



EXPLAINING THE 1914 WAR IN EUROPE: AN ANALYTIC NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT: This essay constructs a theoretically rigorous explanation of the 1914 European war that involved Austria Hungary, Germany, Russia, and France. It also serves to confirm Trachtenberg’s contention that ‘one does not have to take a particularly dark view of German intentions’ to explain the onset of war in 1914 and ‘question the “inadvertent war” theory’. A number of related questions about the Great War are also addressed within the context of a generic game-theoretic escalation model with incomplete information. The analysis suggests that general war broke out in Europe in 1914 because both Austria– Hungary and Germany believed that, when push came to shove, Russia would stand aside if Austria moved aggressively against Serbia. There is a sense in which the war can be said to be unintended but there is no sense in which it should be understood as accidental.

KEY WORDS: analytic narrative, escalation, game theory, July crisis World War I

Introduction: The outbreak of World War I remains one of the most perplexing events of international history. It should be no surprise, then, that rationalist interpretations of the July crisis are a diverse lot, ranging from the sinister on the one hand to the benign on the other. The dark view is that German leaders simply wanted a war in 1914; the less baleful interpretation is that the war was unintended and, at least in some sense, accidental. Somewhere in between are those intentionality accounts that attempt to show how instrumentally rational agents were led to the choices that gave rise to an escalation spiral.

Levy’s (1990/1991) attempt at explanation, with preference assumptions that shade toward the sinister, but with conclusions that approach those of the invader-tent war school, is a good example of an in-between interpretation of the events that led, eventually, to the First World War. Levy locates the cause of the war in those ‘economic, military, diplomatic, political, and social forces ... [that] ... shaped the policy preferences of statesmen and the strategic and political constraints within which they had to make extraordinarily difficult decisions’ (p.184). But Levy’s rational choice explanation is, as are most explanations of the July crisis, theoretically *ad hoc*. It contains no formal structure, game-theoretic or otherwise, to demonstrate a direct mapping between postulated preferences and the eventual dénouement of the crisis. Moreover, its explanatory power is circumscribed by the absence from among the possible outcomes of the crisis of an outcome labeled ‘status quo’ – or an equivalent. The latter is a particularly problematic deficiency since the heart of any explanation of the start of the Great War must contain an explicit statement of exactly why the prevailing European state system failed to withstand challenge in early August 1914.

One purpose of this essay is to overcome some of the deficiencies of extant ‘in-between’ intentionality accounts of the war’s outbreak, and to do so without taking the sinister view that Germany was simply an evil empire seeking expansion. That explanation, normally associated with the German historian Fritz Fischer (1967, 1975), is theoretically uncomplicated and logically straightforward. It suffers, however, from an almost exclusive focus on German policies and decisions. Today, most historians and political scientists regard Fischer’s argument as incomplete at best, misleading at worst (Langdon, 1991; Mombauer, 2002).

It is not my intention here to revisit the debate that the so-called Fischer thesis set off in the 1960s. Rather, my goal is more modest: I hope to demonstrate, formally, using an incomplete information game model that Trachtenberg’s (1991: 57) contention – that ‘one does not have to take a particularly dark view of German intentions’ to explain the onset of war in 1914 (and ‘question the “inadvertent war” theory’) – is logically correct, and to do this in a theoretically rigorous way.¹ Along the way I also hope to answer a number of related questions about the July crisis.²

Background: Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated in Sarajevo on 28 June, 1914. By the end of the first week of July, German leaders had issued the so-called ‘blank check’, pledging unconditional support of Austria’s reactive decision to deal harshly with Serbia, in effect agreeing to a coordinated strategy that ceded control of some critical aspects of German foreign policy to decision makers in Vienna.

Even with Germany’s backing, though, Austria was slow to move. It was not until 23 July that Vienna delivered its humiliating ultimatum to Belgrade which, according to Farrar (1972: 8), signaled the beginning of the ‘European stage’ of the crisis. The next day the details of the ultimatum were formally conveyed to other European leaders including Russia’s Foreign Minister Serge Sazonov who, after consulting with both the French and British ambassadors, convened a meeting of the Russian Council of Ministers. As Spring (1988: 57) notes, this meeting was ‘the critical point for Russia in the July crisis’. The decisions reached that afternoon established the type of player Russia would be in the days that followed, Sazonov’s inclination toward a hard-line policy was supported by the rest of



the government and, on the following day, ratified by the Tsar. The agreed-upon strategy was multifaceted; it covered a number of contingencies and revealed a clear hierarchy of objectives.

