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## I

## World Wars

*Definition and Causes*

Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig

It is only fair to ask: *Why* another book on 1914? Surely, the origins of that war have been studied, reviewed, and revised almost beyond any reader's endurance. Vladimir Dedijer, arguably the leading expert on the Sarajevo assassination, claimed that already in 1966 more than 3,000 books had been published on that subject alone. And the torrent of ink spilled on that tragic murder has never abated. Hence, why more?

The short answer is that many of us have missed several key elements in the vast literature on 1914. First, who precisely *were* the decision makers? Monarchs, presidents, foreign ministers, staff chiefs, or a combination of these? And what were their mindsets in July 1914? How had the experiences of the recent past (and especially of the two Balkan Wars of 1912–13) shaped their outlooks? Second, *how* did those governments go about declaring war? In other words, was there a constitutional definition of war powers? Were cabinet and parliamentary approval required in all cases? Or could war be declared simply by royal fiat? Third, *which* “social forces” or extraparliamentary lobbies had input into the decision for war? And fourth, what *were* the reasons? What were the justifications for the decisions to go to war? Why did those decision makers do it? Were there common or similar justifications? Or is a differentiated reading needed? In short, we sought answers to questions that had troubled us from previous readings on July 1914. We hope in this volume to have provided not only answers, but, above all, stimulus for further thought and research.

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### The Road to 1914

World War I, once called the Great War, seems to defy explanation: Why did it happen? Numerous books on the subject carry the words “causes” or “origins” in their titles. The literature on the subject is extensive, probably the largest for any war in human history.<sup>1</sup> To address that question, we begin with a definition of what constituted a world war and then proceed to a discussion of possible causes regarding July 1914. It is our argument that the numerical suffix established in 1919 for the “war to end all wars” (1914–18) as constituting the “first” world war is flawed. Rather, we see it in terms of the *longue durée*, of five centuries of conflicts that transcended “normal” or “short” wars in terms of both intensity and globalization. We offer this overview to place the “Great War” in historical perspective, fully aware that our selections are open to debate (precisely our intention).

We define a world war as one involving five or more major powers and having military operations on two or more continents. Wars of such extent are costly ventures. The principal “actors” therefore have to be rich nations and ones with substantial intercontinental outreach. Rich, of course, is a relative term. The masses in a given nation might have been poor, but that nation, relative to others, could be rich, sufficiently so as to allow it to sustain large armies and navies in distant struggles for extended periods. For example, The Netherlands could do that in the seventeenth century when it was a rich nation. In the eighteenth century, when relative to others it was not so rich, that nation was no longer a “great power.” China, a rich nation, presents the opposite experience. It was a rich nation with a demonstrated ability to reach out, but then in 1433 by imperial decree the voyages ceased, overseas trade was severely restricted, and the construction of ocean-going ships stopped. Confucian-trained officials, it seems, “opposed trade and foreign contact on principle.”<sup>2</sup> China’s foreign involvement ended at that point.

Since central Europe tore itself apart during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), eight wars fit our definition of a world war. They are: the

<sup>1</sup> For a partial listing, see the first section of the bibliography, Appendix C.

<sup>2</sup> John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 138–9; and Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1403–1433* (New York, 1994). Levathes reports a more extended transformation: “In less than a hundred years, the greatest navy the world had ever known had ordered itself into extinction” (p. 175). In the course of the fifteenth century, she reports, “China’s tax base shrank by almost half” (p. 178).

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War of the Grand Alliance (sometimes called the War of the League of Augsburg), 1689–97; the War of the Spanish Succession, 1701–14; the War of the Austrian Succession, 1740–48; the Seven Years' War, 1756–63; the French Revolutionary Wars, 1792–1802; the Napoleonic Wars, 1803–15; then, after a ninety-nine-year interlude, World War I, 1914–18; and, two decades later, World War II, 1939–45. The participating powers and measures of battle fatalities are given in Table 1.1.<sup>3</sup> Following our definition, within this time span the “Great War” was actually World War VII.

