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International Security, Volume 15, Issue 3 (Winter, 1990-1991), 120-150.

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Marc Trachtenberg

The idea that a great war need not be the product of deliberate decision—that it can come because statesmen “lose control” of events—is one of the most basic and most common notions in contemporary American strategic thought. A crisis, it is widely assumed, might unleash forces of an essentially military nature that overwhelm the political process and bring on a war that nobody wants. Many important conclusions about the risk of nuclear war, and thus about the political meaning of nuclear forces, rest on this fundamental idea.

This theory of “inadvertent war” is in turn rooted, to a quite extraordinary degree, in a specific interpretation of a single historical episode: the coming of the First World War during the July Crisis in 1914.¹ It is often taken for granted that the sort of military system that existed in Europe at the time—a system of interlocking mobilizations and of war plans that placed a great emphasis on rapid offensive action—directly led to a conflict that might otherwise have been avoided. George Quester’s view is typical of the way the issue is treated in much of the political science literature. “World War I,” he writes, “broke out as a spasm of pre-emptive mobilization schedules.”²

A longer version of the present article is being published as a chapter in my forthcoming book, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). That chapter will go into a number of issues which, for reasons of space, could not be dealt with here.

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1. The term “inadvertent war” is used here in the specific sense of a war brought on by forces of a military nature; it is not to be taken as referring to the much more general idea that war may break out even though it may not have been intended or anticipated by any of the major actors at the beginning of a crisis. For interpretations of the coming of the First World War which emphasize the role played by the mobilization system in bringing on the conflict, see, for example: Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 221–225; Graham T. Allison, Albert Carnesale, and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., eds., *Hawks, Doves, and Owls: An Agenda for Avoiding Nuclear War* (New York: Norton, 1985), pp. 17–18, 30, 43, 210, 217; Richard Ned Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management: A Dangerous Illusion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 24–26, 32–35, 59–60, 109–113, 122–123. Note also the rather extreme argument in Paul Bracken’s *The Command and Control of Nuclear Forces* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). This book is laced with references to the July Crisis; see esp. p. 65 where Bracken admits that his argument about how a nuclear war could begin might sound a bit extreme “were it not for the history of the outbreak of World War I.”

2. George Quester, *Deterrence Before Hiroshima* (New York: Wiley, 1966), p. 17.

And many well-known historians make the same sort of argument. According to Barbara Tuchman, for example, statesmen tried to draw back on the eve of the war, “but the pull of military schedules dragged them forward.”³ A.J.P. Taylor agrees. The German war plan, the famous Schlieffen Plan, was, he argues, instrumental in precipitating the war: in 1914, Schlieffen’s “dead hand automatically pulled the trigger.”⁴ My aim here is to examine the claim that the mobilization system played an important role in bringing on the conflict; this examination will show, I think, just how weak this argument is.

It is not that the conventional wisdom is wrong in assuming that there was a system of interlocking mobilization plans in 1914. A system of this sort certainly did exist, with the Schlieffen Plan as its linchpin. That strategy proposed to take advantage of the relative slowness of Russian mobilization: Germany, by mobilizing rapidly and then attacking in the west with the great mass of her army, would be able to defeat France before having to face Russia. The Germans could not, therefore, allow a Russian general mobilization to run its course without ordering their own mobilization and in fact attacking France. Russian mobilization would lead to German mobilization, and under the German war plan, mobilization meant war.

A mechanism of this sort clearly existed, but was it actually a *cause* of the war? It is important to think through what is implied by the claim that this mechanism of interlocking mobilization plans helped bring on the cataclysm. A simple analogy may be helpful. Suppose it takes me thirty minutes to get home when the traffic is light, but a full hour during the rush hour. I promise to be home by 6:00, but I choose to leave at 5:30 and arrive a half-hour late, blaming the bad traffic for the delay. The rush hour traffic, however, could hardly be held responsible for my lateness, since I had chosen to leave at 5:30, knowing full well what the situation was: knowledge of the situation had been factored into the original decision. On the other hand, if the heavy traffic had been caused by an accident, or indeed by anything that had not been anticipated, then it would make more sense to blame it for the delay.

Similarly, if in 1914 everyone understood the system and knew, for example, that a Russian or a German general mobilization would lead to war, and if, in addition, the political authorities were free agents—that is, if their hands were not being forced by military imperatives, or by pressure from

3. Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 72.

4. A.J.P. Taylor, *Illustrated History of the First World War* (New York: Putnam, 1964), p. 15.

the generals—then the existence of the system of interlocking mobilization plans could hardly be said in itself to have been a cause of war. Some people argue that the mobilization system was a “cause” of war because, once it was set off, the time for negotiation was cut short. But if the working of the system was understood in advance, a decision for general mobilization was a decision for war; statesmen would be opting for war with their eyes open. To argue that the system was, in such a case, a “cause” of the war makes about as much sense as saying that any military operation which marked the effective beginning of hostilities—the crossing of borders, for example, or an initial attack on enemy forces—was a real “cause” of an armed conflict, simply because it foreclosed the possibility of a negotiated settlement. Such operations are in no real sense a “cause” of war, if in fact their implications are universally understood in advance. Similarly, if it was generally understood how the system worked, and if the statesmen were free agents when they made their mobilization decisions, then in that case the mobilization process should not be viewed as a cause of the war, but should instead be seen simply as its opening phase.

It follows, therefore, that for the inadvertent war theory to hold for the July 1914 case, it must be shown *either* that the implications of mobilization were not understood, *or* that the political leadership was under such great pressure to act that it was not really free to hold back. The arguments that the mobilization system played a crucial role in bringing on the war fall into these two categories.

The first set of arguments focuses on the alleged failure of the political leaders to understand what the military plans actually meant. As a result, it is said, they made their moves and ordered their mobilizations “light-heartedly,” thinking that they were engaged in simple political maneuvering, seeking only to deter their adversaries. But once set loose, the forces they had unleashed could scarcely be controlled.⁵ “The absence of all understanding of military matters on the part of the responsible statesmen” is for Luigi Albertini, author of what is still by far the most important study of the immediate origins of the conflict, a major cause of the war. “It was,” he says, “the political leaders’ ignorance of what mobilization implied and the dangers it involved which led them light-heartedly to take the step of mobilizing and

5. Taylor, *Illustrated History*, pp. 14–15; Michael Howard, “Lest We Forget,” *Encounter*, January 1964, p. 65; Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, pp. 26, 109–112.

thus unleash a European war.”⁶ The basic contention, that the statesmen did not understand that general mobilization meant war, will be examined in the next section.

But it is also argued that the political leadership failed to understand that even a *partial* Russian mobilization, directed only against Austria, would have led to war “no less surely than general mobilization,” and that this was also a major cause of the disaster.⁷ So to test the claim that ignorance of crucial military realities played an important role in bringing on the conflict, a second section will examine the argument that even a partial mobilization would have inevitably led to war.

The second set of arguments focuses on the claim that the statesmen were not really free agents when the mobilization decisions were made. The basic argument is that military considerations, and especially the pressure to move preemptively, came at the crucial moment to dominate policy. It is sometimes taken for granted that the very existence of a military regime based on mass armies and mobilizations automatically generated pressure for preemption. Writing of World War I, for example, Herman Kahn remarked: “This ability to increase one’s force by a large factor and in a very short period of time gave a disastrous instability to the situation, because it promised to give the nation that mobilized first a crucial advantage.”⁸ The point is hardly self-evident, since mobilizations are difficult to conceal, and if detected quickly might lead to such rapid counter-mobilizations that there might be scarcely any advantage to going first.⁹ Was it in fact the case, however, that the incentive to go first, to the extent that it really did exist, played a significant role in shaping at least some of the key decisions that were made on the eve of the war? Was it true that “general staffs, goaded by their relentless timetables, were pounding the table for the signal to move lest their opponents gain an hour’s head start”?¹⁰

Closely related is the issue of whether the military effectively took control of policy—at least in Germany and perhaps in Russia as well. According to

6. Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols., trans. and ed. Isabella M. Massey (London: Oxford University Press, 1952–57), Vol. 2, pp. 479–483, 579. L.C.F. Turner, *Origins of the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 99, follows Albertini on this point.

7. Turner, *Origins of the First World War*, pp. 92, 108; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 392, 485n (for the quote), 529–530, 541.

8. Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 359.

9. As far as I can tell, Stephen Van Evera is the only one to make this point. Stephen Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), p. 75.

