Mobilization and Inadvertence in the July Crisis

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Correspondence

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To the Editors:

Marc Trachtenberg's recent article makes an important contribution both to our understanding of the origins of World War I and to some larger theoretical debates for which the July 1914 crisis is a particularly important case.[1] By arguing that political and military leaders fully understood the implications of the military mobilization plans in 1914, that the politicians did not capitulate to the generals, and that decisions for war resulted from the deliberate calculations of political leaders rather than from their loss of control over events, Trachtenberg poses a serious challenge to the commonly-held view of World War I as an inadvertent war.[2] Trachtenberg also forces us to rethink our understanding of the widely-acknowledged German policy shift on the evening of July 29–30, when German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg abandoned his long-standing pressure on Austria to invade Serbia, and demanded that Vienna accept great power mediation and a favorable negotiated settlement in order to avoid war. Trachtenberg argues that Bethmann reversed his policy in response to news of the imminent Russian partial mobilization rather than to a warning from British Foreign Secretary Grey that Britain would not stand aside in a continental war. If correct, this argument, in conjunction with Trachtenberg's assertion that Bethmann had never been confident of British neutrality, would undermine the hypothesis that if Britain had made an earlier commitment to intervene on the side of France and Russia, this would have induced German leaders to restrain their Austrian ally, and a world war could have been avoided, at least for a while. These historical issues are important for theoretical debates regarding the spiral model, the deterrence model, and inadvertent war.[3]

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1. Marc Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 120–150. Subsequent references to this article appear in parentheses in the text. I thank Jack Snyder, Ed Rhodes, and Roy Licklider for their helpful comments.
2. A classic statement of the "inadvertent war" interpretation is Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Dell, 1962). See also the citations in Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization," pp. 120–124.
3. On the possibilities of effective British deterrence of Germany in 1914, see Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Detente and Deterrence: Anglo-German Relations, 1911–1914," *International Security*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1986), pp. 142–145; Scott D. Sagan, "1914 Revisited," *International Security*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1986), pp. 166–171; Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, trans. Isabella

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International Security, Summer 1991 (Vol. 16, No. 1)

Trachtenberg is correct to emphasize the importance of the deliberate calculations of political leaders rather than their loss of control over events in July 1914, but he goes too far in suggesting that there was no element of inadvertence in the processes leading to World War I. In particular, Trachtenberg is incorrect, first, to suggest that Bethmann assumed all along that Britain would enter the war, and second, to downplay the impact of Grey's warning on July 29. I have already argued at some length that German political leaders not only hoped for but in fact expected British neutrality throughout the crisis;[4] that their preference for a local war in the Balkans over a negotiated peace and their willingness to risk a continental war against Russia and France were contingent upon this assumption;[5] and that only when this premise became untenable on July 29 did Bethmann reverse course and pressure Austrian leaders for restraint and negotiations based on the Halt-in-Belgrade plan.[6]

My aim here is to demonstrate that, contrary to Trachtenberg's argument, Bethmann's policy shift on July 29–30 resulted from Grey's warning of British intervention

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M. Massey (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980 [Milan, 1942–43]), Vol. 2, pp. 514–527. On the spiral and deterrence models see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), chap. 3.

4. The key issue here is the expected *timing* of British intervention. Although Bethmann believed that Britain would not allow France to be crushed by Germany, he thought that any intervention would come too late to affect the outcome of the war, and that it could be avoided if Germany allowed Russia to mobilize first and provided guarantees that Germany sought no territorial annexations from France. Jack S. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 151–186, esp. fn. 49. See also Sagan, "1914 Revisited," pp. 170–171.

5. Although German decisionmakers believed that military threats could probably deter Russian intervention, they had been willing throughout the crisis to risk war with Russia in order to support a military solution to the Serbian threat to Austria. I rank Bethmann's preferences in the following descending order: (1) local war in the Balkans; (2) continental war arising from Russian, German, and French intervention; (3) negotiated settlement; (4) world war with British intervention. See Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices," pp. 154–162.

6. On German expectations of British neutrality and the impact of Grey's warning on July 29–30, see Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 514–527; Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1967 [Düsseldorf, 1961]), chap. 2; Fischer, "The Miscalculation of English Neutrality," in Solomon Wank, et al., eds., *The Mirror of History* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clio, 1988), pp. 369–393; Lynn-Jones, "Detente and Deterrence," pp. 138–145; Sagan, "1914 Revisited," pp. 168–171.

Trachtenberg's arguments (p. 135) that Bethmann did not expect British neutrality are not persuasive. The Mommsen footnote to which he refers concerns a handful of meetings prior to June 6, 1914, which is too early to provide a reliable indicator of the expectations that influenced German policy during the July crisis. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914," *Central European History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 1973), p. 38n. Trachtenberg refers to earlier warnings from Ambassador Lichnowsky (although he acknowledges that German officials may have discounted these messages), but takes no account of numerous other signals suggesting that the British would remain neutral; in fact, many officials in Russia, France, Belgium, and Britain itself also expected British neutrality. Sagan, "1914 Revisited," pp. 169–170. Note also Bethmann's 1912 statement that Britain would not allow France to be "destroyed" by Germany, referred to by Trachtenberg, is consistent with my argument that Bethmann believed Britain would not intervene *early* in a war.

rather than from the Russian partial mobilization, and to explain the broader significance of this point.

