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The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making (Book Review)

Abstract

Reviewed Title: *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* by Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 305 pp. ISBN: 9781107616028.

Keywords

book review, Jack S. Levy, John A. Vasquez, The Outbreak of the First World War, politics, decision-making



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Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, eds., *The Outbreak of The First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xviii, 305. ISBN 978-1-107-61602-8.

Review by Mark McCarthy, Dordt College (mark.mccarthy@dordt.edu).

The Great War changed the Western World more than any other event in the Modern Age. In many ways, it still indirectly influences much of our understanding of the nineteenth century and has shaped our interpretations of what came after. By the time the fighting was over, the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires had fallen, those of France and Great Britain had been significantly weakened, and the new empire of the Soviet Union was just emerging. In addition, World War I and its aftermath laid the groundwork for the rise of Nazi Germany and the Second World War, which in turn set the stage for the Cold War. The year 1914 also set in motion powerful cultural forces that persist to this day.

In *The Outbreak of The First World War*, editors Jack Levy (Rutgers Univ.) and John Vasquez (Univ. of Illinois) have gathered papers originally presented in 2013 at a conference in San Francisco. Its intended audience includes advanced students and professional scholars interested in an interdisciplinary approach to the origins of the war, combining diplomatic history and international relations theories. Rather than reviewing the well known events of World War I, the volume's contributors ask and answer key theoretical questions.

This volume focuses on the causes and immediate expansion of the First World War. It touches upon a number of ... analytic themes ..., including structure and agency, international and domestic sources of causation, and the impact of shifting power and preventive logic. It also addresses the questions of whether the primary causes of the war were located in Berlin, or in Vienna and the Balkans, or elsewhere, and the critical, but long-neglected, question of why the war broke out in 1914 but not before. In the process, our contributors highlight the complex nature of causation in the outbreak and spread of war. The volume links historiographical debates about the causes of the First World War to the debates in the theoretical literature on international conflict. (5)

The editors had four criteria for choosing contributors. They wanted (a) both veteran and younger scholars from (b) Europe and North America, with (c) specializations in history and political science, and (d) a familiarity with both English- and non-English-language sources.

The book comprises ten chapters distributed through four parts. Part I is an "Overview of Debates about the Causes of the First World War." Chapter 1, "Introduction: Historians, Political Scientists and the Causes of the First World War," by the editors, sets up the framework of the book and its subjects. Chapter 2, "July 1914 Revisited and Revised," by historian Samuel Williamson (Univ. of the South) examines the emergence and then erosion of the view that identified Germany as the primary cause for the outbreak of the war. Williamson sees instead a "perfect storm" of conditions that led Austria-Hungary, Russia, Serbia, and France to play significant parts in triggering hostilities. He also explores the reasons why war came in 1914 and not earlier.

Part II concerns "Structure and Agency." In chapter 3, political scientists Karen Rasler and William Thompson (both Indiana Univ.) discuss "Strategic Rivalries and Complex Causality in 1914." They identify systemic elements that contributed to the ignition of war, arguing that it was not only individual interstate rivalries that helped lead to war. They see no single cause for the war, but instead think that "the field of rivalry dynamics appears to have contributed significantly to the outbreak of war" (85). In chapter 4, "A 'Formidable Factor in European Politics,'" historian T.G. Otte (Univ. of East Anglia) attempts to make a stronger case for historical agency. Too often, he observes, scholars have rather simplistically attributed the opening of the war to a series of crises that led to an inevitable conclusion. He prefers a more nuanced look

at the long- and short-term effects of events leading up to July 1914; he stresses the value of understanding the intricacies of the decision-making process, which belongs “back at the heart of the debate” (110).