10. Tuchman, *Guns of August*, p. 72.

Gordon Craig, for example, by the end of the crisis General von Moltke, the head of the general staff, "had superseded the Chancellor in all but name"; the military technicians "had overborne the civilian authorities and brought war on in their own way"; in the end, "the great decision of 1914 was made by the soldiers."¹¹ Albertini also has the chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, "surrendering" to Moltke, "capitulating" to his "will to war," and says: "At the decisive moment the military took over the direction of affairs and imposed their law."¹² With regard to Russia, Albertini remarks that after the Austrian declaration of war on Serbia, the Russian foreign minister, S.D. Sazonov, lost "control of the situation" which "passed into the hands of the military."¹³ If these claims are valid, it would make sense to hold the military system in some measure responsible for the coming of the war.

The claim that policy makers were "stampeded" into war in 1914 thus needs to be tested.¹⁴ This set of issues will therefore be examined in a third section focusing on the most important phase of the crisis: the final hours before Russia ordered general mobilization on July 30.

The Meaning of Mobilization

The July Crisis began on June 28, 1914, with the assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne. Serbia was the base of the nationalist movement that had been responsible for that terrorist act, and Austria, having secured German support, was determined to use force against Serbia in order to put an end to what was, for Austria, an intolerably subversive movement. On July 23 the Austrians issued a series of demands; the Austrian terms were designed to be unacceptable. The Serbs were given 48 hours to reply to this ultimatum. On July 24 the Russian government, which saw itself as the protector of Serbia, considered, and on July 25 decided to prepare, a partial mobilization against Austria. The Russians also decided on the 25th to enforce "throughout the entire Empire the order for the period preparatory to war." Important pre-mobilization measures were to be put into effect secretly the

11. Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 291, 294, 295.

12. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, pp. 13, 27, 31, 190, 232, 248.

13. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 540.

14. See, for example, Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, pp. 34, 60.

next day.¹⁵ Reservists, for example, were called up to bring the army divisions on Russia's frontiers, including her frontiers with Germany, up to strength.

With the decisions of July 25, Russia was moving closer to general mobilization. Did the Russian leaders understand what they were doing—that their full mobilization would lead to a German mobilization, and that for Germany mobilization meant war? It is an important element of the “inadvertent war” thesis that they did not, and Albertini returns to this point repeatedly. “Russia,” he says, “had no knowledge of the fact that for Germany mobilization meant going to war,” and Sazonov, in particular did not understand that Germany could not afford delay, but would begin military operations almost immediately.¹⁶ Many political scientists seem to have accepted these arguments, and have perhaps even taken them a step or two further. According to Ned Lebow, for example, “Russian political leaders mobilized in 1914 in the belief that mobilization would be a deterrent to war.” “Neither the czar nor Sazonov,” he says, “believed that their action would directly trigger war.”¹⁷

It is quite clear, however, from the evidence that Albertini himself presents, that the Russian government understood very well what mobilization meant when it made its mobilization decisions at the end of July. The Russian documents show, first of all, that support for general mobilization was rooted in a belief in the virtual inevitability of war. On July 30, the day the fateful decision was made, A.V. Krivoshein, the dominant figure in the government, met with Sazonov before the latter was scheduled to see the Tsar. According to the official diary of Baron M.F. Schilling, the chief of the chancellery at the Russian foreign ministry, their conversation “was almost exclusively concerned with the necessity for insisting upon a general mobilization at the earliest possible moment, in view of the inevitability of war with Germany, which every moment became clearer.” When Sazonov saw Tsar Nicholas II, he argued along similar lines. “During the course of nearly an hour,” Schilling reported, “the Minister proceeded to show that war was becoming inevitable, as it was clear to everybody that Germany had decided to bring about a collision, as otherwise she would not have rejected all the pacificatory pro-

15. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 290–294, 304–308.

16. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 245, Vol. 2, pp. 579–581. See also Paul Kennedy's comments in Paul M. Kennedy, ed., *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), p. 16; and Stephen Van Evera, “Why Cooperation Failed in 1914,” *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (October 1985), p. 104.

17. Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, pp. 26, 111.

posals that had been made and could easily have brought her ally to reason. . . . Therefore it was necessary to put away any fears that our warlike preparations would bring about a war and to continue these preparations carefully, rather than by reason of such fears to be taken unawares by war."

Sazonov here was virtually conceding that mobilization ("our warlike preparations") would in all probability bring on war; his argument was that since war was now unavoidable, this point could no longer carry weight. The Tsar, however, resisted Sazonov's arguments, because he also knew what mobilization meant: "The firm desire of the Tsar to avoid war at all costs, the horrors of which filled him with repulsion, led His Majesty, in his full realization of the heavy responsibility which he took upon himself in this fateful hour, to explore every means for averting the approaching danger." As a result, the Tsar "refused during a long time to agree to the adoption of measures which, however indispensable from a military point of view [again, an allusion to general mobilization], were calculated, as he clearly saw, to hasten a decision in an undesirable sense," that is, to precipitate the war. But finally Nicholas agreed that "it would be very dangerous not to make timely preparations for what was apparently an inevitable war, and therefore gave his decision in favour of an immediate general mobilization."¹⁸

The argument for holding back had thus been based on the idea that it might still be possible to save the peace. This in turn reflected an assumption that a decision for mobilization would in itself for all practical purposes make war unavoidable. It was taken for granted that there was a trade-off between seizing the military advantages of the first mobilization and paying the price of precipitating the war; the argument for making the move thus turned on the point that the price now was really low, because war was virtually inevitable anyway. The notion that the Russians ordered general mobilization in the belief that "mobilization would be a deterrent to war" is without foundation. They clearly understood that to order mobilization was to cross the Rubicon: there could be no turning back.

Sazonov had certainly been told many times what the situation was. As early as July 25, for example—that is, before any irrevocable decision had been taken—the British ambassador had warned him that "if Russia mobi-

18. Baron M.F. Schilling, *How the War Began in 1914: The Diary of the Russian Foreign Office* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1925), pp. 62–66; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 565, 571–572. Note also the account of the meeting held the previous day that had led to Russia's first decision for general mobilization, a decision later revoked by the Tsar: Schilling, *How the War Began*, pp. 49–50; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 555.

lized, Germany would not be content with mere mobilization or give Russia time to carry out hers, but would probably declare war at once." Sazonov did not dispute the point. He simply stated that because the political stakes were so great, Russia, sure of French support, would "face all the risks of war."¹⁹ The following day, Bethmann instructed Count Pourtalès, the German ambassador in Russia, to issue a warning: "Preparatory military measures on the part of Russia aimed in any way at us would compel us to take measures for our own protection which would have to consist in the mobilization of the army. Mobilization, however, would mean war."²⁰ The warning was issued the next day, but Sazonov did not show alarm, and Albertini infers from this that it failed to register on the foreign minister.²¹

The evidence that Albertini gives to support his argument that Sazonov did not understand what mobilization meant is extremely weak. Sazonov had admitted in his memoirs that Pourtalès had warned him that German mobilization would immediately lead to war. But according to Albertini, the foreign minister was mistaken about having been warned, and the proof, he says, comes from Pourtalès himself: "Sazonov put the question: 'Surely mobilization is not equivalent to war with you, either, is it?' I replied: 'Perhaps not in theory. But . . . once the button is pressed and the machinery of mobilization set in motion, there is no stopping it'."²² Pourtalès was thus clearly saying that, for all practical purposes, mobilization meant war, but Albertini insists on interpreting the remark in exactly the opposite sense: the ambassador's remark "seemed to imply that mobilization was not yet war."²³ Similarly, referring to Bethmann's important warning to the Russians of July 29 that "further progress of Russian mobilization measures would compel us to mobilize and that then a European war could scarcely be prevented," Albertini emphasizes that Bethmann said "'scarcely,' but not 'not at all,'"—as though this had the slightest practical importance.²⁴

19. Buchanan to Grey, July 25, 1914, Great Britain, Foreign Office, *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, Vol. 11 (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1926), No. 125; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 307.

20. Bethmann to Pourtalès, July 26, 1914, *German Documents Relating to the Outbreak of the World War*, collected by Karl Kautsky (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), No. 219; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 428.

21. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 43.

22. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 42.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 43. Note, similarly, the discussion in Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, pp. 112–113.