A few cautionary remarks should be noted. The “severity” figures in the table considerably understate the total wartime deaths: Neither civilian deaths nor the deaths – military and civilian – suffered by smaller countries (i.e., not great powers) are included. One source gives World War I deaths as 14,663,000 and World War II as between 41 and 49 million.<sup>4</sup> Seen in relative terms (losses per 1,000 of population), some other wars were much more destructive. The victorious Athenians put to death “all the grown men” of Melos in 416 B.C. The destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C., it is said, “was essentially total.” Taking an unlikely high estimate of European losses in World War I, one author suggests a loss of “about 4.1 percent.” The German states lost one-fifth of their population in the Thirty Years' War; Prussia, one-seventh of its population in the Seven Years' War. A very destructive war, one that receives little attention, was a civil war, the Taiping Rebellion in China (1851–64), with a loss of some 20 million lives. We routinely focus on wars as the big killing events but neglect another even more lethal one. In March 1918 an influenza epidemic broke out among army recruits in Kansas. Subsequently

<sup>3</sup> In Britain's North American colonies, the first three wars are known as King William's War, Queen Anne's War, and King George's War. The Seven Years' War is known there as the French and Indian War; in Germany it is called the Third Silesian War.

The table suggests a level of knowledge and degree of precision that, as seen below, is not warranted. The severity/intensity numbers are rough estimates best interpreted as involving fair-sized margins for error. The dates vary somewhat from source to source. The War of the Spanish Succession, for example, ended with the Peace of Utrecht, 1713, but that was supplemented with other treaties in 1714. For brief reviews, see Stanley Chodorow, MacGregor Knox, Conrad Schirokauer, Joseph R. Strayer, and Hans W. Gatzke, *The Mainstream of Civilization*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Fort Worth, 1994); Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, and Frank M. Turner, *The Western Heritage*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2001); and R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History from 3500 B.C. to the Present*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, 1993). For brief reviews of those wars in North America, see John M. Blum, Edmund S. Morgan, Willie Lee Rose, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Kenneth M. Stampp, and C. Vann Woodward, *The National Experience: A History of the United States*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Fort Worth, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Dupuy and Dupuy, *Encyclopedia of Military History*, pp. 990 and 1198.

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TABLE I.I. *World Wars*

War	Dates	Number of great powers	Countries <sup>a</sup>	Severity <sup>b</sup>	Intensity <sup>c</sup>
Grand Alliance	1689-97	5	ABFNS	680	6,939
Spanish Succession	1701-14	5	ABFNS	1,251	12,490
Austrian Succession	1740-48	6	ABFPRS	359	3,379
Seven Years' War	1756-63	6	ABFPRS	992	9,118
French Revolutionary Wars	1792-1802	5	ABFPR	663	5,816
Napoleonic Wars	1803-15	5	ABFPR	1,869	16,112
All European wars, 1815-1913 (N = 18)	1815-1913	3 or fewer	A: 6; B: 1; F: 8; R: 5	Fewer than 217	Fewer than 1,743
World War I	1914-18	8	ABFGIJRU	7,734	57,616
World War II	1939-45	7	BFGIJRU	12,948	93,665

<sup>a</sup> Countries participating in war: A: Austria-Hungary; B: Britain (England); F: France; G: Germany; I: Italy; J: Japan; N: Netherlands; P: Prussia; R: Russia; S: Spain; U: United States.

<sup>b</sup> Severity of war: total battle fatalities suffered by great powers, in thousands.

<sup>c</sup> Intensity of war: total battle fatalities suffered by great powers, per million European population. Source: Joshua S. Goldstein, *Long Cycles: Prosperity and War in the Modern Age* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 236-37. Reprinted with the permission of Yale University Press.

called the Spanish flu, it spread, within a year, to all continents. Estimates of total deaths range from 25 to 39 million, more than twice the World War I total. The rates would be equivalent to the above-mentioned wartime losses of Prussia and the German states.<sup>5</sup>

The eight world wars were initiated by well-off, indeed, rich European nations. Five or more major powers were involved in those struggles. Most history textbooks, understandably perhaps, emphasize the battles fought on the European continent. But in each case, the wars were fought also in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. In three of those wars, the English and French fought in India, with France ultimately losing out. And in four of them, the same contenders fought in North America. In the last of those

<sup>5</sup> For the comparisons with other wars, see John Mueller, "Changing Attitudes Towards War: The Impact of the First World War," *British Journal of Political Science* 21 (1991): 1-28. On the "Spanish flu," see K. David Patterson and Gerald F. Pyle, "The Geography and Mortality of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 65 (1991): 4-21.

