Continuity in German History* (London: Longman, 1970), p. 70.

better."<sup>107</sup> General Gebstattel recorded the mood of the German leadership on the eve of the war: "Chances better than in two or three years hence and the General Staff is reported to be confidently awaiting events."<sup>108</sup> The *Berlin Post*, a newspaper which often reflected the views of the General Staff, saw a window in 1914: "at the moment the state of things is favorable for us. France is not yet ready for war. England has internal and colonial difficulties, and Russia recoils from the conflict because she fears revolution at home. Ought we to wait until our adversaries are ready?" It concluded that Germany should "prepare for the inevitable war with energy and foresight" and "begin it under the most favorable conditions."<sup>109</sup>

German leaders also saw a tactical window of opportunity in the political constellation of July 1914, encouraging them to shut their strategic window of vulnerability. In German eyes, the Sarajevo assassination created favorable conditions for a confrontation, since it guaranteed that Austria would join Germany against Russia and France (as it might not if war broke out over a colonial conflict or a dispute in Western Europe), and it provided the Central powers with a plausible excuse, which raised hopes that Britain might remain neutral. On July 8, Bethmann Hollweg reportedly remarked, "If war comes from the east so that we have to fight for Austria-Hungary and not Austria-Hungary for us, we have a chance of winning."<sup>110</sup> Likewise, the German ambassador to Rome reportedly believed on July 27 that "the present moment is extraordinarily favorable to Germany,"<sup>111</sup> and the German ambassador to London even warned the British Prime Minister that "there was some feeling in Germany . . . that trouble was bound to come and therefore it would be better not to restrain Austria and let trouble come now, rather than later."<sup>112</sup>

The window logic reflected in these statements is a key to German conduct in 1914: whether the Germans were aggressive or restrained depended on

107. Leuckart's summary of the views of the General Staff, quoted in Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 69. For more on advocacy of preventive war by the German army, see Martin Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps, 1890-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 96-114; and Hull, *Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II*, pp. 236-265.

108. August 2, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 403.

109. February 24, 1914, in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, p. 100n.; and Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 371-272.

110. Jarausch, "Illusion of Limited War," p. 58. Earlier Bülow had explained why the Agadir crisis was an unsuitable occasion for war in similar terms: "In 1911 the situation was much worse. The complication would have begun with Britain; France would have remained passive, it would have forced us to attack and then there would have been no *causus foederis* for Austria . . . whereas Russia was obliged to join in." In 1912, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 85.

111. Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 66n.

112. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 324, quoting Lichnowsky, on July 6.

whether at a given moment they thought windows were open or closed. Germany courted war on the Balkan question after Sarajevo because window logic led German leaders to conclude that war could not be much worse than peace, and might even be better, if Germany could provoke the right war under the right conditions against the right opponents. German leaders probably preferred the status quo to a world war against the entire Entente, but evidence suggests that they also preferred a continental war against France and Russia to the status quo—as long as Austria joined the war, and as long as they could also find a suitable pretext which they could use to persuade the German public that Germany fought for a just cause. This, in turn, required that Germany engineer a war which engaged Austrian interests, and in which Germany could cast itself as the attacked, in order to involve the Austrian army, to persuade Britain to remain neutral, and to win German public support. These window considerations help explain both the German decision to force the Balkan crisis to a head and German efforts to defuse the crisis after it realized that it had failed to gain British neutrality. The German peace efforts after July 29 probably represent a belated effort to reverse course after it became clear that the July crisis was not such an opportune war window after all.

Window logic also helped to persuade Austria to play the provocateur for Germany. Like their German counterparts, many Austrian officials believed that the relative strength of the central powers was declining, and saw in Sarajevo a rare opportunity to halt this decline by force. Thus the Austrian War Minister, General Krobotin, argued in early July that “it would be better to go to war immediately, rather than at some later period, because the balance of power must in the course of time change to our disadvantage,” while the Austrian Foreign Minister, Count Berchtold, favored action because “our situation must become more precarious as time goes on,”<sup>113</sup> warning that unless Austria destroyed the Serbian army in 1914, it would face “another attack [by] Serbia in much more unfavorable conditions” in two or three years.<sup>114</sup> Likewise, the Austrian foreign ministry reportedly believed that, “if Russia would not permit the localization of the conflict with Serbia, the present moment was more favorable for a reckoning than a later one would be”,<sup>115</sup> General Conrad believed, “If it comes to war with Russia—as

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113. July 7, quoted in Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 81, 84.

114. July 31, quoted in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 218.

115. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 372, quoting Baron von Tucher on July 18.

it must some day—today is as good as any other day”;<sup>116</sup> and the Austrian ambassador to Italy believed an Austro–Serbian war would be “a piece of real good fortune,” since “for the Triple Alliance the present moment is more favorable than another later.”<sup>117</sup>

Thus the First World War was in part a “preventive” war, launched by the Central powers in the belief that they were saving themselves from a worse fate in later years. The cult of the offensive bears some responsibility for that belief, for in a defense-dominated world the windows which underlie the logic of preventive war are shrunken in size, as the balance of power grows less elastic to the relative sizes of armies and economies; and windows cannot be shut as easily by military action. Only in a world taken by the cult of the offensive could the window logic which governed German and Austrian conduct have proved so persuasive: Germans could only have feared that an unchecked Russia could eventually “crush us by the numbers of her soldiers,” or have seen a “singularly favorable situation” in 1914 which could be “exploited by military action” if material superiority would endow the German and Russian armies with the ability to conduct decisive offensive operations against one another. Moltke claimed he saw “no alternative to making preventive war,” but had he believed that the defense dominated, better alternatives would have been obvious.

The cult of the offensive also helped cause the arms race before 1914 which engendered the uneven rates of military growth that gave rise to visions of windows. The German army buildup after 1912 was justified by security arguments: Bethmann Hollweg proclaimed, “For Germany, in the heart of Europe, with open boundaries on all sides, a strong army is the most secure guarantee of peace,” while the Kaiser wrote that Germany needed “More ships and soldiers . . . because our existence is at stake.”<sup>118</sup> This buildup provoked an even larger Russian and French buildup, which created the windows which alarmed Germany in 1914.<sup>119</sup> Thus the cult both magnified

116. In October 1913, quoted in Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, 4 vols., trans. Heinz Norden (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1969–73), Vol. 2, p. 234. Likewise the *Militärisch Rundschau* argued for provoking war: “Since we shall have to accept the contest some day, let us provoke it at once.” On July 15, 1914, quoted in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, p. 367. For more on preventive war and the Austrian army, see Ritter, *Sword and the Scepter*, Vol. 2, pp. 227–239.

117. Count Mery, July 29, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 383.

118. Both in 1912, quoted in Jarausch, *Enigmatic Chancellor*, p. 95; and Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 165.

119. On the motives for the Russian buildup, see P.A. Zhilin, “Bol’shaia programma po usileniiu russkoi armii,” *Voenna-istoricheskii zhurnal*, No. 7 (July 1974), pp. 90–97.

the importance of fluctuations in ratios of forces and helped to fuel the arms race which fostered them.