The news from Russia and from London were not the only negative developments for Germany on July 29–30, and Bethmann's policy shift must be understood in a larger context. Vienna had yet to respond to Bethmann's July 28 request that the Austrians repeat their renunciation of territorial annexations and negotiate with Russia on the basis of the Kaiser's Halt-in-Belgrade plan.[7] Moreover, Bethmann learned on the 29th that inept Austrian diplomacy and duplicity regarding territorial annexations had further alienated St. Petersburg, London, and Rome (*GD* 365, 301, 363); that the defection of Italy and Rumania had become increasingly likely;[8] and that Belgium had begun to fortify its defenses and Britain had begun naval activity, both of which increased the pressure from German generals for military preparations.[9] With all of this bad news in the span of a few hours on July 29, it would be stretching the evidence too far to suggest that Bethmann's move to increase the pressure on Austria that evening can be traced to any single cause. A careful examination of the sequence of telegrams, however, will demonstrate that the warning of British intervention had far greater impact than did the Russian partial mobilization.

Although Trachtenberg is correct (p. 136) that authorities in Berlin learned of Russian partial mobilization at 5 p.m., Bethmann did not hear of it until after he returned to Berlin (probably 7–8 p.m.) from the Potsdam meetings with the Kaiser and the army chiefs. There was no discussion at Potsdam of the Russian move, and the meeting adjourned with a decision to take no action until Vienna responded to Bethmann's July 28 telegram.[10] Thus the German decisionmakers' interest in encour-

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7. *German Documents on the Outbreak of the World War* collected by Karl Kautsky (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), No. 323, pp. 288–289. (The documents are henceforth referred to in parentheses in the text by *GD*, followed by the document number as given by Kautsky.) At the time he transmitted the Kaiser's proposal, Bethmann was probably more concerned with the appearances than the reality of Austrian flexibility, in order to shift the blame for any war onto Russia and thus to ensure British neutrality and the support of the Social Democrats at home. Bethmann delayed transmitting the proposal and distorted its content in significant ways. He deleted the Kaiser's phrase about war no longer being necessary, inserted one about the "complete fulfillment" of Austrian demands, and instructed German Ambassador at Vienna Tschirschky "to avoid very carefully giving rise to the impression that we wish to hold Austria back." The goal was "to realize Austria's desired aim . . . without at the same time bringing on a world war, and, if the latter cannot be avoided in the end, of improving the conditions under which we shall have to wage it" (i.e., with blame placed on Russia and without British intervention). Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, p. 72.

8. Bethmann heard from Lichnowsky on July 29 that "Italy would not participate in a world war that arose on account of Serbia" (*GD* 355, 362), and from Bucharest that Rumania was likely to remain neutral (*GD* 379). Bethmann's own telegrams (*GD* 340, 361, 395) suggested that he believed these warnings.

9. The Belgian actions were threatening because a successful German *coup de main* at Liège was absolutely essential for the Schlieffen Plan to work. At the Potsdam meeting Bethmann resisted pressure from the German military for a proclamation of imminent danger of war. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 494–503, 520–521; Bernadotte Schmitt, *The Coming of the War* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1966), Vol. 2, p. 145.

10. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 494–503.

aging Vienna to negotiate with St. Petersburg on the basis of the Halt-in-Belgrade plan (in an attempt to avoid war, or to shift the blame for war onto Russia) predated their knowledge of the Russian mobilization. The Russian action was not discussed until Bethmann's meeting with Jagow, Moltke, and War Minister Falkenhayn (probably 8–10 p.m.). The German leaders concluded that the Russian mobilization did not mean war, and that Germany could not yet respond because of the problem of public opinion at home and in England.[11] The meeting ended with the dispatch of an ultimatum to Belgium (*GD* 375, 376), to be opened and delivered only upon instructions from Berlin.[12]

Bethmann's telegrams to Tschirschky in Vienna at 10:18 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. (*GD* 377), each consisting of one line, requested an Austrian reply to the Kaiser's Halt-in-Belgrade proposal (July 28, *GD* 323).[13] There is little else to indicate that they reflected Bethmann's "newly-found eagerness for a negotiated settlement" that Trachtenberg (p. 136) claims. Bethmann expressed only slightly greater urgency in two 12:30 a.m. telegrams to Vienna (*GD* 384, 385). Still unaware of the warning from Grey,[14] Bethmann included sections from an earlier Lichnowsky telegram (*GD* 357),[15] mentioned (for the first time) the Russian partial mobilization but stated that it was "far from meaning war," and urged Vienna to follow his July 28 proposal for a halt in Belgrade (*GD* 323), "in order to prevent a general catastrophe, or at least to put Russia in the wrong."[16] Thus Trachtenberg is correct that Lichnowsky's 9:12 p.m. telegram had not been decoded when Bethmann sent the 10:18 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. telegrams, but incorrect to suggest that these telegrams to Vienna indicated a profound policy change.

