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War Planning: Obvious Needs, Not So Obvious Solutions

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Wars are curious, puzzling, problematic events. Sensible people everywhere know that wars can be extremely costly in lives, property, and money. And they know that their outcomes are uncertain. Yet they still happen. Few other human activities have stimulated as much thought as the simple question: Why do wars happen?[1] More often than not, the concern is with specific wars such as World War I, once called the Great War. The basic question: what happened in August 1914? Or, more precisely, why did the leaders of Europe's major powers choose war?

A formal answer to that question, something discussed in a previous work, *The Origins of World War I*, is that in each case a small coterie, the nation's leaders, made the decisions that took the nation to war. Those leadership groups assessed current situations, defined the threats, considered alternatives, and chose war as their most appropriate option, either initiating action or responding to another nation's initiative. In each case, moving a step beyond that formal statement, the participants had specific strategic agendas. Austria-Hungary's leaders were seeking to prevent dissolution of the empire, a threat they sensed as stemming from Serbia's initiatives. Germany's leaders saw the threat of a two-front war with France and Russia arming and becoming ever more dangerous. For Germany's leaders the events of July and August 1914 provided a twofold opportunity, to protect their most valued ally, Austria-Hungary, and to remove the threat posed by the *entente* powers. In summary, one German leader declared that it was "now or never." Russia's leaders saw their nation threatened, primarily, by the central European allies,

[1] For recent overviews, see Appendix, "On Wars: General."

Germany and Austria-Hungary. Our view is that the decisions made by those coteries, based on their readings of threats and judgments of resultant needs, brought about the Great War. Our argument, in short, focuses on decision-making groups and on what we termed the strategic causes.[2]

Following the basic decision, saying "yes" to the option of war, the immediate concern for any decision-making coterie would be that of the appropriate war plan: how should the war be conducted? Most modern (or developed) nations would have several contingency war plans ready at hand. In this scenario, one would expect to find a division of labor and some necessary coordination. A nation's top leaders, monarchs, presidents, and ministers, would ordinarily make the initial decision, the choice of war. War plans would, presumably, have been developed by military leaders, the trained specialists. Leaders, civilian and military, would then coordinate the first steps of implementation, justifying the action, mobilizing the needed forces, transforming the economy, and so on.

The preceding paragraph contains several plausible inferences, some easy, logical conclusions. But such assumptions, beginning with the term "war plan," are seriously misleading. The term itself, war plan, sounds both easy and obvious. But such plans are extraordinarily complicated. They involve the movements and aims of armies, of navies, and, as of 1914, of rudimentary air forces. A plan must deal with the movement of large forces (horse-drawn wagons, motor vehicles, trains, and ships). It must deal with the supplying of those same units. One would have to organize intelligence (i.e., spy), assess the findings, and adjust plans accordingly. A naval plan must consider confronting the enemy (or enemies). It must also arrange for a blockade to prevent the passage of supplies to the enemy and, simultaneously, must prevent the enemy from blocking one's own supply routes. With large units in movement, some in enemy territory, one must consider and coordinate the means of communication.

The term "plan," a static concept suggesting fixity, is inappropriate. In a war, especially in the opening phases, to quote Heraclitus, "All is flux, nothing is stationary." The appropriate term, accordingly, is planning whereby one is dealing with an ongoing process. Still another cautionary note: given the complexities, close coordination of these diverse activities

[2] Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds., *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge, 2003).

would seem a strong imperative. But, as will be seen, the requirement of secrecy, to ensure that none of this crucial information reaches the enemy, limits such efforts.

Five of the six major European powers began the Great War following the principal directions of their respective war plans. Many educated persons are likely to know "the basics" of one such plan, Germany's Schlieffen Plan. Apart from the handful of specialists, however, few would know anything of the comparable Austro-Hungarian plan, the first to be implemented. And few would know anything of the Russian, French, or British plans, or that of the exceptional case, Italy. Apart from the work of a few specialists, war plans and planning processes have not been of great interest to those concerned with World War I.[3]

Some words of caution should be noted. Those clear and unambiguous expressions – "war plans" and "the Schlieffen Plan" – can be seriously misleading. They suggest the existence of definitive statements, ones that have been tested, reviewed, and agreed upon. All that remains, presumably, is implementation. When the need arises, the nation's decision-makers reach for "the plan" and, following "its" prescriptions, proceed according to the directions contained there. Depictions of final definitive plans or of leaders following "its" prescriptions, as will be seen, could hardly be more mistaken.

