

1 Introduction: The Great War

It is one of those seismic disturbances in which nations leap forward or fall backward generations in a single bound.

David Lloyd George,
British Minister of Armaments
December 25, 1915

Before its sequel overshadowed it in popular memory, the First World War was simply “the Great War.” Perhaps it still should be. What began in summer 1914 as a local Balkan conflict between an upstart Serbia and the wizened Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary became by 1918 a war that raged across the globe, involving all the great powers and ushering in a level of mass battlefield killing unimaginable just a few years earlier. The Entente coalition led by France, Britain, Russia (for a time), and (late in the war) the United States claimed victory over the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire, but not before Germany knocked Russia out of the war in 1917 and sniffed victory on the Western Front in 1918. The world that emerged battered, scarred, and disillusioned from four years of unprecedented destruction, upheaval, and suffering was hardly recognizable to those who lived to see the peace.¹ Defeat shattered the German, Russian, Austrian, and Ottoman Empires, and though victory enlarged Japan’s empire, it sounded the death knell of the British and French empires and moved Indian and Chinese nationalism closer to their modern forms. The world entered the new age of industrial war, during which states and empires attempted to mobilize entire populations for the conflict – and nearly succeeded in doing so – as their subjects manned trenches and produced the weapons that armies would

¹ The major belligerents stopped fighting in 1918, but war continued for years in the East, as Russia collapsed into a vicious civil war and the Ottoman Empire continued fighting until the early 1920s. Marking the end in 1918 isn’t unreasonable, since Germany was the heart of the Central Powers, but it’s also a bit misleading. On the continued fighting in defeated states, see Gerwarth (2016).

use to lay waste to the physical, social, and political face of the globe. The war killed 10 million on the battlefield alone,² more than twice as many as those killed in all major wars since 1790,³ poisoning politics and class relations and straining the bonds between state and society in all belligerent countries, some of which, like the Russian, German, and Ottoman empires, succumbed to revolution and bloody civil violence.⁴

The Great War also hastened the rise to great power status of the United States, which would throw its economic and military weight behind the Entente even as it espoused an open skepticism about the nineteenth-century world order that its new partners had bled so profusely to preserve. America's wartime president, Woodrow Wilson, sought to rearrange global politics around a binding system of collective security, even as the Americans withdrew from European security politics after the war, hoping that financial might alone could do the job. The United States wasn't the only new revolutionary power; a royal abdication, crushing military defeat, the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, a Bolshevik coup, and a subsequent civil war in Russia produced a Soviet regime that made its own rhetorical break with classical power politics, even as it pursued traditionally Russian imperial ambitions. Its military presence and political weight in Europe, diminished at war's end, would only grow in the interwar years as the result of a forcible Stalinist recovery. A nominally democratic Germany emerged from the war with its unity accepted and legitimized for the first time by the other great powers, even as it labored bitterly under the harsh peace of the Treaty of Versailles. Defeat was bitter, but victory entailed its own problems. Entente competition over former Ottoman possessions would sow the seeds for future conflicts in the Middle East, whose present fault lines echo many of the hasty decisions over borders and governance made in those early days after Germany's capitulation in 1918. On the other side of the globe, Japan scooped up German possessions in the Pacific that sat ominously astride American lines of communication its imperial possessions in Hawaii and the Philippines. Japan's disillusionment over frustrated ambitions at the peace conference, including a simple request for the recognition of racial equality opposed by the British and American delegations, strengthened a militarist faction that would, alongside Germany, play a part in igniting the Second World War barely a generation later.

Map 1.1 shows the war's reach, from its beginnings in southeastern Europe to the falling dominoes of the great powers and their colonies (like India, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) to the eventual participation

² Prost (2014)

³ Kershaw (2015, chapter 3).

⁴ Payne (2011) and Gerwarth (2016).