Indeed, earlier that day Pourtalès and Sazonov had had another meeting, the record of which shows that the Russian foreign minister understood that for Germany mobilization meant war. Sazonov pointed out that “in Russia, unlike western European states, mobilization is far from being the same as war. The Russian army could, at need, stand at ease for weeks without crossing the border.”²⁵ There is no question that by “western European states,” Sazonov had Germany in mind, and Albertini acknowledges this point later in the book.²⁶ The Russians, of course, had an interest in arguing that their mobilization did not necessarily mean war, since if they could get Germany to tolerate a Russian mobilization, the military position of the Entente in the event of war would improve dramatically. This point was very widely understood in Europe; even the British foreign secretary realized that asking Germany to acquiesce in a Russian mobilization of any sort, even one directed only against Austria, would be tantamount to asking her to “throw away the advantage of time.”²⁷ For the same reason, however, the Germans had a great interest in explaining why they could not do this.²⁸ Thus, for example, Pourtalès pointed out to Sazonov on the 29th that “the danger of all military measures lies in the counter-measures of the other side. It is to be expected that the General Staffs of eventual enemies of Russia would not want to sacrifice the trump card of their great lead over Russia in mobilization and would press for counter-measures.”²⁹ If Sazonov had not already understood this, one would again expect some expression of surprise or dismay. But in Pourtalès’s account, there is no record of any such reaction. Sazonov once again took the point in stride.

In short, the Russian leadership certainly understood what mobilization meant. The evidence is quite overwhelming. Albertini himself admits in the end that Sazonov advised the Tsar to order general mobilization, although he was “well aware that this would bring Germany on the scene, and render

25. Pourtalès to Foreign Office, July 29, 1914, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 549. Emphasis added.

26. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 658.

27. Quoted in *ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 339. See also the extract from Grey’s memoirs quoted in *ibid.*, p. 392.

28. This assumes that the German goal was to avoid war by getting the Russians to back down. If, as Fritz Fischer and his followers argue, their aim was to provoke a war for which Russia would be blamed, a Russian mobilization would have been welcome, and the German government would not have attempted to deter Russia from ordering it by issuing this series of warnings. See especially Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914*, trans. Marian Jackson (New York: Norton, 1975), chap. 22.

29. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 549.

war practically inevitable."³⁰ Even the Tsar, more removed from the situation than Sazonov, spoke about being "forced to take extreme measures which will lead to war," an obvious reference to general mobilization.³¹ At the crucial moment, moreover, when he was asked to sign the general mobilization decree, Nicholas clearly realized what was at stake. "Think of the responsibility you are advising me to assume," he said to Sazonov. "Consider that it means sending thousands and thousands of men to their deaths."³²

It follows that a failure to understand what general mobilization meant was not the problem. For tactical reasons, certain statesmen might have pretended to believe that a Russian general mobilization need not lead to war, but such assertions can scarcely be taken at face value. The Russian political leadership certainly understood how risky this movement toward mobilization was, and, as Bethmann's warnings show, German statesmen were also fully aware of the situation.

The Russian Partial Mobilization

On July 28, Austria, finding the Serbian reply to her ultimatum unsatisfactory even though most of her demands had been accepted, declared war on Serbia. As a result, the Russian government decided later that day to order a partial mobilization against Austria. Neither of these moves was made for essentially military reasons. From the military point of view, the Austrian declaration of war came two weeks too early. Baron Conrad von Hötzendorff, the chief of the Austrian general staff, had told the foreign minister, Count Berchtold, that he wanted war declared only when he was capable of beginning military operations, "say on August 12." But the foreign minister wanted to act quickly in order to put an end to what he vaguely referred to as "various influences." "The diplomatic situation," he told Conrad, "will not hold so long."³³

30. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 581. As for the French mobilization, note the analysis in *ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 105–108. Albertini argues, quite persuasively in this case, that President Poincaré and Prime Minister Viviani were disingenuous in declaring that "mobilization is not war," and that it was "the best means of assuring peace with honor."

31. This is from a telegram the Tsar sent to the Kaiser, dispatched at 1 a.m. on July 30, quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 542.

32. Bernadotte Schmitt, *The Coming of War 1914*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1930), Vol. 2, p. 243. See also Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 558.

33. Baron Franz Conrad von Hötzendorff, *Aus meiner Dienstzeit 1906–1918*, 5 vols. (Vienna, 1921–25), Vol. 4, pp. 131–132, quoted in Turner, *Origins of the First World War*, p. 98.

As for the Russian decision to mobilize against Austria, this too was taken for political and not military reasons.³⁴ "Its object," Bernadotte Schmitt writes, "was to indicate Russia's earnestness of purpose and to compel Austria-Hungary, under pressure of a 'military demonstration,' to consent to negotiate a pacific settlement of her quarrel with Serbia."³⁵ Moreover, Albertini and L.C.F. Turner go even further and argue that it did not make much sense militarily to mobilize against Austria alone at that point; Russia, they say, would have been better off waiting until Austria had concentrated her forces in the south and perhaps had even become involved in military operations against Serbia. Then Austria would be more vulnerable in the north, and thus more susceptible to the pressure of a Russian partial mobilization.³⁶ Conrad himself thought that this was the most dangerous, and therefore the most likely, Russian strategy.³⁷ The original Russian plan had in fact been to wait until Austria actually invaded Serbia before ordering partial mobilization, but Sazonov impulsively jumped the gun and opted for this measure right after hearing about the Austrian declaration of war.³⁸

The "inadvertent war" argument turns in this case not on causes but on consequences. The decisions had been made freely, not as the result of undue pressure from the military. But the statesmen, it is argued, had set off a process they simply could not control. "For the Austrian government," Michael Howard writes, "a declaration of war was a political manoeuvre, for the Russian government a mobilisation order was a counter-manoeuve; but such orders set in motion administrative processes which could be neither halted nor reversed, without causing a chaos which would place the nation at the mercy of its adversaries."³⁹

34. See Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 291–292, 529.

35. Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 94. Note also the discussion in D.C.B. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1983), pp. 142–144. The goal was to deter Germany, but the Russian leaders were acutely conscious of the fact that this might not work; in such a case, they were prepared to go to war.

36. See Turner, *Origins of the First World War*, pp. 92–93; Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 482.

37. Norman Stone, "Moltke and Conrad: Relations between the Austro-Hungarian and German General Staffs, 1909–1914," in Kennedy, *War Plans of the Great Powers*, p. 228.

38. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 532, 538, 305, 484. Albertini says that Sazonov acted precipitately "possibly in the belief that the invasion of Serbia would follow immediately" (p. 538). But the Austrians had told the British that if the Serbs did not accept their demands, they would not begin military operations immediately, and the British had passed this information on to the Russians. See *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, Vol. 11, Nos. 104 and 105; and Schilling, *How the War Began*, pp. 35–36.

39. Howard, "Lest We Forget," p. 65. The importance of Howard's article derives from the fact that it was one of only two sources cited by Thomas Schelling to support his account of the

The political leaders—not just Sazonov, but British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey and his German counterpart Gottlieb von Jagow, who each in his own way had consented to the Russian partial mobilization—certainly did not believe that it would lead inevitably to war. If they were wrong in this regard—if, in fact, irreversible “administrative processes” had been set off—then this would be an important point in support of the argument that the political leaders’ ignorance of military matters helped bring about the war.

Albertini and various other scholars in fact argue along these lines. The claim is that a Russian partial mobilization against Austria would have led to an Austrian general mobilization, which “in turn would require Germany to mobilize.” It was “ridiculous,” Albertini says, to think that Germany could stand idly by and allow Russia, through even a partial mobilization, to deploy her forces more quickly in the event of a European war and thus make the success of the Schlieffen Plan more problematic. “It is quite clear,” he argues, “that even if Russia had confined herself to ordering partial mobilization, the logic of the case as presented by Conrad and Moltke would have forced Germany to demand that it be cancelled, or, in case of a refusal, mobilize in her turn in order to go to the help of Austria. In short partial mobilization would have led to war no less surely than general mobilization.”⁴⁰

Germany’s alliance arrangements with Austria were, however, a good deal more ambiguous than Albertini and his followers imply. The important exchange of letters between Moltke and Conrad that had taken place in 1909 during the Bosnian crisis was, as Schmitt says, the equivalent of a military convention. With the emperor’s and the chancellor’s approval, Moltke had promised that “at the moment that Russia mobilizes, Germany will also mobilize and will mobilize her entire army.”⁴¹ But it is by no means clear

coming of World War I—an account which plays an important role in his analysis of the “dynamics of mutual alarm” in *Arms and Influence*. (The other was Ludwig Reiners’ popular account, *The Lamps Went Out in Europe* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1955].)

40. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 340, 344, 392, 529–530, 541 and (for the final quotation) 485n; Turner, *Origins of the First World War*, pp. 92, 104. Fischer also accepts this conclusion; see *War of Illusions*, p. 491. Albertini makes this argument even though he accepts the view of the Russian military leaders that a partial mobilization would have made a general mobilization more difficult, and thus would have placed Russia in a weaker position in the event that war broke out with Germany. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 292–294, 541–543. Given that view, the Germans therefore should have had no military basis for objecting to partial mobilization, since it would have placed them in a stronger position if war came, all the more so since it would have put pressure on the Austrians to deploy their forces along their border with Russia instead of against Serbia, which would have facilitated the implementation of the Schlieffen Plan.

41. Quoted in Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 1, pp. 15, 17.

that this arrangement applied to the case of a partial Russian mobilization against Austria. In view of Austria's well-known alliance with Germany, Moltke may have calculated that mobilization against Austria alone made little military sense, that this contingency was thus unlikely to arise, and that it was therefore not worth worrying about.⁴²

It is striking that neither Conrad nor Moltke nor the Russians took it for granted that mobilization by Austria and Russia against each other would in itself lead to war. Berchtold, on July 30, did say that such a joint mobilization would lead to war, but Conrad replied that "if the Russians do not touch us, we need not touch them either."⁴³ The Russians, who of course had an interest in allowing their mobilization to proceed for as long as possible before hostilities broke out, and who in any event had an interest in avoiding blame for the war, naturally made the same sort of argument, even about a general mobilization. "There was no fear," said Sazonov, "that the guns would go off by themselves."⁴⁴ It is much more significant that Moltke himself, after learning of the partial mobilization, told the Austrians in very direct language on the morning of the 30th that the Russian move gave the Germans "no reason" to mobilize. German mobilization, he said, would only begin after war broke out between Austria and Russia, and he advised the Austrians not to "declare war on Russia but wait for Russia to attack."⁴⁵ It is true that his attitude was to change that afternoon, but this apparently had more to do with early indications that the Russians were moving toward *general* mobilization than with his changing his mind about *partial* mobilization.⁴⁶

42. The Entente, on the other hand, was more careful in this regard, and its members in their military understandings with one another took such contingencies explicitly into account. Under the 1913 arrangement, any German mobilization or attack would automatically lead to French and Russian mobilization, but even a general Austrian mobilization would not have such an automatic effect; specific arrangements would have to be worked out at the time. "Procès-verbal des Entretiens du mois d'août 1913 entre les chefs d'état-major des armées française et russe," *Documents diplomatiques français*, Series 3, Vol. 8, Doc. 79.

43. Conrad, *Dienstzeit*, Vol. 4, pp. 150–151; quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 670.

44. Quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 682.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 671–672, quoting a telegram and a letter from the Austrian liaison officer in Berlin, Captain Fleischmann, to Conrad, both of July 30, 1914. It is important to note that Moltke was now drawing back from the position he had taken earlier. On July 28, Moltke had drafted his well-known memorandum for Bethmann analyzing the situation. In it, he had argued that a Russian partial mobilization would lead Austria to order general mobilization, and that then "the collision between herself and Russia will become inevitable." Imanuel Geiss, ed., *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War: Selected Documents* (New York: Scribner's, 1967), p. 283.

46. See Ulrich Trampener, "War Premeditated? German Intelligence Operations in July 1914," *Central European History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 1976), p. 79.

Finally, there is the argument that Germany could not tolerate even a partial Russian mobilization directed only against Austria: after having encouraged the Austrians to move against Serbia, the Germans would find it impossible to stand by while Austria was subjected to this form of extreme Russian military pressure. The Germans therefore had to try to prevent the Russians from implementing the partial mobilization order. Albertini argues that Bethmann, therefore, on July 29 "sent Pourtalès a telegram containing such threats that they powerfully contributed to persuading Sazonov that he must mobilize not only against Austria but also against Germany."⁴⁷ In this way the partial mobilization, Albertini says, helped bring on the war.

It is wrong, however, to say that Russia's partial mobilization led to Bethmann's warning on the 29th, which in turn led to general mobilization and thus to war. This could not possibly have been the case, because, as Albertini's own evidence shows, the warning had been issued *before* the Germans even knew about the partial mobilization. Bethmann's telegram—"Kindly impress on M. Sazonov very seriously that further progress of Russian mobilization measures would compel us to mobilize and that then European war could scarcely be prevented"⁴⁸—left Berlin a little before 1 p.m. on the 29th. The Germans only learned of the partial mobilization later that afternoon.⁴⁹ What the Germans seem to have been reacting to when they issued their warning were the far-reaching Russian pre-mobilization measures, many of which were directed against them.⁵⁰ In any case, the Germans seemed to be demanding a standstill, and not a revocation of measures already put into effect.

Instead of leading to war, the partial mobilization played a key role in bringing about an important softening of German policy on the night of July 29–30. Up to the 29th, Germany had been hoping for a localization of the conflict. But now the partial mobilization order was demonstrating quite dramatically that this probably would not be possible. It was one thing to

47. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 485.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 553.

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 553, 498. Jagow, however, did threaten war as a response, which was quite extraordinary, given that he himself (as his interlocutor, the Russian ambassador Sverbeev, was quick to point out) was the one who had just given assurances that Germany would tolerate such a move. Jagow added, however, that the views he expressed were purely personal, and that he would have to talk with Bethmann before giving a definite reply. *Ibid.*, p. 499. Sazonov used the warning to defend his policy of moving toward general mobilization; but this was evidently a debater's argument, since he had begun to push energetically for general mobilization the previous day. *Ibid.*, pp. 556, 540.

50. See *ibid.*, pp. 489, 592.

talk about backing Austria even at the risk of a European war at the beginning of the crisis when that risk was judged to be low. But it was an entirely different matter to take such a line at a time when the risk appeared much greater. Bethmann's attitude, in fact, began to shift almost as soon as he learned of the Russian move. The reply he sent off at 11 p.m. on July 29 to the telegram from Pourtalès reporting the partial mobilization "struck a different note," as Albertini says, "from his earlier one of intimidation." "Russian mobilization on the Austrian frontier," Bethmann pointed out, "will, I assume, lead to corresponding Austrian measures. How far it will still be possible to stop the avalanche then it is hard to say."⁵¹ The reference here to Austrian, rather than German, countermeasures was particularly significant.

Indeed, Bethmann's general attitude on the night of July 29–30 underwent a stunning shift. He comes across as a man desperately anxious to avoid war. Up to then, he was scarcely interested in working out any kind of peaceful settlement. He had effectively sabotaged all proposals that might have prevented an Austrian attack on Serbia, including an important one that had come on July 28 from the Kaiser himself.⁵² But on the night of July 29–30, the chancellor sent off a series of increasingly tough telegrams demanding that the Austrians do what was necessary to head off a war. This effort culminated in a dispatch sent out at 3 a.m.: we "must decline to let ourselves to be dragged by Vienna, wantonly and without regard to our advice, into a world conflagration."⁵³

Why this shift? Albertini contends that it was a threat from Grey, warning that Britain would intervene in a continental war, that had led Bethmann to alter his position so radically. The chancellor, he says, had "based his whole policy on the assumption that, in case of war, England would remain neutral."⁵⁴ Fritz Fischer and his followers also argue that Grey's warning explains the series of telegrams Bethmann sent to Vienna in the early hours of July 30. The German leaders, Fischer says, had been willing to face war "with equanimity" because they believed that Britain would probably stay out. When they received the telegram from Prince Lichnowsky, the German am-

51. *Ibid.*, p. 562.

52. The Kaiser had suggested that a settlement be based on the Serbian reply to the ultimatum; compliance would be guaranteed by the temporary occupation of Belgrade. Bethmann, in passing on a somewhat distorted version of the idea to Vienna, told the German ambassador there that in presenting it, he was "to avoid very carefully giving rise to the impression that we wish to hold Austria back." Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 256–257, 259–260.

53. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 504, 522–525.

54. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 520, Vol. 3, pp. 3, 4.

bassador in London, containing Grey's warning, they were "shattered" and "grew unsure of themselves." "The foundation of their policy during the crisis"—the belief that Britain would remain neutral if Germany handled events the right way—"had collapsed." Imanuel Geiss thinks that Bethmann really shifted course and was now trying to avert the catastrophe; Fischer himself sees only momentary shock, followed by a return the next morning to the earlier policy.⁵⁵

The problem with this interpretation, in any of these variants, is that it vastly overestimates the degree to which the Germans had been counting on British neutrality, ignores the degree to which the Germans had already been warned that Britain would intervene in a European war, and—most important of all in this context—plays down the significance of the one really great event, the announcement of Russian partial mobilization, that immediately preceded the change in Bethmann's policy.

There is little evidence to support the claim that Bethmann had been confidently counting on British neutrality. On the eve of the crisis (which according to Fischer the Germans had provoked with this calculation about Britain in mind), Bethmann was quite pessimistic about the chances that Britain would stay neutral in a continental war.⁵⁶ During the crisis itself, moreover, he was repeatedly warned by Lichnowsky that Britain would not stay out of any war in which France was involved.⁵⁷

55. Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1967) pp. 78–80, Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 495–496; Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 269.

56. See, for example, the evidence in Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914," *Central European History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 1973), p. 38n. Fischer's contrary argument on this point is laid out most extensively in Fischer, "The Miscalculation of English Neutrality: An Aspect of German Foreign Policy on the Eve of World War I," in Solomon Wank, et al., eds., *The Mirror of History: Essays in Honor of Fritz Fellner* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clio, 1988). But the evidence he presents here shows only that the Germans hoped for British neutrality in a European war, not that they were counting on it. At one point, Fischer even quotes Bethmann (evidently without realizing how this contradicts his basic argument) as writing to a friend in December 1912 that "Britain continues to uphold the policy of the balance of power and that it will therefore stand up for France if in a war the latter runs the risk of being destroyed by us" (p. 374). Bethmann did at this point understand that the main goal of the Schlieffen Plan was indeed to crush France.

57. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 432, 442, 501. During the crisis, Bethmann and Jagow did occasionally predict—to the French ambassador, for example, and to the emperor—that Britain would remain neutral, at least at the start of the war, but the aim here was probably tactical in nature: to convince the French of German resolve, or to dissuade the emperor from calling a halt to the tough policy the government was pursuing. The Berlin authorities, moreover, may have viewed Lichnowsky as "soft," and thus might have discounted his opinions; but his reports of British thinking could not be dismissed out of hand, and Bethmann and Jagow were too experienced to think they could be confident of British neutrality without hard evidence—and

While the German government certainly would have been delighted if Britain remained neutral, and did what it could to maximize the probability that Britain would stay out of the war, it is going much too far to say that the hope of British neutrality was the basis of German political or military calculations. Grey's warning was of course a blow to Bethmann, but not quite as severe a blow as is often argued, since there had been many earlier indications that Britain would probably not stand by and allow France to be crushed.

It seems rather that it was the news from Russia about partial mobilization that played the key role in bringing about the shift in Bethmann's attitude. The evidence strongly suggests that the decisive change took place *before* the chancellor learned of Grey's warning, but *after* he had found out about Russia's partial mobilization. The authorities in Berlin became aware of Russia's move at about 5 p.m. on July 29; the telegram containing Grey's warning was received at the Foreign Office at 9:12 p.m. The first of the telegrams reflecting Bethmann's newly-found eagerness for a negotiated settlement was dispatched from Berlin at 10:18 p.m.⁵⁸ Given how long it generally took for a dispatch to be deciphered, delivered and read, and for a new dispatch to be thought out, composed, sent over for coding, and then encoded and transmitted, it is very hard to believe that all this could have been done in barely more than an hour.⁵⁹ And yet this would have had to be the case for the telegram received at 9:12 to have led directly to the telegram sent out at 10:18—that is, for the news from London to have brought about the dramatic shift in Bethmann's position. It is much more likely that it was the information about Russia's partial mobilization that led to this change in policy. Albertini himself recognizes the importance of the news from Russia in bringing about this shift on Bethmann's part, and he says explicitly that even before receiving the message containing Grey's warning, "the Chancellor was clutching at the idea"—the Kaiser's proposal for a peaceful settlement, which Bethmann had tried to sabotage the previous day—"like a shipwrecked man at a lifebuoy."⁶⁰

no really satisfactory indicators were forthcoming during the crisis. Indeed, the amount of attention the Germans gave to Britain and the important efforts they made to influence British policy show in themselves that British neutrality was not simply taken for granted.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 498, 520, 504.

59. For a brief discussion of these sorts of delays, see *ibid.*, p. 525 n. 6.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 500–502, 522.

Thus, far from leading inevitably to German counter-measures which would have brought on a war, the Russian decision to order partial mobilization appears actually to have led to a *softening* of German policy, breaking the deadlock and at least in theory opening the way to a political settlement.

The Final Hours

Thus Bethmann now wanted to head off a European war. So did the Entente powers. Austria by herself could not have stood in their way. How then was war possible? Many assume there is only one answer to the riddle: the political process that should normally have brought about a negotiated settlement was overwhelmed in those momentous final hours of the crisis by forces welling up from within the military sphere, by generals "pounding the table for the signal to move lest their opponents gain an hour's head start."⁶¹ The validity of the whole "inadvertent war" thesis, therefore, turns on a close analysis of the events of those fourteen fateful hours, the period from Bethmann's dramatic dispatch to Austria sent out at 3 a.m. on July 30, to the Russian order for general mobilization, issued at 5 p.m. that afternoon.

One can begin with the case of Germany, the most militaristic of the European powers, the state whose whole strategy was most strongly based on the idea of swift offensive action. If there is anything to the argument about the importance of preemption in 1914, surely here is where the evidence will be found. Yet as one studies the German case, one is struck by the unwillingness of the German government to force the pace of the crisis in those final days, and by its preference for leaving the initiative in the hands of others. A basic goal, shared by the political and the military leadership, was that Germany not appear the aggressor. Germany would, of course, have to *react* quickly if Russia or France mobilized first; but the more rapidly Germany could respond, the less incentive there would be for her adversaries to make the first move.

The Germans, in fact, were reluctant to take even the sort of pre-mobilization measures that they knew that the Russians (and eventually even the French and the British) were taking. On the 29th, but before the news of Russia's partial mobilization had reached them, the top German leaders met

61. Tuchman, *Guns of August*, p. 72.

at Potsdam. General Erich von Falkenhayn, the war minister, called for the pre-mobilization regime to be put into effect—for the proclamation of the *Kriegsgefahrzustand*, the declaration of “threatening danger of war”—but Moltke was opposed even to that and Falkenhayn deferred to the chief of staff.⁶² Later that evening, the new situation resulting from the Russian partial mobilization was discussed. “Against slight, very, very slight opposition from Moltke,” Bethmann ruled out German mobilization as a response; this would have to wait until Russia actually unleashed a war, “because otherwise we should not have public opinion with us either at home or in England.” As for Falkenhayn, he was by no means pressing for preemptive action. There was no need, he thought, to be the first to move, because “our mobilization, even if two or three days later than that of Russia and Austria, would be more rapid than theirs.”⁶³

The following afternoon, Moltke began to call for a tougher policy, probably because new information had been received about the seriousness of Russian military preparations.⁶⁴ He and Falkenhayn now asked for the proclamation of the *Kriegsgefahrzustand*. Bethmann refused to agree to it then and there (even though this would by no means have made mobilization, and therefore war, automatic), and simply promised that the generals would get an answer by noon the next day.⁶⁵ By that point, the news of Russia’s general mobilization had reached Berlin, so the issue had been overtaken by events. But some new evidence on Moltke’s reaction to this information hardly supports the image of a general “pounding the table for the signal to move.” Moltke reacted to the first report of general mobilization “with some skepticism” and wondered whether the evidence had been misinterpreted. When he was told that the report had been “very specific” and that “similar information had just arrived” from two other intelligence posts, he “turned toward the

62. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 495–497, 499–500 (for the chronology).

63. *Ibid.*, p. 502.