#### THE SCOPE AND INFLEXIBILITY OF MOBILIZATION PLANS

The spreading of World War I outward from the Balkans is often ascribed to the scope and rigidity of the Russian and German plans for mobilization, which required that Russia must also mobilize armies against Germany when it mobilized against Austria–Hungary, and that Germany also attack France and Belgium if it fought Russia. Barbara Tuchman writes that Europe was swept into war by “the pull of military schedules,” and recalls Moltke’s famous answer when the Kaiser asked if the German armies could be mobilized to the East: “Your Majesty, it cannot be done. The deployment of millions cannot be improvised. If Your Majesty insists on leading the whole army to the East it will not be an army ready for battle but a disorganized mob of armed men with no arrangements for supply.”<sup>120</sup> Likewise, Herman Kahn notes the “rigid war plan[s]” of 1914, which “were literally cast in concrete,”<sup>121</sup> and David Ziegler notes the influence of military “planning in advance,” which left “no time to improvise.”<sup>122</sup>

The scope and character of these plans in turn reflected the assumption that the offense was strong. In an offense-dominant world Russia would have been prudent to mobilize against Germany if it mobilized against Austria–Hungary; and Germany probably would have been prudent to attack Belgium and France at the start of any Russo–German war. Thus the troublesome railroad schedules of 1914 reflected the offense-dominant world in which the schedulers believed they lived. Had they known that the defense was powerful, they would have been drawn towards flexible plans for limited deployment on single frontiers; and had such planning prevailed, the war might have been confined to Eastern Europe or the Balkans.

Moreover, the “inflexibility” of the war plans may have reflected the same offensive assumptions which determined their shape. Russian and German soldiers understandably developed only options which they believed prudent to exercise, while omitting plans which they believed would be dangerous to implement. These judgments in turn reflected their own and their adver-

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120. Tuchman, *Guns of August*, pp. 92, 99.

121. Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, pp. 359, 362.

122. David W. Ziegler, *War, Peace and International Politics* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), p. 25.

saries' offensive ideas. Options were few because these offensive ideas seemed to narrow the range of prudent choice.

Lastly, the assumption of offense-dominance gave preset plans greater influence over the conduct of the July crisis, by raising the cost of improvisation if statesmen insisted on adjusting plans at the last minute. Russian statesmen were told that an improvised partial mobilization would place Russia in a "extremely dangerous situation,"<sup>123</sup> and German civilians were warned against improvisation in similar terms. This in turn reflected the size of the "windows" which improvised partial mobilizations would open for the adversary on the frontier which the partial mobilization left unguarded, which in turn reflected the assumption that the offense was strong (since if defenses were strong a bungled mobilization would create less opportunity for others to exploit). Thus the cult of the offensive gave planners greater power to bind statesmen to the plans they had prepared.

**RUSSIAN MOBILIZATION PLANS.** On July 28, 1914, Russian leaders announced that partial Russian mobilization against Austria would be ordered on July 29. They took this step to address threats emanating from Austria, acting partly to lend emphasis to their warnings to Austria that Russia would fight if Serbia were invaded, partly to offset Austrian mobilization against Serbia, and partly to offset or forestall Austrian mobilization measures which they believed were taking place or which they feared might eventually take place against Russia in Galicia.<sup>124</sup> However, after this announcement was made, Russian military officers advised their civilian superiors that no plans for partial mobilization existed, that such a mobilization would be a "pure improvisation," as General Denikin later wrote, and that sowing confusion in the Russian railway timetables would impede Russia's ability to mobilize later on its northern frontier. General Sukhomlinov warned the Czar that "much time would be necessary in which to re-establish the normal conditions for any further mobilization" following a partial mobilization, and General Yanushkevich flatly told Sazonov that general mobilization "could not be put into operation" once partial mobilization began.<sup>125</sup> Thus Russian lead-

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123. By Generals Yanushkevich and Sukhomlinov, according to Sazonov, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 566. See also M.F. Schilling, "Introduction," in *How the War Began*, trans. W. Cyprian Bridge, with a Foreword by S.D. Sazonov (London: Allen & Unwin, 1925), pp. 16, 63.

124. On the Russian decision, see Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, pp. 85-87, 94-101; and Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 539-561.

125. Anton I. Denikin, *The Career of a Tsarist Officer: Memoirs, 1872-1916*, trans. Margaret Patoski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), p. 222; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 559; Schilling, *How the War Began*, p. 16.

ers were forced to choose between full mobilization or complete retreat, choosing full mobilization on July 30.

The cult of the offensive set the stage for this decision by buttressing Russian military calculations that full mobilization was safer than partial. We have little direct evidence explaining why Russian officers had prepared no plan for partial mobilization, but we can deduce their reasoning from their opinions on related subjects. These suggest that Russian officers believed that Germany would attack Russia if Russia fought Austria, and that the side mobilizing first would have the upper hand in a Russo–German war (as I have outlined above). Accordingly, it followed logically that Russia should launch any war with Austria by preempting Germany.

Russian leaders had three principal reasons to fear that Germany would not stand aside in an Austro–Russian conflict. First, the Russians were aware of the international Social Darwinism then sweeping Germany, and the expansionist attitude toward Russia which this worldview engendered. One Russian diplomat wrote that Germany was “beating all records of militarism” and “The Germans are not . . . wholly without the thought of removing from Russia at least part of the Baltic coastline in order to place us in the position of a second Serbia” in the course of a campaign for “German hegemony on the continent.”<sup>126</sup> Russian military officers monitored the bellicose talk across the border with alarm, one intelligence report warning: “In Germany at present, the task of gradually accustoming the army and the population to the thought of the inevitability of conflict with Russia has begun,” noting the regular public lectures which were then being delivered in Germany to foster war sentiment.<sup>127</sup>

Second, the Russians were aware of German alarm about windows and the talk of preventive war which this alarm engendered in Germany. Accordingly, Russian leaders expected that Germany might seize the excuse offered by a Balkan war to mount a preventive strike against Russia, especially since a war arising from the Balkans was a “best case” scenario for Germany, involving Austria on the side of Germany as it did. Thus General Yanushkevich explained Russia’s decision to mobilize against Germany in 1914: “We knew well that Germany was ready for war, that she was longing

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126. G.N. Trubetskoy, in 1909, quoted in Lieven, *Russia & the Origins of the First World War*, p. 96.

127. The Kiev District Staff, February 23, 1914, quoted in Fuller, “The Russian Empire and Its Potential Enemies,” p. 17.

for it at that moment, because our big armaments program was not yet completed . . . and because our war potential was not as great as it might be." Accordingly, Russia had to expect war with Germany: "We knew that war was inevitable, not only against Austria, but also against Germany. For this reason partial mobilization against Austria alone, which would have left our front towards Germany open . . . might have brought about a disaster, a terrible disaster."<sup>128</sup> In short, Russia had to strike to preempt a German preventive strike against Russia.

