The Iron Dice | *Dominic Tierney*

Fatalism and War

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Moscow's understanding of the conflict has been imbued with fatalism, or the belief that events are guided by forces beyond Russia's control, such as the enemy's machinations, wider structural dynamics, or destiny. "The showdown between Russia and these forces cannot be avoided," said Russian President Vladimir Putin in February 2022. "It is only a matter of time."[1] As the war evolved into a costly struggle, Moscow became even more fatalistic, claiming that Russia did not start the war and instead that the United States engineered the conflict. Russia also framed the war as a natural disaster such as an earthquake, which was pointless to oppose.[2] Putin said it was better to die a hero on the front lines than succumb to alcoholism at home: "One day we will all leave this world."[3]

Why do leaders in international relations become fatalistic, and what are the effects of their fatalistic beliefs? In some cases fatalism reflects reality, and the leader does, in fact, have little or no control. Alternatively, leaders may use fatalistic rhetoric to boost support. There is also an important psychological explanation for fatalism: it can help leaders avoid responsibility for costly outcomes and protect their self-image. The psychological approach suggests predictable sources of variation. Fatalism is more likely to occur: (1) when leaders face bad outcomes—for example, a war—versus good outcomes; (2) when leaders view a bad outcome as imminent rather than as far-off; and

Dominic Tierney is Claude Smith Professor of Political Science at Swarthmore College.

1. Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 24, 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843.
2. Mikhail Zygar, "Putin's New Story about the War in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, November 10, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-new-story-about-war-ukraine; Kseniya Kirillova, "Putin's Popular Support: A Miasma of Jew Hate and Fatalism," Center for European Policy Analysis, July 18, 2023, https://cepa.org/article/putins-popular-support-a-miasma-of-jew-hate-and-fatalism/.
3. Robyn Dixon and Catherine Belton, "Putin, Czar with No Empire, Needs Military Victory for His Own Survival," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/20/putin-czar-with-no-empire-needs-military-victory-his-own-survival/.

(3) in nondemocratic regimes versus democratic regimes. Autocrats who stare down a disaster of their own making are especially prone to fatalism.

The argument is important for several reasons. First, fatalism may be more common among leaders in international relations versus other domains. Causality and responsibility for decisions are especially hard to discern in global politics given an array of complex forces and a diversity of state and non-state actors. In addition, outcomes in international relations may incur a dramatic material cost that incentivizes leaders to reduce the psychic burden of governance by highlighting the structural drivers for bad events.

Second, fatalism among leaders is surprising because it seems to contradict the well-established psychological tendency toward overconfidence and the "illusion of control," whereby people exaggerate their capacity to manipulate events, even ones that are inherently uncontrollable.[4] This tension can be resolved because leaders exhibit an illusion of control with good things (i.e., claiming credit for positive outcomes) and display fatalism with bad things (i.e., seeking to diminish their responsibility for costly decisions by appealing to external forces).

Third, fatalism can powerfully shape political outcomes and even be a cause of war. The feeling of control is vital for an individual's mental health. Indeed, fatalism is associated with depression, passivity, and "learned helplessness," whereby individuals essentially give up hope.[5] Fatalism can be perilous in a crisis if leaders conclude that conflict is certain because of external forces or destiny and fail to pursue paths to avoid catastrophe. Fatalism may also combine with the belief in a "window of opportunity," or a temporary military edge over a rival, to cause war.[6] If a leader concludes that conflict is inevitable and it is better to fight now than later, then war may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Fourth, the argument offers implications for democratic peace theory.[7] If elected leaders are less prone to fatalism and more willing to recognize their

4. Ellen J. Langer, "The Illusion of Control," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1975), pp. 311–328, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.32.2.311.

5. Lyn Y. Abramson, Martin E. Seligman, and John D. Teasdale, "Learned Helplessness in Humans: Critique and Reformulation," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (1978), pp. 49–74, https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843x.87.1.49; John Mirowsky and Catherine E. Ross, "Control or Defense? Depression and the Sense of Control over Good and Bad Outcomes," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (March 1990), pp. 71–86, https://doi.org/10.2307/2137046.

6. Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 74. See also Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973), pp. 114–124.

7. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace," *Ameri-*

own agency, democracies may have more room to maneuver in a crisis. Such flexibility helps to explain the lack of war between regimes of this type. Whereas traditional democratic peace theory often highlights the pacifying effect of norms such as the peaceful resolution of disputes, this argument focuses on beliefs about individual agency.[8]

The concept of fatalism is central to philosophy and religion. It is also widely studied in medicine and epidemiology.[9] Fatalism is a major focus of research in sociology, with a number of overlapping concepts like "efficacy," "mastery," and "control."[10] Fatalism is a core idea in psychology, with an enormous literature on an "internal locus of control" versus an "external locus of control."[11] Indeed, the link between a perceived lack of control and mental distress is "one of the best-established, most often reproduced findings in all of social psychology."[12] There is a significant literature on how attributions of responsibility shape political attitudes on issues like poverty.[13] Many historians highlight the importance of fatalistic beliefs in causing individual wars. Given all this research, it is striking that not a single book, chapter, or article exists in international relations on fatalism among leaders.[14] Scholars have

can Political Science Review, Vol. 93, No. 4 (December 1999), pp. 791–807, https://doi.org/10.2307/2586113.

8. Zeev Maoz and Bruce Russett, "Normative and Structural Causes of Democratic Peace, 1946–1986," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (1993), pp. 624–638, https://doi.org/10.2307/2938740; Michael R. Tomz and Jessica L. P. Weeks, "Public Opinion and the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 4 (November 2013), pp. 849–865, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055413000488.

9. Viktor Gecas, "The Social Psychology of Self-Efficacy," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (August 1989), pp. 291–316, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.15.080189.001451; Fabio D'Orlando, Francesco Ferrante, and Gabriele Ruiu, "Culturally Based Beliefs and Labor Market Institutions," *Journal of Socio-Economics*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 150–162, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2010.12.010.

10. Steven Hitlin and Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson, "Reconceptualizing Agency within the Life Course: The Power of Looking Ahead," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 120, No. 5 (March 2015), pp. 1429–1472, https://doi.org/10.1086/681216.

11. One review in 2016 finds over 6,000 journal articles on the concept of a locus of control. Benjamin M. Galvin et al., "Changing the Focus of Locus (of Control): A Targeted Review of the Locus of Control Literature and Agenda for Future Research," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 39, No. 7 (March 2018), pp. 820–833, https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2275. See also Julian B. Rotter, *Social Learning and Clinical Psychology* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1954).

12. John Mirowsky and Catherine E. Ross, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*, 2nd ed. (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 2003), p. 196.

13. Gail Sahar, "On the Importance of Attribution Theory in Political Psychology," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (May 2014), pp. 229–249, https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12102.

14. For a discussion of fate and modernity, see Andrew Gamble, *Politics and Fate*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2007). For a study of pessimism in international relations, see Tim Stevens and Nicholas Michelsen, eds., *Pessimism in International Relations: Provocations, Possibilities, Politics* (Cham,

long explored whether individual leaders have agency, but they have given little attention to leaders' *beliefs* about whether they have agency.

This article explores the impact of fatalism on decision-making. It is organized into four sections. The first section defines the concept of fatalism and outlines sources of variation. The second section examines the impact of fatalistic beliefs among leaders. The third section explores the argument with case studies of World War I and World War II. The fourth section offers concluding comments, including policy implications and avenues for future research.

Fatalism in International Politics

Fatalism is derived from the Latin *fatalis*, meaning "ordained by fate." It refers to the belief that one has little or no capacity to direct events, because of either another actor's choices, broader structural forces, accidents, luck, God's will, the law of karma, or other causal drivers. Leaders often espouse fatalistic beliefs. Alexander George describes fatalism versus efficacy as a central part of leaders' "operational code," or their core beliefs about the political universe that structure reality and shape decision-making.[15] Leaders vary significantly in their views about the role of chance in political life, whether the future is predictable and deterministic, and whether they can take the initiative and shape outcomes.[16]

In 1849, the Prussian politician Otto von Bismarck claimed that the great political issues of the age would not be settled by parliamentary debates but instead by divine will, fate, and war: "Sooner or later the God who directs the battle will cast his iron dice."[17] A century later, in 1945, Adolf Hitler believed that the collapse of the Reich was beyond his control. "Hitler was quite unable to grasp the extent of his own responsibility," writes Richard Overy. "Germany was a plaything for fate, doomed by the forces of world history to fight on 'until our last drop of blood has been shed.'"[18] Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States demanded that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan

---

Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). For fatalistic narratives in World War I, see Thomas Lindemann, "World War I as a Self-Fulfilling Catastrophe," *International Relations*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2014), pp. 268–273, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117814533221f.

15. Alexander L. George, "The 'Operational Code': A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 1969), pp. 190–222, https://doi.org/10.2307/3013944.
16. Ibid.
17. James Wycliffe Headlam, *Bismarck and the Foundation of the German Empire* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1899), p. 53.
18. Richard J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 345.

hand over Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders. As war loomed, the Taliban head, Mullah Omar, became paralyzed by fatalism and failed to plan a coherent strategy to defend against a U.S. assault. "There is nothing more we can do," concluded Omar, "except depend on almighty God."[19] The United States invaded Afghanistan and routed Taliban forces, which fled toward Pakistan.

Psychology offers a useful approach to understand why leaders become fatalistic and view outcomes like war as inevitable. In recent decades, scholars in international relations have adopted a diverse range of theories, concepts, and methods from cognitive psychology, social psychology, neuroscience, and biology, reflecting the wider "behavioral revolution" in the social sciences.[20] Scholars have also paid greater attention to how psychological factors interact with the broader institutional and political environment of decision-making.[21]

How can a psychological approach explain leaders' fatalism? A major research program in psychology distinguishes between an internal locus of control, or non-fatalism, whereby people believe that they can alter outcomes through skill and effort, and an external locus of control, or fatalism, whereby people believe that their own actions cannot change the result.[22] Fatalism varies by the degree of perceived agency and can be moderate (viewing external constraints as significant while still seeing the potential for meaningful individual action) or extreme (viewing oneself as essentially powerless).[23]

---

19. Quoted in "Transcript: VOA Interview with Taliban Leader," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/attack/transcripts/omarinterview0923 01.htm. See also Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2015), pp. 32–33.
20. Emilie M. Hafner-Burton et al., "The Behavioral Revolution and International Relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 71, Supplement S1 (April 2017), pp. S1–S31, https://doi.org/10.1017/ S0020818316000400; James W. Davis and Rose McDermott, "The Past, Present, and Future of Behavioral IR," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Winter 2021), pp. 147–177, https://doi.org/ 10.1017/S0020818320000272.
21. Jack S. Levy, "Foreign Policy Decision-Making: The Psychological Dimension," in Leonie Huddy et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 349–392; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).
22. Rotter, *Social Learning and Clinical Psychology*; Galvin et al., "Changing the Focus of Locus." Following much of the literature in psychology, I use external locus of control and fatalism synonymously to refer to the absence of a belief in individual agency. This allows me to focus on a key variable: an internal versus an external locus of control. Some scholars distinguish between different external loci of control—for example, the belief that outcomes are determined by fate or luck rather than by the actions of another person or wider social factors. In the conclusion, I recommend investigating different external loci of control as a useful next step in research on fatalism in international relations.
23. Gecas, "The Social Psychology of Self-Efficacy"; Mirowsky and Ross, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*, chap. 7.