64. Trumpener, “War Premeditated?” p. 79.

65. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, pp. 10, 18; on the issue of the *Kriegsgefahrzustand*, see *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 491, 599. When defending his decision not to proclaim the *Kriegsgefahrzustand*, Bethmann did claim that it meant mobilization and therefore war, but this can scarcely be taken at face value. See *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 15. An Army document also strongly suggests that war was not viewed as following automatically from the proclamation of the *Kriegsgefahrzustand*. See the extract from the “Protokoll der Chefkonferenz in Frankfurt a. M. am 21. Januar 1914,” in W. Knoll and H. Rahne, “Bedeutung und Aufgaben der Konferenz der Generalstabschefs der Armeekorps in Frankfurt a. M. am 21. Januar 1914,” *Militärgeschichte*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1986), p. 58: “The Corps should not allow their hands to be tied” by a proclamation of threatening danger of war, “for example, by buying horses.”

window, took a deep breath, and said: 'It can't be helped then; we'll have to mobilize too'."⁶⁶

Nor did Bethmann, contrary to what both Craig and Albertini argue, "capitulate" to the generals during the crisis. It is amazing how common this notion is, given how little evidence there is to back it up. Moltke was not able to get Bethmann to agree even to the *Kriegsgefahrzustand* until after news of the Russian general mobilization reached Berlin. The chief of staff did go behind Bethmann's back on the afternoon of the 30th, urging Austria to mobilize against Russia and reject mediation.⁶⁷ But this is hardly proof that Bethmann was capitulating to the military, or even that Moltke was overstepping his own authority, since the Kaiser may have authorized his messages to the Austrians.⁶⁸ In any case, the move could hardly be viewed as a cause of the war, because, as Gerhard Ritter, for example, has pointed out, Moltke's messages were received by the Austrian ministers after they had decided on general mobilization, and thus had no "practical effect."⁶⁹

Two other stories are commonly used to support the argument that the military had, by the end of the crisis, effectively taken control of German policy. First, there is the episode of Telegram 200, which Albertini treats as decisive. In this dispatch, sent out on the evening of July 30, Bethmann told his ambassador in Vienna to press Austria once again to accept mediation. His language was not as strong as it had been the previous night, but even so the instruction contained in the telegram was suspended soon after it was dispatched. The telegram ordering the suspension referred to information from the General Staff about "the military preparations of our neighbors, especially in the east." Albertini interprets this suspension as a "capitulation" and says that the "Chief of Staff was no longer allowing the political leadership to waste time in attempts to save the peace and compose the conflict."⁷⁰ But again, this conclusion hardly follows from the evidence. The fact that Bethmann agreed with, or was convinced by, arguments and information coming from the military scarcely proves that he was surrendering to their will. In fact, Albertini himself suggests that information was being received in Berlin that evening indicating that the Russian general mobilization, which

66. Trumpener, "War Premeditated?" p. 82.

67. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 11.

68. *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 11–13; Schmitt, *Coming of the War*, Vol. 2, p. 198.

69. Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, 4 vols. (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1969–73), Vol. 2, p. 258.

70. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, pp. 21–24.

indeed had been decided upon at 5 p.m. that afternoon, might be imminent.⁷¹ If that were the case, and war was about to break out, what was the point of irritating Germany's only ally with a *démarche* which would almost certainly do no good anyway? If this, as seems likely, was Bethmann's calculation, the cancellation of Telegram 200 can hardly be interpreted as a "capitulation."

The other story supporting the claim about the inability of the civilian leadership to control the military at the peak of the crisis is even more widely known. At the very last minute, on August 1, with the storm in its full fury about to break, the German government was told by its ambassador in London that Britain might remain neutral, and might even guarantee French neutrality, if Germany did not attack France and would conduct the war only in the east. The Kaiser was jubilant and wanted to take the British up on this offer and march only against Russia. But Moltke explained that Germany had only one plan, the Schlieffen Plan, and it was too late now to change that strategy; the plan would have to be carried out. The chancellor and the Kaiser, Craig writes—and this is characteristic of the way this story appears in many accounts—"had no answer for this and gave way."⁷² It soon turned out that British views had been misunderstood, but Bernard Brodie's comment on the affair is typical of the way this story is interpreted: "The falsity of the initial report saved that particular episode from being utterly grotesque; but the whole situation of which it formed a part reveals a rigidity and a habit of pleading 'military necessity' that made it impossible after a certain point to prevent a war which no one wanted and which was to prove infinitely disastrous to all the nations concerned."⁷³

This is certainly a wonderful story. The only problem with it is that it happens to be wrong on the most important point. On the issue of whether the attack on France had to proceed as planned, it was the Kaiser and not Moltke who won. This should have been clear from the most important source on the incident, Moltke's memoirs, written in November 1914 and published posthumously in 1922; Moltke's account is confirmed by a number of other sources, extracts from which appear in the sections on the episode

71. *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 27.

72. Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, p. 294; Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, p. 86; Barry Posen (citing Craig), "Inadvertent Nuclear War? Escalation and NATO's Northern Flank," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 1982), p. 32.

73. Bernard Brodie, "Unlimited Weapons and Limited War," *The Reporter*, November 18, 1954, p. 21.

in Albertini's book.⁷⁴ It is true that there was a violent argument on August 1 between Moltke and the political leadership about whether to accept what appeared to be the British proposal. Although Moltke succeeded in convincing the Kaiser that for technical reasons the concentration in the west would have to "be carried out as planned," and that only after it was completed could troops be transferred to the east, a basic decision was made to accept the "offer." "In the course of this scene," Moltke wrote, "I nearly fell into despair." Bethmann then pointed out how important it was, in connection with this British proposal, that the plan for the occupation of neutral Luxembourg be suspended. "As I stood there the Kaiser, without asking me," Moltke went on, "turned to the aide-de-camp on duty and commanded him to telegraph immediate instructions to the 16th Division at Trier not to march into Luxembourg. I thought my heart would break." Moltke again pleaded that the very complicated mobilization plan, "which has to be worked out down to the smallest details," could not be changed without disastrous results. It was essential, he said, for Germany to secure control over the Luxembourg railroads. "I was snubbed with the remark that I should use other railroads instead. The order must stand. Therewith I was dismissed. It is impossible to describe the state of mind in which I returned home. I was absolutely broken and shed tears of despair."⁷⁵

74. Helmuth von Moltke, *Erinnerungen—Briefe—Dokumente, 1877–1916* (Stuttgart: Der Kommendetag, 1922); extracts appeared in English translation in *Living Age*, January 20, 1923, pp. 131–134. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, pp. 171–181, 380–385. See also Harry Young, "The Misunderstanding of August 1, 1914," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (December 1976), pp. 644–665.

75. Quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, pp. 172–176. It is sometimes argued that despite the Kaiser's order, the Luxembourg frontier was violated, and that this shows that the plans had a momentum of their own which the political leadership was unable to control. In fact, an infantry company had moved into Luxembourg before the Kaiser's order had been received, but a little later a second detachment arrived and ordered it out (in accordance, one assumes, with the Kaiser's instructions). This episode thus scarcely proves that central control over military operations had been lost. The story has been clear since the publication of the Kautsky documents in 1919, the source Tuchman relies on for her accurate account of this episode in *Guns of August*, p. 82. Note also the story about the revocation of the Russian general mobilization order by the Tsar, after he had agreed to it the first time on July 29: according to one account, when the chief of staff told him "that it was not possible to stop mobilization, Nicholas had replied: 'Stop it all the same,'" and this order was respected. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 560. See also Norman Stone's excellent analysis and refutation of Conrad's claim that technical military requirements prevented him from adjusting his strategy to the new situation created by Russian mobilization, "Moltke and Conrad," in Kennedy, *War Plans*, pp. 235–241; and also Stone's chapter on Austria-Hungary in Ernest May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Thus the political leadership had hardly “capitulated” to the generals. The real problem was not that the civilians had lost control, but rather that Germany’s political strategy and her military strategy were pulling in opposite directions. The demands of the Schlieffen Plan implied that Germany had to act quickly, but this meant that Germany would be the first to cross borders. Germany would have to invade Belgium and attack France, but one of Bethmann’s basic goals was for Germany to avoid coming across as the aggressor and to make it appear that Russia was responsible for the war. “The fact is,” says Albertini, “that Bethmann, who had made every effort to cast the blame on Russia, failed to see that his endeavours would be defeated by the very demands of the Schlieffen Plan.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, important military measures had been delayed for political reasons, and given Germany’s military strategy, even short delays might have had serious consequences. The two sides of their policy were working at cross purposes, but this particular difficulty did not actually help bring on the war. It should have had the opposite effect of pushing Germany toward a peaceful settlement. If the German leadership had faced up to the problem, which was to some extent rooted in an astonishing lack of coordination between the political and the military authorities,⁷⁷ they would have recognized that this was a major source of weakness, and, as Albertini argues, this should have made them move energetically to settle the dispute.⁷⁸ But instead events were allowed to take their course.