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struggles, in 1763, the British gained the vast territories of New France. In the course of the same war, the British “took” Martinique, Grenada, Havana, and Manila (all later returned).

World wars, as defined here, require extensive economic, technological, and political development. Five or more nations had to generate considerable wealth, create capable naval forces, and acquire overseas empires. Basically, they had to establish and maintain relatively large military forces and send them enormous distances. That initially meant transport with large seagoing vessels armed with effective cannons. Later, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, railroads, motor vehicles, and air transport came to be the decisive factors.<sup>6</sup>

A military revolution occurred in the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> The most important of the many changes was a considerable growth in the size of the armies. Those large forces could no longer “live off the land”: steal supplies from the populace. That change forced the creation of “the train,” a large number of horse-drawn wagons to carry foodstuffs (for men and animals), munitions, medical supplies, and so forth. The size of military operations increased accordingly, with armies marching over several roads and converging later, it was hoped, at the site of battle. For several reasons, the military was forced to give much greater emphasis to drill and discipline; much more elaborate arrangements for command and control became necessary.

<sup>6</sup> Carlo Cipolla, *Guns, Sails, and Empire: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion* (New York, 1965). For more extensive treatments, see Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge, 1977); William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago, 1982); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987); and John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York, 1993).

There are always complications and specifications. Russia was a rich and powerful nation with a sizable army. But it had a small navy, one with limited ocean access. In the 1880s Russia's leaders viewed Britain as their implacable enemy but were frustrated by their inability “to strike back at London in any meaningful way. How indeed could the elephant exert pressure on the whale?” From William C. Fuller, Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600–1914* (New York, 1992), p. 332.

<sup>7</sup> See Michael Roberts, *The Military Revolution, 1560–1660* (Belfast, 1956); Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1996); Brian M. Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, 1992); Clifford J. Rogers, *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation in Early Modern Europe* (Boulder, 1995); and MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, eds., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050* (New York, 2001).

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The increase in the size of armies and their growing complexity required the development of trained professional leaders, changes that came about in the next two centuries. No longer did it suffice to send aspirants to cadet schools at Lichterfelde in Germany, Sandhurst in Britain, St. Cyr in France, or West Point in the United States. Now, staff officers were formally educated at academies (*écoles militaires*) in Berlin, St. Petersburg, Vienna, Woolwich, Santiago de Chile, and Nanking. Likewise, naval colleges were created in Brest, Kronstadt, Newport, and Etajima. While Maximilien Robespierre's experimental *École de Mars* eventually failed, the French Revolution was highly successful with its new engineer officer training academy (*École polytechnique*) as well as its advanced gunnery school at Châlons and its military engineering school at Metz. At the end of the Napoleonic period, the Prussians founded a special advanced war academy (*Kriegsschule*, later called *Kriegsakademie*) in Berlin.

War offices and admiralties were created to provide both the training and the command structures. Those rich modern states were able to create the disciplined and organized forces that allowed the conduct of coherent and effective military operations over long periods not only in Europe, but also, as indicated, across broad expanses of the world's oceans.

Although often overlooked, economic costs are a constant factor in military and diplomatic affairs. The military revolution increased those costs considerably. There were more soldiers to be housed, clothed, fed, armed, and trained. The number of infantry and artillery pieces required grew, and with the technological advances, the unit costs of those weapons also increased. The sources of wealth allowing this revolution were diverse: New World gold and silver as well as trade and commerce (tea, coffee, cocoa, sugar, silk, spices, slaves, woolens, and, later, cotton goods). Machine manufacture had a considerable impact, increasing national wealth and making new weapons possible. This innovation came first in the production of cotton goods, and then in that of iron and steel. The latter industry produced the steam engines for cotton manufacture, pumps for the mines, rails and locomotives for the railways, and ever more effective cannons.

A nation's military capacity, at all times, is limited by its economic strength, by its ability to pay. One can increase taxes and borrow money to pay the costs. But ultimately, an end point would be reached, forcing that nation out of the struggle. Histories generally focus on monarchs and generals when discussing wars. But that overlooks another important figure: the finance minister. When the tax monies reach their limit

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and no further loans are possible, the war ends. Austria's participation in the Seven Years' War is a classic case in point. Campaigns were budgeted for 10 to 12 million florins per annum, but a single campaign in 1760 cost 44 million florins. Overall, the costs for the Seven Years' War came to 260 million florins. The war ended in large part when the finance minister told Maria Teresa that Vienna had reached its financial limit.<sup>8</sup>

A curious interpretative bias appears in this connection. Many writers focus on the military outcome: Who won the war? But the economic consequences are often markedly different. The Seven Years' War ended in 1763. But the debts incurred continued and, in the case of France, subsequently had very serious impacts, especially with the added costs of its involvement in the American Revolution. An important lesson was restated here: that wars can contribute to revolution.