More than anything, the Russians wanted to defuse the crisis before it could further intensify. Accordingly, the Council of Ministers approved Sazonov's proposal to ask Austria for an extension of the ultimatum's deadline and to encourage Serbia to accede to as many of Vienna's terms as possible. Of course, these measures could always fail. In this eventuality, Serbia was also to be urged not to resist an Austrian invasion. Needless to say, this latter suggestion was not well received by the Serbs (Stokes, 1976: 70).

Asymmetric Escalation Game: To understand the dynamic process that eventually, albeit briefly, involved four of the European great powers in a continental conflict, consider now the *Asymmetric Escalation Game* depicted in Figure 1, which is analyzed with incomplete information. This general model was specifically designed by Zagare (1990) to gain insight into intense interstate disputes, such as the one under investigation, that involve at least two distinct levels of conflict, one limited and the other unlimited.³ The empirical fit between this model and the events that led to the European phase of the war is especially close. It is, therefore, a powerful tool for understanding the escalatory process that led, eventually, to the initiation of armed conflict by Germany in early August 1914.

Notice that Austria-Hungary is listed as the first (principal) member of the coalition. This is no accident. For all intents and purposes, the German government played a subordinate role in actual decision making prior to 4 August when it invaded Belgium. And by that time the die had already been cast. As Williamson (1991: 196) notes, 'the steps that pushed Europe toward war were taken in Vienna. The support given by Berlin simply confirmed and assured that the Hapsburg decision to settle accounts would this time be a military solution rather than a diplomatic one'.

Preferences: There are six possible outcomes of the Asymmetric Escalation Game. These outcomes, and the choices that led to them, are indicated both verbally and symbolically on the game tree of Figure 1. Note again that the model admits two distinct conflict outcomes. *Limited Conflict* occurs only when Challenger defects at node 1, Defender responds in kind at node 2, and Challenger chooses not to escalate at node 3a. *All-Out Conflict* occurs whenever both players escalate.

It is also worth pointing out once more that there are two distinct paths to *All-Out Conflict* in the Asymmetric Escalation Game. The first results when Defender escalates immediately at node 2 and Challenger retaliates at node 3b. The second path conforms to a classic escalation spiral:

- Challenger initiates at node
- Defender responds in kind at
- Challenger escalates first at node
- Defender counter-escalates at node 3

Some Caveats: There are a few devils in the details of the preference assumptions that, perhaps, require exorcism. Before proceeding, however, it will be useful to comment briefly on the connection between the six theoretical outcomes of the Asymmetric Escalation Game and the real-world events they are meant to represent.

The outcome with the clearest meaning is the one labeled *Status Quo*, which takes to be the existing European order as of July 1914. As things stood shortly after Sarajevo, neither Austria-Hungary nor Germany placed a high value on this outcome, which provides further justification for the identification of the governments in Vienna and Berlin with the player called 'Challenger'. Specifically, German leaders looked around and saw both a dominating Great Britain and a rising Russia – which was tied closely to France, a long-time rival. For their part, Austria's policy makers feared that their polyglot empire would soon implode if Serbian subversives were not quickly eradicated. Clearly, both Austria-Hungary and Germany were dissatisfied powers as the July crisis unfolded.

Another outcome whose meaning should be clear is *Defender Concedes*. *Defender Concedes* is simply a more generic term for the outcome that Levy (1990/1991) calls 'localized war'. *Defender Concedes*, therefore, is intended to capture the dénouement of a war in the Balkans that pitted Austria-Hungary against 'tiny Serbia' (Geiss, 1967).

Defender Escalates/Wins and *Challenger Escalates/Wins* refer to one-sided victories for Defender and Challenger, respectively, that come about after an escalatory move by one player and capitulation by the other. In the context of the July crisis, Russia (i.e. Defender) would clearly have gained a political and diplomatic advantage had it implemented a full mobilization of its army and forced Austria-Hungary and Germany to back off. Similarly, Austria-Hungary and Germany (i.e. Challenger) would have gained the upper hand, and probably split the Entente, had the partially mobilized Russian army stood down as Belgrade was leveled and Serbia dismembered.

Analysis: With two players, each with at least two moves, and six outcomes, the Asymmetric Escalation Game with incomplete information can have many variants. To gain tractability, I focus on the special case in which Challenger is likely *Hard*, that is, when Challenger's threat to counter-escalate at node 3b is highly credible.