In some cases, leaders' fatalism may be rational because they update information in a fair and reasoned manner and accurately conclude that they have little or no control. If an asteroid were about to strike Earth, an external locus of control might be perfectly rational. But other examples of fatalism are inconsistent with rationalism. Leaders may fail to update their beliefs about causality as new information emerges. Their perceptions of their own agency may not align with their actual degree of control. Psychologists have long argued that attributions of responsibility are subject to numerous biases.[24] People routinely make self-serving causal claims to boost their own image or reinforce their existing value system. For example, poorer people tend to believe that the accrual of wealth is based on situational factors (e.g., inheritance or luck), whereas richer people tend to see financial success as dispositional (e.g., gained through hard work and good character).[25]

Alternatively, fatalistic claims may be mere rhetoric to justify decisions made on other grounds. For example, leaders may self-consciously contend that a risky war is inevitable to diminish criticism in case of failure. Leaders may also exhibit fatalism as a bargaining ploy to use with an adversary: *we can't change course, but you can.*[26] If leaders employ fatalistic arguments on rare occasions, and in public rather than in private, it may imply that fatalism is mainly rhetorical. Yet the rhetorical explanation is not compelling when fatalistic beliefs are sincerely held, adopted consistently in public and in private, and influence a leader's strategy and decisions. For example, Omar's fatalism in 2001 does not seem to be mere rhetoric. He viewed events as beyond his control and then failed to defend against the impending U.S. invasion.

What explains non-rational and non-rhetorical fatalism among leaders (henceforth simply termed "fatalism")? There may be an important psychological explanation. Believing in an external locus of control can protect a leader's self-image, shield them from the pain of responsibility, and reassure the leader that they are part of a meaningful cosmic process rather than just a mere individual. I identify three variables that may increase fatalism among leaders. First, the positive versus negative nature of an event is the main independent variable that predicts a perceived internal versus external locus of control.

---

24. Susan T. Fiske and Shelly E. Taylor, *Social Cognition*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).
25. Sahar, "On the Importance of Attribution Theory," p. 243.
26. For the manipulation of perceptions of agency, see Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Reid B. C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," *International Security*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Winter 2022/23), p. 40, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00451.

Second, the imminence of a bad outcome is a moderator that heightens fatalism. Third, regime type is a moderator that predicts extreme fatalism.[27]

POSITIVE VERSUS NEGATIVE EVENTS

Leaders tend to be fatalistic in regard to negative events (that might produce harmful or undesirable outcomes) versus positive events (that might produce beneficial or desirable outcomes).[28] The "actor-observer bias" finds that people tend to explain other people's behavior in dispositional terms (i.e., their innate characteristics), whereas they explain their own actions in situational terms (i.e., the role of external constraints).[29] The bias is much more evident with negative events: "When actors explain failures, mishaps, and socially undesirable behaviors, they are less willing than observers to cite internal causes."[30]

For example, Egypt's ruler, Gamal Abdel Nasser, saw the 1956 Suez Crisis as a personal and national victory. But when Egypt suffered a major defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War, Nasser offered an Arab proverb, "Precaution or alertness does not change the course of [destiny]," and he compared Egypt to "a man who was hit in the street by a car or a tramway."[31] In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea in a swift and largely bloodless intervention, Putin highlighted Russian agency: "Russia is an independent, active participant in international

---

27. Beliefs about the locus of control also vary according to individual-level factors like socioeconomic status, education, employment, income (higher levels reduce fatalism), gender (women are more fatalistic, although the gender gap is reduced with younger people), and race (Black people are more fatalistic). But it is unclear whether these factors also apply to leaders. Mirowsky and Ross, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*, chap. 7; John Mirowsky, Catherine E. Ross, and Marieke Van Willigen, "Instrumentalism in the Land of Opportunity: Socioeconomic Causes and Emotional Consequences," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (December 1996), pp. 322–337, https://doi.org/10.2307/2787074; Katie E. Corcoran, David Pettinicchio, and Jacob T. N. Young, "The Context of Control: A Cross-National Investigation of the Link between Political Institutions, Efficacy, and Collective Action," *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (December 2011), pp. 575–605, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2011.02076.x. Studies on religion and fatalism yield mixed results. D'Orlando, Ferrante, and Ruiu, "Culturally Based Beliefs"; Gabriele Ruiu, *Is Fatalism a Cultural Belief? An Empirical Analysis on the Origin of Fatalistic Tendencies* (Munich: Munich Personal RePEc Archive, 2012), https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/id/eprint/41705.
28. Gifford W. Bradley, "Self-Serving Biases in the Attribution Process: A Reexamination of the Fact or Fiction Question," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (January 1978), pp. 56–71, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.36.1.56; Gamble, *Politics and Fate*, p. 12.
29. Bertram F. Malle, "The Actor-Observer Asymmetry in Attribution: A (Surprising) Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 132, No. 6 (2006), pp. 895–919, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.132.6.895.
30. Ibid, p. 907.
31. Quoted in As'ad Abu Khalil, "*Al-Jabriyyah* in the Political Discourse of Jamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir and Ṣaddām Husayn: The Rationalization of Defeat," *Muslim World*, Vol. 84, Nos. 3–4 (July/October 1994), pp. 247, 248, respectively, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1994.tb03600.x.

affairs . . . this is a matter for Russia's own political decision."[32] By contrast, after 2022, Putin described the costly Ukraine invasion in more fatalistic terms.[33]

When contemplating good outcomes, people tend to reject fatalism and exhibit bias in the *opposite* direction, known as the "illusion of control."[34] Mentally healthy people maintain an exaggerated belief that they can control events even when such events are inherently beyond their control (e.g., coin tosses, a lottery, or influencing sports games from the stands).[35] In one experiment, subjects pressed a button that turned a "score" light on. In reality, the light was only loosely associated with the button presses. But subjects tended to overestimate their degree of control over the light, especially if they "won" (i.e., the score light turned on). Exaggerating one's feeling of control over positive outcomes can boost self-esteem and mental well-being, as well as spur perseverance in tasks.[36]

When contemplating bad outcomes, however, people are less likely to exhibit the illusion of control and more likely to adopt fatalism as a form of self-defense. People who believe that they are responsible for negative events can feel shame or humiliation (when others judge them negatively) as well as guilt (when they judge themselves negatively). People are motivated to avoid such feelings by denying personal blame.[37] The "negativity bias" provides a powerful impetus for wishful thinking about causality. People are systematically more sensitive to bad things than good things across a wide range of psycho-

---

32. "Crimea Crisis: Russian President Putin's Speech Annotated," *BBC*, March 19, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26652058.
33. Zygar, "Putin's New Story about the War in Ukraine."
34. Langer, "The Illusion of Control"; Shelley E. Taylor and Jonathon D. Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fact from Fiction," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 116, No. 1 (July 1994), pp. 21–27, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.116.1.21; Dominic D. P. Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
35. Ibid.
36. Herbert M. Jenkins and William C. Ward, "Judgment of Contingency between Responses and Outcomes," *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (1965), pp. 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0093874; Lauren B. Alloy and Lyn Y. Abramson, "Judgment of Contingency in Depressed and Nondepressed Students: Sadder but Wiser?," *Journal of Experimental Psychology General*, Vol. 108, No. 4 (1979), pp. 441–485; Robert E. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 231–237; Taylor and Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being."
37. Joel Cooper and Russell H. Fazio, "A New Look at Dissonance Theory," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 17 (1984), p. 236, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60121-5; Rose McDermott, "Psychology, Leaders, and New Deterrence Dilemmas," in Vipin Narang and Scott D. Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the New Nuclear Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023), pp. 39–62.

logical phenomena.[38] Fatalism may be a coping mechanism to mitigate negativity bias, as people appeal to an external locus of control when facing bad outcomes. Psychologists find that negativity bias is so strong that the brain has powerful mechanisms specifically to downplay bad information about oneself (e.g., people tend to underestimate the likelihood of bad events more than they overestimate the likelihood of good events).[39]

I predict that leaders will exhibit asymmetrical beliefs about causality: an illusion of control regarding good things and fatalism regarding bad things. A leader may believe that they exercise more control over positive outcomes than they actually do. By contrast, a leader may blame external forces for negative outcomes because accepting responsibility could threaten their self-image and erode their domestic and international political standing. Indeed, asymmetrical beliefs about causality may be especially pronounced among leaders in the arena of foreign policy. Scholars suggest that individuals are more likely to take responsibility for good outcomes and deny responsibility for bad outcomes in four scenarios: (1) when the issue is public; (2) when an individual believes that they made a choice and are potentially responsible for their actions; (3) when there is a significant threat to the individual's ego or self-esteem; and (4) when there is "high objective self-awareness" (i.e., the individual was on camera when they made judgments about causality) versus "low objective self-awareness" (i.e., the individual was not on camera). All these scenarios may apply to leaders contemplating wars or crises.[40] It is reasonable to think that if a leader becomes fatalistic, *then* they may see an outcome as negative. But the causality may be reversed: if an outcome is negative, then the leader may become fatalistic.

IMMINENCE

Leaders tend to become more fatalistic when they believe that a potentially negative event (e.g., a war) is imminent. At first glance, this argument might

---

38. Roy F. Baumeister et al., "Bad Is Stronger Than Good," *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 2001), pp. 323–370, https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.4.323; Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, "Bad World: The Negativity Bias in International Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Winter 2018/19), pp. 96–140, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00336.

39. Shelley E. Taylor, "Asymmetrical Effects of Positive and Negative Events: The Mobilization-Minimization Hypothesis," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (1991), pp. 67–85, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.110.1.67; Shelley E. Taylor et al., "Maintaining Positive Illusions in the Face of Negative Information: Getting the Facts without Letting Them Get to You," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (June 1989), pp. 114–129, https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.1989.8.2.114.

40. Bradley, "Self-Serving Biases," pp. 68–69.

seem circular: the certainty of war causes the belief that war is certain. But leaders may perceive war as imminent even when it is not 100 percent certain to happen. The view that conflict is looming may result from cognitive bias, emotion, or poor intelligence, as leaders misperceive their opponent's intentions or wrongly conclude that all actors are losing control amid a slide to war.