Instead of a static image – "the plan" – it is best to think in terms of a process, that is, of a continuous, ever-changing planning effort. The French experience illustrates the point – their option in August 1914 was entitled Plan XVII. The Russians proceeded with a modified version of their Mobilization Schedule No. 19A. The processes, moreover, are often disorderly with conflicting perceptions of threat and serious differences with regard to appropriate responses. Some accounts suggest orderly planning processes directed by rational calculating decision-makers. But, as will be seen, much of the planning is better described as murky with poorly informed and anxious participants making last-minute reversals, in some cases extemporizing major changes. The title here – *War Planning* – is intended to signal this fact, a continuous process, as opposed to the notion of some final, definitive, and binding plan. The word plan appears frequently in the following pages but, keeping in mind the

[3] Two notable exceptions: Paul M. Kennedy, ed., *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914* (London and Boston, 1979); and John H. Maurer, *The Outbreak of the First World War: Strategic Planning, Crisis Decision Making, and Deterrence Failure* (Westport, CT, 1995).

just-reviewed difficulties, readers should remember the tentative or provisional character of many such accomplishments.

War plans, it should be noted, are a relatively recent phenomenon, something that came late in the late nineteenth century. Alexander probably had no such comprehensive plan when he set out from Macedonia to conquer the world. Charles XII, the king of Sweden, probably had no such plan when, in 1708, he decided to invade Russia. When first setting out, he had probably never heard of Poltava, the scene of the decisive battle. Until well into the nineteenth century, military commanders moved their troops about the landscape, either pursuing or avoiding, during which time they studied their opportunities, the task being to discover the best place and time to engage the enemy.

No specific "war plans" have been found for the campaigns of George Washington during the American Revolutionary War. His was a system of *ad hoc* reactions in the face of a superior British force of 32,000 men, 130 warships, and more than 300 cannon. Washington, who was described by Ambrose Serle, General William Howe's top aide, as the "little paltry colonel of a militia of bandits," remained on the defensive in the last months of 1776.[4] Defeats at Brooklyn Heights, Harlem Heights, White Plains, and Fort Washington forced the American commander to avoid further engagement. He and his men crossed the Hudson, marched across New Jersey, crossed the Delaware and halted, momentarily, in Pennsylvania. Then, sensing an appropriate moment, Washington and his forces re-crossed the Delaware to surprise and defeat the Hessians in Trenton. Several days later, in another surprise move, he defeated a small British force at Princeton. Then, enduring incredible winter hardships at his base in Morristown early in 1777, Washington engaged in guerilla tactics, hitting the British and their supply lines as opportunity allowed. Only the next year, with a revived Continental Army, was he able to engage the British in head-on conventional European warfare and to defeat them – which he did at Monmouth, New Jersey.

Napoleon Bonaparte did not have a "war plan" when he set out to conquer the rest of Europe. It was not part of his plan that he would bring his forces specifically to Austerlitz or Jena. Later in the century, when the size of armies had increased enormously, when the weight and volume

[4] Bruce Chadwick, *George Washington's War: The Forging of a Revolutionary Leader and the American Presidency* (Naperville, Ill., 2004), the quotation, p. 4. See also David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York, 2004); and David McCullough, *1776* (New York, 2005).

of the weaponry increased with accompanying logistical needs, extensive and detailed planning became necessary.[5]

Most accounts of World War I follow a familiar narrative. After reviews of the background events and of the July crisis, they turn to the initial operations of the war, beginning with Austria-Hungary's move into Serbia. Then much attention is given to Germany's sweep through Luxembourg and Belgium and the move into France, following a modified Schlieffen Plan. That effort ended in failure with Germany's defeat in the First Battle of the Marne, a failure that introduced (or "set the stage for") consideration of the subsequent four years of the Great War. Within weeks, it was evident that *all* of the war plans of the major powers were seriously flawed, some in astonishing ways.