Third, the Russians knew that the Germans believed that German and Austrian security were closely linked. Germany would therefore feel compelled to intervene in any Austro-Russian war, because a Russian victory against Austria would threaten German safety. German leaders had widely advertised this intention: for instance, Bethmann Hollweg had warned the Reichstag in 1912 that if the Austrians "while asserting their interests should against all expectations be attacked by a third party, then we would have to come resolutely to their aid. And then we would fight for the maintenance of our own position in Europe and in defense of our future and security."<sup>129</sup> And in fact this was precisely what happened in 1914: Germany apparently decided to attack on learning of Russian *partial* mobilization, before Russian full mobilization was known in Germany.<sup>130</sup> This suggests that the role of "inflexible" Russian plans in causing the war is overblown—Russian full mobilization was sufficient but not necessary to cause the war; but it also helps explain why these plans were drawn as they were, and supports the view that some of the logic behind them was correct, given the German state of mind with which Russia had to contend.

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128. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 559. See also Fuller, "The Russian Empire and Its Potential Enemies," p. 16.

129. In 1912, quoted in Stern, *Failure of Illiberalism*, p. 84. Likewise the Kaiser explained that security requirements compelled Germany to defend Austria: "If we are forced to take up arms it will be to help *Austria*, not only to defend ourselves against Russia but against the Slavs in general and to remain *German*. . . ." In 1912, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 190–191, emphasis in original. The German White Book also reflected this thinking, declaring that the "subjugation of all the Slavs under Russian sceptre" would render the "position of the Teutonic race in Central Europe untenable." August 3, 1914, quoted in Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, p. 172.

130. See Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, pp. 198–199; and Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, pp. 7, 17–27; also Vol. 2, p. 485n. As Jagow plainly told the Russians on July 29: "If once you mobilize against Austria, then you will also take serious measures against us. . . . We are compelled to proclaim mobilization against Russia. . . ." Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 140.

In sum, Russians had to fear that expansionist, preventive, and alliance concerns might induce Germany to attack, which in turn reflected the German assumption that the offense was strong. The Russian belief that it paid to mobilize first reflected the effects of the same assumption in Russia. Had Europe known that the defense dominated, Russians would have had less reason to fear that an Austro-Russian war would spark a German attack, since the logic of expansionism and preventive war would presumably have been weaker in Germany, and Germany could more easily have tolerated some reduction in Austrian power without feeling that German safety was also threatened. At the same time, Russian soldiers would presumably have been slower to assume that they could improve their position in a Russo-German war by mobilizing preemptively. In short, the logic of general mobilization in Russia largely reflected and depended upon conclusions deduced from the cult of the offensive, or from its various manifestations. Without the cult of the offensive, a partial southern mobilization would have been the better option for Russia.

It also seems probable that the same logic helped persuade the Russian General Staff to eschew planning for a partial mobilization. If circumstances argued against a partial mobilization, they also argued against planning for one, since this would raise the risk that Russian civilians might actually implement the plan. This interpretation fits with suggestions that Russian officers exaggerated the difficulties of partial mobilization in their representations to Russian civilians.<sup>131</sup> If Russian soldiers left a partial mobilization option undeveloped because they believed that it would be dangerous to exercise, it follows that they also would emphasize the difficulty of improving a southern option, since they also opposed it on other grounds.

**GERMAN MOBILIZATION PLANS.** The Schlieffen Plan was a disastrous scheme which only approached success because the French war plan was equally foolish: had the French army stood on the defensive instead of lunging into Alsace-Lorraine, it would have smashed the German army at the French frontier. Yet General Schlieffen's plan was a sensible response to the offense-

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131. See L.C.F. Turner, "The Russian Mobilization in 1914," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1968), pp. 72-74. But see also Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 148-150.

Likewise, German soldiers exaggerated the difficulties of adapting to eastward mobilization, as many observers note, e.g., Tuchman, *Guns of August*, p. 100, and Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, p. 236.

dominant world imagined by many Germans. The plan was flawed because it grew from a fundamentally flawed image of warfare.

In retrospect, Germany should have retained the later war plan of the elder Moltke (Chief of Staff from 1857 to 1888), who would have conducted a limited offensive in the east against Russia while standing on the defensive in the west.<sup>132</sup> However, several considerations pushed German planners instead toward Schlieffen's grandiose scheme, which envisioned a quick victory against Belgium and France, followed by an offensive against Russia.

First, German planners assumed that France would attack Germany if Germany fought Russia, leaving Germany no option for a one-front war. By tying down German troops in Poland, an eastern war would create a yawning window of opportunity for France to recover its lost territories, and a decisive German victory over Russia would threaten French security by leaving France to face Germany alone. For these reasons they believed that France would be both too tempted and too threatened to stand aside. Bernhardt, among others, pointed out "the standing danger that France will attack us on a favorable occasion, as soon as we find ourselves involved in complications elsewhere."<sup>133</sup> The German declaration of war against France explained that France might suddenly attack from behind if Germany fought Russia; hence, "Germany cannot leave to France the choice of the moment" at which to attack.<sup>134</sup>

Second, German planners assumed that "window" considerations required a German offensive against either France or Russia at the outset of any war against the Entente. German armies could mobilize faster than the combined Entente armies; hence, the ratio of forces would most favor Germany at the beginning of the war. Therefore, Germany would do best to force an early decision, which in turn required that it assume the offensive, since otherwise its enemies would play a waiting game. As one observer explained, Germany

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132. Assessing the Schlieffen Plan are Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, and Snyder, "Defending the Offensive," pp. 189–294.

133. Bernhardt, quoted in Anon., *Germany's War Mania* (London: A.W. Shaw, 1914), p. 161.

134. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 194. Moreover, these fears reflected views found in France. When Poincaré was asked on July 29 if he believed war could be avoided, he reportedly replied: "It would be a great pity. We should never again find conditions better." Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 82n. Likewise, in 1912 the French General Staff concluded that a general war arising from the Balkans would leave Germany "at the mercy of the Entente" because Austrian forces would be diverted against Serbia, and "the Triple Entente would have the best chances of success and might gain a victory which would enable the map of Europe to be redrawn." Turner, *Origins*, p. 36. See also the opinions of Izvolsky and Bertie in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, pp. 20–21, and Vol. 2, p. 349n.

“has the speed and Russia has the numbers, and the safety of the German Empire forbade that Germany should allow Russia time to bring up masses of troops from all parts of her wide dominions.”<sup>135</sup> Germans believed that the window created by these differential mobilization rates was big, in turn, because they believed that both Germany and its enemies could mount a decisive offensive against the other with a small margin of superiority. If Germany struck at the right time, it could win easily—Germans hoped for victory in several weeks, as noted above—while if it waited it was doomed by Entente numerical superiority, which German defenses would be too weak to resist.

Third, German planners believed that an offensive against France would net them more than an offensive against Russia, which explains the western bias of the Schlieffen Plan. France could be attacked more easily than Russia, because French forces and resources lay within closer reach of German power; hence, as Moltke wrote before the war, “A speedy decision may be hoped for [against France], while an offensive against Russia would be an interminable affair.”<sup>136</sup> Moreover, France was the more dangerous opponent not to attack, because it could take the offensive against Germany more quickly than Russia, and could threaten more important German territories if Germany left its frontier unguarded. Thus Moltke explained that they struck westward because “Germany could not afford to expose herself to the danger of attack by strong French forces in the direction of the Lower Rhine,” and Wegerer wrote later that the German strike was compelled by the need to protect the German industrial region from French attack.<sup>137</sup> In German eyes these considerations made it too dangerous to stand on the defensive in the West in hopes that war with France could be avoided.