There is another potential problem with the claim that the perceived imminence of a bad event boosts fatalism: it seems to contradict the well-established finding that proximity in time strengthens the illusion of control. According to the "Rubicon Model of Action Phases" in psychology, when people are in a "pre-decisional" phase and weighing different options, they adopt a "deliberative" mindset, make relatively accurate assessments of costs, benefits, and risks, and are less prone to the illusion of control.[41] The act of deciding (or "crossing the Rubicon") causes people to switch to an "implemental" mindset, whereby they assess information in a biased manner and become partisans of the selected course of action and more prone to the illusion of control.[42] In one experiment, for example, subjects pressed a button and a light turned on and off. In a similar manner to the experiment mentioned previously, the operation of the light was only loosely associated with the button presses. Subjects in an implemental mindset were especially likely to overestimate their degree of control over the light.[43] Other studies find that being temporally close (or even physically close) to something tends to strengthen the illusion of control. For instance, people are more rational about the odds of success when the purchase of lottery tickets is hypothetical. But when someone is immersed in the experience of buying lottery tickets, the illusion of control is more evident.[44]

Yet when an outcome is negative, the perception that the event is drawing near can spur fatalism, as the pressure to ward off responsibility becomes even greater. For instance, implemental mindsets increase the vulnerability to cognitive dissonance and self-serving evaluations, which can encourage leaders to adopt situational explanations of bad outcomes.[45] In the experiment with the

---

41. Peter M. Gollwitzer, "Mindset Theory of Action Phases," in Paul A. M. Van Lange, Arie W. Kruglanski, and E. Tory Higgins, *The Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, Vol. 1 (London: Sage, 2012), pp. 526–546.
42. Ibid.
43. Peter M. Gollwitzer and Ronald F. Kinney, "Effects of Deliberative and Implemental Mind-Sets on Illusion of Control," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (1989), pp. 531–542, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.56.4.531.
44. Kathryn B. Bates and Zehra F. Peynircioğlu, "Proximity to Task: A Prerequisite for Two Cognitive Biases," *American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 130, No. 4 (2017), pp. 477–491, https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjpsyc.130.4.0477; Langer, "The Illusion of Control."
45. Eddie Harmon-Jones and Cindy Harmon-Jones, "Testing the Action-Based Model of Cognitive

light, subjects in an implemental mindset exhibited a much stronger illusion of control when the light went on frequently (i.e., they experienced repeated "wins"). They were much more skeptical about their causal role when the light went on rarely (i.e., they experienced repeated "losses").[46]

It might appear that rationalism can explain the effect of imminence on fatalism. Leaders may be more fatalistic about near-term events because path dependency means that their actions have less marginal impact on something that may occur soon. In reality, however, leaders may exercise *more* control over imminent threats than long-term ones because they have greater information about the context and the options for effective action. Temporal distance gives side A time to plan—but it also offers side B time to shift strategy, and side C time to enter the picture, in ways that may reduce side A's degree of agency. Crucially, if leaders are fatalistic about near-term bad events, but claim agency over near-term good events, this is strong evidence that their assessments may be biased.

REGIME TYPE

Another variable that shapes a leader's propensity to fatalism is regime type. A combination of institutional, cultural, and normative factors mean that authoritarian leaders are more prone to extreme fatalism about bad outcomes—or seeing negative events as entirely outside their control because of powerful structural forces.

At first glance, we might expect *less* fatalism among autocratic leaders compared to elected leaders. Authoritarian leaders exert significant control over politics and society, with limited accountability. They often present themselves as masters of destiny who alone can fix the nation's problems, such as Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, who embraced the title "king of kings of Africa."[47] By contrast, elected leaders operate in a more constrained environment and may face pushback from the legislature or judiciary. Yet authoritarian leaders are more likely than democratic ones to exhibit extreme fatalism about bad outcomes for five reasons: the autocrat's dilemma; narcissism; culture and norms; checks and balances; and military versus civilian preferences.

Dissonance: The Effect of Action Orientation on Postdecisional Attitudes," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 6 (2002), pp. 711–723, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167202289001.
46. Gollwitzer and Kinney, "Effects of Deliberative and Implemental Mind-Sets on Illusion of Control."
47. Neil MacFarquhar, "An Erratic Leader, Brutal and Defiant to the End," *New York Times*, October 20, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/21/world/africa/qaddafi-killed-as-hometown-falls-to-libyan-rebels.html.

The first reason for greater fatalism in authoritarian regimes is what I call the "autocrat's dilemma." The centralization of power in authoritarian systems means that an autocratic leader is responsible for decisions—even bad decisions such as a costly war. Autocratic leaders often worry about potential punishment if they are blamed for poor performance.[48] The leader might be tempted to pass the buck or blame other domestic actors for failure, but doing so could inadvertently empower rivals or undermine the regime's authority. Fatalism can resolve the autocrat's dilemma. By blaming external structural forces for bad outcomes, authoritarian leaders can absolve themselves of responsibility without eroding their own legitimacy. If one controls the state, the attribution for failure must lie beyond the state. Here, fatalism may be either a conscious strategy or a subconscious way to mitigate an injury to self-image (or both).

For example, appealing to divine will is a tempting fatalistic excuse for autocratic leaders. It externalizes failure and may also strengthen the regime by identifying a hierarchical order that passes from God through the leader to the masses. During his early years in power, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein asserted his control over destiny and called himself "the engineer of the Revolution." After the costly invasion of Kuwait in 1990, however, Saddam switched to fatalism and told his generals, "God as my witness, God Himself—and not us—wanted this [war] to happen." When the Iraqi military was routed, he said God's "will is unpreventable."[49]

Of course, elected leaders also routinely try to shift blame for failure. But they are less prone to extreme fatalism like appealing to God's will. In a democracy, the executive and legislative branches share responsibility for foreign policy. This arrangement gives leaders more scope to claim that any decision was by consensus, to scapegoat another official, or to blame the opposing party for its incompetence. Ronald Reagan's decentralized decision-making style enabled him to deflect responsibility for failure onto his subordinates. He became known as the "Teflon president" because criticism rarely stuck.[50]

Second, authoritarian leaders are more prone to narcissism, whose defining

---

48. Jessica L. P. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
49. Quoted in Khalil, "*Al-Jabriyyah* in the Political Discourse," pp. 251, 253, 255, respectively. See also Daniel Pipes, "Are Muslims Fatalists?," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Fall 2015), pp. 1–18, https://www.meforum.org/5478/are-muslims-fatalists.
50. R. Kent Weaver, "The Politics of Blame Avoidance," *Journal of Public Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (October/December 1986), p. 388, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4007281.

traits include a sensitivity to criticism, an unwillingness to take responsibility for bad outcomes, and the denial or rewriting of history to externalize failure.[51] As Rose McDermott puts it, "narcissistic leaders are likely to blame everyone else for the problems they caused."[52]

Third, extreme fatalism is more pronounced among autocratic leaders because of culture (i.e., the attitudes and patterns of behavior in a social group) and norms (i.e., attitudes and patterns of behaviors that are considered to be appropriate).[53] Authoritarian cultures often promote a traditional or immutable order in which structural factors dictate outcomes (e.g., communism, fascism, racism, theocracy, monarchy, or a caste or slavery system). For example, antebellum culture in the American South was highly fatalistic, as Southern whites saw slavery as part of a natural and hierarchical order ordained by God.[54]

At the mass level, a wealth of studies find that countries with authoritarian political systems and high social regulation tend to exhibit greater fatalism.[55] Individual country studies have associated authoritarianism with fatalism in places such as China, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union.[56] Fatalism among the public in authoritarian societies may be rational because power is highly concentrated and the locus of control lies outside the individual. It may also result from norms that de-emphasize individual agency. Katie Corcoran, David Pettinicchio, and Jacob Young conclude: "Macro-level author-

---

51. Frederick M. Burkle Jr., "Character Disorders among Autocratic World Leaders and the Impact on Health Security, Human Rights, and Humanitarian Care," *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2019), pp. 2–7, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X18001280; Jerrold M. Post, "Current Concepts of the Narcissistic Personality: Implications for Political Psychology," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (March 1993), pp. 99–121, https://doi.org/10.2307/3791395.
52. McDermott, "Psychology, Leaders, and New Deterrence Dilemmas," p. 47.
53. Richard K. Herrmann and Vaughn P. Shannon, "Defending International Norms: The Role of Obligation, Material Interest, and Perception in Decision Making," *International Organization*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 621–654, https://doi.org/10.1162/00208180152507579.
54. Edward H. Bonekemper III, *The Myth of the Lost Cause: Why the South Fought the Civil War and Why the North Won* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2015); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Hearts of Darkness: Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).
55. D'Orlando, Ferrante, and Ruiu, "Culturally Based Beliefs"; Charles F. Andrain and James T. Smith, *Political Democracy, Trust, and Social Justice: A Comparative Overview* (Boston: Northeastern University Press; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2006); Corcoran, Pettinicchio, and Young, "The Context of Control"; Ruiu, *Is Fatalism a Cultural Belief?*
56. Andrain and Smith, *Political Democracy, Trust, and Social Justice*; Robin Goodwin and Peter Allen, "Democracy and Fatalism in the Former Soviet Union," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 12 (December 2000), pp. 2558–2574, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2000.tb02 450.x; Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis, and Aaron B. Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990).

itarian political structures may therefore contribute to the generation of micro-level fatalism."[57]

Culture and norms may also shape authoritarian leaders' beliefs about fatalism. A substantial body of scholarship in international relations shows that norms influence leaders' attitudes and actions.[58] In authoritarian systems, culture and norms may encourage leaders to believe that immutable structures guide political outcomes and even to embrace extreme fatalism. Bertram Wyatt-Brown describes how leaders in the antebellum American South were "angry, autocratic, honor-obsessed, and yet fatalistic souls."[59] Political culture in the Stalin-era Soviet Union was also fatalistic, as Marxist-Leninist ideology cultivated the belief that capitalism made war inevitable: "Soviet leaders saw themselves as predestined protagonists in an age of civil and world wars."[60]

By contrast, democratic culture and norms are fundamentally anti-fatalist. That is, democratic societies tend to suppress the notion that destiny is inevitable and beyond human control in favor of the belief that people have agency over events. The democratic model assumes that leaders make decisions and are rewarded or punished through elections, and that citizens have meaningful ways to alter outcomes.[61] T. J. Jackson Lears describes "the fundamental dogma of Western liberal thought: the belief that the individual can master fate through will and choice."[62]

Democratic culture and norms may suppress extreme fatalism among elected leaders and encourage them to maintain belief in their individual capacity to make meaningful choices. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy noted that many people saw peace as an impossible goal: "But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable—that mankind

---

57. Corcoran, Pettinicchio, and Young, "The Context of Control," p. 580.
58. Herrmann and Shannon, "Defending International Norms"; Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle against Apartheid* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
59. Wyatt-Brown, *Hearts of Darkness*, p. 37.
60. Silvio Pons, *Stalin and the Inevitable War, 1936–1941* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), p. xii.
61. Amir N. Licht, Chanan Goldschmidt, and Shalom H. Schwartz, "Culture Rules: The Foundations of the Rule of Law and Other Norms of Governance," *Journal of Comparative Economics*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (December 2007), pp. 659–688, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2007.09.001.
62. T. J. Jackson Lears, "What If History Was a Gambler?," in Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, eds., *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 309. See also David Runciman, "Optimism, Pessimism and Fatalism," in Katrina Forrester and Sophie Smith, eds., *Nature, Action, and the Future: Political Thought and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 203; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Ware, UK: Wordsworth, 1998), pp. 196–197.

is doomed—that we are gripped by forces we cannot control. We need not accept that view. Our problems are manmade—therefore, they can be solved by man."[63]

