

The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory

Keir A. Lieber

Nearly a century after the outbreak of World War I, the image of European statesmen sliding into a war that nobody wanted seems fixed in the popular imagination. The 1914 analogy is conveyed in David Lloyd George's classic statement that "the nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay"; Barbara Tuchman's memorable description of leaders who "attempted to back away but the pull of military schedules dragged them forward"; Henry Kissinger's conclusion that "nation after nation slid into a war whose causes they did not understand but from which they could not extricate themselves"; and a recent *Wall Street Journal* column comparing contemporary international relations to a time when everyone was "poised on the edge of an abyss that nobody saw coming."¹

World War I looms large in international relations theory. The view that the war was in some significant degree unintended or undesired helped to inspire the concept of the security dilemma and drove related work on spiral model dynamics and offense-defense variables.² To be sure, the current consensus

Keir A. Lieber is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame.

The author thanks Meredith Bowers, Charles Glaser, Brian Greenhill, Rose Kelanic, Elizabeth Kier, Robert Lieber, Daniel Lindley, Jonathan Mercer, Benjamin Riddleberger, Sebastian Rosato, Jack Snyder, Jeffrey Wolf, the anonymous reviewers, and seminar participants at the University of Chicago Program on International Politics, Economics, and Security, and the University of Washington International Security Colloquium for helpful comments on previous drafts of this article.

1. David Lloyd George and Henry Kissinger quoted in Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds., *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 38–39; Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 72; and Ross Douhat, "What Year Is It? 1938? 1972? Or 1914?" *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2006.

2. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 94; Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214; Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 58–107; Jack Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 108–146; Charles L. Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models," *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (July 1992), pp. 497–538; Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–90; Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (October 1997), pp. 171–201; and Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

among international security scholars is that a simple “blind blunder” explanation for the origins of World War I is incorrect. Most scholars acknowledge Germany’s key role in the outbreak of the war and assign Germany a greater share of the blame, though almost always in qualified terms. For example, the common account holds that German leaders preferred a local war in the Balkans and may have been willing to risk a continental war against France and Russia, but they never sought or expected a broader European war involving Great Britain. Similarly, international relations scholars often state that the Germans (as well as other Europeans) were unprepared and overwhelmed by crisis escalation dynamics on the eve of war and did not expect the cataclysm that ensued. When political scientists teach or write about the causes of World War I today, the narrative typically emphasizes a tragedy stemming from such factors as rigid alliance commitments and mobilization plans, intense arms racing, ignorant civilians, bellicose generals, domestic political and decision-making pathologies, and massive misperceptions of the nature of technology and enemy intentions.

Newly available primary source material challenges many of the long-held assumptions about the origins of World War I. This article discusses the latest historical scholarship most relevant to international relations theory and the field of international security. The main conclusion is that much of the new evidence runs counter to security dilemma theory and key tenets of defensive realism. Common depictions of World War I being triggered by a “cult of the offensive,” a “short-war illusion,” spiral dynamics, or preemptive strike incentives do not accord with the empirical record. Instead, the evidence suggests that German leaders went to war in 1914 with eyes wide open. They provoked a war to achieve their goal of dominating the European continent, and did so aware that the coming conflict would almost certainly be long and bloody. They neither misjudged the nature of modern military technology nor attacked out of fear of Germany’s enemies moving first. In light of the new historiography, international relations scholars should reexamine their empirical understandings of this conflict, as well as their theoretical presuppositions about the causes of war.

The first section of this article traces the “old” historiography of the origins of World War I. The second section examines the close connection between international relations theory and World War I. The third section discusses three major contributions of the new history and how these findings challenge the conventional wisdom and international relations theory.

The “Old” Historiography

The debate about the origins of World War I is as rich as the origins of the war itself.³ As one political scientist notes, “World War I is probably the most analyzed and contested case in international relations scholarship,” in large part because it appears to offer at least some empirical support for practically any theory or explanation.⁴ Moreover, historical scholarship on the Great War has been so frequently manipulated and distorted for political purposes that it is difficult to follow a reasonably objective trail of evidence and interpretation. Nevertheless, a summary of the historical debate over the war’s origins (with an emphasis on German intentions and planning) and a brief description of how that history has been incorporated into international relations theory are useful for the subsequent analysis of the new history.

EARLY DECADES

The debate over culpability for World War I began as soon as the conflict was under way, as the major powers published official (and highly selective) document collections designed to prove their own innocence in the face of foreign aggression.⁵ Immediately after the war, the allied powers forced Germany to sign the famous “war guilt clause” of the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 despite the lack of concrete evidence for the charge and Germany’s vehement denials of responsibility. The German innocence campaign gained ground in the interwar period in part due to the work of the American revisionist historian Sidney Fay, who argued that no one country was to blame for the outbreak of war, and Harry Barnes, who portrayed Russia and France as the aggressors and Germany and Austria-Hungary as the victims.⁶ These views were challenged throughout the 1920s and 1930s by those who assigned Germany paramount responsibility for starting the war. Among these antirevisionists was another prominent American historian, Bernadotte Schmitt, who frequently

3. On the former, see John W. Langdon, *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918–1990* (New York: Berg, 1991); Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (London: Pearson, 2002); and Hamilton and Herwig, *The Origins of World War I*. On the latter, see Hew Strachan, *The First World War, Vol. 1: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004). See also Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (New York: Berg, 2004).

4. Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 56.

5. Among these so-called colored books, *Deutsches Weissbuch* [The German white book] was published on August 3, 1914.

6. Sidney B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1928); and Harry Elmer Barnes, *The Genesis of the World War: An Introduction to the Problem of War Guilt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927).

clashed with Fay.⁷ But by the 1930s, the consensus view in much of Europe held that no country wanted war in 1914 and that all the major powers deserved blame for allowing the diplomatic crisis that summer to escalate out of control.

The “slide to war” consensus remained dominant into the 1950s, for several reasons. First, it was relentlessly promoted by German governmental propaganda efforts and supporting official documents.⁸ Second, it helped differentiate World War I from World War II, which in turn allowed Germans to see the Nazi era as a terrible anomaly and Europeans to focus exclusively on Adolf Hitler’s crimes. Third, and related, it facilitated West German integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization by suggesting that German militarism had died along with national socialism in 1945. Finally, it had great appeal: the war had been so horrific that many people were more comfortable with the notion that it must have been started inadvertently. Surely nobody could have desired such a catastrophe.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, works by Luigi Albertini, A.J.P. Taylor, Barbara Tuchman, and Gerhard Ritter (despite their significant substantive differences and varying degrees of academic credibility) rejected the simplistic account of war occurring despite the best intentions and peaceful motives of all parties to the conflict, but without claiming that German leaders deliberately sought to provoke a general European war in 1914. Rather, they argued that German decisionmaking leading up to the war was heavily marred by miscalculation, misperception, or militarism.

Albertini’s monumental study has generally been regarded by diplomatic historians as the best account of the origins of the war, even though it is often overlooked in general historical and popular narratives.⁹ Albertini blamed other states for their roles in escalating the July crisis, but argued that Germany was most responsible for the outbreak of war because it pushed Austria to take a hard-line diplomatic stance against Serbia, encouraged

7. Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *The Coming of the War*, 2 vols. (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1930). On these debates, see Langdon, *July 1914*; and Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War*, pp. 78–118.

8. See Holger H. Herwig, “Clio Deceived: Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany after the Great War,” *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Fall 1987), pp. 5–44; Terence Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning, 1871–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War*, pp. 1–69, 105–113. See also the official document collection *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette, 1871–1914* [The high policies of the European cabinets, 1871–1914], which was published in forty volumes between 1922 and 1927.

9. Albertini’s work was published in Italy during World War II, but only appeared in English translation from 1952 to 1957 and was slow to disseminate. Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952–57). On Albertini’s arguments and influence, see Langdon, *July 1914*, pp. 50–61, 130–131.

Austria to attack Serbia, and sabotaged British mediation proposals. According to Albertini, Germany sought to provoke a local war between Austria and Serbia that would shatter the alliance system between France and Russia (and their ententes with Britain). Unfortunately, German leaders foolishly believed they could contain a Balkan war; their misguided views of political and military realities and reckless diplomacy quickly led to a wider conflagration.¹⁰

Tuchman and Taylor noted poor German decisionmaking, but blamed the war on broader systemic problems of runaway militarism and interlocking mobilization imperatives, especially Germany's plan for mobilization and war.¹¹ As Taylor wrote, "When cut down to essentials, the sole cause for the outbreak of war in 1914 was the Schlieffen Plan—product of the belief in speed and the offensive."¹² Understanding this traditional depiction of the German war plan, especially Ritter's analysis, is crucial for appreciating the significance of the new history.

THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN

The argument that the Schlieffen Plan was a major cause of World War I is commonplace, yet the nature and consequences of German war planning continue to be the subject of intense debate. The controversy has been particularly intense because the topic is tightly intertwined with the broader issue of assigning war guilt; primary evidence has been in short supply; and influential historical interpretations were distorted for political and ideological purposes.

In the interwar period, former German officers responsible for writing the official history of the war sought to salvage the reputation of the German general staff by promulgating the narrative that Count Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the general staff from 1891 to 1905, handed to his successor, the younger Helmuth von Moltke, a plan for victory in the event of war against France and Russia: attack deeply into France and defeat the French army in one massive battle of annihilation over a six-week period and then turn east to deal with the slower-mobilizing Russian army. According to the official history,

10. Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, Vol. 3: *The Epilogue of the Crisis of July 1914: The Declaration of War and Neutrality*, pp. 252–253.

11. Tuchman, *The Guns of August*; and A.J.P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (London: H. Hamilton, 1963). See also A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery of Europe: 1848–1918* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954); A.J.P. Taylor, *War by Timetable: How the First World War Began* (London: Macdonald, 1969), pp. 15–45, 119–121; B.H. Liddell Hart, *History of the First World War* (London: Faber, 1972), pp. 22–27; and L.C.F. Turner, *Origins of the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970). Tuchman's book and Taylor's *The First World War* and *War by Timetable* have had the most popular resonance, but not academic credibility. Taylor's *Struggle for Mastery in Europe* does have greater academic credibility, but his analysis in that book is similar to (and derives from) Albertini.