The war began with the Austro-Hungarian move. The plan was similar to the Schlieffen Plan, it too assuming a two-front war with a struggle first against a weak enemy, Serbia, and then one against a much stronger enemy, Russia. The armed forces would be moved first for the quick and total defeat of Serbia. They would then be shifted to Galicia in the northeast to confront the Russians, who, being slower to mobilize, would now be coming to the aid of their Slavic ally. Fully aware of the likely Russian response, Austria-Hungary's first requirement, one of utmost importance, was to secure a promise of support from their German ally. After securing that assurance, the Dual Monarchy's forces then invaded Serbia moving from Bosnia. The Russian move into Galicia came sooner than expected. After "frantic appeals" from the German chief of staff, Austria-Hungary broke off the Serbian campaign, leaving that enemy undefeated and moved its armies to Galicia. There, a hopelessly mismanaged offensive brought a catastrophic defeat to the Austro-Hungarian army and the loss of a third of its forces.

Russia also faced a two-front problem. With two enemies in the West, Germany and Austria-Hungary, an appropriate plan was developed. Russia's first move in the war was against Austria-Hungary with the invasion of Galicia. Then its troops moved against Germany, entering East Prussia *en masse*, dividing forces as they passed through the Masurian lakes region. One aspect of this operation brought much deprecating comment, both then and later: the Russians were communicating "in the clear." Messages sent to help coordinate movement through the lake district were not encoded, a "planning failure" that helped to produce an important German victory in the Battle of Tannenberg. But the problem

[5] A brief review of this transformation of military procedures appears here in Chapter 8.

was general – "in France the German Army did precisely the same, with identical results."[6]

For some years, Germany's leaders had anticipated a two-front war, their enemies being France in the West and Russia in the East. The Schlieffen Plan had been designed to address that problem. Like the Austrian and Russian designs, this too called for "one-two punches," first a quick move with overwhelming forces against weaker France followed by the transfer of forces for the longer engagement on the eastern front. The move into France proceeded with initial success, all apparently proceeding according to schedule. But then, making the great sweep to the north of Paris for the attack on the rear of the French forces in Lorraine and Alsace, French leaders saw their opportunity. The Germans were "giving them their flank." The French mobilized all available forces, attacked the exposed German right wing, and won that famous first battle. The Germans were then forced to retreat and to dig in. The long four-year battle of the trenches now began. The plan was brilliant, but seriously flawed. Also, a second step of planning was missing. What should be done if the first step failed?

French planning is perhaps the most problematic of the six to be discussed. French leaders knew the basics of the Schlieffen Plan, namely, that the Germans would invade through Belgium. Yet they placed the bulk of their forces to the East, facing Lorraine and the Ardennes, planning to begin with offensive operations there. Here too there was a serious planning error. French artillery was "state of the art," a fast-firing, 75-mm weapon. But it had a relatively short range, most notably a shorter range than German heavy artillery. It also had a flat trajectory and Lorraine was hilly. To reach an enemy on the other side of those hills, they needed weapons with high, arching fire. A more serious problem, one that would have pernicious effects, was the acceptance of the "offensive doctrine."

The British "plan" called for a quick movement of units across the Channel, to be placed on the western edge of the allied front. The Germans moved with massive numbers, which overwhelmed the modest British forces. On the first day of their engagement, the Empire lost more soldiers than had been lost in combat on any day in the previous century.

Italy was allied with Germany and Austria-Hungary. Its leaders had promised Germany that they would send an army to the Rhine in the

[6] For a detailed account of the problems involved, see John Ferris, ed., *The British Army and Signals Intelligence during the First World War* (Phoenix Mill, UK, 1992), Introduction.

event of war. The presence of those numbers facing the French would have freed up more German units for the sweep through Belgium and, perhaps, would have brought the anticipated "decisive" victory. But in Germany's "hour of need," Italy's leaders instead declared that nation's neutrality.