A fourth cause of extreme fatalism among authoritarian leaders is the absence of checks and balances. In democratic systems, representative institutions, a free press, and open policy debate can filter out extreme fatalism by subjecting simplistic causal theories to higher levels of critical scrutiny. By contrast, in autocratic regimes, extreme fatalism is less likely to be corrected. Leaders are surrounded by sycophants, and opposition groups, independent sources of information, and free media are all absent.[64] Jack Snyder claims that unitary personalist systems like Nazi Germany are prone to "myths of empire" that justify imperial expansion because there is no rival center of power to contest these narratives. In contrast, democratic systems (and unitary oligarchic systems) have diffuse interests and countervailing factions that reduce the odds of strategic mythmaking.[65] Scholars show that both India and Pakistan exhibited overconfidence about war, but vigorous and critical debate in democratic India suppressed this bias. The same pattern may hold with other biases like extreme fatalism.[66]

A fifth factor that explains extreme fatalism in authoritarian regimes is the influence of the military. Scholars find that militaries tend to be more fatalistic than civilian institutions about the likely outbreak of war. The military may select certain types of people for service and then reinforce norms that portray conflict as a near-universal pattern across societies that is rooted in human psychology.[67] Snyder describes how the military's focus on planning for war spurs a zero-sum and Hobbesian view of international relations.[68] Recent

---

63. John F. Kennedy, "Commencement Address at American University, Washington, DC, June 10, 1963," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, June 10, 1963, https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/american-university-19630610.
64. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*. Attributions of responsibility in democracies may still be subject to various biases such as partisanship. See, for example, Sandra León, Ignacio Jurado, and Amuitz Garmendia Madariaga, "Passing the Buck? Responsibility Attribution and Cognitive Bias in Multilevel Democracies," *West European Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2018), pp. 660–682, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2017.1405325.
65. Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 18–19.
66. Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
67. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957), pp. 65–67.
68. Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 28. See also: Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*; Scott D. Sagan, "The Perils of Proliferation: Organization

scholarship finds that leaders with military experience but *not* combat experience are more likely to initiate the use of force. Military service "socializes participants to think about the use of force as a potentially effective solution to political problems," whereas firsthand combat experience tempers this dynamic by teaching people about the risks of war.[69]

Non-democracies often have reduced controls over the military—indeed, in some cases, the military is in charge. Therefore, fatalistic attitudes about war may hold greater sway over decisions. Jessica Weeks argues that regimes run by a military junta tend to see the use of force as routine: "In officers' Hobbesian worldview, resort to force is unavoidable and therefore morally acceptable, further reducing its perceived costs."[70] Moreover, Lisa Langdon Koch says that "by virtue of their professional training and experience, military officers—who lead military regimes—are experts in planning for war. Militaries tend to view war as inevitable."[71]

Fatalism and War

Leaders' beliefs in an internal versus an external locus of control may influence a range of domains in global politics. This article focuses on one application: the outbreak of war. The theory predicts that extreme fatalism is more likely when authoritarian leaders face an imminent and costly war. What are the effects of fatalism on decision-making?

Psychologists find that fatalism can have a negative impact on mental health and functioning. An internal locus of control is associated with positive health outcomes (e.g., seeking early treatment for medical problems),[72] reduced conformity, stronger interpersonal relations, more willingness to help others, greater persistence and creativity in carrying out projects,[73] and being

---

Theory, Deterrence Theory, and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1994), pp. 66–107, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2539178.pdf; Lisa Langdon Koch, "Military Regimes and Resistance to Nuclear Weapons Development," *Security Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2023), pp. 239–270, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2197621.
69. Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2014), p. 532, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818314000046; Michael C. Horowitz, Allan C. Stam, and Cali M. Ellis, *Why Leaders Fight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 35–40.
70. Jessica L. P. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (May 2012), p. 333, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000111.
71. Koch, "Military Regimes and Resistance," p. 248.
72. Gecas, "The Social Psychology of Self-Efficacy," pp. 298–300.
73. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness*, pp. 236–237.

"more curious and efficient processors of information."[74] By contrast, fatalism is associated with anxiety, anger, fear, mistrust, paranoia, and even learned helplessness.[75] Of the nearly one hundred studies on fatalism in a meta-analysis, every study finds a positive correlation between a perceived lack of control and depression.[76] Scholars describe a vicious cycle in which, "Fatalists suffer more and more problems, reinforcing their perceived powerlessness and thus producing escalating passivity in the face of difficulties, and more and more distress."[77]

I identify five main ways that these effects will shape decision-making in international relations. First, leaders with an internal locus of control will be more engaged and active in the political process. In the words of Kenneth Sherrill and David Vogler, "The less fatalistic people are, the more inclined they should be to think that there will be some payoff from political involvement and participation."[78] For example, studies find that U.S. civil rights activists in the 1960s tended to have an internal locus of control.[79] By contrast, fatalistic leaders are more likely to be resigned or passive. They may ignore problems and hope they disappear. In the 1970s, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia brushed aside concerns over security arrangements because he believed that God had fixed the moment of his death to the second. He was assassinated by a relative in 1975.[80] Studies suggest that fatalistic individuals tend to withdraw from politics and show less support for national institutions. They are also less likely to engage in collective action.[81] For example, the belief that climate change is "unstoppable, inevitable or otherwise unchangeable by human action" can be dangerous because it "reduces the behavioural and policy response to climate change and moderates risk perception."[82]

Second, leaders with an internal locus of control will process information

74. Herbert M. Lefcourt, *Locus of Control: Current Trends in Theory and Research* (New York: Psychology Press, 1982), p. 80.
75. Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale, "Learned Helplessness in Humans"; Mirowsky and Ross, "Control or Defense?"
76. Mirowsky and Ross, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*.
77. Ibid., p. 196.
78. Kenneth S. Sherrill and David J. Vogler, *Power, Policy, and Participation: An Introduction to American Government*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 260.
79. Rotter, *Social Learning and Clinical Psychology*.
80. David Holden and Richard Johns, *The House of Saud: The Rise and Rule of the Most Powerful Dynasty in the Arab World* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982), pp. 379–380.
81. Corcoran, Pettinicchio, and Young, "The Context of Control."
82. Adam Mayer and E. Keith Smith, "Unstoppable Climate Change? The Influence of Fatalistic Beliefs about Climate Change on Behavioural Change and Willingness to Pay Cross-Nationally," *Climate Policy*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2019), p. 512, https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2018.1532872.

more effectively. They search for new sources of data, interrogate them, anticipate problems, and develop more creative solutions.[83] Fatalistic leaders, by contrast, process information less effectively. They may highlight structural (and self-serving) explanations for their own actions, and downplay, dismiss, or ignore data suggesting their own responsibility for outcomes.

Third, fatalistic leaders will be more prone to negative emotional and psychological states, including mistrust, paranoia, and depression. These impairments may constrain decision-making. For example, depression can affect sleep, mood, and motivation.[84] In an extreme case, fatalistic leaders may exhibit learned helplessness and essentially give up on the political process.

Fourth, fatalistic leaders may be more likely to see their own bad actions as situational and their opponent's bad actions as dispositional. They tend to view the enemy as solely responsible for conflict, spurring a more hawkish stance. In one study, Israeli Jews who blamed Arabs for the Arab-Israeli conflict displayed more anger and a greater willingness to use force. In contrast, Israeli Jews who saw Israel as responsible exhibited more guilt, showed less anger toward Arabs, and backed more conciliatory policies.[85]

Fifth, fatalistic leaders may exhibit variation in attribution of responsibility: an external locus of control regarding *strategic* decision-making and the initiation of conflict (believing that the outbreak of war is inevitable); and an internal locus of control regarding *tactical* and *operational* decision-making (believing they can effectively manipulate the battlefield). One reason for this variation is that the strategic decision to start a conflict carries a potentially high material and moral cost. To diminish the psychic burden of such outcomes, leaders face incentives to adopt fatalism. But exercising control at the tactical and operational level of war may not trigger the same sense of opprobrium, and therefore officials are more likely to take responsibility. Overcoming battlefield challenges may be seen as apolitical, professional, and technical—the skillful exercise of a game played by all sides in war. Even enemies may respect one another's clever tactics. During and after World War II, the Allied countries condemned the Nazi high command for waging aggressive war but sometimes admired German proficiency on the battlefield (e.g.,

---

83. Corcoran, Pettinicchio, and Young, "The Context of Control."
84. Rose McDermott, *Presidential Leadership, Illness, and Decision Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
85. Aharon Bizman and Michael Hoffman, "Expectations, Emotions, and Preferred Responses regarding the Arab-Israeli Conflict: An Attributional Analysis," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 1993), pp. 139–159, https://www.jstor.org/stable/174499.

praising General Erwin Rommel as the "Desert Fox").[86] In addition, promoting fatalism about war but not war planning serves military interests. Seeing the outbreak of conflict as inevitable justifies the existence of the military, whereas maintaining an internal locus of control at the tactical and operational level rationalizes war preparation, boosts the military's case for funding and autonomy, and allows an offensive (versus a defensive) strategic posture.[87]

The net effect of fatalism among leaders is that it raises the odds of war. Accurately assessing the likelihood of conflict is central to making effective strategic calculations, or appropriately combining ends, ways, and means in military operations.[88] Leaders who are fatalistic about the enemy threat, structural conditions, or God's plan, and who see war as inevitable, may miss opportunities to avert disaster.[89] They may worry less about the feasibility of victory and avoid consulting critics who hold contrary views. They may show less empathy or interest in seeing things from the opponent's point of view and believe that only the adversary has the capacity to swerve and avoid a collision. They may exhibit fewer ethical concerns about war. For example, Vladimir Lenin saw himself as an instrument of history, which "absolved him from all moral responsibility."[90] Fatalistic leaders may give up trying to avoid war and pivot to an intense focus on preparing for war, which can generate its own psychological and societal momentum. The potential surge in fatalism when leaders view fighting as imminent is especially dangerous: at a critical moment when the risk of conflict is elevated, leaders may believe they have no control.

Fatalism may interact with the emergence of a perceived window of opportunity or "a period during which a state possesses a significant military advantage over an adversary."[91] Some scholars suggest that a "fading offensive opportunity" is a powerful cause of war because it incentivizes leaders to take risks and initiate conflict when one actor has the edge.[92] In particular, a win-

86. Desmond Young, *Rommel: The Desert Fox* (New York: Harper, 1950).
87. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, p. 28; Sagan, "Perils of Proliferation," pp. 75–76.
88. Joseph R. Cerami and James F. Holcomb Jr., eds., *U.S. Army War College Guide to Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2001).
89. Runciman, "Optimism, Pessimism and Fatalism."
90. Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (New York: John Day, 1943), p. 226.
91. Richard Ned Lebow, "Windows of Opportunity: Do States Jump through Them?," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), p. 147, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2538638.pdf; Jack Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1984), pp. 108–146, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538637.
92. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, p. 74. See also Blainey, *The Causes of War*, pp. 114–124.

dow of opportunity can enhance the appeal of preventive war on the basis that war is better now than later.