The more significant change in Bethmann's policy, and his demand that Austria accept great power mediation, occurred after Bethmann learned that England would not remain neutral. Bethmann's first reference to Lichnowsky's warning from Grey came in an urgent and agitated telegram to Vienna at 2:55 a.m. (*GD* 395), which was followed by another five minutes later (*GD* 396).[17] In the first he wrote:

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11. Albertini (*Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 502–503) suggests that the meeting proceeded "quietly." The concern was for the proper political conditions for mobilization, not, as Trachtenberg implies, with the Russian threat *per se*.
12. Immediately afterwards Bethmann met with British Ambassador Goschen and issued a formal request for British neutrality. It is unlikely that Bethmann would have done this had he not believed neutrality was a strong possibility. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 519–520; Sidney B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, 2nd ed., rev. (New York: Free Press, 1966 [New York, 1928]), Vol. 2, pp. 501–502.
13. Recall (fn. 7 above) that Bethmann was probably more concerned with the appearances than the reality of Austrian conciliatory behavior in *GD* 323.
14. Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, p. 60; Pierre Renouvin, *The Immediate Origins of the War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928), p. 179.
15. These conveyed Grey's hint that Serbia might accept the disputed points 5 and 6 of the Austrian ultimatum. Had Bethmann known at this time of Grey's warning of British intervention, surely he would have used it as further pressure on Vienna.
16. That Bethmann did not perceive the news from St. Petersburg as earth-shattering is further suggested by the fact that he waited until 6 a.m. to inform the Kaiser (*GD* 399).
17. Bethmann's sense of urgency is also reflected in a flurry of telegrams to St. Petersburg at 2:40 a.m., 2:55 a.m., and 3:05 a.m. (*GD* 387, 392, 397), and to London at 2:55 a.m. (*GD* 393).

As a result we stand, in case Austria refuses all mediation, before a conflagration in which England will be against us; Italy and Rumania to all appearances will not go with us, and we two shall be opposed to four Great Powers. On Germany, thanks to England's opposition, the principal burden of the fight would fall. Austria's political prestige, the honor of her arms, as well as just claims against Serbia, could all be amply satisfied by the occupation of Belgrade or of other places. . . . We must urgently and impressively suggest . . . the acceptance of mediation on the above-mentioned honorable conditions. The responsibility for the consequences that would otherwise follow would be an uncommonly heavy one both for Austria and for us.

In the second telegram, Bethmann stated that, "we are, of course, ready to fulfil the obligations of our alliance, but must decline to be drawn wantonly into a world conflagration by Vienna, without having any regard paid to our counsel."[18] Thus Bethmann not only urged restraint at this time, but hinted that Germany might abandon her ally rather than be drawn into a world war. Moreover, unlike his telegrams earlier that evening and on the 28th, Bethmann did not qualify either of these messages in any significant way. He no longer mentioned concern about shifting the blame for any conflict onto Russia, but spoke only about avoiding a world war.[19]

These striking differences in both the content and the tone of the dispatches Bethmann sent before and those he sent after he learned of Grey's unambiguous warning, along with his much more measured response to news of the Russian partial mobilization, provide solid evidence that the shift in German policy and its attempts to restrain Austria were affected more by the collapse of the assumption of British neutrality than by Russian military measures. This provides further evidence that, contrary to Trachtenberg's assertions, British neutrality really mattered to Bethmann, and that his preference for a local war and his willingness to risk a war with France and Russia, rather than accept the status quo, were contingent on the assumption that Britain would not immediately enter the war.

These points are directly relevant to some important theoretical debates concerning the spiral and deterrence models, misperceptions, and inadvertent war. Although World War I is generally used as evidence in support of the spiral model, some aspects of the July crisis fit the deterrence model: a firmer and more timely commitment from England would almost certainly have induced Germany to restrain Austria from declaring war against Serbia, and thus have increased the likelihood of a peaceful settlement of the July crisis.[20] In this sense the outbreak of World War I was a failure of general deterrence, and misperceptions played an important role in the process: the failure of England to issue a clear deterrent threat contributed to the German misperception of British intentions. Although I agree with Trachtenberg that most decisions and actions in the July crisis followed from the deliberate, interest-based

18. Bethmann also scolded Austrian leaders for their refusal to negotiate with the Russians.
19. Bethmann's pressure on Vienna was too little and too late, for by this time Austrian leaders had diplomatically and politically committed themselves a war against Serbia. I develop this argument further in Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices," pp. 174–178.
20. But given the interests of the great powers and the international and domestic constraints on their actions, it is not clear how long any negotiated settlement would have lasted.