The third part of the book, “The Question of Preventive War,” considers whether a German strategy of preventive war actually increased the likelihood of a world conflict. In chapter 5, “Restraints on Preventive War before 1914,” historian William Mulligan (Univ. College Dublin) asks why, if such a strategy was so critical, did peace prevail until 1914 despite opportunities for the Germans to act on their plans earlier? His answer is that preventive war had become a doctrine that European leaders were unwilling to espouse publicly. But, during the July Crisis, “the assassination of Franz Ferdinand provided a just cause for war, at least in the eyes of Austro-Hungarian and German leaders, at a moment when conditions also favored a preventive war” (138). In the sixth chapter, “The Sources of Preventive Logic in German Decision-Making in 1914,” political scientist Jack Levy carefully distinguishes prevention from preemption. He concludes that the notion of preventive war may have preoccupied some German decision-makers, but that the evidence just does not show that Germany had any such consistent strategy in the years just before the July Crisis (165).

In chapter 7, “International Relations Theory and the Three Great Puzzles of the First World War,” political scientist Dale Copeland (Univ. of Virginia) places the blame for the larger war squarely on Germany. He argues that German leaders believed their country to be in a state of irreversible decline in comparison to an increasingly industrialized and powerful Russia. The only option available to solve their security issues seemed to be “a total war that would eliminate the French threat in the west to give the Germans time to reduce Russian power in the east” (198). The eighth chapter—“Was the First World War a Preventive War?”—by political scientist John Vasquez presents six criteria for designating a war as “preventive” and maintains that the German case does not meet all of them. Most importantly, he believes German foreign policy decision-makers were not motivated by a commitment to preventive war during the July Crisis. Instead, he underscores the part played by Austria-Hungary in initiating a war that drew in the other major participants: “the war occurred because Germany gets dragged into a coercive game with Russia (in support of its only real ally) that breaks down. The First World War, then is not a preventive war because the preventive motivation was not a causally significant factor that brought about the war, let alone the main factor” (223).

The fourth part of the book concerns “The Role of the Other Powers.” In chapter 9, “War Accepted but Unsought,” historian Ronald Bobroff (Oglethorpe Univ.) contends that Russia took the stand it did and finally mobilized its armies because its leaders believed too many of their vital interests were threatened. The fate of Serbia, Russian prestige as a great power, and even the balance of power in Europe itself were all at stake—“In the face of other states seeking war for gain or survival, the Russians reluctantly stood their ground, because they could no longer see any alternative” (251). In the final chapter, “France’s Unreadiness for War in 1914,” historian J.F.V. Keiger (Cambridge Univ.) intends to determine whether France was sufficiently prepared militarily in 1914 and then to use this state of (un)preparedness as an indicator of its (un)willingness to go to war. He also seeks to evaluate the decision-making of French leaders in light of broader theoretical debates about why nations go to war (253). Unlike Williamson, who believes France had a stronger hand than traditionally recognized in bringing about the general war, Keiger contends that it was unprepared for war, which left French decision-makers with limited options during the July Crisis.

This essay collection makes a valuable, thought-provoking contribution to the outpouring of centennial publications on the First World War. As its editors put it, “We see our niche and contribution to the literature as providing analytic perspectives on a set of critical questions on the war from an interdisciplinary perspective of political scientists and diplomatic historians ... [in an effort to] help bridge the gap between those who actively engage the archival evidential base and those who reflect on that evidence from [*sic*] the lens of concepts and models” (5, 11).

1. The chapter presents conclusions reached in Mulligan’s *The Origins of the First World War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2010).

Another strength of this well conceived and well edited² volume is that the various authors do not always agree. In this day and age of bitter polarization and hardening of views, even in academia, it is heartening to see opposing viewpoints presented in a civil and scholarly manner. *The Outbreak of The First World War* will appeal strongly to anyone seeking an interdisciplinary approach to the momentous events of 1914.

2. In one instance, however, the editors seem to misrepresent an author's position. They state that "Though Mulligan does not examine the 1914 case in detail, it is clear that each of these constraints [on preventive war] *had eroded* by that time" (21), but, in his conclusion, Mulligan writes that "between 1871 and 1914 the restraints on preventive war *became tighter*" (138; my emphases). He seems to mean that restraints were present, but that the assassination altered the situation, at least for the Austrians and Germans.