Finally, German planners believed that Britain would not have time to bring decisive power to bear on the continent before the German army overran France. Accordingly, they discounted the British opposition which their attack on France and Belgium would elicit: Schlieffen declared that if the British army landed, it would be “securely billeted” at Antwerp or “arrested” by the German armies,<sup>138</sup> while Moltke said he hoped that it would

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135. Goschen, in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 321.

136. Moltke, in General Ludendorff, *The General Staff and its Problems*, trans. F.A. Holt (New York: E.P. Dutton, n.d.), Vol. 1, p. 61.

137. Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 357; and Alfred von Wegerer, *A Refutation of the Versailles War Guilt Thesis*, trans. Edwin H. Zeydel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), p. 310.

138. Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 71, 161–162; and Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, p. 101. See also Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, p. 161. But see also Moltke quoted in Turner, *Origins of the World War*, p. 64.

land so that the German army “could take care of it.”<sup>139</sup> In accordance with their “bandwagon” worldview, German leaders also hoped that German power might cow Britain into neutrality; or that Britain might hesitate before entering the war, and then might quit in discouragement once the French were beaten—Schlieffen expected that, “If the battle [in France] goes in favor of the Germans, the English are likely to abandon their enterprise as hopeless”—which led them to further discount the extra political costs of attacking westward.<sup>140</sup>

Given these four assumptions, an attack westward, even one through Belgium which provoked British intervention, was the most sensible thing for Germany to do. Each assumption, in turn, was a manifestation of the belief that the offense was strong. Thus while the Schlieffen Plan has been widely criticized for its political and military naiveté, it would have been a prudent plan had Germans actually lived in the offense-dominant world they imagined. Under these circumstances quick mobilization would have in fact given them a chance to win a decisive victory during their window of opportunity, and if they had failed to exploit this window by attacking, they would eventually have lost; the risk of standing on the defense in the West in hopes that France would not fight would have been too great; and the invasion of France and Belgium would have been worth the price, because British power probably could not have affected the outcome of the war.

Thus the belief in the power of the offense was the linchpin which held Schlieffen’s logic together, and the main criticisms which can be levelled at the German war plan flow from the falsehood of this belief. German interests would have been better served by a limited, flexible, east-only plan which conformed to the defensive realities of 1914. Moreover, had Germany adopted such a plan, the First World War might well have been confined to Eastern Europe, never becoming a world war.

“MOBILIZATION MEANS WAR”

“Mobilization meant war” in 1914 because mobilization meant war to Germany: the German war plan mandated that special units of the German standing army would attack Belgium and Luxemburg immediately after mobilization was ordered, and long before it was completed. (In fact Germany

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139. Ritter, *Sword and the Scepter*, Vol. 2, p. 157.

140. Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 163. See also Bethmann Hollweg, quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 169, 186–187.

invaded Luxemburg on August 1, the same day on which it ordered full mobilization.) Thus Germany had no pure "mobilization" plan, but rather had a "mobilization and attack" plan under which mobilizing and attacking would be undertaken simultaneously. As a result, Europe would cascade into war if any European state mobilized in a manner which eventually forced German mobilization.

This melding of mobilization and attack in Germany reflected two decisions to which I have already alluded. First, Germans believed that they would lose their chance for victory and create a grave danger for themselves if they gave the Entente time to mobilize its superior numbers. In German eyes, German defenses would be too weak to defeat this superiority. As one German apologist later argued, "Germany could never with success have warded off numerically far superior opponents by means of a defensive war against a mobilized Europe" had it mobilized and stood in place. Hence it was "essential for the Central Powers to begin hostilities as soon as possible" following mobilization.<sup>141</sup> Likewise, during the July crisis, Jagow explained that Germany must attack in response to Russian mobilization because "we are obliged to act as fast as possible before Russia has the time to mobilize her army."<sup>142</sup>

Second, the German war plan depended on the quick seizure of Liège. Germany could only secure Liège quickly if German troops arrived before Belgium prepared its defense, and this in turn depended on achieving surprise against Belgium. Accordingly, German military planners enshrouded the planned Liège attack in such dark secrecy that Bethmann Hollweg, Admiral Tirpitz, and possibly even the Kaiser were unaware of it.<sup>143</sup> They also felt compelled to strike as soon as mobilization was authorized, both because Belgium would strengthen the defenses of Liège as a normal part of the Belgian mobilization which German mobilization would engender, and because otherwise Belgium eventually might divine German intentions towards Liège and focus upon preparing its defense and destroying the critical bridges and tunnels which it controlled.

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141. Von Wegerer, *Refutation*, pp. 307–309.

142. August 4, quoted in Alfred Vagts, *Defense and Diplomacy* (New York: Kings Crown Press, 1956), p. 306. Likewise Bethmann Hollweg explained that, if Russia mobilized, "we could hardly sit and talk any longer because we have to strike immediately in order to have any chance of winning at all." Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 484.

143. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 581; Vol. 3, pp. 195, 250, 391; Ritter, *Sword and the Scepter*, Vol. 2, p. 266; and Fay, *Origins*, Vol. 1, pp. 41–42.

Both of these decisions in turn reflected German faith in the power of the offense, and were not appropriate to a defense-dominant world. Had Germans recognized the actual power of the defense, they might have recognized that neither Germany nor its enemies could win decisively even by exploiting a fleeting material advantage, and decided instead to mobilize without attacking. The tactical windows that drove Germany to strike in 1914 were a mirage, as events demonstrated during 1914–1918, and Germans would have known this in advance had they understood the power of the defense. Likewise, the Liège *coup de main* was an artifact of Schlieffen's offensive plan; if the Germans had stuck with the elder Moltke's plan, they could have abandoned both the Liège attack and the compulsion to strike quickly which it helped to engender.

#### BRINKMANSHIP AND FAITS ACCOMPLIS

Two *faits accomplis* by the Central powers set the stage for the outbreak of the war: the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia on July 23, and the Austrian declaration of war against Serbia on July 28. The Central powers also planned to follow these with a third *fait accompli*, by quickly smashing Serbia on the battlefield before the Entente could intervene. These plans and actions reflected the German strategy for the crisis: "*fait accompli* and then friendly towards the Entente, the shock can be endured," as Kurt Riezler had summarized.<sup>144</sup>

This *fait accompli* strategy deprived German leaders of warning that their actions would plunge Germany into a world war, by depriving the Entente of the chance to warn Germany that it would respond if Austria attacked Serbia. It also deprived diplomats of the chance to resolve the Austro–Serbian dispute in a manner acceptable to Russia. Whether this affected the outcome of the crisis depends on German intentions—if Germany sought a pretext for a world war, then this missed opportunity had no importance, but if it preferred the status quo to world war, as I believe it narrowly did, then the decision to adopt *fait accompli* tactics was a crucial step on the road to war.