The most striking thing, in fact, about German policy on the 30th is that Bethmann did seem to resign himself to the situation and gave up trying to prevent war. On the night of July 29–30, he had begun to move energetically to head off a war, but by the following morning—that is, even before Moltke’s shift that afternoon—the effort had ended. The pressure on Austria subsided,

76. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 249. See also the discussion of this issue, *ibid.*, pp. 186–187.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 250. Nor was there any serious coordination between the Army and Navy general staffs. Admiral Tirpitz claimed that he “was never even informed of the invasion of Belgium.” Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1919), Vol. 1, p. 346. Similarly, the lack of military coordination with Austria is astounding. Although some loose agreements covering this matter had been reached in 1909, more precise arrangements were not worked out during the crisis, and it was only at the last minute that Moltke asked Austria “to employ her main strength against Russia and not disperse it by a simultaneous offensive against Serbia.” But this the Austrians refused to do. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, pp. 45–46; Stone, “Moltke and Conrad.” This hardly fits in with the picture of a German government carefully and systematically plotting a war of aggression. For a similar point based on a study of German intelligence operations during the crisis, see Trumpener, “War Premeditated?” pp. 83–85.

78. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 249.

and Bethmann certainly did not do the one thing he would have had to do if he had really wanted to prevent war. His first priority, in that case, would have been to keep the Russians from ordering general mobilization, and to do this, he would have had to make it clear to them that war was not inevitable, that a political settlement was within reach, that Austria could be led to moderate her demands on Serbia, but that he needed a little time to bring her around. And to increase the pressure on Russia to hold back, he could have approached the western powers, explained why a political settlement was within sight, and asked them to do what they could to keep Russia from resorting to general mobilization and thus setting off the avalanche. But Bethmann made none of these moves. The Russians ordered general mobilization that afternoon, and the great war could no longer be prevented.

Had the war come because, as Bethmann himself said at the time, "control had been lost"? The "stone had started rolling," he declared; war was being unleashed "by elemental forces."⁷⁹ But there had been no "loss of control," only an abdication of control. Bethmann had chosen not to act. He had decided to let events take their course—and thus to take his "leap into the dark."⁸⁰ If war had to come—and if the Russians were not going to give way this time when they were relatively weak, a conflict with them was probably unavoidable in the long run—then maybe the generals were right, maybe it was better to have it now rather than later. His hands were clean—more or less. He had not set out to provoke a great war with this calculation in mind. He had even made a certain effort to get the Austrians to pull back. But war was almost bound to come eventually, so he would just stand aside and let it come now. The preventive war argument, which had not been powerful enough to dictate German policy at the beginning of the crisis, now proved decisive. It might have been difficult, if only for moral reasons, for the German leadership to set out deliberately to provoke a great war. It was much easier just to let the war come—not to "hide behind the fence," as Jagow put it.⁸¹ Bethmann probably had something of this sort in mind when he later admitted that "in a certain sense, it was a preventive war."⁸²

79. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

80. K.D. Erdmann, ed., *Kurt Riezler: Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1972), entry for July 14, 1914, p. 185.

81. Jagow to Lichnowsky, July 18, 1914, in Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 123.

82. Quoted, for example, in Konrad Jarausch, "The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's Calculated Risk, July 1914," *Central European History*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March 1969), p. 48.

This, however, has nothing to do with preemption: there had been no "loss of control" resulting from the pressure to mobilize first. Indeed, as far as the German side is concerned, the argument about preemption has surprisingly little support. With the Russian mobilization the die had been cast: after that point, any specific incentive to move quickly that the Germans may have felt could do little more than affect the exact timing of the German attack. From that point on, it was extremely unlikely that war itself could be avoided.⁸³

It remains to be seen, however, whether preemption was a more compelling factor on the Entente side. To begin with France: the chief of staff and the war minister did urge Russia to move against Germany as soon as possible after war broke out, which of course was exactly what the pre-war military arrangements had called for. L.C.F. Turner, for example, argues that this was pressure "calculated to drive the Russian General Staff into demanding general mobilization."⁸⁴ Perhaps so, but the evidence presented is

83. The Germans' need to seize Liège quickly is often cited as a major source of such pressure for preemption. But while the German general staff was certainly concerned with the Liège situation at the end of July, there is little evidence that this factor contributed in any major way to the German decision for war. Ritter, for example, blamed the Liège problem for Germany's "unbelievable haste" in declaring war on Russia on August 1, and Churchill thought that if it were not for Liège, the armies might have mobilized without crossing frontiers while a peace settlement was worked out. Gerhard Ritter, "Der Anteil der Militärs an der Kriegskatastrophe von 1914," *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 193, No. 1 (August 1961), pp. 89–90; Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis: The Eastern Front* (London, 1931), p. 93, quoted in L.C.F. Turner, "The Significance of the Schlieffen Plan," in Kennedy, *War Plans*, p. 213. Jack Snyder, on the other hand, says that "Moltke's attitude was not decisively influenced by this incentive to preempt." Jack Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), p. 113. There is much about the Liège issue that remains obscure. It is not clear exactly when German troops would have begun their attack and crossed the Belgian frontier if the earlier plan had not been altered in 1911 to include the Liège operation as one of its vital elements. Given the basic philosophy of the Schlieffen strategy, which even in its original form of a one-front war against France "depended," as Ritter says, "on the speed and surprise of the German advance through Belgium," Germany could not hold off for long after the Russian general mobilization had begun. Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth* (London: Wolff, 1958), p. 90. If it were not for Liège, would Germany have postponed her declaration of war for a brief period after ordering mobilization? The answer is by no means obvious, but even if a certain delay was possible, the argument that the Liège factor played a key role in bringing on the war would turn on the claim that there was a real chance of saving the peace during those extra few days while Germany was still mobilizing, but before war absolutely had to be declared. There is, however, little basis for this assumption. It is not as though serious negotiations had been going on that might have led to a settlement, had they not been cut off by the declarations of war.

84. Turner, *Origins of the First World War*, p. 104. See also Turner's "The Role of the General Staffs in July 1914," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 9 (1965), pp. 320–321. The sort of attitude to which Turner refers was evidently not limited to French military circles: see, for

hardly sufficient in itself to warrant this conclusion, and there is really no indication in the Russian sources that pressure from French military authorities made any important difference.

It is therefore on Russian policy that an analysis of the preemption question in 1914 must focus. In this case it does turn out to have some substance. It clearly mattered a great deal to the Russian authorities whether Germany or Russia was the first to mobilize. This is the only way to make sense of the constant allusions to the great risks of delaying a general mobilization that one finds in the records of the meetings where these mobilization decisions were made. On July 30, for example, the chief of staff "pleaded" with Sazonov to convince the Tsar "to consent to a general mobilization in view of the extreme danger that would result for us if we were not ready for war with Germany." Sazonov did precisely that. Since "war was becoming inevitable," he told the Tsar when he saw him that afternoon, "it was necessary to put away any fears that our warlike preparations would bring about a war and to continue these preparations carefully, rather than by reason of such fears to be taken unawares by war." The Tsar "agreed that in the existing circumstances it would be very dangerous not to make timely preparations for what was apparently an inevitable war, and therefore gave his decision in favour of a general mobilisation."⁸⁵ The mobilization decision was thus based on a political assessment: there was a diplomatic deadlock, Austria was beginning to move against Serbia, the issue could no longer be avoided. It is important to note that the Russian mobilization decision was not rooted in the fear that Germany was about to mobilize first. In the key meetings at which the Russian mobilization decisions were made, the argument was that it was war itself, and not a German mobilization as such, that was imminent.

Did "pressure from the Russian generals" cause the political leadership to "lose control" of the situation?⁸⁶ The generals' main argument was that "in resorting to partial mobilization, there was a big risk of upsetting plans for general mobilization."⁸⁷ Albertini, who blames pressure from these generals for helping push Europe into war, thinks that they were correct in this assessment: a partial mobilization, he says, would "have been a blunder,"

example, Doumergue's comments quoted in Maurice Paléologue, *Au Quai d'Orsay à la veille de la tourmente. Journal 1913-1914* (Paris: Plon, 1947), p. 269.

85. Schilling, *How the War Began*, pp. 64-66.

86. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, 539-545.