calculations of political leaders,[21] and although I argue that most misperceptions during the July crisis had only a modest impact on the outcome, I think the German misperception of British intentions was critical, and was in fact a necessary condition for an Austro-Serbian war or a world war.[22]

Similarly, although Trachtenberg is correct to challenge the popular image of World War I as an inadvertent war, he goes too far in suggesting that political leaders were fully aware of the consequences of all of their actions. None of the leading European statesmen either wanted or expected that the July crisis would lead to a world war involving all of the great powers. Each preferred a negotiated settlement to a world war, and none expected at the time of the assassination that the conflict would escalate all the way to a world war. The conflict escalated because Germany and Austria-Hungary each preferred a localized war or even a continental war to a negotiated settlement, and because the German misperception of British intentions led German leaders to believe that they could attain their preferred outcomes without risking the one outcome they most feared, world war.

—*Jack S. Levy*
New Brunswick, N.J.

To the editors:

Marc Trachtenberg's provocative critique of the theory of "inadvertent war" poses a challenge to the conventional understanding of the causes of World War I.[1] But, rather than refuting the standard accounts, the evidence that Trachtenberg presents actually supports them, albeit in a novel manner. Trachtenberg is convincing in his argument that the Tsar knew his July 30 decision for general mobilization would lead to war; but his evidence from before July 30 demonstrates that the earlier Russian "pre-mobilization" had set in motion a series of unintended consequences leading to that "fateful decision." He fails to show that Russian leaders understood and intended the results of their earlier decisions. Thus his new interpretation leaves ample room for an amendment to the inadvertent war account of the July Crisis.

A revised inadvertent war argument based on Trachtenberg's evidence might look like the following. The Russians planned (July 24–25) and then ordered (July 28) a partial mobilization toward Austria as a response to the Balkan crisis (pp. 124–125, 129). At this point, rather than accepting general war as inevitable, the Russian leadership hoped to deter Austrian aggression toward Serbia and to compel Germany to assume a more compromising posture toward the crisis (pp. 129–131). As a corollary

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21. Note that, on the theoretical level, I give more attention than Trachtenberg does to the structural constraints which conditioned calculations based on interests.
22. In "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices" I argue (p. 167) that the German misperception of British intentions was not unreasonable given the inherent uncertainty of the environment and the mixed signals emanating from London.

1. Marc Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/1991), pp. 121–150. Subsequent references to this article are in parentheses in the text.

to this partial mobilization, the Russians ordered more general "pre-mobilization" measures, including the readying of frontier forces facing both Germany and Austria and the recall of troops on annual summer maneuvers (July 25–30). These measures constituted a bet-hedging strategy. They increased the alert status of defensive forces deployed on the German frontier to repel preemptive German cavalry incursions. Also, by reducing Russian mobilization time in the event of general war, they served to keep that option open for the Tsar if the Balkan crisis escalated into general war.[2] The pre-mobilization measures were detected by German leaders even before they learned of the partial mobilization toward Austria. The Germans, immediately feeling threatened by such actions, warned Russia against mobilization in hostile terms.[3] Upon learning of the Russian partial mobilization, Moltke and Bethmann were relieved by its limited nature and subsequently urged Austrian restraint (pp. 132, 134, 138). But, because of continuing signs of the more general accompanying "pre-mobilization," Germany changed its moderate positions toward the Austro-Serbian conflict. In the last crucial hours before the Tsar's decision, the Germans began to see Russia as hostile and general war as inevitable (pp. 132, 142–143). Since they perceived their long-term strategic position as declining, the Germans decided to allow Russia to start the war sooner rather than later (p. 143). Therefore, they halted attempts to rein in Austria (pp. 139, 142–143). On the evening of July 30, because they saw no cooperation from the Germans on Austria, the Russians also decided that war was inevitable and that general mobilization, therefore, was necessary (pp. 125–126). As everyone expected, Russian general mobilization led to war.

In the complex scenario above, as in the standard accounts, war is still a tragically unintended outcome of Russian partial mobilization. Pre-mobilization measures, ancillary elements of the limited Russian design to deter war, altered German behavior and, in turn, Russian attitudes about German intentions. As a result of this inadvertent spiral of tensions, on the evening of July 30, the Tsar and his advisers viewed war with Germany as inevitable and decided on general mobilization.

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2. Despite their full understanding that France was to be the first major target of the Schlieffen Plan, the Russians also feared that a smaller number of highly-trained German cavalry divisions might puncture the Russian defensive lines in the early phases of mobilization. See William C. Fuller, Jr., "The Russian Empire," in Ernest R. May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 119–120. Also see Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 185–186. For a fuller discussion of Russian pre-mobilization measures, see Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, trans. Isabella M. Massey (London: Oxford University Press, 1952–57 [Milan, 1942–43]), Vol. 2, pp. 305–306. It should be noted that the Russian policy of activating reservists in the German frontier regions (cited by Trachtenberg on p. 125) was not in fact implemented in the crucial July 25–30 period. Rather, the Russians readied existing forces on the frontier. See Ulrich Trumpener, "War Premeditated? German Intelligence Operations in July 1914," *Central European History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 1976), p. 79. I am grateful to William C. Fuller, Jr., and Jack Snyder for helpful comments on Russian pre-mobilization.