12. Taylor, *War by Timetable*, p. 121.

Germany would have achieved victory in 1914 if only the army had carried out Schlieffen's "great symphony," which allegedly had been worked out in detail in Schlieffen's final memorandum of 1905 and presented to Moltke upon taking office.¹³ The narrative continues, however, that Moltke was incapable of grasping the brilliance of the Schlieffen Plan. He unwisely altered crucial elements of the military blueprint, thereby squandering Germany's golden opportunity to strike an opening knockout blow—and condemning Europe to a lengthy war of attrition.¹⁴

Only a small cohort of retired German army officers had access to the pre-war documents upon which the official history of Germany's strategic plan (and assessments of Moltke's competence) was based. Therefore, few outsiders could challenge claims by its supporters, such as Gen. Wilhelm Groener, who stated, "The Schlieffen Plan is not only to be understood as a 'basic concept,' but as an operations plan that had been worked out in all of its particulars. The plan is in fact contained in Count Schlieffen's *Denkschrift* [study] of December 1905, after Schlieffen had worked out the principles of the *Aufmarsch* [deployment] in years of study while on the General Staff."¹⁵

When British incendiary bombing destroyed the German military archive in Potsdam in 1945, all of Schlieffen's and Moltke's planning documents were thought to have been lost, and the Schlieffen legend secured. Schlieffen's *Denkschrift*, however, survived. The memorandum and related documents were discovered in 1953 by the German historian Gerhard Ritter among Schlieffen's papers being held in the U.S. National Archives, where they had been taken after World War II.

After analyzing the strategic and political implications of Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum and related documents, Ritter concluded in *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth* that the plan was deeply flawed and reckless.¹⁶ While accepting that Schlieffen's objective was "an offensive which would annihilate the entire French Army at a single blow and achieve quick and total victory on the Western front," Ritter asserted that the Schlieffen Plan's huge wheeling in-

13. The term "great symphony" was used by Gen. Wilhelm Groener, one of the principal creators of the Schlieffen myth. Other retired officers in this "Schlieffen school" included Wilhelm von Hahnke, Hermann von Kuhl, Erich Ludendorff, and Wolfgang Förster.

14. The mythical narrative is summarized in Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 2–6. The idea that Moltke failed to keep the right flank strong was especially popularized in Tuchman, *The Guns of August*.

15. Quoted in Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, p. 37. Groener had served on the general staff under both chiefs and was closely involved in crafting the postwar official German military archive account of the conflict.

16. Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth* (New York: Praeger, 1958). The original version in German appeared in 1956.

vasion of France “was a daring, indeed an over-daring, gamble whose success depended on many lucky accidents.”¹⁷

Ritter argued that Germany’s politicians endorsed the plan because they were blinded by militarism. In this context, “militarism” does not necessarily mean that civilian decisionmaking was dominated by the military or that civilian leaders adopted an aggressive foreign policy. Rather, leaders subordinated political ends to military ends; considerations of war dominated considerations of politics. For Ritter, German decisionmaking was driven by purely military-technical calculations—about where and how to attack, how quick to mobilize, and when to strike first. Ritter viewed militarism as a Europe-wide problem, at least initially,¹⁸ but Germany’s Schlieffen Plan exemplified war planning run amok: “Plans of aggression, to say nothing of conquest, were, as everybody knows today, entirely foreign to [German political leaders].”¹⁹ Instead, German politicians were helplessly dependent on military strategists who had built a dangerous and inflexible short-war strategy premised on the belief that Germany needed to attack as soon as possible once war seemed imminent. Political quandaries, logistical obstacles, and manpower shortages were repeatedly cast aside under the spell of the “short-war illusion.”²⁰

THE FISCHER CONTROVERSY

The 1960s’ consensus among most historians and in popular understanding was that the Great War began inadvertently. If Germany deserved the lion’s share of responsibility for the outbreak of war, this was ultimately due to its blunders, not to its political design.

Two hugely controversial books by Fritz Fischer, however, challenged this consensus. Based on extensive research on previously inaccessible or unavailable primary documents, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* argued that World War I was a war of aggression engineered by Germany.²¹ German leaders not only willed a local war in the Balkans but also launched a “grab for world power” (*Weltpolitik*) that would likely result in a wider European war.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 66.

18. The problem of a uniquely German militarism is presented in Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, Vol. 2: *The European Powers and the Wilhelminian Empire, 1890–1914* (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1969).

19. Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 90.

20. See L.L. Farrar Jr., *The Short-War Illusion: German Policy, Strategy, and Domestic Affairs, August–December 1914* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clio, 1973); and Gunther E. Rothenberg, “Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment,” in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 296–325.

21. Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967). The original version in German appeared in 1961.

Although the primary motive of German leaders was to consolidate domestic political power, their ultimate goal was to dominate the European continent and expand overseas. *War of Illusions* explored how Germany's imperialism stemmed from the ruling elite's desire to divert attention from domestic problems and claimed to identify concrete evidence that German leaders decided as early as December 1912 to launch a preventive war.²² For Fischer, this "preventive war" was driven not by the fear of attack by Germany's neighbors, but rather by the desire to forestall a situation where Germany would no longer be strong enough to pursue hegemony.²³

Fischer's two volumes provided solid grounds for rejecting the already tenuous position that Europe accidentally slid into war. Some of his more extreme claims, however—the global extent of German ambitions or the long shadow of deliberate war planning—were arguably not fully supported by the evidence.²⁴ Nonetheless, by the 1970s most historians had come to accept that Germany was even more to blame for the outbreak of World War I than previously thought.²⁵

22. Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914*, trans. Marian Jackson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975). The original version in German appeared in 1969.

23. Fischer states, "There is no doubt that the war which the German politicians started in July 1914 was not a preventive war fought out of 'fear and despair.' It was an attempt to defeat the enemy powers before they became too strong, and to realise Germany's political ambitions which may be summed up as German hegemony over Europe." *Ibid.*, p. 470.

24. For example, in his first book, Fischer claimed that Germany's radically ambitious war aims were clearly reflected in the "September Programme," a list of goals for future peace negotiations drawn up by Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Holweg one month after the outbreak of war in 1914. For Fischer, this document, which he had discovered among surviving files in the East German archives, constituted a blueprint for world domination in that it called for large territorial annexations, economic hegemony, and an African colonial empire. For critics, a list of plans put together during the heady days of the German offensive into France in early September could not be used as evidence for Germany's prewar objectives. Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, pp. 103–106; and Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War*, pp. 132–133. Critics also argued that Fischer exaggerated the importance of the infamous "war council" meeting between the German kaiser and his military advisers in December 1912—a meeting where Fischer in his second book claims that the German government settled on a design for a war that broke out a year and a half later. Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War*, pp. 149–152, 157. Fischer later appeared to soften his more extreme contention about the December 1912 war council, and scholars continue to challenge his view that Germany engineered a European war in 1914 as part of a bid for world power. Fritz Fischer, "Twenty-five Years Later: Looking Back at the 'Fischer Controversy' and Its Consequences," *Central European History*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (September 1988), pp. 207–223, at pp. 214–215; and Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 67–73.

25. One might argue that there was nothing new in Fischer that could not already be found in Albertini. Imanuel Geiss, one of Fischer's own students and followers, claimed that Fischer "did nothing more than introduce Albertini's results into Germany for the first time." Geiss, ed., *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War* (New York: Scribner, 1967), p. 11. One might further argue that because Fischer's most ambitious claims were less convincing, Albertini's central thesis—that Germany deliberately took steps that risked a European war and thus bears the greatest responsibility for the war—is and should be seen as the standard account of the origins of the war to this

Still, scholars have continued to argue over whether domestic politics or international systemic pressures motivated German goals and actions, whether German leaders lost control of events in the July crisis, and whether the pressures for preventive war faced by German leaders stemmed more from anxieties about encirclement, fears of increasing Russian power, or concerns about the growing inability to achieve European hegemony.²⁶ Since the early 1970s, most interpretations of German decisionmaking have emphasized intentionality with a heavy dose of miscalculation, misperception, and misunderstanding; German leaders did not get the war they desired or expected.

World War I and International Relations Theory

Few historical cases have received as much attention from international relations scholars as World War I; for many it has arguably attained paradigmatic status. Such attention is understandable if only because the war was perhaps the most significant international political event of the twentieth century. Another reason lies with the course of the development of international relations theory itself.

Classical realist theory became prominent in the aftermath of World War II, as scholars sought to understand Nazi Germany's apparently insatiable lust for power and the failure of the international community to check Germany's aggression until it was almost too late. However, some realist scholars of the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (now typically known as "defensive realists") believed that the Soviet Union might be an altogether different enemy and that the main "lesson of Munich" (i.e., that aggressive states can be deterred only by greater capability and deeper resolve) might not apply. In this contest, two otherwise enormously secure states were locked in an arms race and competition for security that seemed perilously close to precipitating World War III. Many of these scholars believed that nuclear weapons gave defenders a huge military advantage, and thus should have ensured strategic stability in the form of mutual deterrence and allowed U.S. and Soviet leaders to feel even more secure and therefore to act more peacefully.

Many scholars worried that the Cold War nuclear arms race and security

day. Although Fischer's work may have had less impact on international diplomatic historians who already had access to English translations of Albertini's work, it still had a huge impact in Germany, and most important, it provides a counterview to Albertini. That is, Albertini asserts that Germany wanted only a local war between Austria and Serbia, whereas Fischer believes that Germany sought a much wider European war. To the extent that the newest evidence of German intentions bolsters Fischer and undermines Albertini, it is appropriate to emphasize their different contributions.

26. See Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War*, chap. 4.

competition were analogous to the decade of great power politics before the outbreak of World War I. Indeed, attempts to generalize across the two cases in large part drove the emergence of defensive realism and its core concepts of the security dilemma, the spiral model, and offense-defense variables.²⁷ According to the security dilemma, the anarchic international system and pervasive uncertainty about other states' intentions and capabilities compel governments to interpret each other's military preparations as hostile, even when such preparations are meant for self-defense. The spiral model is the action-reaction process of reciprocal arms buildups, diplomatic tensions, and hostility that frequently flows from the security dilemma. Particularly intense spirals can trigger a war that no state intended or desired.²⁸ Offense-defense variables explain the intensity of the security dilemma and spiral dynamics. International competition, conflict, and war are more likely when offensive military operations have (or appear to have) the advantage over defensive operations, whereas cooperation and peace are more likely when defense dominates. The offense-defense balance is determined primarily by the prevailing state of military technology. When technology shifts the balance toward offense, attackers are more likely to win quick and decisive victories. In turn, leaders' perceptions of the prospect of quick and decisive warfare make wars of expansion, prevention, and preemption more likely. Alternatively, when leaders perceive defense dominance, they are more likely to feel secure and act benignly.²⁹ The security dilemma thus purports to show how even states that are relatively satisfied with the status quo, mainly concerned with their own national security, and primarily taking defensive measures can wind up in an unintended, undesired, and unnecessary conflict.

Defensive realists see World War I as the classic case of security dilemma, spiral, and offense-defense dynamics at work. The alignment of Britain, France, and Russia in the Triple Entente of 1907 was seen by those states as primarily an effort to form a counterweight to German power in defense of the status quo in Europe. This alignment, however, exacerbated German insecurity by generating fears of encirclement, causing Germany to increase its arms

27. Some international relations scholars who applied the analogy of World War I to the Cold War were not defensive realists (or realists at all). See, for example, Miles Kahler, "Rumors of War: The 1914 Analogy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Winter 1979/80), pp. 374–396.