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144. July 8, quoted in John A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion: The Fischer Controversy in German Historiography* (London: George Prior, 1975), p. 39. Austria declared war on Serbia, as one German diplomat explained, "in order to forestall any attempt at mediation" by the Entente; and the rapid occupation of Serbia was intended to "confront the world with a '*fait accompli*.'" Tschirschky, in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 5; and Jagow, in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 344; see also pp. 453–460.

Had Germany not done so, it might have recognized where its policies led before it took irrevocable steps, and have drawn back.

The influence of the cult of the offensive is seen both in the German adoption of this *fait accompli* strategy and in the disastrous scope of the results which followed in its train. Some Germans, such as Kurt Riezler, apparently favored brinkmanship and *fait accompli* diplomacy as a means of peaceful expansion.<sup>145</sup> Others probably saw it as a means to provoke a continental war. In either case it reflected a German willingness to trade peace for territory, which reflected German expansionism—which in turn reflected security concerns fuelled by the cult of the offensive. Even those who saw *faits accomplis* as tools of peaceful imperialism recognized their risks, believing that necessity justified the risk. Thus Riezler saw the world in Darwinistic terms: “each people wants to grow, expand, dominate and subjugate others without end . . . until the world has become an organic unity under [single] domination.”<sup>146</sup> *Faits accomplis* were dangerous tools whose adoption reflected the dangerous circumstances which Germans believed they faced.

The cult of the offensive also stiffened the resistance of the Entente to the Austro-German *fait accompli*, by magnifying the dangers they believed it posed to their own security.<sup>147</sup> Thus Russian leaders believed that Russian security would be directly jeopardized if Austria crushed Serbia, because they valued the power which Serbia added to their alliance, and because they feared a domino effect, running to Constantinople and beyond, if Serbia were overrun. Sazonov believed that Serbian and Bulgarian military power was a vital Russian resource, “five hundred thousand bayonets to guard the Balkans” which “would bar the road forever to German penetration, Austrian invasion.”<sup>148</sup> If this asset were lost, Russia’s defense of its own territories would be jeopardized by the German approach to Constantinople: Sazonov warned the Czar, “First Serbia would be gobbled up; then will come Bulgaria’s turn, and then we shall have her on the Black Sea.” This would be

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145. On Riezler’s thought, see Moses, *Politics of Illusion*, pp. 27–44; and Thompson, *In the Eye of the Storm*.

146. Quoted in Moses, *Politics of Illusion*, pp. 28, 31. Likewise during the war Riezler wrote that unless Germany gained a wider sphere of influence in Europe “we will in the long run be crushed between the great world empires . . . Russia and England.” Thompson, *In the Eye of the Storm*, p. 107.

147. I am grateful to Jack Snyder for this and related observations.

148. Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, p. 131n. See also Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 40–41, 99–100, 147.

“the death-warrant of Russia” since in such an event “the whole of southern Russia would be subject to [Germany].”<sup>149</sup>

Similar views could be found in France. During the July crisis one French observer warned that French and Serbian security were closely intertwined, and the demise of Serbia would directly threaten French security:

To do away with Serbia means to double the strength which Austria can send against Russia: to double Austro–Hungarian resistance to the Russian Army means to enable Germany to send some more army corps against France. For every Serbian soldier killed by a bullet on the Morava one more Prussian soldier can be sent to the Moselle. . . . It is for us to grasp this truth and draw the consequences from it before disaster overtakes Serbia.<sup>150</sup>

These considerations helped spur the Russian and French decisions to begin military preparations on July 25, which set in train a further sequence of events: German preliminary preparations, which were detected and exaggerated by French and Russian officials, spurring them on to further measures, which helped spur the Germans to their decision to mobilize on July 30. The effects of the original *fait accompli* rippled outward in ever-wider circles, because the reactions of each state perturbed the safety of others—forcing them to react or preempt, and ultimately forcing Germany to launch a world war which even it preferred to avoid.

Had Europe known that, in reality, the defense dominated, these dynamics might have been dampened: the compulsion to resort to *faits accomplis*, the scope of the dangers they raised for others, and the rippling effects engendered by others’ reactions all would have been lessened. States still might have acted as they did, but they would have been less pressured in this direction.

#### PROBLEMS OF ALLIANCES: UNCONDITIONALITY AND AMBIGUITY

Two aspects of the European alliance system fostered the outbreak of World War I and helped spread the war. First, both alliances had an unconditional, offensive character—allies supported one another unreservedly, regardless of whether their behavior was defensive or provocative. As a result a local war would tend to spread throughout Europe. And second, German leaders were not convinced that Britain would fight as an Entente member, which

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149. Fay, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 300; Sazonov, *Fateful Years*, p. 179; Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, p. 87.

150. J. Herbette, July 29, in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 596.

encouraged Germany to confront the Entente. In both cases the cult of the offensive contributed to the problem.

UNCONDITIONAL (“TIGHT”) ALLIANCES. Many scholars contend that the mere existence of the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente caused and spread the war. Sidney Fay concluded, “The greatest single underlying cause of the War was the system of secret alliance,” and Raymond Aron argued that the division of Europe into two camps “made it inevitable that any conflict involving two great powers would bring general war.”<sup>151</sup> But the problem with the alliances of 1914 lay less with their existence than with their nature. A network of defensive alliances, such as Bismarck’s alliances of the 1880s, would have lowered the risk of war by facing aggressors with many enemies, and by making status quo powers secure in the knowledge that they had many allies. Wars also would have tended to remain localized, because the allies of an aggressor would have stood aside from any war that aggressor had provoked. Thus the unconditional nature of alliances rather than their mere existence was the true source of their danger in 1914.

The Austro–German alliance was offensive chiefly and simply because its members had compatible aggressive aims. Moreover, German and Russian mobilization plans left their neighbors no choice but to behave as allies by putting them all under threat of attack. But the Entente also operated more unconditionally, or “tightly,” because Britain and France failed to restrain Russia from undertaking mobilization measures during the July crisis. This was a failure in alliance diplomacy, which in turn reflected constraints imposed upon the Western allies by the offensive assumptions and preparations with which they had to work.

First, they were hamstrung by the offensive nature of Russian military doctrine, which left them unable to demand that Russia confine itself to defensive preparations. All Russian preparations were inherently offensive, because Russian war plans were offensive. This put Russia’s allies in an “all or nothing” situation—either they could demand that Russia stand unprepared, or they could consent to provocative preparations. Thus the British ambassador to St. Petersburg warned that Britain faced a painful decision, to “choose between giving Russia our active support or renouncing her friendship.”<sup>152</sup> Had Russia confined itself to preparing its own defense, it

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151. Fay, *Origins*, Vol. 1, p. 34; and Raymond Aron, *The Century of Total War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 15.