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of future great powers like the United States and China.⁵ And yet, as easy as it is to see its global political footprint with a century's worth of hindsight, the Great War's participants were under no illusions that the world would again be the same. Eventual British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, addressing the public as Armaments Minister in December 1915, said

It is the deluge, it is a convulsion of Nature ... bringing unheard-of changes in the social and industrial fabric. It is a cyclone which is tearing up by the roots the ornamental plants of modern society ... It is one of those seismic disturbances in which nations leap forward or fall backward generations in a single bound.⁶

That assessment, offered just under three years before the armistice of November 11, 1918, hasn't changed much in the intervening century. Modern historians call the First World War "the seminal event of modern times,"⁷ an all-consuming "global revolution" that upended power relationships between and inside countries.⁸ Even the ostensibly low-stakes, plodding-then-galloping July Crisis that preceded the war has been dubbed "the most complex [event] of modern times, perhaps of any time so far."⁹ The First World War is one of those rare events that lives up to the historiographical hype. It gestated slowly and ominously under the shadow of the past, then burst forth violently, if not unexpectedly, to consume and change everything before it. In its destruction and dislocation, it shaped all that came afterward in global politics.

The war merits attention for its consequences alone, but it's illuminating for more than just its aftermath. Its sheer scale and complexity mean that it touches on nearly every aspect of the politics of war and peace that concern contemporary students of international relations. Its origins in great power competition, complicated by civil conflict and cross-border political violence, are eerily modern.¹⁰ The more one looks at the Great War, the less exotic it seems, despite the intervening century, and the less comfortable one feels dismissing it as a historical curiosity, an outrageous outlier, or a pale shadow of the still more terrible world war that would follow it.¹¹ When that familiarity echoes the present, it offers

⁵ However darkly shaded it is, this map is still misleading: Mexico, which preserved its neutrality, didn't remain untouched, subject as it was of a German proposal to form an alliance against the United States (see Chapter 13).

⁶ Quoted in Tooze (2014, p. 3).

⁷ Fromkin (2004, p. 8).

⁸ Sondhaus (2011, pp. 1–2).

⁹ Clark (2012, p. xxix).

¹⁰ Clark (2012, p. xxvii).

¹¹ It's easy to focus on the Second World War. As David Frum (2015) notes (quoting an anonymous *Atlantic* reader), it's got "bigger explosions" and "better villains." World War II is the blockbuster, and World War I is the challenging indie film.

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not answers but more questions, more puzzles in need of resolution. Why do states go to war only to draw new borders or install new foreign governments, when negotiations can (and often do) achieve the same things without wasting blood and treasure? How can small disputes involving minor powers draw in not just one of but *all* the world's great powers, especially when they stand to lose large volumes of peacetime trade and investment? When does international law shape the behavior of states, and when is it dismissed as just so many scraps of paper? Why do some military partners cooperate effectively, while others fail spectacularly to work together even as their survival hangs in the balance? Why are some countries willing to gamble everything, even their very survival, on fleeting chances of military victory? How can frugal, calculating leaders throw good money after bad, hurling citizen soldiers into an apparently futile, grinding contest of attrition? Why keep the war at sea limited while the war on land manifestly isn't? Why do wars end when and how they do, typically with both sides still standing and able in principle to continue the fight, even after years of strain, resentment, and animosity? Finally, how do states make peace after war, what makes it last, and why does it break down?

Each of these puzzles emerges from the narrative of the Great War we follow in subsequent chapters. This book introduces students to modern theories of international relations by offering answers – many old, some amended, a few new to this text – to these and many other enduring questions. We'll develop solutions to a series of puzzles using game theory, a mathematical tool that helps us build simple, elegant models of politics and strategic choice that offer pithy, useful insights into otherwise baffling, complex phenomena. Students will develop a working knowledge of (1) international war and peace, (2) building, analyzing, and learning from simple game-theoretic models of international politics, and (3) the historic and contemporary importance of an event that shaped (and continues to shape) the world in which we live. The First World War is horrifying, fascinating, challenging, and very present, and not just because international relations scholars won't (maybe can't) stop talking about it. Passing through the war's centennial, it's tempting to compare every hiccup in the international order, from nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula to Russian attempts to regain Eastern Europe to Chinese ambitions in the South and East China Seas to American presidents questioning the value of their alliance networks, to something in the run-up to war in 1914. As such, it's fitting that we use the Great War as a starting point for understanding the challenges of a new and rapidly changing world of international politics. If it's true that everything old becomes new again, relearning the lessons of the Great War might be all the more timely

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precisely because of how far the Great War has receded from popular memory.