3. For discussion of the critical effect of Russian pre-mobilization measures on both Bethmann and Moltke, see Trachtenberg, pp. 132–133 and 138. For evidence that Russian pre-mobilization, not general mobilization, affected Moltke's reversal on the issue of Austrian restraint, see Trumpener, "War Premeditated?" p. 79.

In defense of Trachtenberg's argument, one might ask whether Russian leaders understood the consequences of their July 25 and July 28 actions as well. If they did, it can be argued that they accepted war even before July 30. If they did not, then war still might be seen as an *inadvertent* outcome of decisions made before July 30.

Unfortunately, Trachtenberg's view on the meaning of those earlier policies to the Russian leaders is unclear. When first discussing the July 25 pre-mobilization measures, Trachtenberg argues that the Russians were "moving closer to general mobilization" (p. 125). He then immediately moves to a discussion of the meaning of the July 30 general mobilization. The key question he leaves unanswered in this section is not what the Russians thought about the latter decision, but what they saw as the significance of their measures of July 25–30. We can only infer Trachtenberg's position on this issue. By arguing that, at 5 p.m. on July 30, "holding back" was still an option for the Russian leaders, Trachtenberg strongly implies that they did not view their earlier pre-mobilization as part of an irreversible progression toward war (p. 126). This is consistent with his portrayal of the partial mobilization toward Austria as a deterrent strategy and his argument that Sazonov, among others, did not see war as inevitable on July 28 (pp. 130–131).

But, later in the article, Trachtenberg takes a different angle on events before July 30. Taking issue with Stephen Van Evera's argument that Russian civilian leaders were relatively ignorant on military matters,[4] Trachtenberg asserts that Sazonov accepted all along the military's position that partial mobilization would require general mobilization. Moreover, Trachtenberg speculates that, on July 28, Sazonov went ahead with partial mobilization because he had already decided on the need for general mobilization and believed that implementing the former would convince the Tsar to accept the latter (pp. 146–147). In this scenario, the accompanying pre-mobilization might simply be seen as preparation for inevitable general mobilization and war. While plausible in and of itself, this interpretation undermines other key elements of Trachtenberg's historical account. First, if, on July 28, Sazonov knew partial mobilization would lead to general mobilization and thus to general war, how can we still see the move toward Austria as a deterrent strategy? (pp. 130–131). Second, if, for all intents and purposes, the die was cast by Sazonov alone on July 28, Trachtenberg's centerpiece evidence—the July 30 meeting, replete with smoking-gun quotes—seems like mere window dressing. The Russian partial mobilization itself, not German intransigence in the face of it, necessitated Russian general mobilization and war.

Trachtenberg's failure to specify clearly the significance of pre-mobilization raises questions about his argument that mobilization and war were not ultimately the result of inadvertency. His best evidence of Russia's intentions comes from the July 30 meeting of the Tsar and his advisers. But, by his own account, the Russian leaders' decision was based largely on the Germans' failure to restrain Austria and the Tsar's consequent perceptions about the inevitability of war. Since the German failure itself

4. See Stephen Van Evera, "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914," in Kenneth A. Oye, ed., *Cooperation Under Anarchy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 104.

was largely conditioned by Russian pre-mobilization activities *before* 5 p.m., July 30, Trachtenberg must either show that Russian leaders knew that pre-mobilization itself would precipitate general war, or settle for a revised inadvertent war argument.

This critique does not call into question the fundamental usefulness of Trachtenberg's historical account. A new inadvertent war scenario for World War I would constitute a major contribution to the understanding of a momentous event. Moreover, I do not argue above that World War I was primarily an inadvertent war. There exist extremely persuasive alternative arguments about the German desire for war and the failure of British deterrence.[5] Here I argue only that the bulk of the evidence Trachtenberg presents, instead of refuting the theory of inadvertent war, actually supports a sophisticated alternative version of it. We should, then, categorize the article accurately and enter it into the debate.

—*Thomas J. Christensen*
New York, N.Y.

The author replies:

In my article on the July Crisis, I wanted to examine the idea that the First World War was "inadvertent" in the narrow sense that it had been brought on by forces of a military nature acting independently of the will of the political authorities. I certainly did not mean to suggest, in Jack Levy's phrase, that there had been "no element of inadvertence" in the much broader sense that misunderstanding and miscalculation played no role in shaping the course of the crisis. Nor did I intend to argue that "political leaders were fully aware of the consequences of all of their actions," or that any of the European leaders originally "wanted or expected" the crisis to lead to a world war.