Another economic linkage should be noted. Britain was likely the richest of the European nations on the eve of the French Revolution. Though maintaining only a small army, Britain's wealth allowed the hiring of mercenaries and the payment of subsidies to its allies. Above all, Britain's wealth, combined with its insular position and command of the seas, allowed it to participate in as much or as little of a European war as it desired. In raw figures, Britain spent £1,657 million on wartime expenditures between 1793 and 1815, up more than £1,400 million from the period 1776 to 1783. Much of that was to finance the various coalitions it formed against Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>9</sup>

The above paragraphs deal with necessary conditions, with the prerequisite factors that make world wars possible. One must also consider

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Duffy, *The Army of Maria Theresa: The Armed Forces of Imperial Austria, 1740–1780* (Vancouver and London, 1977), p. 124. For a brief account of the struggles between the ministries of war and finance in Russia, see Fuller, *Strategy and Power*, p. 329. For the problems facing the chancellor of the exchequer in Britain in the years before the Great War, see David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, 6 vols. (London, 1933–6), vol. 1, pp. 8–10. The nations differed also in the efficiency and the sensed justice of their taxation arrangements. In these respects, Britain was well ahead of France, its most important continental rival. See John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); J. F. Bosher, *French Finances, 1770–1795* (Cambridge, 1970); and Kennedy, *Rise and Fall*, chs. 3 and 4.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, *Rise and Fall*, pp. 81, 136. British subsidies kept Prussia and other mercenary states involved in the struggle during the Seven Years' War. *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 98. John M. Sherwig, *Guineas and Gunpowder: British Foreign Aid in the Wars with France, 1793–1815* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), makes the point that these subsidies, though large in aggregate, constituted only a small percentage of the military outlays of Britain's continental partners.

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the sufficient conditions, the circumstances that would lead five or more great powers to engage in such a war. Some of these world wars (1688, 1701, 1803) were fought by coalitions to thwart the ambitions of a dominant power; others (1740, 1756, 1792) were fought to *create* a dominant power or hegemon once a war had started. Louis XIV had obvious expansive ambitions; in response, combinations of English, Dutch, Austrian, Spanish, Swedish, and German principalities allied at various times to resist the Sun King's aspirations. In 1688 Louis XIV invaded and laid waste to the Palatinate. In what we have termed the first world war, the Grand Alliance sought to block his ambitions. The war involved five major powers and lasted nine years. It raged from Belgrade to Bantry Bay (Ireland), and from Lagos to the British and French settlements in America.

In 1700, the Spanish monarch, Carlos II, died without heir. Both Habsburgs and Bourbons had claims to the succession. If the Bourbons gained the crown, the French-Spanish linkage (with their massive overseas connections) would produce a very formidable power. Once more, Louis XIV chose war (our second world war) to pursue his hegemonic aspirations. And once more, the other European powers – England, Austria, The Netherlands, Portugal, Prussia, and many of the smaller German states – combined to thwart that possibility. Again, the struggle reached beyond the European continent: from Cartagena to Mallorca, and from Port Royal to St. Augustine to Quebec. After twelve years of war, a compromise was reached. The Bourbons retained the Spanish throne, but the settlement excluded joint occupancy. France and Spain would continue as two separate nations.

In 1740, Frederick II of Prussia, who had just recently taken the throne, on the flimsiest of pretexts took Silesia from Austria. Maria Theresa understandably responded, which led to the War of Austrian Succession (our fourth world war). It involved six powers (Austria, Britain, France, Prussia, Russia, and Spain) and lasted eight years. Overseas, the war witnessed two mainly Anglo-French wars, one in India and the other in North America.

But the War of Austrian Succession solved little. From 1756 to 1763, Austria and Prussia (and later Britain, France, Sweden, Russia, and most small German states) fought the Seven Years' War. Again, the six major powers fought in Europe. Elsewhere the war was fought in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, in India and in the Americas. For eight years, six major powers mounted seven major campaigns. In India, Robert Clive drove the French under Thomas Lally off most of the subcontinent. In



the Americas, the French were driven out of Canada in 1760 and out of Martinique in 1762.