Yet a window of opportunity is not, on its own, a sufficient condition for war. Most temporary power shifts in international relations do not involve an interstate war. For example, in 1905, Japan defeated Russia and created a potential window of opportunity for Germany to crush Russia's ally, France. But Berlin chose to stay at peace.[93] Even if a window of opportunity emerges, states may conclude that peace is preferable to fighting now or later. War is risky and can spur significant costs or provoke resistance from both the public and foreign allies. Leaders may require a plausible casus belli to contemplate hostilities.[94] A further challenge to the logic that windows of opportunity cause war is that the superior but declining state's heightened incentive for war may be counterbalanced by the inferior but rising state's heightened incentive for peace. For example, the rising state may try to avoid hostilities by adopting a noninterventionist posture, appeasing the declining state, or claiming that peace is strongly preferable to war.

A window of opportunity in combination with fatalism may be sufficient to cause war. If a leader believes that the choice for war is out of their hands and that conflict is inevitable, the benefits of fighting now versus later may become determinative. War may be reduced to a question of timing that is guided by strategic expediency. As Snyder puts it, "The perception that war is inevitable becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."[95] Fatalism can also help to solve the puzzle of why the rising state's incentive for peace does not counteract the declining state's incentive for war. If the declining state believes that war is inevitable, it may dismiss the rising state's appeals for peace as cheap talk to run down the clock before the window of opportunity closes.

Fatalistic leaders may initiate a preventive war while believing themselves to be prisoners of circumstance. In reality, the leader's decisions make war more likely, and yet the leader may not think they chose war in any meaningful sense. They did not jump through the window of opportunity; instead, a great force pushed them through it.

---

93. John N. Westwood, *Russia against Japan 1904–05: A New Look at the Russo-Japanese War* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986).
94. Richard Ned Lebow, *Coercion, Cooperation, and Ethics in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 71–120.
95. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, p. 28.

Case Studies

In summary, I predict that extreme fatalism is more likely when nondemocratic leaders contemplate a looming war. The argument has three scope conditions: (1) it explains fatalism about war (but not other events in international relations); (2) it contrasts democratic and nondemocratic regimes (but does not explore different kinds of nondemocratic regimes); and (3) it focuses on an internal versus an external locus of control (but does not distinguish between different external loci of control). Factors outside of the theory may also shape beliefs about inevitable war (e.g., power shifts). Here, I focus on psychological bias because it is understudied, and because I can draw on a significant literature in psychology.

I test the argument with two paired comparisons: nondemocratic Germany and democratic Britain in World War I, and nondemocratic Japan and the democratic United States in World War II. The cases are a plausibility probe, or an initial assessment to see if further research on a theory is warranted.[96] These are good cases for at least five reasons. First, these countries were all major actors in the origins of the world wars. Second, exploring claims about fatalism requires sufficient information about the beliefs of key leaders, and the world wars are among the best researched cases in international relations. Third, fatalism can help to explain major puzzles in the origins of both world wars. For example, historians identify a powerful strain of fatalism in both 1914 and 1941, but none have offered a theoretical framework to understand it. The argument also helps to explain the coexistence of an internal and external locus of control for different aspects of the conflict (i.e., strategic versus tactical domains). Fourth, the world wars are paradigmatic cases for international relations theories (e.g., the spiral model of war), and thus analyzing these conflicts may offer benefits in theory development. Fifth, these countries are a hard test for the theory. Scholars might expect leaders in the democracies (Britain and the United States) to be *more* fatalistic than leaders in the nondemocracies (Germany and Japan) because the former faced greater checks and balances at home, and, crucially, played less of a role in causing the wars. But my theory expects *less* fatalism in London and Washington than in Berlin and Tokyo.

---

96. Harry Eckstein, "Case Study and Theory in Political Science," in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science*, Vol. 7, *Strategies of Enquiry* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), pp. 79–137; Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

I compare the psychological approach with a rational actor model, which holds that decision-makers identify goals, search for different policy options, and select the choice with the highest expected utility. As Jack Levy and William Thompson explain, "The rational model is generally taken as the standard against which other models are compared."[97] I also consider the rival explanation that fatalism is merely rhetorical—that is, leaders make fatalistic claims self-consciously to ward off criticism.

It is challenging to demonstrate the presence of fatalism, the causes of fatalism, and the role of fatalism in triggering war. One issue, for example, is whether fatalism is evident in the real world of politics, where decision-makers often work in groups and are incentivized to see things accurately. Yet studies suggest that psychological biases may be more pronounced during international crises, when time is short and there are major threats to core values.[98] In both 1914 and 1941, a wealth of evidence shows that leaders attributed responsibility in biased ways. For example, some leaders ignored information that emphasized their individual agency and instead fixated on fatalistic narratives.[99]

I use process-tracing of beliefs to show how key decision-makers assessed information, evaluated their degree of control, and ultimately chose a course of action.[100] I examine the degree to which decision-makers were fatalistic (i.e., whether they exhibited low, moderate, or extreme fatalism) and the association between fatalism and hawkish or dovish preferences.[101] I measure a leader's fatalism by exploring their writing, speeches, and other communications to see whether they believed that: (1) it was possible to circumvent constraints and change political outcomes through individual effort (low fatalism); (2) the environment was highly constrained but some individual action was possible

97. Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 129. See also Hafner-Burton et al., "The Behavioral Revolution and International Relations."
98. Joshua D. Kertzer et al., "Hawkish Biases and Group Decision Making," *International Organization*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (Summer 2022), pp. 513–548, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818322000017.
99. Chaim D. Kaufmann, "Out of the Lab and into the Archives: A Method for Testing Psychological Explanations of Political Decision Making," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (December 1994), pp. 557–586, https://doi.org/10.2307/2600865.
100. Alexander L. George, "The Causal Nexus between Cognitive Beliefs and Decision-Making Behavior: The Operational Code Belief System," in Lawrence S. Falkowski, ed., *Psychological Models in International Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), pp. 95–121; George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
101. Khong, *Analogies at War*; George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*.

(moderate fatalism); or (3) an outcome was entirely forced upon them (extreme fatalism).

If the argument holds true, the following observable implications should be evident: (1) German and Japanese leaders exhibited greater fatalism than British and U.S. officials (e.g., extreme fatalism versus low or moderate fatalism), especially when war was perceived as costly and imminent; (2) German and Japanese officials systematically privileged information suggesting war was inevitable and beyond their control and downplayed information suggesting that they retained agency; (3) fatalism occurred both in public and in private, and without a mindful choice, suggesting that it emerged at a subconscious level and was not simply rhetorical; and (4) fatalism shaped decision-making and increased the odds of war.

The argument would be undermined if: (1) democratic leaders exhibited the same (or a greater) degree of fatalism as nondemocratic leaders; (2) fatalism was mainly rhetorical (i.e., leaders used fatalistic arguments in public but recognized their individual agency in private, and even admitted that the use of fatalistic language was instrumental); (3) rationalism offers a sufficient explanation for leaders' behavior (i.e., leaders assessed information about causality in a fair way, aiming to maximize utility, and their perceptions of imminent war reflected reality); and (4) fatalism played little role in decision-making or the outbreak of war.

WORLD WAR I

Many scholars view the powerful strain of fatalism that emerged during the 1914 July crisis as an important cause of World War I. William Mulligan describes a "fatalist logic, in which participants recognized the catastrophic consequences of war but neither wanted nor felt capable of averting it."[102] The perceived external locus of control "offered decision-makers a means of rationalizing any decision for war and reducing their own agency, and therefore responsibility."[103] But fatalism was not uniformly evident. A comparison of

---

102. William Mulligan, "Armageddon: Political Elites and Their Visions of a General European War before 1914," *War in History*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2019), p. 467, https://doi.org/10.1177/0968344517736082.
103. Ibid. See also Holger Afflerbach, "The Topos of Improbable War in Europe before 1914," in Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson, eds., *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), pp. 161–182; James Joll, *1914: The Unspoken Assumptions; An Inaugural Lecture Delivered 25 April 1968* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968); Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, p. lxxxvi; Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2013).

Germany and Britain in 1914 suggests that fatalism was more prevalent among leaders: (1) who saw war as costly and felt potential responsibility; (2) who perceived conflict as imminent rather than far-off; and (3) who were from non-democratic regimes versus democratic regimes.

GERMANY. Historians highlight the degree of extreme fatalism among German leaders in 1914. According to Wolfgang Mommsen, "A fatalistic attitude, which no longer believed in the possibility of being able to control the course of events, overshadowed the decisions of the Reich leadership in the days and weeks following the murder at Sarajevo."[104] German officials concluded that the enemy had agency, but Berlin was not responsible for war. German leaders even contended that no country could stop a conflict that was driven by hidden and inexorable forces.

The core driver of German fatalism was a desire to avoid taking responsibility for a potentially catastrophic war. German planners understood that a wider European conflict could turn into a protracted and attritional struggle. Chief of the German General Staff Helmuth von Moltke said that a general war "will destroy civilization in almost all of Europe for decades to come."[105] German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg claimed that a wider war in Europe would cause "the overthrow of everything that exists."[106]

During the summer of 1914, the perception that a costly war was drawing near spurred the belief that Germany had little or no agency. In the first days after the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, many officials in Berlin saw room for political maneuver and hoped that Germany might achieve a diplomatic victory or that Austria-Hungary might win a localized war against Serbia in the Balkans.[107] Within a few weeks, Austria issued a harsh ultimatum to Serbia (July 23), Austria declared war on Serbia (July 28), and Russia ordered partial mobilization (July 30). As a wider

---

104. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "The Topos of Inevitable War in Germany in the Decade before 1914," in Volker R. Berghahn and Martin Kitchen, eds., *Germany in the Age of Total War* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 41. See also Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2014), p. 144.
105. Holger H. Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short-War' Illusion: Toward a New Interpretation?," *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (July 2002), p. 692, https://doi.org/10.2307/3093355. See also: Thomas G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 380–381; Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
106. Quoted in Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short-War,'" p. 692. See also Mulligan, "Armageddon"; Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, 40th anniversary rev. ed. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2020), p. 145.
107. Mulligan "Armageddon," p. 467.

conflict loomed, German leaders tended to deny their own agency and became resigned to war.[108]

Moltke had long seen war as inevitable and had been tempted by the idea of preventive war against Russia. He became even more fatalistic during the crisis. James Joll claims that "when war was imminent," leaders like Moltke, "felt themselves caught up in an ineluctable historical process—an age-old conflict between Germans and Slavs."[109] In 1915, Moltke claimed that the war was both necessary and inevitable and demonstrated "how the epochs of civilization follow one another in a progressive manner, how each nation has to fulfill its preordained role in the development of the world."[110]

Bethmann's behavior illustrates how the perceived imminence of war triggered fatalism. For years he had worried about Russia's growing demographic strength and threatening intentions. Nevertheless, during the first weeks of the crisis, Bethmann believed that he could shape events and keep the crisis contained.[111] But in the end, as Holger Herwig puts it, Bethmann "came 'round to Moltke's fatalism."[112] Suffering from intense stress and melancholy, Bethmann embraced fatalism as a way of reducing his responsibility for disaster.[113] He saw Germany as a prisoner of the enemy's machinations, of allied pressures, and of grand structural forces. By late July, he felt "a fate greater than human power hanging over Europe and our own people."[114] After Germany announced *Kriegsgefahrzustand* (or an imminent danger of war), Bethmann said he would not abandon hopes for peace but "direction had been lost and the stone had begun to roll."[115] In a reference to Bismarck, Bethmann added:

108. Ibid.
109. Joll, *1914*, p. 13; Strachan, *The First World War*, p. 172.
110. Stig Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871–1914," in Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 375.
111. Lindemann, "World War I"; Mommsen, "The Topos of Inevitable War," p. 36.
112. Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short-War,'" p. 692. See also Strachan, *The First World War*, pp. 72, 144.
113. Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 97. Other factors may also have encouraged Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann's fatalism, including a "depressive temperament" and the death of Bethmann's wife in May 1914. Peter S. Jenkins, *War and Happiness: The Role of Temperament in the Assessment of Resolve* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2019), p. 77.
114. Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 99.
115. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 441.