Key Terms for Chapter 1

- War
- Strategy
- International System
- Territorial State
- Anarchy
- Self-Enforcing
- Hierarchy
- Great Power

1.1 HISTORY, WAR, AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Its focus on the past notwithstanding, this is a book not of history but of political science. We're concerned with using the tools and accumulated insights of political science to develop answers about *why* the war broke out, expanded, lasted, and ended the way it did, leveraging as much as possible our collected knowledge about other like events. We'll build explanations with models – in this case, simple mathematical constructs that represent actors, their goals, their choices, and how those choices add up to produce the outcomes we observe – that allow us to think about elements of the war as specific instances of more general political phenomena. War, diplomacy, great powers, arms races, empires, alliances, democracy, dictatorship, international law, military strategy, war finance, and peace settlements existed before the Great War, in every region of the world, and they continue to define and shape the ebb and flow of international politics. This allows us to leverage insights from modern political science to learn about the First World War, to frame its puzzles in illuminating (and sometimes new) fashion, and to understand better a war that, at first blush, appears so large, so consequential, and so unique as to defy explanation.

Key to this approach is an endeavor to explain the actions of soldiers, politicians, civilians, revolutionaries, and laborers as much as possible *in real time*. We'll explain an event – for example, the outbreak of the war itself – in terms of the goals, alternatives, and information available to the actors when they made the relevant choices, as well as how multiple choices interacted to produce the outcomes we want to explain. We'll strive to avoid relying on hindsight, which can generate puzzles but not solve them. We might be puzzled, for example, why Britain and Germany wasted six years and millions of pounds and marks on a competition in battleship construction that left both states poorer but the distribution of naval power between them unchanged. If we look at the waste of the naval race, we might be tempted to blame the leaders who made the key decisions. We might land on an apparently satisfying answer, like

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corrupt politicians, “bad” systems of government, or individuals that (so conveniently) lack our insight or intelligence. An answer like that isn’t as illuminating as it is self-serving, an understandable but distorting attempt at self-exoneration in the face of some of the defining tragedies of political life: “dictators/capitalists/imperialists/communists/fools/devils would embark on a wasteful arms race, but, of course, no one like me.” That’s a polemic, not an analysis. Yet something like it is too prevalent in the way we think and talk and (sometimes) vote about war. Solving puzzles about war in the seductive and easy way blinds us to the fact that we don’t need to assume that people are venal, ignorant, treacherous, or evil to explain how they might end up fighting a monstrous, bloody contest of arms – even one as calamitous as the First World War.¹²

Putting ourselves in the heads of the people whose decisions we want to explain, from Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm II to France’s Marshal Ferdinand Foch to American President Woodrow Wilson, helps us see how even clever, frugal, calculating individuals can choose something that, in hindsight, looks like obvious folly. We’ll work hard to avoid explaining war in ideological, superstitious, or moralizing terms. The required moral detachment may be jarring, but it’s necessary. We’ll explain the war, its nature, its course, and its end in *political* terms, as *political* acts with *political* goals. We’ll be disquietingly silent on who’s “to blame.” In fact, we’ll see that many of us, faced with the same choices, might act in ways surprisingly similar to the Kaiser and his generals, the Tsar and his soldiers, or the Prime Minister and his Cabinet. Confronting the political story of the First World War in real time obliges us to view its participants not as figures buried deep in the past to be vainly praised or safely condemned, but as persons to be understood. Neither excused nor pardoned, of course, but humanized and rationalized.¹³ Only then, after an exercise in the analytical equivalent of empathy, can we see how Russia could have embarked with some urgency on a potentially ruinous war with Germany to protect little Serbia; how the British Empire could enter a European war in support of its erstwhile Russian rival over a so-called scrap of paper guaranteeing Belgian neutrality; how Germany could in 1917 roll the iron dice on a program of unrestricted submarine warfare that was sure to draw the last remaining uncommitted great power into the war against it; and why the United States, its rhetorical fidelity to aloofness notwithstanding, would finally choose to participate in a war to reshape the global balance of power. Stripping away the artifice of popular but bad explanations, we’ll