28. On the security dilemma and spiral model, see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 58–113; Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma"; Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy"; and Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited."

29. On offense-defense theory, see Van Evera, *Causes of War*. For a critique, see Keir A. Lieber, "Grasping the Technological Peace: The Offense-Defense Balance and International Security," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 71–104; and Keir A. Lieber, *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics over Technology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

production in preparation for war, which only confirmed the Triple Entente's perception of a hostile Germany, and so on.³⁰ As Robert Jervis describes it, "A version of spiral dynamics was also an immediate cause of the outbreak of war in 1914. Each of the continental powers believed that the side that struck first would gain a major military advantage. Since to wait for the other side to clarify its intentions could mean defeat, even a country that preferred the status quo to a war would feel great pressures to attack. . . . Under these conditions it would have required unusual empathy and statesmanship—and unusual willingness to risk receiving the first blow—to halt the final rush toward war."³¹ The perception of offense dominance at the time made the security dilemma and spiral dynamic especially deleterious. The "cult of the offensive" fostered intense arms racing, rigid and interlocking mobilization schedules, and dangerous preemptive war incentives—all of which limited the time and space for crisis diplomacy.³² That offense dominance was a fallacy, according to defensive realists, makes the resulting war especially tragic.

At the theoretical level, offensive realism asserts that great power wars are driven by power-maximizing states with regional hegemonic ambitions, not status quo states struggling with fears of their own encirclement.³³ Defensive realists believe that expansionist state behavior can and should be differentiated between that driven by "greedy" or "predatory" motives (i.e., those aimed at achieving extra-security goals such as acquiring greater treasure, pride, glory, or the like) and security-seeking motives (i.e., those aimed at self-defense and a desire to freeze the status quo).³⁴

Defensive realists tend to argue that German goals and actions in 1914 more closely track security-seeking logic, albeit with many exacerbating domestic factors. Specifically, to the extent that German leaders took risks that made continental war more likely, these actions are best explained in preventive terms—the German leadership was driven by fear of a rising Russia and the threat this would pose to Germany's security. Offensive realists, on the other hand, find the root cause of World War I in Germany's pursuit of European he-

30. Works linking defensive realist concepts to World War I include Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 92–95; Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma"; Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War"; Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984"; Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Van Evera, *Causes of War*.

31. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, p. 94. See also pp. 92–94 and examples throughout chap. 3.

32. Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War."

33. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

34. Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy"; and Glaser, "Realists as Optimists."

gemony. This expansionism was indeed security-seeking behavior, but not of the variety identified by the defensive-realist security dilemma/spiral model.

Empirically, other international relations scholars have critiqued several major pillars of the inadvertent war thesis and related arguments, questioning the degree to which World War I was caused by spirals of hostility, rigid mobilization schedules, or the cult of the offensive.³⁵

Of course, defensive realists who have spent a great deal of effort in examining cases of international competition, war, and imperialist expansion driven by security dilemma dynamics do not necessarily believe that defensive (purely security-seeking) motives explain all or most conflict. For example, in his seminal article on the security dilemma, Jervis sought insights into the nature of international politics by considering "the extreme case in which all states would like to freeze the status quo."³⁶ Stephen Van Evera argued that belief in offense dominance was "a principal cause" of World War I, as well as "a mainspring driving many of the mechanisms" behind the outbreak of war, primarily because it exacerbated security fears. But he also noted that it made expansion more tempting as the costs of aggression declined.³⁷ Yet, if World War I were no longer to serve as the classic case of security dilemma dynamics, then the value of the concept as it is employed by defensive realists would deserve much greater scrutiny.³⁸

35. See Scott D. Sagan, "1914 Revisited: Allies, Offense, and Instability," *International Security*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1986), pp. 151–175; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Détente and Deterrence: Anglo-German Relations, 1911–1914," *International Security*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1986), pp. 121–150; Marc Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 120–150; Jack S. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 151–186; Jonathan Shimshoni, "Technology, Military Advantage, and World War I: A Case for Military Entrepreneurship," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 187–215; and Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, pp. 56–117.

36. Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," p. 167. Jack Snyder writes, "Counterproductive aggressive policies are caused most directly by the idea that the state's security can be safeguarded only through expansion. This idea, the central myth of empire, was the major force propelling every case of overexpansion by the industrialized great powers." He also writes, however, that "much imperial expansion is unproblematic: the strong conquer the weak because it pays." Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 1, 10.

37. Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," pp. 58, 63–64, 66.

38. More recently, in seeking to balance the relationship between predatory and security motives in the context of civil wars, Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis offer a more nuanced interpretation of World War I, yet one that still relies heavily on the security dilemma: "Germany was not a status quo state in the years before World War I; nonetheless, its aggressive policy in 1914 can be understood only in terms of the security dilemma provoked by its own earlier belligerence, not as the result of a simple calculation that the predatory benefits of conquest would be worth the costs and risks." Snyder and Jervis, "Civil War and the Security Dilemma," in Barbara F. Walter and Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 15–37, at p. 23.

The New Historiography of World War I

New historical work on German war planning challenges the idea that World War I was largely an inadvertent conflict stemming from misperception, miscalculation, or militarism. First, using previously unavailable and undiscovered documents, Terence Zuber, a former U.S. army officer and German-trained military historian, argues that Schlieffen's famous memorandum was not the blueprint for war in 1905 or 1914, or even a war plan at all, but rather an elaborate ploy to increase the size of the German army. The real-world military objective in September 1914 was much more limited. Second, both old and new evidence demonstrates that German leaders were not misguided by expectations of a quick and decisive victory, but rather sent their forces into battle aware that the war would likely be long and bloody. Third, German decisionmaking in July and early August 1914 shows that crisis dynamics were not to blame for the outbreak of World War I.

THE ZUBER THESES

Terence Zuber sparked a major debate among military historians when he first published his theses in 1999, and the debate continues today.³⁹ Before the reunification of Germany in 1990, the only significant original German war-planning documents to survive the bombing of the German army archive in 1945 and become available to researchers were those found, published, and analyzed by Gerhard Ritter in 1956.⁴⁰ Thus, virtually everything scholars knew about the Schlieffen Plan derived from Ritter's book and Germany's official military history of the war. As the Cold War drew to a close, however, it became apparent that many other important German military files (including those used to construct the official history during the interwar period) had survived, either because they had been stored elsewhere at the time of the de-

39. Zuber published his core claims in Terence Zuber, "The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered," *War in History*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (July 1999), pp. 262–305; Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*; and Terence Zuber, "The Schlieffen Plan: Fantasy or Catastrophe?" *History Today*, Vol. 52, No. 9 (September 2002), pp. 40–46. He defended his arguments in Terence Zuber, "Debate: Terence Holmes Reinvents the Schlieffen Plan," *War in History*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (November 2001), pp. 468–476; Terence Zuber, "Debate: Terence Holmes Reinvents the Schlieffen Plan—Again," *War in History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January 2003), pp. 92–101; Terence Zuber, "Debate: The Schlieffen Plan Was an Orphan," *War in History*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (April 2004), pp. 220–225; and Terence Zuber, "The 'Schlieffen Plan' and German War Guilt," *War in History*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2007), pp. 96–108. An edited volume based on the proceedings from an international conference dedicated to Zuber's thesis is forthcoming.

40. These were the drafts and copies of Schlieffen's memorandum of December 1905, a supplemental text from February 1906, Moltke's annotations and supplement to these documents (dated 1911), and Schlieffen's 1912 supplement. Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*; and Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 42–46.

struction of the archives or because they survived the bombing and were seized by the Soviets in 1945. Many of these documents have yet to be inspected, but others were returned to East Germany in 1988 and made available to Western scholars after the two Germanys reunited.⁴¹

Zuber relied heavily on two of these sources when developing his controversial theses. The first was an unpublished manuscript titled "Der Schlieffenplan" written during the interwar period by Wilhelm Dieckmann, a historian in the German army archives who had direct access to many of the prewar German planning documents and officers involved in writing those plans.⁴² The manuscript provides a lengthy analysis of Schlieffen's strategic thought, offering summaries of various deployment plans, general staff rides, war games, and studies on force structure and operations, as well as the direct texts of twenty other studies.⁴³ The second was a set of Schlieffen's and Moltke's critiques of war games conducted in the west from 1904 to 1908. According to Zuber, these "are almost certainly the only surviving original documents concerning Schlieffen's and Moltke's west-front war planning."⁴⁴

THESIS #1: WHAT SCHLIEFFEN PLAN? Zuber's central claim is that "there never was a Schlieffen Plan."⁴⁵ The 1905 memorandum was not the culmination of Schlieffen's strategic thought about how best to fight a coming war, nor did it provide the actual or perceived basis of a German operational plan before or after 1905. Instead, Schlieffen's study was primarily a political ploy to convince a reluctant ministry of war to seek a dramatic increase in the size of the German army. Schlieffen wanted to force the hand of civilian leaders by presenting them with a campaign that could result in victory only if the government shifted course, altered German conscription policy, and raised a more powerful army.

Schlieffen had a career-long obsession with the need to increase the size of the army. He understood that Germany would need to fight a two-front war against mass armies. And even though Germany had technically adopted universal conscription, its rate of training soldiers was relatively low. As Schlieffen wrote in 1889, the German army was numerically inferior to the

41. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, pp. 9–10; and Robert T. Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870–1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 93.

42. Wilhelm Dieckmann, "Der Schlieffenplan," unpublished and unfinished manuscript, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, W10/50220. Zuber's translation of the Dieckmann document appears in Terence Zuber, *German War Planning: 1891–1914: Sources and Interpretations* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell, 2004), pp. 49–121.

43. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 136–138; and Robert T. Foley, "Debate: The Real Schlieffen Plan," *War in History*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 2006), pp. 91–115, at pp. 92–96.

44. Zuber, "The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered," p. 270.

45. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, p. vii.

French army, even though France had a smaller population and lower birth rate. This was because Germany conscripted little more than half its available manpower, a figure 25 percent less than that of France.⁴⁶ Schlieffen knew, however, that in peacetime the Reichstag was unlikely to pay for mobilizing a greater proportion of available manpower. Instead, at the outset of any conflict, Germany would have to rely on mobilizing huge numbers of trained reservists. The expedient of planning to mobilize troops on the eve of battle was taken to the extreme in Schlieffen's 1905 memo. Not only did Schlieffen employ the entire active German force and all available reserve corps for the hypothetical campaign against France, but he also introduced many imaginary reserve units and newly created "ersatz" units to address the worst-case scenario that France might stay on the defensive and try to hold a line extending from the Franco-German border to Paris.⁴⁷ Zuber writes, "The obvious implication [of this wholesale use of nonexistent units] was that if Germany wanted to be able to meet any eventuality, she needed even more maneuver units and must raise an army based on universal conscription as the French had done."⁴⁸ In short, the 1905 memo was meant to show that even in a one-front war against France, Germany did not have enough troops to attack.