In testing the theory that the mobilization system was somehow responsible for the war, I had to examine the idea that in opting for partial mobilization, the Russian government had unwittingly set off a process it was unable to control—that it had ordered partial mobilization without understanding that it would have "led to war no less surely than general mobilization." My argument was that this claim was not valid, and that in fact the partial mobilization led to a shift in German policy that, for a time at least, actually brought a peaceful settlement within reach. As part of this argument, I dealt briefly (on pp. 134–136) with the common claim that this shift in German policy was due to the warning the Germans received from the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, that Britain would intervene in a continental war. My argument was that the role of this factor had been greatly exaggerated in the literature, and this to my mind strengthened the argument that the news about

5. For examples of the German belligerence argument, see Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1967 [Düsseldorf, 1961]); and Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911–1914*, trans. Marian Jackson (New York: Norton, 1975). For a more recent, persuasive alternative to the inadvertent war thesis, see Jack S. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 151–186.

Russian partial mobilization was the decisive factor accounting for the German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's well-known shift in policy on the night of July 29–30.

Levy in his letter takes issue with this interpretation, and our disagreement turns on our varying assessments of Bethmann's telegrams in the period after he learned of the Russian partial mobilization but before he received Grey's warning. It seemed to me that these documents showed that an important substantive shift in German policy had taken place during this period. I agree of course that Bethmann became more desperate after he received Grey's warning, but I still think this marked only an intensification of Bethmann's efforts to pursue a new policy, and that the substantive shift had occurred earlier that night.

What exactly was this new policy, and when was it put in place? On this issue, I followed Albertini's analysis quite closely.[1] What he shows is that up to this point—the evening of the 29th—Bethmann had encouraged Austria in her intransigence, and had even, on the 28th, tried to sabotage the proposal the Kaiser had just come up with for a peaceful settlement, the famous "Halt in Belgrade" proposal.[2] But now Bethmann was shifting course, and was finally beginning to press seriously for a peaceful settlement.

What is the proof that such a major shift in German policy took place on the night of the 29th, even before Bethmann learned of Grey's warning? What convinced me was the fact that a whole *series* of telegrams was sent off at this time. A single short telegram could easily be explained in terms of Bethmann doing the minimum needed to satisfy the emperor that his policy was being carried out, but a whole series of telegrams to Vienna clearly seemed to reflect a new-found sense of urgency: Bethmann was now, for the first time, really pushing the Austrians to accept a negotiated solution. This general impression was confirmed by certain minor details—for example, the fact that Bethmann sent off the 10:18 telegram in the clear, "so great was his haste," as Albertini put it.

The point remains that the 3 a.m. telegrams were stronger and more emotional than anything that had come before, and Levy is right to point out that Bethmann was now, for the first time, hinting that Germany might abandon Austria if the Austrians remained intransigent. But what led Bethmann to take this position? If various factors played a role, how is their relative importance to be assessed? Maybe Grey's warning was by far the most important factor, but isn't it also possible that it was a kind of last straw, and that in essential ways the ground had been prepared by the events that had taken place earlier that night? Who can tell, for example, what effect Grey's warning would have had if the news of Russia's partial mobilization had not been received just a few hours earlier? How one assesses the seriousness of

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1. 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. 499–505, esp. pp. 503–505.
2. This important point is obscured by the account in the fourth paragraph of Levy's letter, which makes it seem that Bethmann had backed the Kaiser's proposal on the 28th. Compare this with the relatively accurate account of this episode in his article, Jack Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), p. 177.

Bethmann's efforts earlier that night is certainly relevant to a judgment of this sort, but one's *general* interpretation of German policy during the crisis—including especially the role that calculations regarding British neutrality played in it—is also quite important. For if one is convinced that the Germans throughout the crisis had been counting on Britain to remain neutral, and had built their policy on this assumption, then it would make sense to assume that Grey's warning was by far the most important factor involved here. On the other hand, if one does not think that the Germans had been so firmly convinced that the British would stay out of a European war, or that their expectations about Britain had been the basis of their policy in the crisis, one would be inclined to take a somewhat milder view of the impact of Grey's warning.

Levy and I obviously differ on this broader question, but the disagreement is not quite as he portrays it. Levy says I claimed that "Bethmann assumed all along that Britain would enter the war," and that British neutrality did not "really matter" to Bethmann (pp. 190, 193). But I never argued that Bethmann was sure that Britain would come in, only that he was *not* sure that Britain would stay *out*.[3] So our disagreement is as follows: Levy thinks that the German leaders were not just hoping for, but were confident of, British neutrality, while my view is that they thought there was a certain chance the British would stay out, but at no point thought British neutrality was certain.