152. Buchanan, in Fay, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 379.

would have sacrificed its Balkan interests by leaving Austria free to attack Serbia, and this it would have been very reluctant to do. However, the British government was probably willing to sacrifice Russia's Balkan interests to preserve peace;<sup>153</sup> what Britain was unable to do was to frame a request to Russia which would achieve this, because there was no obvious class of defensive activity that it could demand. Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, wrote later:

I felt impatient at the suggestion that it was for me to influence or restrain Russia. I could do nothing but express pious hopes in general terms to Sazonov. If I were to address a direct request to him that Russia should not mobilize, I knew his reply: Germany was much more ready for war than Russia; it was a tremendous risk for Russia to delay her mobilization. . . . I did most honestly feel that neither Russian nor French mobilization was an unreasonable or unnecessary precaution.<sup>154</sup>

One sees in this statement a losing struggle to cope with the absence of defensive options. Russia was threatened, and must mobilize. How could Britain object?

Britain and France were also constrained by their dependence upon the strength and unity of the Entente for their own security, which limited their ability to make demands on Russia. Because they feared they might fracture the Entente if they pressed Russia too hard, they tempered their demands to preserve the alliance. Thus Poincaré wrote later that France had been forced to reconcile its efforts to restrain Russia with the need to preserve the Franco-Russian alliance, "the break up of which would leave us in isolation at the mercy of our rivals."<sup>155</sup> Likewise Winston Churchill recalled that "the one thing [the Entente states] would not do was repudiate each other. To do this might avert the war for the time being. It would leave each of them to face the next crisis alone. They did not dare to separate."<sup>156</sup> These fears were probably overdrawn, since Russia had no other option than alliance with the other Entente states, but apparently they affected French and British behavior.<sup>157</sup> This in turn reflected the assumption in France and Britain that the security of the Entente members was closely interdependent.

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153. See Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 176; and Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 295.

154. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 518.

155. *Ibid.*, p. 605.

156. Winston Churchill, *The Unknown War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), p. 103.

157. Thus Grey later wrote that he had feared a "diplomatic triumph on the German side and humiliation on the other as would smash the Entente, and if it did not break the Franco-Russian

French leaders also felt forced in their own interests to aid Russia if Russia embroiled itself with Germany, because French security depended on the maintenance of Russian power. This in turn undermined the French ability to credibly threaten to discipline a provocative Russia. Thus the British ambassador to Paris reflected French views when he cabled that he could not imagine that France would remain quiescent during a Russo–German war, because “If [the] French undertook to remain so, the Germans would first attack [the] Russians and, if they defeated them, they would then turn round on the French.”<sup>158</sup> This prospect delimited French power to restrain Russian conduct.

Third, British leaders were unaware that German mobilization meant war, hence that peace required Britain to restrain Russia from mobilizing first, as well as attacking. As a result, they took a more relaxed view of Russian mobilization than they otherwise might, while frittering away their energies on schemes to preserve peace which assumed that war could be averted even after the mobilizations began.<sup>159</sup> This British ignorance reflected German failure to explain clearly to the Entente that mobilization did indeed mean war—German leaders had many opportunities during the July crisis to make this plain, but did not do so.<sup>160</sup> We can only guess why Germany was silent, but German desire to avoid throwing a spotlight on the Liège operation probably played a part, leading German soldiers to conceal the plan from German civilians, which led German civilians to conceal the political implications of the plan from the rest of Europe.<sup>161</sup> Thus preemptive planning threw a shroud of secrecy over military matters, which obscured the mechanism that would unleash the war and rendered British statesmen less able

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alliance, would leave it without spirit, a spineless and helpless thing.” Likewise during July 1914 Harold Nicolson wrote: “Our attitude during the crisis will be regarded by Russia as a test and we must be careful not to alienate her.” Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, pp. 38, 258.

158. Bertie, on August 1, in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 349n.

159. Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 198, 212–213, 250–251; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 330–336.

160. See Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 479–481; Vol. 3, pp. 41–43, 61–65. Albertini writes that European leaders “had no knowledge of what mobilization actually was . . . what consequences it brought with it, to what risks it exposed the peace of Europe. They looked on it as a measure costly, it is true, but to which recourse might be had without necessarily implying that war would follow.” This reflected German policy: Bethmann’s ultimatum to Russia “entirely omitted to explain that for Germany to mobilize meant to begin war,” and Sazonov gathered “the distinct impression that German mobilization was not equivalent to war” from his exchanges with German officials. Vol. 2, p. 479; Vol. 3, pp. 41–43.

161. Kautsky and Albertini suggest that the German deception was intended to lull the Russians into military inaction, but it seems more likely that they sought to lull the Belgians. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 43.

to wield British power effectively for peace by obscuring what it was that Britain had to do.

Lastly, the nature of German war plans empowered Russia to involve France, and probably Britain also, in war, since Germany would be likely to start any eastern war by attacking westward, as Russian planners were aware. Hence France and Britain would probably have to fight for Russia even if they preferred to stand aside, because German planners assumed that France would fight eventually and planned accordingly, and the plans they drew would threaten vital British interests. We have no direct evidence that Russian policies were emboldened by these considerations, but it would be surprising if they never occurred to Russian leaders.

These dynamics reflected the general tendency of alliances toward tightness and offensiveness in an offense-dominant world. Had Europe known that the defense had the advantage, the British and French could have more easily afforded to discipline Russia in the interest of peace, and this might have affected Russian calculations. Had Russia had a defensive military strategy, its allies could more easily and legitimately have asked it to confine itself to defensive preparations. Had British leaders better understood German war plans, they might have known to focus their efforts on preventing Russian mobilization. And had German plans been different, Russian leaders would have been more uncertain that Germany would entangle the Western powers in eastern wars, and perhaps proceeded more cautiously.

The importance of the failure of the Western powers to restrain Russia can be exaggerated, since Russia was not the chief provocateur in the July crisis. Moreover, too much can be made of factors which hamstrung French restraint of Russia, since French desire to prevent war was tepid at best, so French inaction probably owed as much to indifference as inability. Nevertheless, Russian mobilization was an important step toward a war which Britain, if not France, urgently wanted to prevent; hence, to that extent, the alliance dynamics which allowed it helped bring on the war.

**THE AMBIGUITY OF BRITISH POLICY.** The British government is often accused of causing the war by failing to warn Germany that Britain would fight. Thus Albertini concludes that "to act as Grey did was to allow the catastrophe to happen,"<sup>162</sup> and Germans themselves later argued that the British had led them on, the Kaiser complaining of "the grossest deception" by the British.<sup>163</sup>

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162. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 644.

163. *Ibid.*, p. 517. See also Tirpitz, quoted in *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 189.