Zuber was not the first historian to link Schlieffen's use of nonexistent forces in the 1905 memo and the general's desire to extract more manpower resources from reluctant political leaders.⁴⁹ But he is the first to infer that this motivation was the primary reason for the crafting of the memo. He also argues that the same motivation led Moltke to turn to Schlieffen's study in the final years before the war. In 1911 Moltke made marginal notes and offered supplemental observations to the 1905 memorandum that might lead one to believe that he viewed the Schlieffen Plan as the basic operational blueprint for a coming war, even as he sought important changes.⁵⁰ Zuber, however, dismisses this view.

46. Schlieffen's August 25, 1889, study appears in Dieckmann, "Der Schlieffenplan," annex 2, pp. 227–239, quoted in Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 138–139. Schlieffen makes a similar complaint in his 1905 study. See Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 143.

47. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 138–141, 214.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

49. See Stig Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871–1914," in Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914* (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1999), p. 358 n. 58. Förster writes that the presence of these imaginary corps in Schlieffen's study might have been his "way of telling his successor to force through his long-cherished demand for the full realization of universal conscription." See also Foley, "Debate: The Real Schlieffen Plan," p. 55; and Annika Mombauer, "Of War Plans and War Guilt: The Debate Surrounding the Schlieffen Plan," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (October 2005), pp. 857–885, at p. 865.

50. The marginal notes in Schlieffen's memorandum are indicated in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 131–148; the supplemental memorandum appears in *ibid.*, pp. 165–167.

For example, he argues, if the 1905 memo was a template for subsequent war planning, Moltke would have reviewed and commented on the plan after taking office in 1906 or sometime well before 1911. Moreover, Zuber claims to be able to explain why Moltke did not take such actions until 1911. By that year, especially after the Agadir crisis,⁵¹ Moltke had become increasingly concerned about the size of the German army and believed a radical increase in troop strength was needed. Because Schlieffen's study addressed just this problem, Moltke had it pulled from the shelf and reevaluated.⁵²

To reinforce his case, Zuber points to four crucial inconsistencies and oddities surrounding the Schlieffen Plan. First, he shows that Schlieffen apparently never conducted a military exercise that tested a German attack into France or anything resembling what is laid out in the Schlieffen Plan. In all of Schlieffen's war games, it is the French who are attacking into Germany (i.e., into Lorraine, the German region directly in front of the French fortress area near the border), with the German army playing the role of a counterattacking strategic defender (and doing so close to the border, not in the French interior).⁵³ None of Schlieffen's final staff rides resemble the operational concepts in the Schlieffen Plan. Zuber states, "Aside from the Schlieffen plan *Denkschrift*, there is no evidence of any kind that the German army at any time planned to move to the west of Paris, ever intended to abandon Lorraine or ever conducted an exercise to test either idea."⁵⁴ All of this, he concludes, "would be very curious were the Schlieffen plan *Denkschrift* truly Schlieffen's *magnum opus*."⁵⁵

Second, Zuber suggests that the form of the 1905 memo was unlike any previous or future German war plan or operations order.⁵⁶ Because German war plans were traditionally firmly rooted in the present—"there is no room in a real war plan for imaginary units and other flights of the imagination," Zuber writes—there is good reason to think that Schlieffen's "operations plan" (as General Groener described it) was nothing of the sort.⁵⁷ Zuber argues that the use of notional units in training exercises would normally be permissible, but would hardly be acceptable in a real war plan.⁵⁸ Moreover, the gap between

51. Germany's dispatch of a warship to the Moroccan port of Agadir that summer secured its commercial rights in French-controlled Morocco and won it territorial concessions in the Congo, but the German action exacerbated relations with Britain and bolstered diplomatic ties between Britain and France.

52. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 214–217.

53. Zuber, "The Schlieffen Plan Was an Orphan," p. 220.

54. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, p. 217.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

56. Strachan, *To Arms*, p. 166.

57. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 46, 218.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

the imaginary force in the Schlieffen Plan and the forces available in either 1905 or 1914 was enormous. The Schlieffen Plan required 96 divisions in the west (with 82 divisions in the main right wing). But there were only 62 divisions available in the west in 1905–06 and only 76 in 1914. If the German right wing planned to march around Paris, it would be doing so without many of the units envisaged in the Schlieffen Plan and thus would be doing so without protection for its flank, rear, or lines of communication. The possibility of ever raising the adequate forces for the Schlieffen Plan was remote. Therefore it seems logical that Schlieffen's memorandum was not really meant to guide subsequent German operations.⁵⁹

Third, the Schlieffen Plan called for deploying the entire German army in the west in a one-front war against France, leaving no forces to protect against the Russians in the east. Historians have long assumed that this was a reasonable calculation in German war planning because the Russian army had not recovered from its stunning defeat in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War and the Russian revolution of 1905. But, Zuber notes, this assumption is at odds with Germany's assessment of the Russian threat at the time the Schlieffen Plan was written. He cites German intelligence reports from 1905 and 1906 to show that the German military continued to see Russia as a viable threat. The 1905 report gave no indication of Russian army collapse, and the 1906 report stated that Russia could deploy about 25 infantry divisions against Germany (plus 22 divisions against Austria).⁶⁰ Indeed, according to official histories, Schlieffen's last real war plan (before writing the 1905 memorandum) deployed 10 German divisions in the east, and Schlieffen's final war game in November and December 1905 used an initial 16 divisions in East Prussia, with 22 divisions deployed as reinforcements, against an expected Russian force of 33 divisions.⁶¹ That Schlieffen would propose leaving Germany undefended against 25 to 33 attacking Russian divisions offers further proof that the 1905 memo was never the basis for a real war plan.

Fourth, Zuber notes that it would be extraordinary for a major war-planning document to be handled the way the Schlieffen Plan was. The original text of

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 51. International relations scholars have long been aware of the gap between the number of forces called for in the 1905 document and those available in 1914, and frequently note Schlieffen's professed skepticism about having enough forces for the operation. See, for example, Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 108–116. In Schlieffen's words, it is "an enterprise for which we are too weak." Quoted in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 66. Snyder and others, however, largely rely on Ritter's interpretation that Schlieffen's memo presented the general plan for a two-front war designed to achieve decisive victory in a short time by using the bulk of the German army to envelop Paris. Zuber's work undermines this interpretation.

60. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 212–213.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 206, 213.

Schlieffen's memo remained in Schlieffen's possession when he retired in 1906, became the property of Schlieffen's daughters in 1913 when he died, and was not turned over to the German army archive until 1931. As Zuber sardonically notes, "If the 'Schlieffen Plan' was actually the German war plan, then in August 1914 the original text of the most closely guarded secret in Europe was in the custody of two Prussian ladies of a certain age, who, according to the various inventories in the Schlieffen plan file, stored the Schlieffen plan with the family photos."⁶²

THESIS #2: STRATEGY IN THE WEST. Zuber reconstructs a starkly revisionist picture of how Schlieffen and Moltke expected to fight the opening phases of the war. Because both officers knew the German army would be outnumbered on the eastern and western fronts, Zuber writes, "[t]he German war plan in the west was always to win the first battles and not to conduct a colossal battle of annihilation."⁶³ According to Zuber, Schlieffen and Moltke expected the fighting to begin with French attacks into Lorraine or the Ardennes forest (in Belgium, north of the French fortress line), or possibly both. If the French army did not attack as expected, then the German right wing would have to go through Belgium to outflank the French fortresses and force the issue. Regardless, the Germans were confident they could defeat the French in any battle. But this would not end the war. If Russians were attacking in the east, Germany would counterattack while remaining on the defensive in the west. If the Russian frontier were secure, Germany would counterattack in the west by moving the right wing of the German army behind the French fortress line while using the left wing to fix in place the French forces there. Schlieffen and Moltke expected Germany would also win this battle by breaking the French fortress line from the front and rear. Only after this first campaign was completed in about a month would the German army launch a second campaign into the interior of France. Zuber writes, "At no time did either Schlieffen or Moltke plan to swing the German right wing to the west of Paris. They always kept the left wing very strong, as it might well conduct the decisive battle. The war in the west would begin with a French attack. The first campaign would end with the elimination of the French fortress line. It would involve several conventional battles, not one battle of encirclement. If the Germans did win a decisive victory, it would be the result of a counter-offensive, not through an invasion of France. There was no intent to destroy the French army in one immense battle."⁶⁴

62. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

63. Zuber, "The Schlieffen Plan: Fantasy or Catastrophe?" p. 46.

64. *Ibid.* See also Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 298–299.

If Zuber is correct, why did Germany's campaign in the west in 1914 appear so similar to the scenario presented in the Schlieffen Plan? (After all, the battle maps still show great curving arrows sweeping through Belgium and Luxembourg deep into French territory toward Paris.) Zuber's answer is that the campaign was fortuitous. Offering a fresh interpretation of existing deployment and operational orders, Zuber reconstructs the campaign as follows: at the outset, on August 4, the main body of the German army began to move through Belgium and Luxembourg toward France. The French opened the fighting with an attack into Alsace on August 7 and Lorraine on August 14. Germany was compelled to counterattack, doing so in Lorraine on August 20 and in the Ardennes on August 22. The German army won all the meeting engagements in Lorraine and Belgium, and by August 30 the French had broken contact and were in full retreat. At this point, either a decision to transfer a large force (e.g., six corps) by rail to the east to inflict a severe defeat on the Russians while temporarily going on the defensive in the west or a decision to continue the attack in the west and break the French fortress line would have been consistent with the original strategic plan. Instead, Moltke seized on the surprisingly quick German victories in the initial frontier battles to aim for victory on both fronts simultaneously. On the one hand, he decided to exploit his frontier victories by pursuing battered French units deeper into French territory so as to prevent them from being reinforced. On the other hand, he allowed a smaller force (two corps) to be transferred to the east. Alexander von Kluck's 1st Army, on the extreme right wing of the German advance into France, has typically been seen (through the lens of the Schlieffen Plan memo) as the head of the hammer tasked with swinging around Paris and smashing the French army against the anvil of the Swiss or German border. According to Zuber, however, the mission of the 1st Army was never to encircle Paris or deliver the decisive blow. The 1st Army's mission, from the initial move into Belgium to the end of the Battle of the Marne, was to protect the right flank of the other German armies as they fought to break the French fortress line. "Von Kluck's turn" on August 31—when the 1st Army swung south and east of Paris instead of north and west—did not mark an inglorious end to the master Schlieffen Plan, but was part of the failed attempt to envelop and break the French fortress line—all in preparation for a future campaign into the interior of France once Russian forces had been defeated.⁶⁵

65. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 258–263, 267–280, 303. Zuber acknowledges that from September 2 to September 5, Moltke briefly harbored a hope that the German 1st and 2nd Armies might turn the flank of the retreating French armies and push the French forces onto the Swiss border. But, Zuber argues, this was the first time such an operation was mentioned, and the idea was abandoned when German intelligence reported that elements of the French army had already

THESIS #3: CONCOCTION OF THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN. In Zuber's words, "The Schlieffen Plan was invented by the General Staff to explain away their failure to win the 1914 Marne campaign."⁶⁶ He contends that the Schlieffen Plan achieved its place in popular lore only because the postwar general staff, faced with professional extinction, "decided to explain its failure in 1914 by maintaining that it had an infallible plan, which was spoiled by the actions of three dead officers, Moltke, [Richard] Hentsch, and [Wilhelm] Bülow."⁶⁷ Moltke was accused of failing to understand the genius of the original plan, which would have brought swift victory. Specifically, his initial deployments had reinforced the German left wing at the expense of the right wing, which fatally undermined the latter's ability to carry out the decisive attack as envisioned by Schlieffen. Lieutenant Colonel Hentsch (a senior general staff officer sent by Moltke to 1st Army headquarters to assess the situation) and General Bülow (commander of the 2nd Army) were blamed for prematurely withdrawing the German right wing from the Marne.⁶⁸ Zuber argues that even if scholars accept the account of German war plans and intentions offered by the Schlieffen school, it is clear from the way military operations were carried out that a great many other senior German officers deserved blame. For example, the Germans counterattacked too early in Lorraine, missed golden opportunities to envelop French forces, sent forces to the east before the French had been decisively defeated, and exposed their right flank to counterattack from Paris.⁶⁹

The details of the German propaganda campaign and cover-up do not need repeating here, as Zuber is clearly building on earlier scholarship with this thesis. Ritter was the first to challenge the myth that Moltke bungled Schlieffen's plan for victory, and many others have reinforced the point.⁷⁰ Zuber goes one step further, however, in arguing that Ritter himself created a new myth out of the ashes of the old myth. Ritter was correct to argue that the Schlieffen Plan was both inflexible and risky. But he took at face value the lie (promulgated by Groener and other retired German army officers) that the Schlieffen Plan of 1905 was the template for all subsequent German war plans leading up to 1914. Ritter simply chose to ignore all of the inconsistencies of that explanation because he wanted to demonstrate the evils of militarism: that the requirements of the Schlieffen Plan forced Germany to start the war. According to

reached Paris and other forces were being withdrawn from the French center and right wing. *Ibid.*, pp. 276–277.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

70. See, for example, Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, chap. 2. Zuber addresses the issue in Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, chaps. 1, 6.

Zuber, subsequent historians—for example, Gordon Craig, Martin Kitchen, L.C.F. Turner, Paul Kennedy, Jehuda Wallach, Arden Bucholz, and Holger Herwig—unwittingly based their descriptions of the German war plan on Ritter's erroneous account, including his misconception that Germany intended to swing its right wing around Paris and produce a massive battle of annihilation.⁷¹

ZUBER CRITIQUE AND DEBATE CONSENSUS. Hew Strachan, a preeminent historian of World War I, maintains that Zuber's work requires revision of the traditional understanding of German war planning.⁷² Yet other scholars have been far more critical.⁷³ Some argue that Zuber's less radical arguments are not new and that his more ambitious claims are incorrect.⁷⁴ Even his staunchest critics, however, acknowledge that the traditional depiction of Germany's Schlieffen Plan requires alteration.

Critics argue that Zuber goes too far in challenging the existence and au-

71. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 48–51, 304. The relevant works are Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Martin Kitchen, *A Military History of Germany: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975); L.C.F. Turner, "The Significance of the Schlieffen Plan," in Paul M. Kennedy, ed., *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), pp. 199–221; Jehuda L. Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1986); Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen, and Prussian War Planning* (New York: Berg, 1991); and Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (London: Arnold, 1997).

72. Strachan writes, "All the older literature needs to be revised in the light of Zuber." Strachan, *To Arms*, p. 166.

73. See, for example, Terence M. Holmes, "Debate: The Reluctant March on Paris: A Reply to Terence Zuber's 'The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered,'" *War in History*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (April 2001), pp. 208–232; Terence M. Holmes, "Debate: The Real Thing: A Reply to Terence Zuber's 'Terence Holmes Reinvents the Schlieffen Plan,'" *War in History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (January 2002), pp. 111–120; Robert T. Foley, "Debate: The Origins of the Schlieffen Plan," *War in History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (April 2003), pp. 222–232; Terence M. Holmes, "Debate: Asking Schlieffen: A Further Reply to Terence Zuber," *War in History*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (November 2003), pp. 464–479; Foley, "Debate: The Real Schlieffen Plan"; and especially Mombauer, "Of War Plans and War Guilt."

74. Most historians have rejected Zuber's highly revisionist conclusion that the case for German war guilt collapses if there was no Schlieffen Plan. Zuber contends that France and Russia were the aggressors; Germany's political and military strategy was fundamentally defensive; and France and Russia attacked first in 1914 as the German armies stood on the defensive on both fronts. The German army's attack on Liège in Belgium (which preceded the French offensives and is generally considered to mark the start of the war) was a defensive move to preempt military threats emanating from Belgian territory. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 56, 265, 302–304. This conclusion is weak, and stems from Zuber's virtually exclusive focus on military operations that were crucial to Germany's war plan without properly analyzing the broader political and strategic context. Given that Germany faced enemies on two fronts, it was compelled to try to capitalize on its interior lines and railroad mobility to launch debilitating counterstrikes against flanks of French and Russian attackers. In doing so, it transformed its geographic position from a liability into an advantage. But this was defensive war only in an operational sense, not in a grand strategic or political sense. For a thorough and convincing critique of Zuber's position on the question of German war guilt, see Mombauer, "Of War Plans and War Guilt."

thenticity of the Schlieffen Plan. They contend he ignores a great deal of strategic continuity and natural evolution in German war plans from Schlieffen's time through Moltke's, and that this continuity indicates that the Schlieffen Plan was not just some "aberration."⁷⁵ The basic idea behind virtually all German planning in the decade before the war was to avoid fighting France and Russia simultaneously by seeking a decisive victory against France first. The best hope for accomplishing this would be to send a powerful right wing through neutral Belgium and Luxembourg to avoid the French border fortifications and envelop French forces. Moltke made reasonable alterations to the plan in response to changing strategic conditions—thus, as one Zuber critic, Annika Mombauer, notes, it makes sense to distinguish between the Schlieffen Plan and the Moltke Plan⁷⁶—but the German war plan in 1914 was not radically different from the one contained in Schlieffen's 1905 memo. According to Terence Holmes, who engaged Zuber in a lengthy exchange, Zuber exaggerates the difference in war plans by overemphasizing the march around Paris as the dominant strategic characteristic and underemphasizing the higher goal of enveloping French forces wherever they could be found.⁷⁷

Historians have also challenged Zuber's use of supposed crucial inconsistencies to reinforce his case that the Schlieffen Plan did not represent a serious operational guide. Among these inconsistencies, was the plan's call for the entire German army to be sent west against France with no forces used to defend against Russia—even though intelligence assessments identified Russia as a real threat. Robert Foley disputes Zuber's characterization of German threat assessments, and stands by the traditional interpretation that Germany did consider Russia weak in 1905, which offered the opportunity to focus on fighting France alone. Foley also criticizes Zuber's interpretation of the purpose of staff rides, which leads Zuber to the conclusion that the Schlieffen Plan could not have been a real war plan because it was never "tested" in staff rides. Foley argues that the real purpose of staff rides was not to test war plans (which were treated as far too secret to be modeled with public staff rides), but to test and train general staff officers.⁷⁸

Zuber may lack fully persuasive evidence that the Schlieffen Plan was merely a bureaucratic political ploy, but his work offers a useful corrective to

75. Holmes, "Debate: The Reluctant March on Paris"; Holger H. Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short War' Illusion: Toward a New Interpretation?" *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (July 2002), pp. 681–693, at p. 683; and Foley, "Debate: The Origins of the Schlieffen Plan."

76. Mombauer, "Of War Plans and War Guilt," p. 866.

77. Holmes, "Debate: The Reluctant March on Paris," p. 13.

78. Foley, "Debate: The Real Schlieffen Plan." For Zuber's rejoinder, see Zuber, "The 'Schlieffen Plan' and German War Guilt."

key aspects of the conventional wisdom about German military plans in 1914. The German campaign in August 1914 appears to have been aimed not at encircling Paris in a bid for quick victory, but at destroying a large portion of the French army wherever it could be found in preparation for a long conflict.

THE CULT OF THE OFFENSIVE

It is considered a truism that German leaders went to war confident that the ensuing conflict would be quick and decisive. A “cult of the offensive” dominated German planning, as well as the strategies of other European powers, because military and civilian leaders were mesmerized by “a highly exaggerated faith in the efficacy of offensive military strategies and tactics.”⁷⁹ Van Evera, the foremost proponent of this view, writes that “between 1890 and 1914 Europeans increasingly believed that attackers would hold the advantage on the battlefield and that wars would be short and decisive. They largely overlooked the lessons of the American Civil War, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, the Boer War, and the Russo-Japanese War, which had revealed the power of the new defensive technologies.”⁸⁰ They failed to recognize or chose to ignore the power of modern weaponry (e.g., accurate repeating rifles, machine guns, and artillery) and the battlefield evidence of tactical stalemate that such weapons had produced. They also believed that the spread of railroads allowed for decisive, swift-moving campaigns that would end in massive battles of annihilation. George Quester writes, “The world after 1872 thus theorized that transportation technology now dictated taking the offensive in land warfare, and taking it as quickly as possible . . . [and] continually expected land wars to be short and decisive.”⁸¹ Van Evera concludes, “Europeans embraced political and military myths that obscured the defender’s advantages . . . and primed Europeans to expect a quick, total victory for the stronger side in the next war.”⁸²

Scholars do not view the cult of the offensive as merely one example of the many follies of 1914. It is frequently characterized as a master cause of World War I. According to Van Evera, “The cult of the offensive was a major underlying cause of the war of 1914, feeding or magnifying a wide range of secondary dangers which helped pull the world to war.”⁸³ Jack Snyder and Van Evera ar-

79. Stephen Van Evera, “Why Cooperation Failed in 1914,” *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (October 1985), pp. 80–117, at p. 81.

80. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, p. 194.

81. George H. Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (New York: Wiley, 1977), pp. 79–80.

82. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, p. 194.

83. Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” p. 106.

gued that perceived offense dominance led to tight alliances and overly aggressive operational plans, each of which is often seen as an independent cause of the war.⁸⁴ Van Evera notes, "Most German officers and civilians thought they could win a spectacular, decisive victory if they struck at the right moment."⁸⁵ If the actual power of the defense had been recognized, he adds, "the Austro-Serbian conflict of 1914 would have been a minor and soon forgotten disturbance on the periphery of European politics."⁸⁶ Jervis writes that had the participants recognized the objective defensive advantages of new technological advances, "they would have rushed for their own trenches rather than for the enemy's territory."⁸⁷ Similarly, George Quester contends that World War I was "launched on the illusion of offensive advantage."⁸⁸ After all, these scholars argue, Germany went to war in August 1914 armed with a bold operational plan for quickly enveloping and annihilating the French army, shifting the victorious troops to the east against Russia, and securing victory in Europe by Christmas. Summing up the conventional wisdom, John Maurer writes, "[F]orecasts of a short war were a monumental strategic miscalculation that had the most tragic consequences."⁸⁹

The historical record does not support these claims. Newly available and previously overlooked evidence indicates that German leaders sent their forces into battle aware that the coming war would likely be protracted. This new interpretation has been referred to as the "Förster thesis," named after the Swiss-based German historian Stig Förster, who was one of the first to explore the relevant archival materials. Förster argues that German generals were remarkably uniform in their view that the next European war would likely be a costly struggle. Partly reinforcing Zuber's thesis, the Förster school also contends that the Schlieffen Plan was little more than a proposal for how to win the initial frontier battles of an expected long, hard slog.⁹⁰

The elder Helmuth von Moltke did not come away from the wars of German unification believing that a new era of swift and decisive warfare had dawned.

84. *Ibid.*; and Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984."

85. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, p. 204.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

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

88. Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System*, p. 11.

89. John H. Maurer, *The Outbreak of the First World War: Strategic Planning, Crisis Decision Making, and Deterrence Failure* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995), p. xi. See also Farrar, *The Short-War Illusion*.

90. See Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares," pp. 343–376. For a short summary of Förster's thesis, see Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short War' Illusion," pp. 681–693. Among Förster's works in German, see Stig Förster, "Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871–1914: Metakritik eines Mythos" [German military leadership and the images of future warfare, 1871–1914: Dreams and nightmares], *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (1995), pp. 61–98. See also Strachan, *To Arms*, pp. 1005–1014; and Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, pp. 211, 283–289.

He certainly did not conclude that the rapid expansion of railroad networks or the dramatic increase in the lethality of small arms and artillery had rendered offensive operations more effective. Consider first Moltke's views of railroad mobility. General staff officers were well aware that the German army's rapid battlefield successes in the opening phase of the war against France in 1870 were due to German superiority in mobilizing and concentrating forces by rail, but two ominous conclusions undercut any military optimism. First, Germany recognized serious operational limitations in using railroads to carry on the offensive beyond the frontier to eliminate protracted French resistance in 1871. Second, the Germans feared a new phase of intensive railroad construction and organizational planning in France and Russia that would eventually level the strategic playing field. To be sure, German planners understood the enormous advantage that would accrue to the side that more quickly mobilized and concentrated its massive conscript army by rail—thus their mobilization timetables were continuously revised and shortened—but they also anticipated that Germany's adversaries would inevitably seek to emulate this key component behind recent German victories. Thus, the elder Moltke believed that if France attacked to regain Alsace-Lorraine (territory it lost in 1871), Germany should fight on the defensive until it had the opportunity to launch a counterattack. If forced to fight a two-front war, his inclination was for Germany to defend in the west against France and launch an offensive in the east against Russia because the latter would still have an inferior railroad network. The important point is that Moltke realized that Germany's numerical inferiority and diminishing railway superiority made a repeat of the stunning success of 1870, much less a repeat of that victory on two fronts, highly improbable.⁹¹

The military implications of new rifled and repeating small arms and artillery were hotly contested within the various branches of the German army in the late 1800s, but it does not appear that the elder Moltke misinterpreted the effects of the firepower revolution. In an 1871 study that considered the possibility of a war on two fronts, he wrote, "Germany cannot hope to rid herself of one enemy by a quick victory in the west in order then to turn against the other. We have just seen how difficult it is to bring even the victorious war against France to an end."⁹² Moltke elaborated on his pessimism in an 1874 essay: "I am convinced that improvements in firearms have given the tactical de-

91. Strachan, *To Arms*, pp. 166–167. See also Stig Förster, "Facing 'People's War': Moltke the Elder and Germany's Military Options after 1871," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June 1987), pp. 209–230.

92. Quoted in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 18.

fense a great advantage over the tactical offense."⁹³ He recognized that offensive warfare would become even more difficult as Germany's rivals became stronger and better armed. Even operations that sought to fuse the strategic offensive and tactical defensive, Moltke concluded, would likely deliver only limited victories and military stalemate.

In his last speech in the Reichstag in 1890, the elder Moltke confessed his fears—which were widely shared among his military colleagues⁹⁴—of the next European conflict: "If this war breaks out, then its duration and its end will be unforeseeable. The greatest powers of Europe, armed as never before, will be going into battle with each other; not one of them can be crushed so completely in one or two campaigns that it will admit defeat, be compelled to conclude peace under hard terms, and will not come back, even if it is a year later, to renew the struggle. Gentlemen, it may be a war of seven years' or of thirty years' duration—and woe to him who sets Europe alight, who first puts the fuse to the powder keg!"⁹⁵

The idea that Alfred von Schlieffen, Moltke's successor, drew up the perfect operational solution for quick victory in a two-front war against Russia and France is no longer credible, even if one does not accept Terence Zuber's more radical claim that the Schlieffen Plan never existed. Scholars now have additional evidence to show that Schlieffen and his staff shared his predecessors' realistic appreciation of the nature of modern war and recognition of the high probability that the next conflict in Europe would be protracted, even as they carried on the search for an operational means for rapid and decisive victory. A newly discovered 1895 memorandum written by Gen. Friedrich Köpke, the quartermaster of the general staff, is especially revealing. In analyzing the prospects for a German offensive against France, he concluded that a frontal attack across the Franco-German border would be slow and costly: "Even with the most offensive spirit . . . nothing more can be achieved than a tedious and bloody crawling forward step by step here and there by way of an ordinary attack in siege style in order to slowly win some advantages. . . . [T]here are sufficient indications that future warfare will look different from the campaign in 1870–1. We cannot expect rapid and decisive victories."⁹⁶

93. Helmuth von Moltke, "Defensive and Offensive (1874)," in Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1993), p. 52. See also Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares," pp. 350–355.

94. See Förster, "Facing 'People's War'"; Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares," pp. 352–355; and Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun*, pp. 25–30.

95. Quoted in Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares," p. 347.

96. Quoted in the newly recovered manuscript by Dieckmann, "Der Schlieffenplan," pp. 53–57; and in Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares," pp. 355–356.

Schlieffen's 1905 memo is typically seen as a product of the cult of the offensive and short-war illusion. As old and new evidence suggests, however, it was Schlieffen's well-grounded appreciation of the difficult nature of modern warfare that drove his search for a possible flanking operation through Belgium and Luxembourg to attack French forces. From 1897 to 1905, Schlieffen and his staff explored various plans through annual staff rides, war games, and continuous analysis. Rarely were the results satisfactory: often the French side won an outright victory or the German advance got bogged down. Lessons from contemporary conflicts, such as the Russo-Japanese War, were also troubling. As Schlieffen wrote in 1905, "If the enemy stands his ground . . . all along the line the corps will try, as in siege-warfare, to come to grips with the enemy from position to position, day and night, advancing, digging in, advancing."⁹⁷ Leaving aside the debate over whether the real war plan left by Schlieffen to the younger Moltke in 1905 constituted a rapid and massive envelopment of Paris or, more persuasively, the latest version of a plan dating back to the elder Moltke for how Germany might win the initial frontier battles of a longer war, it is clear from the evolution of Schlieffen's studies and analysis that he never devised a workable strategy for quick and decisive victory against France, much less a solution to Germany's two-front-war dilemma.⁹⁸

Recently recovered documents also show that the younger Moltke understood that Germany's plans for war faced serious operational problems, and he had major doubts that any future war would be short.⁹⁹ In 1905, upon being offered the position of chief of the general staff, Moltke told Kaiser Wilhelm II that even a one-front war against France would be grim: "[It] cannot be won in one decisive battle but will turn into a long and tedious struggle with a country that will not give up before the strength of its entire people has been broken. Our own people too will be utterly exhausted, even if we should be victorious."¹⁰⁰ In letters to his wife, he referred to "a murderous European war" and a "general European massacre, at whose horror one could only shudder."¹⁰¹

Moltke's words of caution were not unique; military writers and planners before 1914 assumed that if a quick and decisive victory were not possible, war

97. Quoted in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 144.

98. Strachan, *To Arms*, pp. 163–172, 1008–1010; Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, chap. 4; Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares"; Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, pp. 72–80, 95; and Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 145–195.

99. See Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares"; Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short War' Illusion," pp. 688–692; and Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, pp. 94–95, 211, 285, 287–288.

100. Quoted in Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares," pp. 363–364.

101. Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short War' Illusion," pp. 688–689.

would ultimately become apocalyptic and destroy masses of people, resources, civil society, and ultimately leaders.¹⁰² As Schlieffen had earlier expressed the fear, "A strategy of attrition cannot be employed when the support of millions requires the expenditure of billions."¹⁰³ Yet, the younger Moltke, prominent officers in and outside his staff, and other governmental officials increasingly believed that a long war on two fronts was the most likely scenario and began to prepare for a protracted campaign. In 1910 the intelligence section of the German general staff warned that the French armies could not be defeated quickly or completely.¹⁰⁴ In 1912, in a newly discovered document, Col. Erich Ludendorff (then head of the mobilization section of the general staff) and Moltke wrote to the war ministry warning it to prepare for a lengthy conflict: "We will have to be ready to fight a lengthy campaign with numerous hard, lengthy battles until we can defeat [even] *one* of our enemies. . . . The need for a great deal of ammunition over a long period of time is absolutely critical."¹⁰⁵ Such dire warnings, both private and public, were expressed by virtually all of Germany's top military leaders until the outbreak of war.¹⁰⁶

The view of Moltke and most German military thinkers that war would almost certainly be long, costly, and grim did not lead Moltke to abandon Germany's offensive plans or to inform Germany's political leadership of his pessimism. Like his predecessors, Moltke accepted the unavoidable fact that modern warfare would be enormously costly. But he was unable to come to terms with the implication that war was no longer a feasible option for German foreign policy. Instead, Moltke and his colleagues sought ways to maximize Germany's chances of winning whatever kind of war materialized, even if it would likely be a protracted conflict. Ironically, Moltke's realistic expectation of a long war led him to make changes to the German war plan that arguably reduced even more the chances of any kind of quick victory. Specifically, by shifting the planned advance of German forces on the right wing so as to avoid Dutch territory, Moltke hoped to preserve German access to outside markets during the war. "It will be very important to have in Holland a country whose neutrality allows us to have imports and supplies. She must be the windpipe that enables us to breathe," he wrote in 1911.¹⁰⁷ This change,

102. Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914–1945," in Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, pp. 530–531.