"If the iron dice must roll, may God help us."[116] On August 4, 1914, Bethmann told the Reichstag: "We have not willed war, it has been forced upon us."[117]

The nondemocratic system in Germany may have spurred fatalism among the leadership in Berlin.[118] The German political system in 1914 had some representative elements (e.g., an elected legislature, the Reichstag). But Kaiser Wilhelm II appointed government ministers and controlled the legislative upper chamber, or Bundesrat, which could veto legislation. Crucially, in foreign policy, the system was essentially autocratic, and the executive was not responsible to the Reichstag.[119] The nondemocratic system meant there was an absence of checks and balances on extreme fatalistic beliefs.[120] For example, the Reichstag was not consulted on Germany's declaration of war and had little opportunity to correct dangerous assumptions. There was no substantive freedom of the press, and the government routinely suppressed publications by accusing them of slander and libel.[121]

German leaders drew on a wellspring of fatalistic cultural beliefs. Mommsen describes German fatalism as "home-made" and the product of "two decades of nationalist agitation which official policy had never been capable of keeping in check."[122] In the years before 1914, German politics was marked by militarism and an emphasis on attaining a "place in the sun," with powerful veteran leagues and a relatively weak peace movement.[123] Meanwhile, right-wing elites used hyper-nationalist claims to outflank one another and defeat the socialist left, which was "part of the background to the fatalism of the civilian as well as military elite in 1914."[124]

---

116. Cathal J. Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 326.

117. Lebow, "Windows of Opportunity," p. 159.

118. Mommsen, "The Topos of Inevitable War."

119. On a scale of -10 to +10, where +7 or higher equates to a democracy, Polity codes Germany as +2 from 1909 to 1914. Monty G. Marshall, "Polity5 Project, Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2018," Excel series, Polity5 Project, Center for Systemic Peace, https://www.systemicpeace.org/inscrdata.html.

120. Peter Simkins, Geoffrey Jukes, and Michael Hickey, *The First World War: The War to End All Wars* (Oxford: Osprey, 2014), chap. 1.

121. Daniel M. Kliman, *Fateful Transitions: How Democracies Manage Rising Powers, from the Eve of World War I to China's Ascendance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 39.

122. Mommsen, "The Topos of Inevitable War," p. 42.

123. Chancellor von Bülow, speech on draft law concerning the German Fleet, to Reichstag, December 6, 1897, Stenographic Reports of Reichstag Proceedings, 9th Legislative Period, 5th session, Vol. 1 (Berlin, 1898), p. 60.

124. David Blackbourn, *Populists and Patricians: Essays in Modern German History* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987), p. 238. See also Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980).

Social Darwinism was particularly influential in Wilhelmine Germany and promoted the notion of an international "survival of the fittest" that emphasized structural forces and inevitable war.[125] In his book *Germany and the Next War*, German General Friedrich von Bernhardi described how population pressure and resource competition created a relentless struggle for existence.[126] Societal norms shaped the beliefs of both leaders and the public: "The expectation of international conflict permeated the political culture and extended into the highest councils of government."[127] The belief in a natural law of endless competition meant that "what was inevitable could hardly be decided by human agency, thus reducing personal responsibility for war."[128]

The German system also elevated military interests, which were especially prone to deterministic thinking about war.[129] High-ranking German officers believed that "war was inherent in man's nature and all the destructive energies mobilized in fighting were nature's tool to foster progress."[130] Political scientists identify Kaiser Wilhelm II as a classic example of a leader who has military experience, but not combat experience, and is conflict-prone.[131] Meanwhile, civilian leaders in Germany had little say over war planning, which was conducted by the military "almost in a vacuum."[132]

German fatalism was an important cause of World War I. Fatalism spurred a sense of narrowing options and dangerous passivity, as Berlin missed several opportunities to avert conflict. Officials in Berlin failed to seriously evaluate whether a shift in strategy could mitigate security dangers, such as by pivoting to a policy of détente to divide the Entente powers.[133] Richard Herrmann describes "the degree of fatalism that seemed to overcome Bethmann Hollweg in the final days, when peace could theoretically have been saved by Germany

125. David Paul Crook, *Darwinism, War, and History: The Debate over the Biology of War from the "Origin of Species" to the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 30.
126. Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, trans. Allen H. Powles (London: Edward Arnold, 1913).
127. Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World without War: The Peace Movement and German Society, 1892–1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 419.
128. Crook, *Darwinism, War and History*, p. 75.
129. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, p. 122; Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, p. 386.
130. Günther Kronenbitter, "The German and Austro-Hungarian General Staffs and Their Reflections on an 'Impossible' War," in Afflerbach and Stevenson, *An Improbable War?*, p. 156.
131. Horowitz and Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders."
132. Annika Mombauer, "German War Plans," in Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds., *War Planning 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 48.
133. Mombauer, *Helmuth Von Moltke*, pp. 6, 159, 285–286; Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 116–119.

restraining Austria-Hungary from a full-scale invasion of Serbia."[134] In the end, German officials "passively accepted the coming of war as something they were powerless to avoid."[135] By July 30, Bethmann focused on presenting Russia as the aggressor to boost domestic support for the coming inevitable conflict.[136]

Fatalism encouraged poor information processing. Officials in Berlin overweighted information suggesting a lack of German agency, exhibited little empathy for strategic dilemmas in Paris and in St. Petersburg, and downplayed evidence that Germany's rivals were reacting to Berlin's own actions. For example, German leaders feared French and Russian rearmament. But they ignored how such developments were, in large part, responses to Germany's earlier rearmament.[137] German officials also assumed that France and Russia were determined to surround and destroy Germany, even though Paris and St. Petersburg had repeatedly failed to support each other in crises before 1914.[138]

Consistent with the findings in social psychology, German fatalism was associated with anger, anxiety, fear, mistrust, and paranoia.[139] For example, Moltke's mind "was beset with pessimism bordering on paranoia."[140] After the war broke out, Moltke experienced a nervous breakdown. German leaders also displayed a classic double standard, believing that their own hands were tied but that Britain, France, and Russia enjoyed a plethora of choices.[141]

German leaders sometimes exhibited a combination of fatalism about the inevitability of war alongside a sense of agency, and even an illusion of control, about tactical issues.[142] By early August, Bethmann was fatalistic about conflict. But he also predicted that Germany would win "a war lasting three, or at the most, four months . . . a violent, but short storm," and then, after victory

---

134. David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 226.
135. Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, p. 145.
136. Ibid., p. 161; Marc Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 120–150, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2538909.pdf.
137. Jack Snyder, "Better Now Than Later: The Paradox of 1914 as Everyone's Favored Year for War," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Summer 2014), pp. 71–94, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00173; William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 133–134.
138. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe*, p. 217.
139. Mirowsky and Ross, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*, chap. 7.
140. Herwig, *The First World War*, p. 22.
141. Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, pp. 165–166.
142. Ibid., pp. 145–161.

was attained, Germany would somehow orchestrate an alliance with France and Britain "against the Russia colossus."[143] He does not seem to have considered whether the diplomatic craft required to achieve this realignment after the war was won might have been employed to prevent the war from ever occurring.

Fatalism interacted with a perceived window of opportunity to enhance the attraction of preventive war. If war was certain, then it was better to fight in 1914 than to delay the contest—when Germany's enemies would only grow stronger and more united.[144] In March 1914, the German foreign minister described Moltke's view: "There was no alternative to waging a preventive war in order to defeat the enemy as long as we could still more or less pass the test."[145] In 1917, Bethmann reflected that it had been preferable to fight in 1914 rather than postpone the struggle: "Yes, by God, in a certain sense it was a preventive war."[146]

In sum, German fatalism was a powerful spur to war. It is striking that the most fatalistic German officials, such as Moltke, were also the most hawkish.[147] Mommsen writes that German fatalism "must have made a significant contribution" to overcoming Berlin's reservations about war; the belief in an inevitable conflict had "the effect of a 'self-fulfilling prophecy.'"[148] In a vicious cycle, once leaders became fatalistic about conflict, each additional escalatory step in the crisis seemed to further confirm the theory that powerful structural forces were propelling Europe to war. Fatalism may even have been a necessary condition for war. Richard Ned Lebow describes how German leaders resisted taking personal responsibility for great power war: "It is certainly difficult to imagine how kaiser, chancellor, and foreign office could have taken this step if they had been compelled to recognize their share of responsibility for it from the outset."[149]

German fatalism in 1914 deviated from a rational actor model. For example, Lebow describes the "cognitive closure of the German political system."[150]

---

143. Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), p. 92.
144. Snyder, "Better Now than Later," pp. 75–76.
145. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, p. 148. See also Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 94.
146. Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*, p. 94.
147. Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short-War,'" p. 693.
148. Mommsen, "The Topos of Inevitable War," pp. 24, 41.
149. Richard Ned Lebow, "Contingency, Catalysts, and International System Change," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 4 (Winter 2000/01), p. 605, https://doi.org/10.2307/2657611.
150. Lebow, *Coercion, Cooperation, and Ethics*, p. 85. See also Mulligan, "Armageddon," p. 467.

Fatalism also cannot be explained as mere rhetoric. According to historians, German leaders' beliefs were sincerely held rather than instrumental, and there is little evidence that leaders were fatalistic in public while accepting their agency in private.[151] Gerhard Ritter says that a "spirit of fatalism" encouraged "a belief that a great war was inevitable; and coupled with a strong sense of national prestige and self-assertion, this was calculated to engender political blindness."[152]

BRITAIN. During the July crisis, British leaders exhibited significantly less fatalism than German leaders. Officials in London recognized the wider structural constraints in European politics and sometimes displayed foreboding about war. But they did not tend to see war as inevitable, to declare their lack of agency, or to espouse extreme fatalism about epochs and laws of civilization. Instead, they believed that individual effort and creativity could alter political outcomes. They may have even exaggerated their degree of control.

