

THE ORIGINS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Anticipating total war: the German and American experiences, 1871–1914. By Manfred Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. ix + 506. ISBN 0-521-62294-8. £55.00.

German strategy and the path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the development of attrition, 1870–1916. By Robert T. Foley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xiv + 316. ISBN 0-521-84193-3. £45.00.

Europe's last summer: who started the Great War in 1914? By David Fromkin. New York: Knopf, 2004. Pp. xiii + 368. ISBN 0-375-41156-9. £26.95.

The origins of World War I. Edited by Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. xiii + 552. ISBN 0-521-81735-8. £35.00.

Geheime Diplomatie und öffentliche Meinung: Die Parlamente in Frankreich, Deutschland und Grossbritannien und die erste Marokkokrise, 1904–1906. By Martin Mayer. Düsseldorf: Droste, 2002. Pp. 382. ISBN 3-7700-5242-0. £44.80.

Helmuth von Moltke and the origins of the First World War. By Annika Mombauer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xvi + 344. ISBN 0-521-79101-4. £48.00.

The origins of the First World War: controversies and consensus. By Annika Mombauer. London: Pearson Education, 2002. Pp. ix + 256. ISBN 0-582-41872-0. £15.99.

Inventing the Schlieffen plan: German war planning, 1871–1914. By Terence Zuber. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Pp. xi + 340. ISBN 0-19-925016-2. £52.50.

As Richard Hamilton and Holger Herwig remark in the introduction to their edited collection of essays on the origins of the First World War, thousands of books (and countless articles) have been written on the subject, a veritable flood that began with the outbreak of the conflict in 1914 and continues to this day. This enduring interest is understandable: the First World War was, in George Kennan's still apt phrase, the 'great seminal catastrophe' of the twentieth century.¹ Marking the end of the long nineteenth century and the beginning of the short twentieth century, the war amounted to an earthquake whose seismic shocks and after-shocks resonated decades afterwards both inside and outside of the belligerent countries. The Bolshevik Revolution, the growth of fascist and Nazi movements, the accelerated emergence of the United States as a leading great power, the economic depression of the 1930s – these and other developments all have their roots in the tempest of war during 1914–18.² Given the momentous nature of the conflict, it is little wonder that scholars continue to investigate – and to argue about – its origins. At the same time, as

¹ George Kennan, *The decline of Bismarck's European order: Franco-Russian relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton, NJ, 1979), p. 3.

² For a recent examination of the immediate effects of the war, see Zara Steiner, *The lights that failed: European international history, 1919–1933* (Oxford, 2005).

Hamilton and Herwig suggest, the sheer number of existing studies places the onus on scholars themselves to justify their decision to add to this historiographical mountain. This being so, in assessing the need for a new work on the origins of the war, one might usefully ask whether it fulfills one of several functions. Does it provide new information? Does it present a novel approach or perspective? Does it arrive at original conclusions? Does it offer a new synthesis that takes into account recent scholarship?

What are the results when this test is applied to the books under review? On the first question, several of the books do provide new information, particularly on German military planning before 1914. The latter now appears to have been a far more uncertain, and even contested, process than previously thought. On the same subject, Terence Zuber argues provocatively that the Schlieffen Plan never existed – an original conclusion if there ever was one. Regarding the fourth question, David Fromkin not only offers a new synthesis, but indeed professes to have discovered the ‘key’ to the mystery of the war’s origins that has confused scholars for so long. But it is in respect to the second question, that concerning a novel approach or perspective, that perhaps the most intriguing claims are made. In explaining the origins of the war several of the books under review share a tendency to focus on the short-term calculations of small groups of political and military decision-makers to the neglect of longer-term political, social, economic, and other factors. Although not without its merits, this tendency arguably posits a false dichotomy between agent and contingency on the one hand and structure and determinism on the other. In so doing, it runs the risk of unduly limiting our understanding of the origins of the war.

I

Annika Mombauer’s *The origins of the First World War* is a good place to start a review essay since it promises to provide a guide through the ‘maze of interpretations’ (p. 1) surrounding the subject. Designed as a text primarily for undergraduate students, the book examines the successive phases of historical writing on the origins of the war, beginning in the immediate aftermath of the conflict and ending with what Mombauer terms the ‘current consensus’ (p. 224). Along the way, she recounts the well-orchestrated campaign of the German foreign ministry during the 1920s to exculpate Germany of responsibility for the war, the emergence during the 1930s of a ‘comfortable consensus’ that responsibility was shared by all belligerents, the fierce controversy kicked off in the 1960s by Fritz Fischer’s *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, and the subsequent and largely unsuccessful efforts of conservative German historians to portray German policy before 1914 and during the July crisis in particular as ‘essentially defensive’ (p. 178). Throughout, Mombauer stresses that the evolving historical debate did not occur in a vacuum, but rather reflected the changing political situation both inside and outside of the former belligerent countries. Her ultimate argument is a warning: that the writing of history is subject to manipulation by professional historians and governments ‘if the findings of history are too uncomfortable or reflect too badly on the present’ (p. 223). Lest this warning induce pessimism concerning the possibility of an objective account of the origins of the war, Mombauer offers guarded optimism, asserting that the subject is no longer politically loaded but now rests ‘wholly in the realm of history’ (p. 222). Freed from the prison of presentist concerns, recent studies promise to be more objective – and thus presumably more enduring. Although too good an historian to believe that historical debate will ever come to an end, Mombauer does suggest that the current consensus will be difficult to overturn.