103. Quoted in Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, p. 95.

104. Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares," p. 364.

105. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 364–365 (emphasis in original).

106. "The 'men of 1914,'" as Holger Herwig writes, "were united in the belief that a general European war would be anything but short." Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short War' Illusion," p. 691.

107. Helmuth von Moltke, "General Observations on the Schlieffen Plan," in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 165.

however, created a serious logistical problem in forcing two German armies to squeeze through a tight bottleneck at Liège, in Belgium, just south of the Dutch border.¹⁰⁸ Whatever operational changes were made, Moltke, on the eve of war, was clearly not blinded by a short-war illusion and, yet, astonishingly was one of the most vocal advocates of launching war as quickly as possible. On July 29, 1914, he sent a letter to Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg in which he discussed the coming “world war,” warned of “the mutual tearing to pieces by Europe’s civilized nations,” and predicted that the war would “destroy civilization in almost all of Europe for decades to come.” Nevertheless, Moltke demanded that the chancellor start the war as soon as possible, a plea voiced to the kaiser the same day. Bethmann Hollweg, too, equated the coming war with “the overthrow of everything that exists.”¹⁰⁹

German military leaders eagerly advocated war in 1914, with the expectation that it would be a long struggle. They had nothing more than a glimmer of hope for a quick and decisive victory. Realistically, the best chance in launching their attack was to win several important battles on the frontiers, which would give Germany some additional strategic advantages before the expected war of attrition. German military and civilian leaders agreed on almost all elements of prewar decisionmaking and policy.¹¹⁰ Both groups believed that a continental war was inevitable, necessary for preserving and extending Germany’s power position in and beyond Europe, and better fought now than later—all despite the shared vision of an apocalyptic struggle.

CRISIS DYNAMICS AND THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

The new history of World War I challenges the common emphasis on crisis dynamics as a major cause of the outbreak of the war. The traditional view is that German leaders became trapped by preemptive war pressures just when diplomacy might have secured a peaceful resolution to the July crisis. The unexpected and horrifying consequences of their actions became apparent to leaders in the final days and hours of the crisis, but it was too late to stop the catastrophe: Germany lost control of its war machine and ushered in a conflict that it neither expected nor wanted.

The traditional view is premised on three key empirical claims: (1) German leaders had a change of heart and tried to avert war when they realized they

108. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, pp. 93–98.

109. Quoted in Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares,” pp. 364–365, 373; and in Herwig, “Germany and the ‘Short War’ Illusion,” p. 692.

110. See Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, pp. 283–289. She writes, “The evidence now available confirms without a doubt that Moltke and his colleagues wanted war and had sufficient influence over their political colleagues to achieve their aim.” *Ibid.*, p. 287.

could not count on British neutrality in a continental conflict; (2) Germany was compelled to start a preemptive war because of fear of Russian mobilization or a French attack; and (3) German political leaders failed to avert war because they caved under the relentless pressure from German military leaders to mobilize and declare war either before or in anticipation of their enemies doing so.

The key decisions of the final days of the July crisis are undisputed—July 25: Austria rejects Serbia’s conciliatory reply to its ultimatum, and Russia decides on military measures to support Serbia; July 27: Austria rejects British peace proposals; July 28: Austria declares war on Serbia; July 29: Austria begins bombardment of Belgrade; July 30: Russia secretly orders general mobilization, and Britain rejects German request for British neutrality; July 31: Austria rejects all offers of mediation, and Germany issues ultimatum to Russia to cease all military preparations; August 1: Germany declares war on Russia and orders general mobilization after receiving no response to its ultimatum, and France orders general mobilization; August 3: Germany declares war on France; and August 4: Germany invades Luxembourg and Belgium, and Britain declares war on Germany.

The new history of World War I, however, undermines the three empirical claims discussed above. To be sure, military and diplomatic historians will continue to debate the many dimensions of German behavior during the July crisis.¹¹¹ In particular, the debate over the degree to which German leaders understood how their actions late in the crisis could or would bring Britain into a European war is unlikely to be settled soon. The newest evidence about decisionmaking during the July crisis, however, suggests that German leaders did not lose control of events on the eve of war, but rather capitalized on what they viewed as a golden opportunity to start the war they wanted.¹¹²

111. This article focuses on German behavior during the July crisis, largely because Germany is the key actor for understanding how the crisis led to war, but a large and contentious historical literature on the role of the other European powers has emerged in recent years—much of which pinpoints steps that other states took that exacerbated the crisis. See Samuel R. Williamson Jr. and Ernest R. May, “An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914,” *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (June 2007), pp. 335–387; Hamilton and Herwig, *The Origins of World War I*; and Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914–1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On how underlying attitudes of decisionmakers during the July crisis were shaped by the arms competition and perceptions of power in Europe in the decade leading up to the conflict, see David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); and David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War, Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

112. Explanations about crisis dynamics in the outbreak of World War I are well known, whether appearing in extreme form in older historical accounts (Albertini, Taylor, Tuchman, and Turner) or in modified form in the works of international relations scholars (Jervis, Thomas C. Schelling, Snyder, and Van Evera). Powerful critiques of such explanations also exist, most notably those by

First, despite Germany's request for British neutrality on July 30, there is little evidence that German officials expected a positive reply or were surprised at its rejection. At most, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg retained a glimmer of hope that Britain might opt to stay out of the coming conflict, but Moltke and the general staff harbored no such hopes. More important, neither German political nor military calculations were based on the possibility of British neutrality.¹¹³ By 1911, in the wake of the summer Agadir crisis, Moltke had concluded that Germany needed to prepare for a world war that included Britain. He never wavered from this belief.¹¹⁴ On December 8, 1912, Berlin received word from London that Britain would not stay out of a war on the continent and would come to the aid of France. This disclosure, wrote Bethmann Hollweg, "was not actually that serious. It only revealed what we have known for a long time: that England still advocates the policy of balance of power and that she will therefore support France." The kaiser similarly insisted, "We have always reckoned on the English as our probable enemies."¹¹⁵ Particularly damaging to the view that Germany counted on British neutrality, however, is the notorious "war council" meeting the same day as the London dispatch, where German leaders either decided upon the war to be fought less than two years hence or came to the conclusion that a war in the near future was highly likely.

Second, the basic goal of German leaders late in the July crisis was merely to pin the blame for starting the war on Russia and France. When confirmation of Russia's general mobilization reached the German war ministry on July 31, the reaction was telling: "Everywhere beaming faces, people shaking hands in the corridors, congratulating one another on having cleared the hurdle."¹¹⁶ Likewise, on August 2, after all sides had ordered general mobilizations but before Germany had declared war on France, Bethmann Hollweg wrote to the kaiser with news of Russian border crossings. Rather than express the fear that France would launch an imminent offensive against Germany, Bethmann Hollweg asserted, "Presentation of declaration of war to France not necessary today for any MILITARY reasons. Consequently it will not be done, in the hope that the French will attack us."¹¹⁷ This goal was pursued not with the ex-

Marc Trachtenberg and Dale Copeland. Therefore, the discussion here need only highlight how the new history reinforces the argument that crisis dynamics were not to blame for the outbreak of the war.

113. For earlier challenges to the thesis that Germany expected British neutrality, see Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914," pp. 135–136; and Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, chaps. 3–4.

114. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, p. 132.

115. Both statements are quoted in *ibid.*, p. 139.

116. Quoted in Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, p. 105.

117. "No. 629: The Imperial Chancellor to the Emperor, August 2, 1914," in Max Montgelas and Walther Schucking, eds., *The Outbreak of the World War: German Documents Collected by Karl Kautsky*,

pectation that Britain would remain neutral if Germany was seen to be the victim of aggression, but rather to mollify domestic constituencies that might otherwise resist Germany's bid for European hegemony.¹¹⁸

These conclusions are reinforced by new evidence, especially from a copy of the diary of Gen. Erich von Falkenhayn (who was then war minister and privy to many of the crucial final discussions during the July crisis) and the previously discussed Dieckmann manuscript.¹¹⁹ On July 29 Falkenhayn wrote that Bethmann Hollweg was eager to let Russia mobilize first so that Russia would appear to the German population as being "responsible for the great debacle."¹²⁰ Germany should "appear to be the attacked."¹²¹ Much has been made of the behavior of Bethmann Hollweg and Moltke on the evening of July 29–30, when they hesitated to go forward with initial steps for German mobilization in the face of news of a partial Russian mobilization and British warnings about nonneutrality. Both urged caution and restraint and, in the early hours of July 30, Bethmann Hollweg sent two telegrams to Austria urging it to negotiate with Russia. This evidence suggests that German leaders indeed got cold feet and tried to avert war after it was too late. The more convincing interpretation, however, is that this was a cynical ploy to make it appear to the world that Austria and Germany were seeking a negotiated solution just as Russia was preparing to mobilize for war. Again, when final word of Russia's mobilization arrived on July 31, another officer recorded in his diary: "Brilliant mood. The government has succeeded very well in making us appear as the attacked."¹²² Finally, when Germany delivered its July 31 ultimatum to Russia to cease its mobilization by noon the next day or face German mobilization, Bethmann Hollweg deliberately omitted a sentence (which was included in

trans. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 478 (capitals in original).

118. As Marc Trachtenberg concludes, the German desire for its adversaries to take the first military steps toward war was "more like a 'second strike' than a 'first strike' strategy, and thus in this respect can hardly be considered 'destabilizing.'" Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914," p. 147. Dale Copeland writes, "It is clear that the biggest fear in Berlin in the last days of peace was not that war might occur, but that it might not." Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, p. 110.

119. Important analyses of German military leaders, especially of Falkenhayn and Moltke, that draw on this evidence include Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares"; Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* [Political thinking in the empire] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994); Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun*; Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*; and Dennis Showalter, "From Deterrence to Doomsday Machine: The German Way of War, 1890–1914," *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (July 2000), pp. 679–710.

120. Falkenhayn diary, July 29, 1914.

121. *Ibid.*, quoted in Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, p. 199.