The British government indeed failed to convey a clear threat to the Germans until after the crisis was out of control, and the Germans apparently were misled by this. Jagow declared on July 26 that “we are sure of England’s neutrality,” while during the war the Kaiser wailed, “If only someone had told me beforehand that England would take up arms against us!”<sup>164</sup> However, this failure was not entirely the fault of British leaders; it also reflected their circumstances. First, they apparently felt hamstrung by the lack of a defensive policy option. Grey voiced fear that if he stood too firmly with France and Russia, they would grow too demanding, while Germany would feel threatened, and “Such a menace would but stiffen her attitude.”<sup>165</sup>

Second, British leaders were unaware of the nature of the German policy to which they were forced to react until very late, which left them little time in which to choose and explain their response. Lulled by the Austro-German *fait accompli* strategy, they were unaware until July 23 that a crisis was upon them. On July 6, Arthur Nicolson, undersecretary of the British foreign office, cheerfully declared, “We have no very urgent and pressing question to preoccupy us in the rest of Europe.”<sup>166</sup> They also were apparently unaware that a continental war would begin with a complete German conquest of Belgium, thanks to the dark secrecy surrounding the Liège operation. Britain doubtless would have joined the war even if Germany had not invaded Belgium, but the Belgian invasion provoked a powerful emotional response in Britain which spurred a quick decision on August 4. This reaction suggests that the British decision would have been clearer to the British, hence to the Germans, had the nature of the German operation been known in advance.

Thus the British failure to warn Germany was due as much to German secrecy as to British indecision. Albertini’s condemnation of Grey seems unfair: governments cannot easily take national decisions for war in less than a week in response to an uncertain provocation. The ambiguity of British policy should be recognized as an artifact of the secret styles of the Central powers, which reflected the competitive politics and preemptive military doctrines of the times.

#### WHY SO MANY “BLUNDERS”?

Historians often ascribe the outbreak of the war to the blunders of a mediocre European leadership. Barbara Tuchman describes the Russian Czar as having

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164. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 429; and Tuchman, *Guns of August*, p. 143. See also Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 514–527, 643–650; and Jarausch, “Illusion of Limited War.”

165. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 631; and Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 90.

166. Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, pp. 417–418.

“a mind so shallow as to be all surface,” and Albertini refers to the “untrained, incapable, dull-witted Bethmann-Hollweg,” the “mediocrity of all the personages” in the German government, and the “short-sighted and unenlightened” Austrians. Ludwig Reiners devotes a chapter to “Berchtold’s Blunders”; Michael Howard notes the “bland ignorance among national leaders” of defense matters; and Oron Hale claims that “the men who directed international affairs in 1914 were at the lowest level of competence and ability in several decades.”<sup>167</sup>

Statesmen often did act on false premises or fail to anticipate the consequences of their actions during the July crisis. For instance, Russian leaders were initially unaware that a partial mobilization would impede a later general mobilization;<sup>168</sup> they probably exaggerated the military importance of mobilizing against Austria quickly;<sup>169</sup> they falsely believed Germany would acquiesce to their partial mobilization; they probably exaggerated the significance of the Austrian bombardment of Belgrade;<sup>170</sup> they falsely believed a general Russian mobilization could be concealed from Germany; and they mobilized without fully realizing that for Germany “mobilization meant war.”<sup>171</sup>

German leaders encouraged Russia to believe that Germany would tolerate a partial Russian mobilization, and failed to explain to Entente statesmen that mobilization meant war, leading British and Russian leaders to assume that it did not.<sup>172</sup> They also badly misread European political sentiment, hoping that Italy, Sweden, Rumania, and even Japan would fight with the Central powers, and that Britain and Belgium would stand aside.<sup>173</sup> For their part, Britain and Italy failed to warn Germany of their policies; and Britain acquiesced to Russian mobilization, apparently without realizing that Russian mobilization meant German mobilization, which meant war. Finally, intelli-

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167. Tuchman, *Guns of August*, p. 78; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 389, 436; Vol. 3, p. 253; Ludwig Reiners, *The Lamps Went Out in Europe* (New York: Pantheon, 1955), pp. 112–122; Howard quoted in Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 243; and Oron J. Hale, *The Great Illusion: 1900–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 285.

168. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 295–296.

169. See Turner, *Origins of the First World War*, pp. 92–93; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 409; Vol. 3, pp. 230–231; but see also Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 148–149.

170. Reiners, *Lamps Went Out in Europe*, p. 135; and Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 553.

171. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 574, 579–581; Vol. 3, pp. 56, 60–65.

172. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 332, 479–482, 485, 499–500, 550; Vol. 3, pp. 41–43, 61–65; Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 245, 253, 266.

173. See Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 334, 673, 678; Vol. 3, p. 233; Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 226, 255, 302, 350–353; Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, pp. 72–74, 322; Vol. 2, pp. 52–55, 149, 390n. Also relevant is Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 308–309, 480, 541.

gence mistakes on both sides made matters worse. Russian leaders exaggerated German and Austrian mobilization measures, some German reports exaggerated Russian mobilizations, and French officials exaggerated German measures, which helped spur both sides to take further measures.<sup>174</sup>

What explains this plethora of blunders and accidents? Perhaps Europe was unlucky in the leaders it drew, but conditions in 1914 also made mistakes easy to make and hard to undo. Because secrecy was tight and *faits accomplis* were the fashion, facts were hard to acquire. Because windows were large and preemption was tempting, mistakes provoked rapid, dramatic reactions that quickly made the mistake irreversible. Statesmen seem like blunderers in retrospect partly because the international situation in 1914 was especially demanding and unforgiving of error. Historians castigate Grey for failing to rapidly take drastic national decisions under confusing and unexpected circumstances in the absence of domestic political consensus, and criticize Sazonov for his shaky grasp of military details on July 28 which no Russian civilian had had in mind five days earlier. The standard implicit in these criticisms is too stiff—statecraft seldom achieves such speed and precision. The blame for 1914 lies less with the statesmen of the times than with the conditions of the times and the severe demands these placed on statesmen.

#### BLAMECASTING

The explosive conditions created by the cult of the offensive made it easier for Germany to spark war without being blamed, by enabling that country to provoke its enemies to take defensive or preemptive steps which confused the question of responsibility for the war. German advocates of preventive war believed that Germany had to avoid blame for its outbreak, to preserve British neutrality and German public support for the war. Moreover, they seemed confident that the onus for war *could* be substantially shifted onto their opponents. Thus Moltke counselled war but warned that “the attack must be started by the Slavs,”<sup>175</sup> Bethmann Hollweg decreed that “we must

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174. See generally Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, pp. 238–242; and Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, pp. 67–68. For details on Russia see Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 499, 545–546, 549, 566–567, 570–571, 576; Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, pp. 97–98, 238, 244n.; Schilling, *How the War Began*, pp. 61–62; and Sazonov, *Fateful Years*, pp. 193, 199–200, 202–203. For details on France, see Joffre, *Personal Memoirs*, Vol. 1, pp. 117–128; and Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 647; Vol. 3, p. 67. On Germany see Trumpener, “War Premeditated?,” pp. 73–74; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 529, 560, 637; Vol. 3, pp. 2–3, 6–9; and Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 291–294.