British leaders believed that a European war would be highly costly. Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, the key British actor in the July crisis, declared: "If war breaks out it will be the greatest catastrophe that the world has ever seen."[153] Prime Minister Herbert Asquith called war "a real Armageddon."[154] Even when a disastrous war loomed, however, British officials resisted fatalism. Some critics have blamed Grey for passivity during the July crisis and for failing to offer clear deterrent threats to Germany.[155] But the most recent scholarship contends that Grey strove to stop the war.[156] "Grey viewed the role of misfortune as being generally outweighed by that of self-determination," writes one scholar, "which is highly indicative of a strong internal locus of control."[157] Grey and Asquith saw themselves as retaining agency, and Grey said that British "hands were free."[158] Initially hopeful of negotiating with Berlin to avert war, Grey gradually shifted to backing France and Russia.[159] Grey used a

---

151. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, p. lxxxvii.

152. Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, Vol. 2, *The European Powers and the Wilhelminian Empire, 1890–1914*, trans. Heinz Norden (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969), p. 275.

153. Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, p. 156.

154. George H. Cassar, *Asquith as War Leader* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), p. 14.

155. David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1933).

156. Thomas G. Otte, *Statesman of Europe: A Life of Sir Edward Grey* (London: Penguin Press, 2020).

157. Jenkins, *War and Happiness*, p. 77.

158. Ole R. Holsti, "The 1914 Case," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (1965), p. 373, https://doi.org/10.2307/1953055.

159. J. Paul Harris, "Great Britain," in Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds., *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 266–299.

wide range of tools to avert conflict, from proposing peace conferences, to employing deterrent threats, to offering reassurances to France. Even when war loomed, he "would not give up on diplomacy."[160]

One reason for reduced British fatalism was the democratic British political system. The Polity Project codes Britain as a democracy after 1880.[161] Compared with Germany, Britain had a more representative system, clearer lines of ministerial responsibility, and a much weaker monarch. Open debate and checks and balances in Britain may have helped to filter out extreme fatalism. Asquith needed support from both the cabinet and the House of Commons before entering the war.[162] Throughout the July crisis, multiple competing factions of the cabinet vigorously debated the wisdom of war.[163] But Grey steadily built a majority for an interventionist position.[164]

Another way that Britain and Germany differed was in civil-military relations. During the July crisis, Austria famously wondered "who rules in Berlin—Moltke or Bethmann?"[165] But there was no question who ruled in London. The British military was completely sidelined, and the cabinet did not even consult the service chiefs during the crisis.[166]

Wider democratic norms and values may have suppressed fatalism. The Quaker tradition, reform socialism, and free trade liberalism spurred a less militaristic culture and a much stronger peace movement compared with Germany.[167] One scholar concludes that, unlike in Germany, "It is not possible to find a strong link between Darwinism as an ideology of biological determinism justifying war and the decision-makers in London in July 1914."[168] The liberal tradition in Britain encouraged norms of negotiating and bargaining. Policymakers were confident that they could find answers to even the toughest political issues.[169] Grey maintained that all problems have solutions, and he could not imagine that any country would willingly unleash general war.

---

160. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 459.
161. Britain receives a Polity score of +7 after 1880 and +8 after 1901. Marshall, "Polity5 Project, Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2018."
162. Harris, "Great Britain."
163. Ibid., p. 282.
164. Ibid., p. 294.
165. Mombauer, *Helmuth Von Moltke*, p. 205.
166. Harris, "Great Britain"; Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*, p. 94.
167. Chickering, *Imperial Germany*.
168. Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*, p. 75.
169. Spencer R. Weart, *Never at War: Why Democracies Will Not Fight One Another* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 192; Zara S. Steiner and Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 2017), pp. 263–265.

Indeed, he was sometimes excessively empathetic, and, according to the French ambassador, "[tended] to attribute to others the sentiments which animate himself."[170]

Did the absence of fatalism among British officials simply reflect the strategic situation—that London had more options? British officials *believed* they had agency, but this may have been an illusion of control. In reality, German officials had more agency. Whereas Germany could stop the war, Britain probably could not. Berlin had factored British intervention into its thinking and clearer British commitments to fight would likely not have mattered. "Britain played a far less important role in July 1914 than British diplomats (and later historians) have assumed, for their actions were of little consequence to the decisions taken by other great powers."[171] German officials had more control but became fatalistic, whereas British leaders had less control but believed in their own agency. In the end, Britain entered the war on August 4 because of a strategic and ethical calculation that London must ensure France's survival as a great power, prevent German control of ports in the English Channel, and fulfill a moral obligation to Belgium.[172]

WORLD WAR II

A comparison of Japan and the United States before the Pacific War suggests that fatalism was more prevalent among leaders: (1) who saw war as costly and felt potential responsibility; (2) who perceived conflict as imminent rather than far-off; and (3) who were from nondemocratic regimes versus democratic regimes.

JAPAN. In 1941, Japanese officials adopted extreme fatalism about war with the United States. Officials in Tokyo concluded that war was unavoidable because Japan's enemies were conspiring to economically strangle Japan and destroy its East Asian empire, forcing Japan to seize the sword.[173]

Japanese officials were keenly aware that initiating war with the United

170. Weart, *Never at War*, p. 193.
171. Annika Mombauer, "Sir Edward Grey, Germany, and the Outbreak of the First World War: A Re-Evaluation," *International History Review*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2016), p. 318, https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2015.1134622. See also Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization."
172. Harris, "Great Britain," p. 293.
173. Gary R. Hess, *The United States at War, 1941–1945*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 15; Sidney Pash, "Containment, Rollback, and the Onset of the Pacific War, 1933–1941," in G. Kurt Piehler and Sidney Pash, eds., *The United States and the Second World War: New Perspectives on Diplomacy, War, and the Home Front* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 39.

States meant taking responsibility for a potentially disastrous conflict, which spurred fatalism to relieve the psychic burden.[174] One former Japanese prime minister said: "If we should by any chance fail, it would be an immeasurable catastrophe."[175] In the fall of 1941, Japanese fatalism became more extreme as war was perceived to draw near. Japan felt pressured as the U.S. economic embargo steadily diminished Tokyo's fuel supplies. Whereas capitulating to U.S. demands meant certain defeat, war was a gamble with at least some chance of success. In November 1941, "the air of suicidal fatalism . . . was beginning to infect almost everyone in Tokyo."[176] Japanese diplomat Toshikazu Kase said: "Events sometimes overwhelm you, surge around you, and carry you along. . . . War has a life of its own."[177] Japanese officials employed a range of deterministic metaphors to describe the country's plight. One official compared Japan to "a fish in a pond from which the water was gradually being drained away."[178] The Japanese Navy chief of staff said Japan was like a patient with a serious illness who could only be saved by an extremely dangerous operation.[179] War Minister Hideki Tojo concluded, "During a man's time he might find it necessary to jump, with eyes closed, from the verandah of Kiyomizu Temple into the ravine below."[180]

The nondemocratic system in Japan may have encouraged extreme fatalism. In 1940, parliamentary politics ended in Japan, and the country became a complex authoritarian regime in which different interests, such as the navy and the army, competed for resources and prestige.[181] The absence of democracy reduced open and critical debate about fatalistic assumptions. In the summer and fall of 1941, Japanese officials attended conferences to canvas different

---

174. Nobutaka Ike, trans. and ed., *Japan's Decision for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conferences* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. xxvi.
175. Pash, "Containment, Rollback, and the Onset of the Pacific War," p. 39.
176. Eri Hotta, *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), p. 275. See also Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions That Changed the World, 1940–1941* (New York Penguin Books, 2007), p. 334.
177. Ian W. Toll, *Pacific Crucible: War at Sea in the Pacific, 1941–1942* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), p. 113.
178. John M. Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 50.
179. Scott D. Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1988), p. 895, https://doi.org/10.2307/204828.
180. Toshio Iritani, *Group Psychology of the Japanese in Wartime* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*, p. 344.
181. Kitaoka Shinichi, *From Party Politics to Militarism in Japan, 1924–1941* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2021).

strategic options. Yet the meetings provided only an illusion of discussion, as leaders avoided open conflict, self-censored, and used vague language.[182] The Japanese Navy opposed war but declined to challenge hawkish assumptions. For one thing, Japanese leaders feared appearing dovish because of the assassinations that radical imperialists carried out during a coup attempt in 1936.[183]

Wider culture and norms in Japan also spurred fatalism. In the 1930s, Japanese society became increasingly nationalistic and closed to dissent, and Japanese values deemphasized individual freedom in favor of conformity to collective standards and obedience to authority. Emperor Hirohito was seen as a living god, which reinforced the idea that divine forces beyond human control guided Japan's fate. Japanese propaganda stressed that war was unavoidable and forced by the enemy and that Japan's existence was at stake.[184] The lack of a free press or freedom of speech meant that the narrative that hostile forces encircled Japan became widely accepted.[185]

Japanese fatalism was a significant cause of the Pacific War. Eri Hotta describes the war as both a war of choice and a product of fatalism.[186] One Japanese political scientist concludes that Japanese leaders "thrust their way forward with their hands over their eyes."[187]

Japanese fatalism was associated with poor information processing. Once Japanese leaders concluded that war was unavoidable, they rejected any information that suggested a different path. In the fall of 1941, a Japanese report concluded that Japan's war production was only one-tenth that of the United States. Although the army did not dispute the report's findings, it nonetheless ordered all copies of the report to be destroyed because it contradicted the will of the state.[188] Fatalism also spurred a double standard in attribution of responsibility—that is, Tokyo believed that it was forced into war whereas its enemies had agency. Tokyo's narrative of encirclement did not

182. Iritani, *Group Psychology of the Japanese*, pp. 14–15; Hotta, *Japan 1941*.
183. Haruo Iguchi, "Japanese Foreign Policy and the Outbreak of the Asia-Pacific War: The Search for a Modus Vivendi in US-Japan Relations after July 1941" in Frank McDonough, ed., *The Origins of the Second World War: An International Perspective* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 466–481.
184. Iritani, *Group Psychology of the Japanese*, pp. 14–15.
185. Saburo Ienaga, "The Glorification of War in Japanese Education," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Winter 1993/94), pp. 113–133, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539207.
186. Hotta, *Japan 1941*, p. 14.
187. Ibid.
188. Kimitada Miwa, "Japanese Images of War with the United States," in Akira Iriye, ed., *Mutual Images: Essays in American-Japanese Relationships* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 125–127.

consider how Japan's own policies caused Britain, the United States, and other states to resist Japan.[189]

Japanese fatalism was associated with negative mental states. Peter Duus describes the "paranoid style" that enveloped Japanese thinking in 1941, with exaggerated fears of "ABCD encirclement," whereby Japan was allegedly surrounded by hostile American, British, Chinese, and Dutch forces—even as Japanese troops advanced further into China and French Indochina. Apprehensive narratives framed Japan as the victim and displaced responsibility for the outbreak of war with the United States.[190]

Fatalism interacted with a perceived window of opportunity to raise the attraction of preventive war. Concessions to Washington might only delay conflict with the United States, and in the future, the likelihood of success would be even lower. "I am confident that at the present time we have a chance to win a war," claimed Japan's naval chief of staff, but "we are getting weaker. By contrast, the enemy is getting stronger. With the passage of time we will get increasingly weaker, and we won't be able to survive."[191]

As predicted by the theory, Japanese military officers were consistently more prone to fatalistic thinking than their civilian counterparts. Military officers tended to see conflict as inevitable and driven by structural factors beyond Tokyo's control, notably the innate hostility of the Anglo-American powers, and as such they favored preventive war. By contrast, civilian officials tended to think that Japan retained agency, that war was avoidable, that conflict was risky, and that diplomacy could bear fruit.[192] Ian Kershaw describes the "fatalists" who were "prominent among the military . . . [and] . . . took the view that war, whatever its outcome, was inevitable."[193]

Japanese leaders were fatalistic about war but maintained an internal locus of control over tactical issues of military planning. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto said that he was strongly opposed to war against the United States, but once conflict loomed, he became fatalistic: "If we have Heaven's blessing, there will be no doubt of success."[194] Meanwhile, Yamamoto controlled the planning

189. Hotta, *Japan 1941*, pp. 18–19.
190. Peter Duus, "The 'Paranoid Style' in Japanese Foreign Policy," in Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, ed., *Japan in the World, the World in Japan: Fifty Years of Japanese Studies at Michigan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), pp. 169–173.
191. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, p. 78.
192. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*, pp. 118–133.
193. Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*, p. 346.
194. Ike, *Japan's Decision for War*, p. xxvi; Takuma Melber, *Pearl Harbor: Japan's Attack and America's Entry into World War II*, Nick Somer, trans. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

for Pearl Harbor, sought out new sources of information, and vigorously de-bated the details of the attack. One problem, for example, was using torpedoes in the shallow waters of the harbor. Yamamoto and his staff studied how the Royal Navy performed against the Italian Navy at the Battle of Taranto (1940) and then developed special torpedoes with wooden fins.[195] The sense of agency, critical discussion, and problem-solving mindset evident when Japan considered tactical issues were all noticeably absent in overall strategic decision-making.