This special-case analysis is easy to justify. First, although this assumption vastly simplifies the analysis of the



Asymmetric Escalation Game, it does so with no serious loss of information. True, the absolute number of perfect Bayesian equilibria is fewer in the special-case analysis, but that is the point.¹⁸ All distinct equilibrium forms of the general case are represented in the special-case analysis. Also, the equilibrium that arise when Challenger is likely to be *Hard* exist under conditions that fully exemplify the existence conditions in the general case. In other words, there is little to be gained theoretically by examining the Asymmetric Escalation Game in the absence of this simplification. The more important justification, however, is empirical. The assumption that Challenger is likely *Hard* is entirely consistent with the facts on the ground at the end of July 1914. According to Berghahn (1993: 197), the ‘hard liners’ were in control in Germany. As the crisis unfolded, both the Russians and French took it for granted that (a) Austria–Hungary had Germany’s backing and (b) a full Russian mobilization implied a general European war. Neither would be reasonable inferences if Challenger (i.e. Austria–Hungary and Germany) was seen as likely *Soft*.

No-Response Equilibrium: The first plausible equilibrium form of the Asymmetric Escalation Game with incomplete information is the *No-Response Equilibrium*. Under the *No-Response Equilibrium*, Challenger always initiates and Defender always capitulates – as the Russians did in 1909 at the conclusion of the Bosnian crisis. Defender gives in because Challenger is very likely always *Hard* and therefore prone to escalate first at node 3a or to counter-escalate at node 3b. To support its choice at node 3a, however, Challenger must believe that a Defender who unexpectedly *responds in kind* at node 2 is more likely to be of type HS than of type HH. This is a plausible belief since, *ceteris paribus*, type HH Defenders are more likely to *escalate* than type HS Defenders.

The Spiral Family: The Spiral family contains four perfect Bayesian equilibria. Two are deterrence equilibria; there is also one member of the *Constrained Limited-Response Equilibrium* (or CLRE) group, and one representative of the *Escalatory Limited-Response Equilibrium* (or ELRE) group. The members of this set are mutually exclusive. As noted earlier, at most one member of the Spiral Family may exist at any one time in the Asymmetric Escalation Game with incomplete information.

The two closely related deterrence equilibria in the Spiral Family (Det_2 and Det_3) are called the *Limited-Response Deterrence Equilibrium*. Under either equilibrium form, Challenger never initiates and the outcome of the game is always *Status Quo*. As their name implies, equilibria of this category do not require Defender to escalate first. In fact, the form of deterrence that emerges under either Det_2 or Det_3 rests *entirely* on the more limited threat of responding-in-kind at node 2. This characteristic alone sets the Limited-Response Deterrence Equilibria apart from all Escalatory Deterrence Equilibria. Additionally, since the Limited-Response Deterrence Equilibria are based on plausible beliefs, they are not so easy to dismiss. Indeed, one would expect that, over time, one or the other of these equilibria would come into play in the Asymmetric Escalation Game with incomplete information. Det_2 , however, is much more likely.

The existence of a Limited-Response Deterrence Equilibrium depends solely on Challenger’s beliefs about Defender’s type.

Discussion: Up to this point I have described the perfect Bayesian equilibria of the Asymmetric Escalation Game with incomplete information for the special case when Challenger is likely to be *Hard*. Next I use the equilibrium structure of the game to address a number of questions about the outbreak of war in Europe in early August 1914.

Was War Avoidable? A second important question is whether or not the crisis in Europe was inevitable, whether Austria–Hungary and Germany could have been deterred from instigating a crisis in Europe toward the end of July 1914. This is a difficult question to answer, though, like many others, I shall attempt to do so.

One answer is that, after the blank check was issued, the die had been cast, that the prevailing status quo was no longer sustainable. But to accept this answer one must also hold the view that in the period before Austria–Hungary finally issued its ultimatum, no new information about Russia’s, France’s, and perhaps Great Britain’s attitude could have stayed the Dual Alliance from its appointed rounds. Needless to say, this is a difficult position to sustain.

Assuming, then, that Austro–Hungarian and German perceptions were subject to revision, the answer is clear. The existence of two distinct Limited Response Deterrence equilibria in the Asymmetric Escalation Game attests to the theoretical *possibility* that the crisis could have been averted. Of course, what is theoretically possible is not necessarily likely. Such is the case in the Asymmetric Escalation Game when Challenger is likely *Hard*.

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