What, then, is this consensus? As Mombauer writes, the ‘current consensus among most historians attributes the largest share of the responsibility to the decisions made by German leaders in 1914’ (p. 2). Two aspects of this consensus are noteworthy. The first one, which reflects Mombauer’s own research interests, is the prominent role assigned to Germany – a prominence that risks producing a circular effect: Germany’s greater responsibility for the war justifies a focus on German policy which, in turn, underscores Germany’s leading role. While Mombauer is aware of this risk, remarking that the policies of other governments must also be examined in order to arrive at ‘a fair judgement’ (p. 224), her book concentrates disproportionately on Germany and German policy, neglecting scholarly work and debates on the role of other countries, notably France.³ The second and related aspect of the current consensus is the focus on political and military decision-makers in 1914. Ironically, this focus grew out of the Fischer controversy; but whereas Fischer devoted much attention to the social, political, and economic context in which German decision-makers operated, arguing for example that Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg’s personality traits were of secondary importance since any German chancellor would have been compelled to act as he did, more recent scholarship, as Mombauer relates, downplays such contextual factors in favour of examining the calculations of individual leaders. One result, evident in Mombauer’s book, is the tendency to view the question of the war’s origins through the lens of personal responsibility and guilt. While the decisions of individuals are an important aspect of any analysis, by itself this lens can blind historians to other factors. For example, Mombauer, in discussing Sir Edward Grey’s ambivalence during the July crisis regarding Britain’s policy in the event of a continental war, contends that this ambivalence cannot be considered as a cause of the conflict since the foreign secretary sought to prevent rather than precipitate hostilities. But surely a decision-maker’s actions can have unintended consequences, which in turn can contribute to producing unwanted results? One should be wary, in other words, of equating intentions with causes. More generally, as we shall see, a good deal is potentially lost if the origins of the First World War are understood solely in terms of the decisions of a handful of national leaders in July 1914.

Reflecting the recent consensus she identifies, Mombauer has also written a study of Helmuth von Moltke (the younger), the chief of the German general staff from 1906 to 1914, and his role in the origins of the war. Mombauer portrays Moltke not as weak and ineffective, not as someone whose hesitant nature prompted him to alter the Schlieffen plan with disastrous consequences, but as a determined leader who decisively influenced German policy during the July crisis. The book, however, is not an exercise in rehabilitation. To be sure, Mombauer rejects the arguments of Schlieffen’s post-war supporters that the Schlieffen plan should have been left intact, pointing out that it was Moltke’s right and duty to adapt the original plan to the changing international situation after 1905–6. But whatever his rights and duties, Mombauer assigns Moltke, and German military leaders in general, a significant part of the responsibility for the outbreak of war. As she writes: ‘The evidence now available confirms without a doubt that Moltke and his colleagues

³ For example, Mombauer’s book omits two important studies of France: Jean-Jacques Becker, *1914, comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre* (Paris, 1977), an investigation of French public opinion on the eve of war; and George-Henri Soutou, *L’or et le sang: les buts de guerre économique de la Première Guerre Mondiale* (Paris, 1989). Although Soutou’s book does not directly address the origins of the war, it does challenge Fischer’s argument regarding the importance of Mitteleuropa in Germany’s economic war aims.

wanted war and had sufficient influence over their political colleagues to achieve their aim' (p. 285). Moltke, convinced that a European war was inevitable and that Germany and its ally, Austria-Hungary, were growing weaker relative to Russia, France (and Britain), concluded that the sooner a conflict came the better – a view he expressed with mounting insistence from 1912. Following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Moltke seized upon the resulting crisis to bring about a preventive European war before it was too late for Germany. Before then, Mombauer speculates, Moltke and the general staff had striven to shape military planning with two goals in mind: to preclude unwanted intervention from political leaders and from the kaiser in particular during a crisis; and to ensure that any local conflict would become a general European war. These goals help to explain the decision to seize Liège, the pivot of the vital Belgian and Dutch rail networks, soon after the declaration of military mobilization, a step which would effectively slam the door on further diplomacy and eliminate the line between mobilization and war. Similarly, in 1913 Moltke scrapped the eastern deployment plan, leaving Germany with the sole option of waging a two front war against France and Russia – of waging, in short, a general European war. For Mombauer, the failure of the general staff to prepare alternatives to the 'all-out war scenario' (p. 105) is proof that Moltke embraced such a war.