87. Quartermaster-General Yuri Danilov, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 542.

since if war came, Russia would have to face both Austria and Germany.⁸⁸ But could the Russian generals be blamed for exercising undue influence if they had simply given an accurate assessment of the situation? As long as they limited themselves to a purely military judgment, only one conclusion followed: partial mobilization was out of the question, so the choice had to be between “general mobilization and none at all.”⁸⁹ Their preference for general mobilization was based on political considerations, and especially on the belief that it would be impossible to abandon Serbia, that the Central Powers were intent on crushing the Serbs, and that war could therefore not be avoided.⁹⁰ If the political leadership had held more moderate views, and especially if the generals rationalized their preference for general mobilization with spurious military arguments, there would be some basis for the argument that pressure from the generals was a major cause of the war. But the striking thing here is that Sazonov shared their assessment of the probability of war. It was not as though he tried to resist the generals’ views and only reluctantly gave way. On July 28, he was, according to General Dobrorolski, “penetrated by the thought that a general war is unavoidable,” and even went so far as to express his astonishment to the chief of staff that full mobilization had not been begun earlier.⁹¹

Had Sazonov, however, been trapped by his own ignorance and impulsiveness? The argument is that he had blindly ordered a partial mobilization without any real understanding of the problems it would cause; but having ordered it, he had no answer for the technical arguments the generals raised against it. He therefore had to choose between revoking the partial mobilization order or escalating to general mobilization. To cancel the partial mobilization order would be taken as a sign of weakness; Sazonov was therefore led, however reluctantly, to opt for a full mobilization.⁹² But again this theory cannot withstand the simple test of chronology. Sazonov had accepted the generals’ argument about the dangers of partial mobilization on July 28—that is, before the partial mobilization had actually begun, probably before the decision to order it had even been made, and certainly long before the Germans learned of the order.⁹³ The real puzzle here is that Sazonov opted

88. *Ibid.*, p. 543.

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*

91. Dobrorolski is commonly viewed as a reliable source; his account is quoted in *ibid.*, p. 540.

92. See, for example, Van Evera, “Why Cooperation Failed in 1914,” p. 104.

93. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 540–545.

for partial mobilization even though he had already been persuaded by the arguments against it. One possible answer is that once partial mobilization was ordered, the Tsar could more easily be brought to accept a full mobilization against both Germany and Austria, which Sazonov had by then come to view as necessary. Sazonov had not been trapped by his own ignorance, nor had he been overwhelmed by pressure from the generals. He had made his choices with his eyes open; he had not been stampeded into them.

So to sum up: although preemption evidently was a factor in 1914, its importance is greatly exaggerated in much of the literature. It played a role on the Russian side in the final hours of the crisis, and even then only because the political judgment had been made that war was inevitable. Its role was quite marginal in comparison with all those factors that had given rise to this judgment in the first place. On the German side, its role was minimal. The Germans wanted Russia to be the first to order mobilization, and they would have been delighted if, after mobilization, France had been the first to attack.⁹⁴ Their strategy was not preemptive but reactive: for political reasons, they were conceding the first move to their adversaries. In contemporary terms, this was more like a "second strike" than a "first strike" strategy, and thus in this respect can hardly be considered "destabilizing."

Conclusion

The aim here was not to offer yet another interpretation of the coming of the First World War. The goal was simply to test a particular set of claims about the role of the mobilization system in bringing on the war in 1914. And the conclusion is quite clear: it was not because statesmen had "lost control" of events that the First World War came about; preemption was not nearly as important in 1914 as is commonly assumed. Instead of generals "pounding the table for the signal to move," one finds Falkenhayn saying on July 29 that it would not matter much if Germany mobilized two or three days after Russia, and Moltke that same day not even supporting the proclamation of the *Kriegsgefahrzustand*. On the afternoon of the 30th, Moltke did begin to press for military measures, but this was very probably in reaction to what the Russians were doing in this area. As long as German

94. "For about forty-eight hours after the issue of the respective mobilization orders the [French and German] armies stood face to face, each waiting and hoping that the other would be the first to open hostilities." *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 204.

policy was reactive, it can hardly be considered a source of “instability” in the contemporary sense of the term.

The Russian generals, on the other hand, did press for early mobilization. But this was only because they thought that war was unavoidable for political reasons, a view that the civilian government also shared. A decision for general mobilization was quite consciously a decision for war: it was not the case that Sazonov and the political leadership as a whole, trying desperately to preserve the peace, were drawn into the abyss by the “pull of military schedules.” It hardly makes sense, therefore, to see the Russian decision to seize the military advantages of the first mobilization as proof that “control had been lost” or that war had come “inadvertently.” In 1941, the Japanese government attacked American forces at Pearl Harbor and in the Philippines after becoming convinced that war with the United States could not be avoided. Even if this judgment had been mistaken—even if one assumes that President Roosevelt could not have taken the country into war if the Japanese had avoided contact with American forces and limited their attack to the Dutch East Indies—no one would say that the fact that the Japanese chose to seize the first-strike advantage by launching a surprise attack against vulnerable American forces means that the War in the Pacific was essentially an “inadvertent” conflict. The same point applies to 1914.

The idea that the First World War came about because statesmen were overwhelmed by military imperatives and thus “lost control” of the situation came to be accepted for essentially political reasons, and not because it was the product of careful and disinterested historical analysis. It was hardly an accident that the first to propagate this idea were the statesmen whose policies in 1914 had led directly to the conflict—that is, the very people who had the greatest interest in avoiding responsibility for the catastrophe. On the very eve of the disaster—on July 31, 1914—Bethmann was already arguing along these lines.⁹⁵

After the war, it became apparent in Western Europe generally, and in America as well, that the Germans would never accept a peace settlement based on the notion that they had been responsible for the conflict. If a true peace of reconciliation were to take shape, it required a new theory of the origins of the war, and the easiest thing was to assume that no one had really been responsible for it. The conflict could be readily blamed on great

95. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

impersonal forces—on the alliance system, on the arms race and on the military system that had evolved before 1914. On their uncomplaining shoulders the burden of guilt could be safely placed.

In the 1930s the idea that the military system was to blame for World War I became even more attractive. With the resurgence of German power in the latter part of the decade, the great war itself came to be widely regarded in the West as a terrible mistake which could only be explained if it was assumed that the political leaders had stumbled into it blindly, pulled along by their military advisers, or trapped by military arrangements whose implications they had never really understood.⁹⁶

By the 1950s and 1960s, these ideas had taken on a life of their own. During this period, American strategists developed a way of thinking about issues of war and peace that placed an extraordinary emphasis on military factors, especially on preemption and the “reciprocal fear of surprise attack.” In such an environment, the notion that the First World War had come about because of the working of the military system of the day had an obvious appeal. This interpretation seemed to provide an important degree of empirical support for conclusions reached through an essentially abstract process of analysis. Thomas Schelling’s work is perhaps the best example.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the environment again shifted, but the theory, which by now had been around long enough to become part of the conventional wisdom, was once more able to find a new niche. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and even more with the fading of the Cold War in the 1980s, the “Munich analogy” was discredited as a basic paradigm for foreign policy. The “Sarajevo analogy” was drawn into the vacuum. It might be hard to believe that general war could result from deliberate aggression. But for this very reason, it was important—the argument now ran—to remember what had happened in 1914. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, for example, pointed out in 1976 that the lesson of the July Crisis was that one could have a war “without any conscious decision to overturn the international structure.” War could come about because “a crisis much like any other went out of control. Nation after nation slid into a war whose causes they did not understand but from which they could not extricate themselves.”⁹⁷

It was in fact commonly assumed that even in the nuclear age there was a real danger that the world might slip into war in this way. Today, in a

96. Note especially Lloyd George’s comments in his exchange with Duff Cooper in March 1936, summarized in *ibid.*, pp. 524–525.

97. Speech of March 11, 1976, *New York Times*, March 12, 1976, p. 4.

world where all of the major powers obviously want very much to avoid a new world war, the only real fear is that the great nations might somehow stumble into one more or less inadvertently. The “inadvertent war” interpretation of the events of 1914 gives focus and substance to this fear and thus appeals particularly to those in the defense and arms control communities who have a professional interest in taking the risk of great-power war seriously.

During this whole process, the inadvertent war interpretation was accepted because it was what people wanted to believe. It is important, however, that our basic thinking about issues of war and peace not be allowed to rest on what are in the final analysis simply myths about the past. The conventional wisdom does not have to be accepted on faith alone: claims about the past can always be translated into historically testable propositions. In this case, when one actually tests these propositions against the empirical evidence, which for the July Crisis is both abundant and accessible, one is struck by how weak most of the arguments turn out to be. The remarkable thing about the claims that events moved “out of control” in 1914 is how little basis in fact they actually have.