122. Quoted in Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, p. 207.

telegrams to other embassies) warning that mobilization for Germany would mean war. German leaders went out of their way to soften their warning to Russia so that the Russians would not actually capitulate and possibly rob Germany of the opportunity to fight its war against France and Russia.¹²³ Indeed, Russian leaders expected only that German mobilization, not war, would follow their rejection of the ultimatum. But Germany had decided on both mobilization and war regardless of Russia's actions.

Third, German political leaders were not overwhelmed by the arguments of bellicose generals.¹²⁴ To be sure, Moltke and his fellow officers, including Falkenhayn, pushed very hard for war in the last days of the crisis, and military concerns began to take precedence over any further diplomacy. In addition, Moltke disguised the full extent of his doubts about Germany's military prospects while continuing to advocate war, and he and the general staff exercised a high degree of autonomy, authority, and secrecy—for example, the kaiser was not even aware of the surprise attack on Liège at the outset of the conflict until July 29. Moreover, the kaiser was notoriously indecisive, and the chancellor was arguably afraid of the war he helped generate.

Nevertheless, German civilian and military leaders—most importantly, Bethmann Hollweg and Moltke—held essentially similar views about Germany's strategic objectives before, during, and after the crisis. Both believed that a war in Europe was inevitable and better fought in 1914 in the wake of the Balkans crisis than in the future if Germany had any hope of dominating the continent. Both understood that Britain would not likely remain on the sidelines in such a war, even if Bethmann Hollweg retained a vain hope for that scenario. Both understood the need to make Russia and France appear as the aggressors in July 1914, even as they knew the importance of reacting quickly to the military moves of their enemies. As the historian Annika Mombauer writes, "To deny Bethmann the same 'aggressive self-confidence' as other German decision-makers . . . and to suggest that the Chancellor followed Germany's 'perilous course' only reluctantly and under pressure from the military leaders and the Kaiser, is to undervalue the strong convictions that Bethmann harboured and that mirrored so closely those of Moltke."¹²⁵

Not surprisingly, Bethmann Hollweg at the time made self-serving statements about war being unleashed by "elemental forces" and his inability to

123. An excellent recent account of this is found in Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, pp. 105–113.

124. A classic example is Ritter, *The European Powers and the Wilhelminian Empire, 1890–1914*.

125. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, p. 286.

change the course of events (“control had been lost”; the “stone had started rolling”).¹²⁶ Yet it appears that civilian decisionmakers could have stopped the crisis from escalating until the very outbreak of war.¹²⁷ One famous example demonstrates the point: on August 1, 1914, shortly after the order for German mobilization was sent out, the kaiser was informed that Britain would unexpectedly remain neutral and guarantee French neutrality if Germany refrained from attacking France. The kaiser responded by insisting that the attack against France be called off and German forces sent east against Russia alone. (If Germany could crack the enemy alliance and defeat Russia without having to fight France and Britain, so much the better.) Moltke objected, saying that such redeployment was impossible; a postponement of the attack on France would ruin any chance of military victory. Besides, German troops were already on the way to seize the Luxembourg railways as planned. The kaiser brushed Moltke’s objections aside and ordered the forces to stop before crossing the German border. If British and French assurances could be secured, the shift of the attack against Russia would proceed. Shortly thereafter, the Germans received clarification that the prior report was unfounded. There was no such British proposal of neutrality. The attack in the west against France was allowed to proceed. The significant aspect of this episode is that the kaiser overruled Moltke.¹²⁸

Conclusion

Despite the significant epistemological and methodological differences that divide historians and political scientists, much of the best work in international security studies in the last three decades has explicitly drawn on the work of

126. Albertini, *The Epilogue of the Crisis of July 1914*, pp. 15–17, quoted in Trachtenberg, “The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914,” p. 143.

127. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, p. 288. See also Trachtenberg, “The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914,” pp. 143–144. David Stevenson challenges the view of the unstoppable momentum of military plans in the context of railroad mobilization requirements. See Stevenson, “War by Timetable? The Railway Race before 1914,” *Past and Present*, No. 162 (February 1999), pp. 163–194. Stevenson argues elsewhere that to the extent military measures or imperatives drove crisis escalation, the crucial dynamics occurred not in July 1914 but rather in a process of armaments competition and cycle of aggressive diplomacy beginning in 1905. See Stevenson, “Military and Diplomacy in Europe before 1914,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 125–161.

128. The incident is recounted in detail in Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, pp. 219–224. See also Trachtenberg, “The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914,” pp. 140–142. For an interesting account of how scholars have misinterpreted this event, see Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, pp. 46–49. Stevenson also rejects the idea that war occurred because of a disconnect between policy objectives and military imperatives: “Civilian statesmen rather than military professionals controlled the [great] powers’ policies.” Stevenson, “Military and Diplomacy in Europe before 1914,” p. 155.

diplomatic and military historians.¹²⁹ Nowhere is this more evident than in the link between security dilemma scholarship and the historiography of the origins of World War I. Indeed, the core concepts of defensive realist theory—the security dilemma, spiral model, and offense-defense balance—were arguably inspired by this single historical case, even as defensive realists sought to apply generalizations derived from the Great War to other cases across time and space.

This is not to suggest that international relations scholars have been simple consumers of the dominant historical narratives or merely purveyors of explanations already well established among historians. Robert Jervis, Jack Snyder, Stephen Van Evera, and others have questioned both the image of World War I as a purely inadvertent war driven by military railroad timetables, which had been popularized by Barbara Tuchman and A.J.P. Taylor, and the view that Germany had deliberately provoked a war for the purpose of achieving European hegemony and global empire, which had been advanced by Fritz Fischer and his followers. Instead, international relations scholars examined the historical evidence both to construct unique causal explanations about the origins of World War I and to develop and test theories about the general causes of war. Regarding particular explanations for the outbreak of war in 1914, these scholars typically acknowledged that German leaders had aggressive ambitions and took steps that made war more likely, but they emphasized the unexpected, unintended, and unwanted consequences of German actions. For example, a cult of the offensive—an erroneous faith in the ability to win quickly and decisively by attacking first—blinded the leaders of 1914 to underlying strategic conditions that should have dampened preemptive, preventive, and expansionist war incentives. The case of World War I then became the basis for more general theorizing about how strategic conditions (or misperceptions about those conditions) can generate security competition, expansion, and war even when statesmen desire peace.

International relations theorists have been less cognizant of the latest round of historical scholarship on World War I. Much of this work emerges from newly available German army records, documents, and accounts that survived Allied bombing and Soviet seizure in 1945 and were returned to Germany after reunification. The new history challenges at least three common arguments

129. On the relationship between diplomatic history and international relations theory, see “Symposium: History and Theory,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 5–85; and Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

about the outbreak of World War I, all of which bear directly on international relations theory.

First, Terence Zuber's work helps undermine the famous view of the Schlieffen Plan as Germany's blueprint for military operations in 1914. German leaders did not go to war equipped with a confident plan for quickly and decisively knocking France out of the war. The iconic account of Germany's bold war plan needs to be thoroughly revised in light of the new evidence. In turn, international relations scholars should revisit common arguments about destabilizing military plans, military doctrines, and militarism more generally as causes of insecurity and conflict.

Second, the new history contradicts explanations about the role of tragic misperceptions of offense dominance in driving the onset of war. Rather than embrace a cult of the offensive, German leaders before 1914 were aware that any coming conflict would almost certainly be long and bloody. Yes, some military and political leaders maintained a vain hope that Germany could achieve a stunning victory—or even that Germany could realize its ambitious political goals without having to bear the heavy costs of battle—but German leaders expected a protracted struggle. The main tragedy is not that German leaders misjudged the impact of modern military technology, but that despite this expectation, they provoked and advocated war. This suggests that much international relations scholarship on offense-defense theory has been built on a shaky empirical foundation, as World War I has long been seen as the classic example of states mobilizing to launch offensives in the hopes of winning quick victories.

Finally, the new history suggests that German leaders did not “lose control” of events during the July crisis in the face of preemptive war pressures and belligerent military officers. By no means does the new evidence decisively settle key questions about German intentions, expectations, and actions during this intense crisis period. But it does undermine arguments that the German leadership was caught off guard by and unable to adapt its strategy to the prospect of British nonneutrality, that Germany was compelled to escalate militarily for fear of Russian mobilization or French attack, or that the leadership was dominated by generals pursuing an independently hawkish strategy. Although international security theorists have rarely relied on explanations of the July crisis that incorporate all of these nonpurposive causal factors, the overall picture of decisionmaking during the crisis appears more rational and premeditated, not one marred by miscalculation, unintended consequences, or a loss of control. It appears that German leaders expected British intervention in any continental conflict (and certainly based their military planning on that assumption), feared more that Russia would not mobilize than that it would,

and were united to a remarkable degree about Germany's political and military objectives.

The new history of World War I undermines security dilemma, spiral model, and offense-defense explanations for the outbreak of war. German behavior before the Great War appears less inadvertent and more intentional, less driven by fears of encirclement and more motivated by a desire to expand.¹³⁰ In one sense, this interpretation makes the causes of World War I more similar to those of World War II, where few scholars would deny Nazi Germany's aggressive and expansionist goals. Yet, unlike Hitler, German leaders in 1914 did not appear to suffer from brazen overconfidence. They provoked war knowing it would almost certainly be protracted and bloody. (Given the accuracy of those expectations, World War I thus remains no less a profoundly tragic event, even if it was no mistake.) If correct, this analysis suggests a common underlying explanation for both wars rooted in Germany's bid for continental domination. Such an explanation fits especially well with offensive realism, but it may also be consistent with other theories.

The implications of the new history for international relations theory should not be exaggerated. Even if World War I should no longer be held aloft as the paradigmatic case for defensive realism and its associated theories and explanations, the unique causal logics of those approaches may still be valid and supported by other empirical cases, as well as by some evidence from the Great War. At a minimum, however, defensive realists (like all political scientists) should be more willing to consider how anomalous evidence from newly available sources bears on the veracity of their theories.¹³¹

The current phase of historical scholarship and debate regarding the origins of World War I is still going strong. More documentary evidence is likely to come to light, and much historical scholarship is currently in the works. In short, both new evidence and new interpretations will emerge. But international relations scholars now have good reasons to reexplore the ways in which World War I challenges or reinforces their understanding of the causes of conflict in international politics.

130. Charles Glaser suggests that even if Germany provoked World War I for the sole purpose of expansion, this would not be inconsistent with the central claims of the spiral model. This finding would undermine the thesis that the war was inadvertent, "but discrediting the spiral model requires going a step further—showing that German interest in war was not driven by insecurity." Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy," p. 506 n. 17.

131. For an insightful discussion of how and why international relations scholars are not particularly good at this, see William C. Wohlforth, "A Certain Idea of Science: How International Relations Theory Avoids the New Cold War History," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 39–60.