Japan's thinking in 1941 deviated significantly from rational analysis, and "does not appear to meet the criteria for a 'vigilant' pattern of decision making consistent with expected utility models."[196] Tokyo was not forced into war. In reality, it had a range of choices.[197] As late as December 6, 1941, Japanese dip-lomats in Washington cabled Tokyo to stress that the United States was poten-tially open to a negotiated deal and to urge continued diplomacy—but the message was ignored.[198] There is also little or no evidence that Japanese fatal-ism was simply rhetoric. Officials in Tokyo exhibited an external locus of con-trol about war in both public and private. The inevitability of conflict was a core assumption for initiating war against a materially superior foe.[199]

THE UNITED STATES. The extreme fatalism evident in Japan in 1941 was largely absent among U.S. officials. U.S. leaders feared that Tokyo would start a conflict; they also sometimes exhibited cultural and racial blinders. But they rarely claimed that structural forces like fate or God's will made war inevita-ble. Instead, U.S. leaders tended to see politics as a world of agency. If anything, they exaggerated the United States' capacity to prevent war.

U.S. officials routinely used negative terms to describe war. In 1936, for ex-ample, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) declared: "I have seen war . . . I hate war."[200] From 1940 to 1941, Washington sought to avoid conflict with Japan because it saw Germany as the primary opponent and believed that the United States needed to build sufficient forces in the Pacific before any show-

195. Paul S. Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy (1941–1945)* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1978), p. 8.
196. Ariel S. Levi and Glen Whyte, "A Cross-Cultural Exploration of the Reference Dependence of Crucial Group Decisions under Risk: Japan's 1941 Decision for War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (1997), p. 809, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002797041006004. See also Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War," p. 894.
197. Hotta, *Japan 1941*.
198. Iguchi, "Japanese Foreign Policy."
199. Levi and Whyte, "A Cross-Cultural Exploration"; Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*, p. 347.
200. Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 129.

down with Tokyo. General George Marshall described the strategic view in Washington: "We must not become involved with Japan."[201]

Even as a potentially costly war with Japan loomed in 1941, FDR never succumbed to fatalism. Instead, he maintained a strong locus of personal control and saw himself as an effective agent who could shape the environment.[202] According to Warren Kimball, Roosevelt believed that "good politics could achieve even the most lofty of goals."[203] FDR was a problem-solver and a creative decision-maker. He maintained control of the administration through a competitive model of decision-making, whereby officials vied for influence, with Roosevelt as the umpire. FDR recognized political pressures such as domestic isolationism but sought to circumvent these constraints using a wide range of policy tools.[204]

In 1941, Roosevelt proposed varied solutions to contain Japan while avoiding war, including a multilateral peace in East Asia, a six-month truce with no troop movements, or even a U.S. loan to boost Japan's economy if it changed course. He told Tokyo: "There is no last word between friends."[205] Washington also sought to aid China, build up the U.S. military presence in Asia, and introduce sanctions on Tokyo. The United States based its combination of incentives and deterrents on a non-fatalistic premise that its actions could alter Tokyo's calculus and avert war.

The democratic U.S. political system tended to diminish fatalism. The United States has a popularly elected president and bicameral legislature with multiple checks and balances. FDR's competitive decision-making model involved appointing diverse figures to agency positions, which ensured that new perspectives were generated in a marketplace of ideas.[206] During the interwar period, U.S. military officials were sometimes prone to fatalism about war: "Like their colleagues the world over, they saw international affairs as an

---

201. Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War," p. 328.

202. Robert Dallek, *Hail to the Chief: The Making and Unmaking of American Presidents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 141–144; Mirowsky and Ross, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*, chap. 7.

203. Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 186.

204. Kimball, *The Juggler*; Waldo H. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, p. 29.

205. Hotta, *Japan 1941*, p. 242. See also Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*, pp. 337, 367–368; Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War," p. 895.

206. Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George, *Presidential Personality and Performance* (New York: Westview Press, 1981).

eternal Darwinian struggle for survival.”[207] But civilian control of the U.S. military was never in doubt.[208]

FDR and other U.S. officials operated in a wider culture that emphasized individual agency. The United States has long seen personal effort as the main source of success.[209] According to Alexis de Tocqueville, Americans “are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.”[210] Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama describe how U.S. culture promotes a vision of individuals as “autonomous, self-determined, and unencumbered.”[211] These values endured beyond World War II: Polls in the 1990s found that over 90 percent of Americans agreed with the statement “I am responsible for my own successes” (although the figure dropped closer to two-thirds when people were asked to take responsibility for their *failures*).[212]

U.S. officials may have exaggerated their degree of agency in 1941. It is not clear that Washington could have stopped Japan from initiating war, given Tokyo’s commitment to its East Asian empire. Nevertheless, Tokyo embraced fatalism, whereas Washington may have maintained an illusion of control “and mistakenly believed that it could deter or retard a Japanese advance into Southeast Asia.”[213]

Conclusion

Fatalism is a powerful psychological dynamic that is associated with depression, passivity, and learned helplessness. Fatalism may be an important cause of war, especially in combination with a perceived window of opportunity. The beliefs that war is inevitable and that fighting is better now than later

---

207. Joe Maiolo, *Cry Havoc: The Arms Race and the Second World War, 1931–41* (London: John Murray, 2010), p. 107.
208. Michael C. Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 25.
209. Sahar, “On the Importance of Attribution Theory,” p. 243.
210. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2 (New York: Colonial Press, 1900), p. 106. See also Lane, *The Loss of Happiness*, p. 231.
211. Hazel R. Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, “Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation,” *Psychological Review*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (1991), p. 228, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224.
212. Mirowsky and Ross, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*, chap. 7; John Mirowsky, Catherine E. Ross, and Marieke Van Willigen, “Instrumentalism in the Land of Opportunity: Socioeconomic Causes and Emotional Consequences,” *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (December 1996), pp. 322–337, https://doi.org/10.2307/2787074.
213. Jeffrey Record, *Japan’s Decision for War in 1941: Some Enduring Lessons* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2009), p. 11.

may together be sufficient to explain the initiation of hostilities. Fatalism in international relations is more likely when nondemocratic leaders face a looming negative event, such as a costly war. Leaders tend to exhibit several double standards when attributing responsibility: (1) an illusion of control in regard to good things and fatalism in regard to bad things; (2) an external locus of control at the strategic level and an internal locus of control at the tactical and operational level; and (3) fatalism about their own capacity to stop war and a belief that the enemy has the free choice to avoid conflict.

The cases largely support the theory's predictions. The nondemocratic leaders in Berlin and Tokyo were relatively unrestrained by domestic checks and balances and were the primary initiators of war, yet they claimed to have little or no control. By contrast, elected leaders in Britain and the United States faced greater domestic constraints and were less responsible for causing the war, yet they maintained an internal locus of control—and even displayed an illusion of control about their capacity to keep the peace.

Historians of World War I are split between those who see Austria-Hungary and Germany as the primary architects of general war and those who contend that the great powers were "sleepwalkers," blind to the catastrophe about to unfold.[214] The role of fatalism can partly reconcile these perspectives. In Germany, the perception of a looming and costly conflict spurred a psychological need to ease responsibility. German leaders embraced an extreme form of fatalism that encouraged them to choose war, or at least risk war.

The findings may be significant for the literature on democratic peace theory. If democracies are less prone to extreme fatalism, then they may have more room to maneuver in a crisis and thus be less likely to fight interstate wars against each other. The chances of conflict are reduced when two states both resist the idea that war is inevitable and maintain a role for human agency.

Further research can distinguish between the impact of different types of fatalism. For example, leaders may base their perception of an external locus of control on a rival's actions (which might trigger more anger) or on bad luck (which might trigger more passivity). Scholars can examine different domains for fatalism beyond major war, such as economic crises, environmental issues, or arms races. Researchers might also consider whether authoritarian

---

214. Contrast, for example, Keir A. Lieber, "The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007), pp. 155–191, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.32.2.155, with Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*.

regimes differ in the kind of fatalism that they exhibit—for example, theocratic versus secular regimes, or personalist dictatorships versus civilian "machine" regimes.[215]

The findings also point to several policy implications. First, an internal locus of control is strongly associated with mental health and effective decision-making. Therefore, extreme fatalism is highly dangerous. One caveat is that it is possible to exercise *too* great a sense of control. An extreme belief in individual agency could produce unrealistic expectations about outcomes and higher odds of depression.[216] Therefore, the optimum option to help leaders manage uncertainty and stress is an internal locus of control, combined with the recognition of some limits on personal agency.[217]

In addition, policymakers should anticipate a potential surge in fatalism among nondemocratic leaders on the eve of war. For example, the odds of a conflict between China and the United States might increase if Chinese officials conclude that structural forces make war with the United States inevitable and that Beijing lacks agency to prevent conflict. It is challenging to counter this mindset in an opposing state, but leaders can at least avoid provocative or risky actions that confirm fatalistic beliefs. Furthermore, democracies are much less prone to—but not immune from—fatalism. Elected leaders should thus also be attentive to the risks of deterministic thinking, especially if the marketplace of ideas breaks down or military voices gain undue influence in decision-making.

215. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*.
216. Mirowsky and Ross, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*, chap. 7.
217. Bethany Keeley, Lanelle Wright, and Celeste M. Condit, "Functions of Health Fatalism: Fatalistic Talk as Face Saving, Uncertainty Management, Stress Relief and Sense Making," *Sociology of Health & Illness*, Vol. 31, No. 5 (July 2009), pp. 734–747, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9566.2009.01164.x.