Our fifth world war took place between 1792 and 1802, as the French revolutionary forces, like Louis XIV before them, tried to establish dominion over the Continent. In this case, five major powers (but mainly France and Austria) fought for ten years. The non-European component of the war extended from Egypt to Ceylon, and from the West Indies to Mysore and Bangalore.

Of particular interest in the French Revolutionary Wars is a second revolution in military affairs: the engagement of the citizenry in the effort. For the first time, rulers dared arm their subjects in vast numbers. Nationalism and patriotism rather than impressment and bad fortune would, presumably, prompt young men to take up arms. The concept of the *levée en masse*, of the “nation in arms,” was formulated by the Committee of Public Safety and passed by the Convention on 23 August 1793. It declared that:

From this moment until that in which every enemy has been driven from the territory of the Republic, every Frenchman is permanently requisitioned for service with the armies. The young men shall fight: married men will manufacture weapons and transport stores: women shall make tents and nurse in the hospitals: children shall turn old linen into lint: the old men shall repair to the public squares to raise the courage of the warriors and preach the unity of the Republic and hatred against the kings.<sup>10</sup>

Military practice was dramatically altered, as the number of men directly involved escalated considerably. Some words of caution should be added. Achievement fell far short of aspiration. Legislative decrees do not easily transform mass sentiments. Monarchists did not become Jacobins; faithful Catholics did not become ardent secularists.

Napoleon Bonaparte put the new principle into practice in his imperial wars from 1803 to 1815, the sixth of the world wars. For twelve years, the emperor and his subjugated allies fought wars against the Revolution's major-power opponents. Once again, the conflict extended well beyond the European continent: to the West Indies, to Turkey, and to Egypt, with indirect effects in the United States and Canada (War of 1812), and in Latin America (the wars of independence). With a single stroke of the pen (and for a good deal of cash), Napoleon in 1803 sold much of a continent,

<sup>10</sup> Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* (Bloomington, Ind., 1980), p. 100.

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the Louisiana Purchase, which gave the United States claim to lands from Louisiana to Alberta. Politics, strategy, and finances were all combined in a single operation.

The first six of these world wars depended on “executive decisions”: A ruler (or rulers) initiated and others responded. The decision makers typically consulted within an immediate circle of advisors. Imperialism, or intercontinental outreach, was clearly involved (although it differed in character from the later efforts). The causal factors that appeared in the course of the nineteenth century – nationalism, militarism, newspapers, public opinion, and insurgent “masses” – are notably muted in discussions of the causes of the first six of these world wars.

### The Men of 1914

Of the eight wars, World War I poses the most serious challenges with regard to explanation. The heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne was assassinated on 28 June 1914. The Austrian government alleged official Serb involvement, issued an ultimatum, and, rejecting negotiation, began hostilities with a bombardment of Belgrade. In a linked series of decisions, four other major powers – Russia, Germany, France, and Britain – joined the struggle. In all instances, the decision makers recognized the hazards involved. They knew their choices could enlarge the conflict and significantly escalate the dimensions of the struggle. A key notion, as one German participant, Kurt Riezler, put it, was that “[w]ars would no longer be fought but calculated.” The assumption underlying this “calculated risk” was that one power could enter the conflict without motivating the next power to make the same choice. Bluff, or offensive diplomacy, could be played, forcing other possible participants to desist just short of a major war.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, however, twenty-nine nations would be involved.<sup>12</sup>

The notion of the “calculated risk” requires further comment. It evokes an image of calm, reasoned deliberation, effectively a scientific judgment.

<sup>11</sup> Andreas Hillgruber, “Riezlers Theorie des kalkulierten Risikos und Bethmann Hollwegs politische Konzeption in der Julikrise 1914,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 202 (1966): 333–51. See also Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> This count is based on a listing of declarations of war contained in Ian V. Hogg, *Historical Dictionary of World War I* (Lanham, Md., 1998), pp. 57–8. Our total indicates participants rather than declarations (thus eliminating double counts). Most accounts, understandably, are selective, passing over the declarations by, among others, San Marino, Siam, Liberia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Haiti, and Honduras.