175. In 1913, in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 486.

give the impression of being forced into war,"<sup>176</sup> and Admiral von Müller summarized German policy during the July crisis as being to "keep quiet, letting Russia put herself in the wrong, but then not shying away from war."<sup>177</sup> "It is very important that we should appear to have been provoked" in a war arising from the Balkans, wrote Jagow, for "then—but probably only then—Britain can remain neutral."<sup>178</sup> And as the war broke out, von Müller wrote, "The mood is brilliant. The government has succeeded very well in making us appear as the attacked."<sup>179</sup>

These and other statements suggest an official German hope that German responsibility could be concealed. Moreover, whatever the source of this confidence, it had a sound basis in prevailing military conditions, which blurred the distinction between offensive and defensive conduct, and forced such quick reactions to provocation that the question of "who started it?" could later be obscured. Indeed, the German "innocence campaign" during and after the war succeeded for many years partly because the war developed from a rapid and complex chemistry of provocation and response which could easily be misconstrued by a willful propagandist or a gullible historian.<sup>180</sup> Defenders seemed like aggressors to the untrained eye, because all defended quickly and aggressively. Jack Snyder rightly points out elsewhere in this issue that German war plans were poorly adapted for the strategy of brinkmanship and peaceful expansion which many Germans pursued until 1914, but prevailing European military arrangements and beliefs also facilitated the deceptions in which advocates of preventive war believed Germany had to engage.

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176. On July 27, 1914, in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 486.

177. On July 27, in J.C.G. Röhl, "Admiral von Müller and the Approach of War, 1911–1914," *Historical Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1969), p. 669. In the same spirit, Bernhardi (who hoped for Russian rather than British neutrality) wrote before the war that the task of German diplomacy was to spur a French attack, continuing: "[W]e must not hope to bring about this attack by waiting passively. Neither France nor Russia nor England need to attack in order to further their interests. . . . [Rather] we must initiate an active policy which, without attacking France, will so prejudice her interests or those of England that both these States would feel themselves compelled to attack us. Opportunities for such procedures are offered both in Africa and in Europe. . . ." Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, p. 280.

178. In 1913, in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 212.

179. Röhl, "Admiral von Müller," p. 670.

180. On this innocence campaign, see Imanuel Geiss, "The Outbreak of the First World War and German War Aims," in Walter Laqueur and George L. Mosse, eds., *1914: The Coming of the First World War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 71–78.

### *Conclusion*

The cult of the offensive was a major underlying cause of the war of 1914, feeding or magnifying a wide range of secondary dangers which helped pull the world to war. The causes of the war are often catalogued as an unrelated grab-bag of misfortunes which unluckily arose at the same time; but many shared a common source in the cult of the offensive, and should be recognized as its symptoms and artifacts rather than as isolated phenomena.

The consequences of the cult of the offensive are illuminated by imagining the politics of 1914 had European leaders recognized the actual power of the defense. German expansionists then would have met stronger arguments that empire was needless and impossible, and Germany could have more easily let the Russian military buildup run its course, knowing that German defenses could still withstand Russian attack. All European states would have been less tempted to mobilize first, and each could have tolerated more preparations by adversaries before mobilizing themselves, so the spiral of mobilization and counter-mobilization would have operated more slowly, if at all. If armies mobilized, they might have rushed to defend their own trenches and fortifications, instead of crossing frontiers, divorcing mobilization from war. Mobilizations could more easily have been confined to single frontiers, localizing the crisis. Britain could more easily have warned the Germans and restrained the Russians, and all statesmen could more easily have recovered and reversed mistakes made in haste or on false information. Thus the logic that led Germany to provoke the 1914 crisis would have been undermined, and the chain reaction by which the war spread outward from the Balkans would have been very improbable. In all likelihood, the Austro-Serbian conflict would have been a minor and soon-forgotten disturbance on the periphery of European politics.

This conclusion does not depend upon how one resolves the "Fischer controversy" over German prewar aims; while the outcome of the Fischer debate affects the *way* in which the cult caused the war, it does not affect the importance which the cult should be assigned. If one accepts the Fischer-Geiss-Röhl view that German aims were very aggressive, then one emphasizes the role of the cult in feeding German expansionism, German window thinking, and the German ability to catalyze a war while concealing responsibility for it by provoking a preemption by Germany's adversaries. If one believes that Germany was less aggressive, then one focuses on the role of the incentive to preempt in spurring the Russian and French decisions to

mobilize, the nature of Russian and German mobilization plans, the British failure to restrain Russia and warn Germany, the scope and irreversibility of the effects of the Austro-German *fait accompli*, and the various other blunders of statesmen.<sup>181</sup> The cult of the offensive would play a different role in the history as taught by these two schools, but a central role in both.

The 1914 case thus supports Robert Jervis and other theorists who propose that an offense-dominant world is more dangerous, and warns both superpowers against the offensive ideas which many military planners in both countries favor. Offensive doctrines have long been dogma in the Soviet military establishment, and they are gaining adherents in the United States as well. This is seen in the declining popularity of the nuclear strategy of "assured destruction" and the growing fashionability of "counterforce" nuclear strategies,<sup>182</sup> which are essentially offensive in nature.<sup>183</sup>

The 1914 case bears directly on the debate about these counterforce strategies, warning that the dangers of counterforce include but also extend far beyond the well-known problems of "crisis instability" and preemptive war. If the superpowers achieved disarming counterforce capabilities, or if they believed they had done so, the entire political universe would be disturbed. The logic of self-protection in a counterforce world would compel much of the same behavior and produce the same phenomena that drove the world to war in 1914—dark political and military secrecy, intense competition for resources and allies, yawning windows of opportunity and vulnerability, intense arms-racing, and offensive and preemptive war plans of great scope and violence. Smaller political and military mistakes would have larger and less reversible consequences. Crises would be harder to control, since military

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181. A useful review of the debate about German aims is Moses, *Politics of Illusion*.

182. On the growth of offensive ideas under the Reagan Administration, see Barry R. Posen and Stephen Van Evera, "Defense Policy and the Reagan Administration: Departure from Containment," *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Summer 1983), pp. 24–30. On counterforce strategies, a recent critical essay is Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

183. "Counterforce" forces include forces which could preemptively destroy opposing nuclear forces before they are launched, forces which could destroy retaliating warheads in flight towards the attacker's cities, and forces which could limit the damage which retaliating warheads could inflict on the attacker's society if they arrived. Hence, "counterforce" weapons and programs include highly accurate ICBMs and SLBMs (which could destroy opposing ICBMs) and air defense against bombers, ballistic missile defense for cities, and civil defense. Seemingly "defensive" programs such as the Reagan Administration's ballistic missile defense ("Star Wars") program and parallel Soviet ballistic missile defense programs are in fact *offensive* under the inverted logic of a MAD world. See Posen and Van Evera, "Defense Policy and the Reagan Administration," pp. 24–25.

alerts would open and close larger windows, defensive military preparations would carry larger offensive implications, and smaller provocations could spur preemptive attack. Arms control would be harder to achieve, since secrecy would impede verification and treaties which met the security requirements of both sides would be harder to frame, which would circumscribe the ability of statesmen to escape this frightful world by agreement.

“Assured destruction” leaves much to be desired as a nuclear strategy, and the world of “mutual assured destruction” (“MAD”) which it fosters leaves much to be desired as well. But 1914 warns that we tamper with MAD at our peril: any exit from MAD to a counterforce world would create a much more dangerous arrangement, whose outlines we glimpsed in the First World War.