¹² I know what you’re thinking, and you’re correct. “Seductive and easy” is basically Yoda’s description of the dark side of the Force. Gird yourself, dear reader.

¹³ Here, *rationalized* doesn’t have its typical negative connotation. We only mean understanding the logic, the rationale, behind people’s decisions.

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see that the tragedy that befell the world in 1914 is not as exotic, as distant, as mysterious, or as unique as we, more than a century later, might wish it to be.

If we look back merely to cast blame, as the victors did when they sat down to make peace in 1919, we risk losing sight of the fact that many people – not just imperialists and capitalists, as Lenin had it, or autocrats and militarists, as Wilson had it – might have made similar decisions in 1914 that risked setting the world on fire. “Tragedy” won’t be just a literary concept. The conscious, open-eyed decision-making of 1914 is one of the fundamental yet easily overlooked tragedies of the war. We may recoil at the idea that the characters in our story knew what they were doing, but disliking the conclusions of a line of inquiry isn’t a sufficient reason to reject it. To explain politics, we need better intellectual tools than an inchoate idea of what we wish the world were like. As such, we’ll leverage the tools of game theory, which helps us explain political events by forcing us to identify the relevant actors, their goals, their choices, and the ways in which their choices interact with the choices of others. By thinking hard, for example, about what the Russians and Germans most wanted in July 1914, what they would’ve been happy with, what they would’ve done anything to avoid, and how their choices could impinge on the pursuit of each other’s goals, we can take personages obscured by the weight of history more seriously and, as a result, see the war’s causes more clearly. We can also see the extent to which the Great War (1) fits in with broader patterns of international politics *and* (2) offers lessons for war, diplomacy, and international politics in the modern era. When we understand the First World War as a political event, we can explain its horrors in terms that are useful to us, not only as students of the war but also as citizens that must make decisions about where we stand on issues of war, peace, and global order.

Explaining complex events is difficult, all the more so when those events entail the horror, destruction, and consequence of a world war. This is especially true of the First World War, an event of such staggering complexity, upheaval, and apparent inhumanity that the mind practically rejects any explanation other than “someone unlike me must be responsible.” The explanations in this book, by contrast, take the characters in our story seriously. We need not assume that they’re evil, venal, naive, incompetent, vain, or cognitively limited. Avoiding these temptations is frequently difficult and often uncomfortable. It requires that we exercise what George Orwell calls the “power of facing unpleasant facts.”¹⁴ The

¹⁴ For more, see Orwell’s moving essay “Why I Write,” originally published in the fourth (and final) issue of *Gangrel* in 1946 but more easily found in 1953’s essay collection *Such, Such Were the Joys*.

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clarity offered by the simple, logical tools of game theory helps us say insightful things about an otherwise messy, illogical, even irrational world. As Harrison Wagner puts it,

Sometimes people say that politics is just “not logical.” *But logic is not a property of the world, it is a property of what we say about the world.* The world is a messy and confusing place. We do not enhance our understanding of it by saying messy and confusing things about it.¹⁵

This standard of analysis faces few bigger challenges than the unprecedented horror and normalized madness of the First World War. To help us along, we’ll leverage a body work in political science that offers a wealth of models of the workings of politics, law, diplomacy, and war. We’ll draw on many of these theories in order to make sense of the Great War, to put it in the context of the international system from which it emerged and went on to reshape, and to see what lessons it offers for war, peace, and international order today.