Italy's and Germany's leaders had also given some serious last-minute consideration to two other plans, an attack on France through the Alps and one in Provence on the Mediterranean coast. Given the secrecy and the death of a key decision-maker in the midst of the crisis, at one point, two groups of Italy's leaders were moving to implement different plans. The decision to avoid immediate engagement, moreover, hid a serious flaw in all of these options. Ninety percent of Italy's coal supply came from Great Britain. The most likely alternative source would have been Germany. But no consideration had been given to the availability of high-grade coal, of the need for locomotives and coal cars, of the schedules, or of the routes to be taken.

The development of those war plans and of the attendant pathologies are the subject of this book. The aim is to examine the planning processes and the resulting plans of the six major European powers.

The most appropriate theoretical framework to deal with such decision-making is the elite theory (or, for short, elitism).[7] It recognizes

[7] For an overview, see G. Lowell Field and John Higley, *Elitism* (London, 1980); also, Mattei Dogan and John Higley, eds., *Elites, Crises, and the Origins of Regimes* (Lanham, Md., 1998).

Modern formulations of elite theory appeared first, more than a century ago, in the works of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels. Their writings were translated and published in English but never gained much attention in the English-speaking world. Possibly the most famous English-language work in this tradition is by C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York, 1956). It contains hundreds of pages about elites in American society, principally those of business and the military, but the work provides no serious evidence about their power or their relationships, the basic problem being one of assertion without evidence. The work remained in print for more than four decades, the last edition appearing in 2000. Suzanne Keller wrote on the autonomy of different elite groups and the problems of their coordination, in *Beyond the Ruling Class: Strategic Elites in Modern Society* (New York, 1963).

Elitism has never gained much attention in the social sciences (apart from the Mills volume) or in history. Field and Higley point up the problem in their opening chapter, one entitled "Elitism in eclipse." For later overviews on the theory and its uses, see Eva Etzioni-Halevy, *The Elite Connection: Problems and Potential of Western Democracy* (Cambridge, UK, 1993); also two works edited by Etzioni-Halevy, *Classes and Elites in Democracy and Democratization* (New York, 1997); and a special issue of the *International Review of Sociology*, 9,2 (1999).

that complex, economically advanced societies develop separate specialized organizations to accomplish necessary or desired goals. Those organizations, sometimes referred to as institutions, include political, economic, and military agencies, as well as those dealing with education, mass communication, religious matters, and so forth. Within each of those categories one would ordinarily find further specialties such as army, navy, and later, air force, as well as various intelligence branches. Those agencies developed somewhat differently in each nation. Also, the pacing of the achievements varied, some being early, some late developments.

Each of these institutions would have a leadership group, the elite, which is central to the theory. Those persons, typically, would have received some initial training in specialized professional schools. Later they would have undergone extensive on-the-job training, moving up the organizational hierarchy to positions that required greater knowledge, oversight, and responsibility.

Given the diverse career lines, each with distinctive training and experience, it follows that the various elites would have different concerns and priorities. Each elite, moreover, would have some degree of autonomy, that is to say, some power or resources allowing the defense or furtherance of its perceived interests. Over time, some understandings, formal or informal, would be developed defining the proper or appropriate tasks of each institution. One such experience would be the European secularization conflict, the centuries-long struggle over church-state relations that ultimately removed religious elites from most tasks of governance.

Given their separate training, careers, and locations it follows that the various elites would not ordinarily have regular contact. And it follows further that some efforts of coordination by these elites, either regular or occasional, would be necessary. Although the logic is easy, such statements are best viewed as hypotheses. Investigation – a testing of those hypotheses – is always appropriate. Did coordination actually occur? And if it did, what was the result?