Why did I reach this conclusion? The basic reason was that the evidence was just not there to support the sort of argument that Levy and various other scholars make in this regard. And one really needed compelling evidence, I thought, because the idea that the Germans were confident of British neutrality is fundamentally counter-intuitive. For, given the general political situation in Europe, given especially Britain's close ties to France, given her well-known interest in maintaining a balance of power on the continent, and given also the fact that the German war plan, as everyone knew, called for the rapid destruction of French military power, the *natural* assumption would be that at the very least British neutrality could not have been taken for granted. The burden of proof therefore had to fall disproportionately on those who made the contrary argument. But the works that make this argument—for example, those that Levy cites in note 44 of his article—do not contain any really convincing evidence proving that the German leaders were, to quote Levy, "quite confident of British neutrality," or that they had "based their policy on that expectation."[4]

Take, for example, Fischer's article on "The Miscalculation of British Neutrality," which Levy cites in that footnote. Since this article is devoted exclusively to this question, this is where one would expect to find the most compelling evidence and

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3. I think anyone who reads the passage in question on pp. 134–136 of my article will see that this was the case. For example, I wrote specifically that the German government "did what it could to maximize the probability that Britain would stay out of the war"; the reference in the last sentence in my note 57 to the "important efforts" the Germans made to influence British policy hardly supports the idea that I was arguing that the British attitude did not "really matter" to the Germans at the time.

4. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices," p. 163.

the most systematic proof. But does one, for example, find Bethmann, the real maker of German policy in July 1914, saying in effect: "If it's just France and Russia we have to deal with, we can face the prospect of war with some confidence. But a war with Britain as well is out of the question"? One finds nothing of the sort. The evidence in that article shows only that the Germans were hoping for British neutrality, not that they were counting on it. And given the importance of this argument to people like Fischer, one has to assume that if the evidence did exist to prove the stronger point, it would have been cited. One could therefore reasonably assume that really persuasive evidence had never been discovered. The hard evidence presented in support of this thesis was quite thin; much of it could be dealt with along the lines I laid out in note 57 of my article; and in any event this material was fully counterbalanced by other pieces of evidence that pointed in the opposite direction.[5]

Beyond all this, there remained the great puzzle of Bethmann's behavior on the 30th, after Grey's warning had been received. If in the final analysis the Germans had been willing to push things to the point of a great war only because they thought Britain would remain neutral, why now did Bethmann not do what had to be done to liquidate the crisis? The events of July 30 would show that the Germans, no matter how much they would have preferred to fight just Russia and France, were ultimately willing to go to war against the entire Triple Entente.

Putting all of this together, I reached the conclusion that it was "going much too far to say that the hope of British neutrality was the basis" of German calculations during the crisis. It followed that the importance of Grey's warning ought not to be exaggerated: the warning had served simply to intensify a shift that had clearly begun earlier that evening, after Bethmann learned that Russia had ordered partial mobilization. Thus the partial mobilization, instead of leading directly to war, was in fact having the opposite effect. I see no reason now to change any of these conclusions.

Where does this leave the general issues that Levy alluded to in the beginning of his letter? In view of the foregoing, it may come as a surprise to some readers that Levy and I are not all that far apart on these broader questions. In particular, I agree with him that different policies, especially on the part of the British, might have helped head off the conflict. But I would make this point somewhat differently.

What should the British have done during the July Crisis? Should they, as Levy implies, have given the Germans a "clear and timely" warning that they would stand with France and Russia if war broke out?[6] Well, not necessarily, because first of all, if the British had issued such a warning, it might have had a certain deterrent effect on the Germans, but it also might have encouraged the Russians to pursue a more

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5. See, for example, the evidence from June 1914 presented in Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914," *Central European History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 1973), p. 38n, cited in my note 56. Levy dismisses this on the grounds that the meetings in question came "too early to provide a reliable indicator" of German expectations in the crisis (note 6). But this is a standard he does not apply to evidence supporting his own interpretation: in note 45 of his article, he cites evidence from the winter of 1912–13 to support a claim about Bethmann basing his "entire policy" in the crisis on an assumption of British neutrality.

6. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints and Choices," pp. 168, 170.

intransigent policy than the one they were in fact following. As far as the overall probability of war was concerned, the net effect might have been minimal. One should also remember that the hope that Britain might remain neutral, misguided though it ultimately proved to be, was one of the key factors that had led Germany to forgo the first mobilization, and was therefore, in this respect, "stabilizing." But by far the most important point to make in this connection is that there was another policy option open to the British, something much better than the simple deterrence policy of Britain issuing clear warnings to Germany and siding unambiguously with her Triple Entente partners. As Albertini argued, instead of trying to be friends with both sides, Grey should have taken a tough line with both Germany and Russia, warning each side that "the political and moral strength of Britain would be thrown in against the aggressor and that, if war came, his decision would be influenced by the conduct, peaceful or aggressive, of the two sides."[7] This argument does not assume that Britain's hands were completely free; but Britain still retained considerable freedom of action, and a policy of this sort would have enabled her to exert maximum influence on both sides. Indeed, Britain's influence on each would have in itself increased her importance in the eyes of the other, and the British government would have been much better able to control the course of the crisis—that is, to maximize its ability to bring about a peaceful settlement. It was a tragedy that Grey, although "a lover of peace and a man of honour" was also "devoid of all political perception," and was simply incapable of thinking in such terms.[8]

Let me turn now to Thomas Christensen's letter, and especially to its second paragraph, where he presents his own "revised inadvertent war argument" which he says my evidence supports. In his scenario, the continuing Russian pre-mobilization, a simple implementation of decisions made on July 24 and 25, led eventually to the hardening of German policy on the afternoon of July 30. This in turn led to the Russian belief that war was inevitable, to general mobilization, and thus to war.