1.2 THEORY AND SIMPLICITY

The theories we develop in each chapter will often be incredibly simple, and it may seem strange at first that we take an event like the First World War and break it down into such spare pieces. But simplification, distillation, and abstraction are the very stuff of a good theory, of a good explanation. Complication, nuance, and ornate description generally aren’t.¹⁶ A useful theory is just like a useful map. It provides only as much detail as necessary to serve its purpose, and not a single detail more. It’s spare in its construction, transparent in its logic, and insightful in its implications. It is, as much as possible, the opposite of the sprawling, noisy, baffling world it seeks to explain. It simplifies the world, acting as a sharp, carefully chosen, enlightening metaphor, one that isolates and sheds light on interesting parts of the whole, all in the service of helping us make sense of the world we observe. But it doesn’t – and it shouldn’t – try to describe the world in anything other than the barest, most miserly possible amount of detail.¹⁷

As we’ll see throughout this book, a good theory is hard to find – and even harder to build from scratch. It’s tempting to demand things of a theory that we shouldn’t, like too much descriptive accuracy. But models

¹⁵ Wagner (2001, p. 4, emphasis added).

¹⁶ If you take one thing away from this book, it should be a healthy skepticism of anyone who critiques a theory as “oversimplifying” something. More often than not, such a critique is a vacuous demand for “nuance,” which is rarely useful (Healy, 2017). Let’s just treat *nuance* as a four-letter word from here on out.

¹⁷ Good theories are metaphors, not onomatopoeia.

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are *supposed* to leave things out; otherwise, they wouldn't be models. The standard model of the atom, for example, does a fine job of telling us how to think about the role of protons, neutrons, and electrons in constituting the elements in the periodic table, but further description (say, at the quantum level) adds nothing more than needless complexity if all we want to do is understand what substance we get when an atom of oxygen combines with two of hydrogen. A theory's usefulness is very often inversely proportional to its complexity, or to the number of "moving parts" that it requires us to keep track of. Our goal is to build explanations that isolate the processes in which we're interested and strip away all the others, to sort the wheat from the chaff, to distill a strategic problem down to its essence. The essence of a strategic problem, though, depends not on any particular detail of the situation but on what we're interested in learning about it, on what we ask of our models. Models, therefore, are best judged against the purposes for which we design them, not any particular level of fidelity with the complex, loony, maddening world we'd like them to help us understand.¹⁸

Theories give us insight and explanation, but they *shouldn't* give us just a description of an event. A good theory doesn't strive for a complete characterization of an event, because the event in full – say, the First World War – is already confusing. If it weren't, we wouldn't need a theory to explain it. We need theory to strip away noise and complication, to help us focus on the essentials. Imagine, if you will, a map of Austin, Texas, that contains every detail, fully to scale. Such a map would cover the entire city, so it wouldn't do us much good if all we wanted to know was how to get from the University of Texas campus to Workhorse Bar in the North Loop neighborhood. For that, we'd need a transit map, but we certainly wouldn't want a huge, carefully detailed map that wasted our time with extraneous information. As long as the transit map gives us routes, stop locations, and bus times, we don't even need it to be drawn to scale (or maybe even drawn at all). And yet this model would still do what we ask of it effectively and efficiently.¹⁹ To that end, the theories in this book offer explanations for puzzling events in the political world. They don't reproduce in confusing detail the already confusing events we're seeking to understand. (That would, in the true sense of the word, be perverse.) To theorize is to simplify, to leave things out, to cut away the inessential, to make the puzzling explicable. Anything less takes us further away from

¹⁸ See Clarke and Primo (2012).

¹⁹ See Clarke and Primo (2012) for an extended treatment of the models-as-maps analogy and Wagner (2001) for a briefer discussion of the same idea.