It is easy also to assume the dominance of a given elite. Economic elites, the owners and managers of leading industrial firms and of the major banks, are often assumed to be all-powerful in modern capitalist societies. The "force" of a logical argument, unfortunately, is often so strong that investigation is discouraged or neglected entirely. The "obvious" (or "compelling") logic allows one to by-pass the onerous tasks of research. The founders of a major social theory, for example, one first expounded in 1848, dealt with the complexities of business-government relations

with a simple declaration: "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie."[8]

In their extensive later writings, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels neglected the research task entirely, never showing how "the whole bourgeoisie" selected that "executive committee." It was never demonstrated that "they" were directing the governments of Lord Palmerston, Benjamin Disraeli, or William Gladstone. In 1854, Marx and Engels could have established the point by presenting evidence showing the "whole bourgeoisie" of Britain and France directing their respective governments to intervene in the Crimea to fight a very costly war. But they did not undertake that task, the declaration of the obvious logic being considered fully sufficient. The logic of the argument, put simply, is that wars in the modern era stemmed from the demands of the capitalists, demands that somehow "reflected" (or "expressed") the needs of the capitalist system.[9]

During the Great War, a revision of the Marxist position was published by Vladimir Ilych Lenin in his *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. He argued that capitalism in its latest form, *Finanzkapital*, must seek out new settings for investment, hence the need for colonies with direct rule as the most "convenient form." To achieve those aims, the major capitalist nations chose war; for them, it was a necessity, a life-or-death matter. The World War, "on the part of both sides," Lenin wrote, was the "proven" result. This work later found an important sponsor, the Soviet Union, which subsidized translations, publication, and gave it worldwide dissemination. It would be "read and studied by millions of people who know no other book on imperialism."[10] This work too was based on a plausible logic as opposed to appropriate research and evidence.

[8] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in the *Collected Works* (New York, 1976), vol. 6, pp. 477–519, quotation, p. 486.

[9] Marx was living in London at this time writing weekly articles for Horace Greeley's New York *Tribune*. One of these gives a strikingly different explanation, declaring that the Crimean crisis was produced by the "conflict between the Latin and Greek churches" in the Near East and that France's intervention was the work of Emperor Louis Napoleon who was seeking Catholic support. Marx's summary, all italicized, reads: "The Bonapartist usurpation, therefore, is the true origin of the present Eastern complication." From his "Russian Diplomacy . . . ," *Tribune*, 27 February 1854, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, pp. 615–616.

[10] V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (46 vols., Moscow, 1960), vol. 22, pp. 185–304. The citation is from Norman Etherington, *Theories of Imperialism: War, Conquest and Capital* (London, 1984), p. 160. For explication and assessment, see Richard F. Hamilton, *Marxism, Revisionism, and Leninism* (Westport, Conn., 2000), Ch. 4.

The Marxist theory challenged a basic claim of the liberal position. An impressive array of liberal thinkers had pointed to the growing internationalism of trade and the resulting interdependencies. Those facts, it was argued, provided powerful incentives for businessmen to oppose war. Among those arguing this position were Baron de Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Paine, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Richard Cobden, John Bright, J. A. Hobson, and, last but not least, a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Norman Angell.[11]

John Stuart Mill, writing in 1848, declared that commerce "is rapidly rendering war obsolete, by strengthening and multiplying the personal interests which act in natural opposition to it." The liberal position held that it was the old regimes, those led by monarchs and aristocracies, that chose to make war. The new regimes, the republican arrangements, responding to significant and growing business influence, would bring an end to wars. Like Marxism, this position was also based on an "obvious" logic and again little investigation was undertaken to establish the basic claim. One similarity ought to be noted: both liberalism and Marxism assumed the dominant influence of business elites. In both theories, "they" were directing the efforts of the political leaders. In both cases, the conclusion was based on a "compelling" logic, which is to say it was presented without benefit of serious research.

The Great War presented an overt challenge to the widely held optimistic liberal assumptions. That event thoroughly discredited the central claim of the liberal position, that international trade and interdependence meant peace. That position, perhaps not surprisingly, would now be treated with disdain, as a curious naïve illusion that no intelligent person could possibly accept.

We have an unexpected convergence here. After 1914–1918, both Marxism and liberalism (the new revised version thereof) were in substantial agreement that "big business" was the dominant elite in advanced capitalist regimes. And both agreed also that "big business" somehow accepted or favored war as an instrument of policy. Because business was "in power," the existence of wars must mean, as expressed in three familiar clichés, that "they" were operating behind the scenes, pulling the strings, and calling the shots. "They" must have pushed for those interventions. The frequent resort to metaphor indicates a serious problem

[11] See Michael E. Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (London, 1978). The Mill quotation in the following paragraph is from p. 37.