Now it may have been the case that the measures that the Germans took to be "early indications that the Russians were moving toward general mobilization" (my article, p. 132) were simply the result of a bureaucratic organization mechanically implementing decisions made at the top political level five days earlier. Or, as is sometimes argued, these measures may have been the result of high Russian military officers sensing that mobilization was imminent and "jumping the gun" by a few hours. Christensen is right to note later on that I did not go into the meaning of pre-mobilization in the depth needed to resolve issues of this sort. I can only say in this connection that I wish it had been possible for me to do this, but the evidence was simply not available that would have allowed me to deal with this kind of question.

The issue is interesting in theory, because it suggests a path through which war might have come, and, as Christensen suggests, this would have been an inadvertent war if the Russian leadership did not understand the consequences of these early decisions. But this question is of purely academic interest, because one can say with

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7. Albertini, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 518.
8. The words are those of Albertini, ibid.

some confidence that this was *not* the path through which war actually came in 1914. Once again, the chronology is crucial. The indications that Russia was moving toward general mobilization affected German attitudes only on the afternoon of July 30, but Bethmann had evidently given up trying to restrain Austria that morning (my article, pp. 132, 142–143). So if the easing of Bethmann's pressure on Austria is taken as the main manifestation of this hardening of German policy, it could not possibly have been because the news of these Russian measures reached Berlin. Moltke's attitude, as is well known, did harden that afternoon—one thinks especially of his messages to the Austrians encouraging them in their intransigence—but this was not relevant to the Russian decision for war. In the record of the Russian meeting where that decision was made, there was no reference to a sudden hardening of German policy; the problem, from the Russian standpoint, was that the Central Powers had been intransigent all along. Moreover, there just was not enough time for German attitudes to harden ("in the last crucial hours" on the afternoon of July 30), for the Russian representatives in Berlin and Vienna to perceive this, for this information then to be transmitted back to St. Petersburg with all the delays that entailed, and for this to have an effect on the top Russian officials who were meeting that very same afternoon to decide on general mobilization. So in these two key respects, I think Christensen's theory fails the test of chronology.

The other point Christensen raises has to do with a possible contradiction in my discussion of the meaning of the Russian partial mobilization. Did the Russian leaders see it as leading inevitably to war? Christensen has me saying that Sazonov accepted the Russian generals' view that "partial mobilization would require general mobilization" (p. 196). In the passage he cites, I had tried to make the somewhat different point that for the military, general mobilization was viewed as an alternative to, and not a consequence of, partial mobilization, which they in fact viewed as dangerous on technical military grounds. For them, the choice was between "general mobilization and none at all," and they preferred the former on political grounds. By July 28, Sazonov, as I said, had accepted this view. Why then had a partial mobilization been ordered? The best I could do in this context was to speculate that, whatever its military disadvantages, the ordering of partial mobilization would help pull the Tsar closer to accepting general mobilization. It was thus not that Sazonov thought that *military* mechanisms were being unleashed that would lead irreversibly from partial mobilization to general mobilization to war, but simply that Sazonov had probably embarked on a *political* strategy designed simply to overcome the Tsar's resistance.

But even this argument is, as Christensen points out, somewhat inconsistent with my earlier argument that the partial mobilization was ordered primarily for deterrent effect. I think, however, that this contradiction is more apparent than real. For the Russian leadership, and for Sazonov in particular, the decisions they faced were not easy; it was not as though all considerations pointed in the same direction. Probably the thinking on July 28 went something like this: Maybe the partial mobilization would have the desired deterrent effect and bring the Central Powers to accept a peaceful settlement. If not—and Sazonov personally was dubious—then the partial mobilization would at least have helped bring the Tsar around to accepting general

mobilization and thus war. This I think is in line with what Christensen himself had referred to earlier in his letter as a Russian "bet-hedging" strategy.

More than three-quarters of a century have gone by since the First World War broke out. A great deal of evidence on the immediate origins of the conflict has been available since the 1920s, and few if any historical episodes have been studied so thoroughly and by so many people. In spite of this, no real consensus exists, either among professional historians or in the broader community, on even the most basic problems relating to the causes of the war. Indeed, the more deeply one goes into the study of this episode, the more perplexing the problems become—but this is part of what makes this crisis so fascinating. I hope that some of these issues—especially the point raised by Christensen about the meaning of the Russian pre-mobilization in 1914—might be resolved in the near future as scholars sort through the archives on this period that the Soviets have begun to open up. But the answers to the most basic questions about the meaning of the crisis do not turn solely, or even essentially, on access to new evidence. There is a great deal that can be learned from the close analysis of material that has been available for years. This is what I tried to do in my article, and I think, after carefully considering the points raised in these two letters, that the basic argument there still holds up.

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