Mombauer insists that a principal weakness of German war planning before 1914 was its divorce from larger political considerations. The general staff, she comments, operated in a 'military vacuum' (p. 80). This statement is no doubt true if one means the lack of co-ordination between diplomacy and military planning, even though, as Mombauer admits, Germany's political leaders were better informed about plans to invade France through Belgium than they let on after the war. But it is less true if one means that military planners became simple 'military specialists' who ignored 'more general, non military knowledge' (p. 80). Elsewhere in her study of Moltke, Mombauer describes the latter's racism and social Darwinism, which fuelled his fatalism regarding a great power clash in Europe. Equally important, Moltke shared these views not only with his military colleagues, but also with Germany's political leaders, most notably Bethmann Hollweg. Accordingly, it becomes difficult to separate political from strictly military considerations in German war planning. The Schlieffen plan, with its premise of a general European war and its prescription of colossal battles of annihilation, was not merely a response to the strategic problem of a two front war; it also reflected views about the role and nature of armed conflict among nations, views that were popular among German decision-makers at the time. This, in turn, points to some possible limits in Mombauer's use of such concepts as personal guilt and responsibility. In her analysis of the chief of the German general staff, there is a tension between Moltke as an individual decision-maker and Moltke as an avatar of larger forces and developments. If Moltke's fatalism about an upcoming war was widely shared among German leaders, the exercise of assigning blame to particular individuals risks exaggerating their importance. This does not mean that one should ignore individual factors such as the role of Moltke's personality or his relationship with other decision makers. But it does raise the question of whether personal responsibility is the best perspective to adopt in attempting to understand how the war came about.

If Mombauer emphasizes military planning in her book on Moltke, in *Inventing the Schlieffen plan* Terence Zuber concentrates exclusively on this aspect of German policy. In so doing, Zuber lays bare the advantages and disadvantages of such a focus for explaining the origins of the war. The book, an elaboration of an earlier article, boldly claims that the

Schlieffen plan never existed.⁴ For Zuber, Schlieffen's famous 1905 memorandum was not a war plan but an 'isolated aberration' (p. 191) designed primarily to pressure the government to increase the army's size. The argument rests on two pillars. The first one is the 'massive inconsistencies' (p. 213) in the memorandum itself, most notably the use of eight non-existent army corps and the absence of any troop deployment in the East to defend against a Russian advance. As Zuber tartly observes: 'there is no room in a real war plan for imaginary units and other flights of the imagination' (p. 218). Based on a close reading of surviving planning documents (war games, staff rides, strategic exercises) between 1871 and 1914, the second pillar of Zuber's argument is the demonstration that German military planning before and after Schlieffen differed fundamentally from the latter's purported plan.⁵ Rather than a massive manoeuvre through Belgium and into France at the beginning of a war, aimed at enveloping the French armies and inflicting a rapid and decisive defeat on them, Schlieffen and his successors, relying on rail mobility, fortresses, and the German army's superior training and leadership, intended to fight a series of counter-offensive battles in France (and Russia) close to the Franco-German frontier. In Zuber's telling, the left wing assumes pride of place over the more familiar right wing; and the invasion of Belgium becomes a pre-emptive move against France more than the key to victory. The goal of German planners was not the early and complete annihilation of the French armies, which was judged beyond Germany's military capabilities, but victories in the opening battles after which it was impossible to plan in advance. What is now known as the Schlieffen plan, Zuber maintains, was a post-war invention of German staff officers desperate to explain the failure to win the war in 1914 and to vindicate Schlieffen as a military genius. For the latter's post-war defenders, the German army would not have been stopped at the Marne if only Moltke had implemented his predecessor's brilliant plan.

Zuber, in fact, stakes out two revisionist claims, one of which is better served than the other by his exclusive focus on military planning. The contention that the Schlieffen plan never existed has been vigorously contested by other scholars, which is not surprising given that German staff officers in 1914 believed themselves to be implementing Schlieffen's precepts as outlined in 1905, and were despondent when the right-wing's advance was halted.⁶ That being said, Zuber, through his meticulous analysis of the documentary evidence, has convincingly shown that German military planning was more open-ended than is often allowed. Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum is probably best viewed as a strategic guide, subject to revision and even rejection, and not as an operational plan. Even in 1914,

⁴ Terence Zuber, 'The Schlieffen plan reconsidered', *War in History*, 6 (1999), pp. 262–305.

⁵ Zuber has helpfully published some of these documents in his *German war planning, 1891–1914: sources and interpretations* (Woodbridge, 2004).

⁶ For the debate, see Terence M. Holmes, 'The reluctant march on Paris: a reply to Terence Zuber's "The Schlieffen plan reconsidered"', *War in History*, 8 (2001), pp. 208–32; Terence Zuber, 'Terence Holmes reinvents the Schlieffen plan', *War in History*, 8 (2001), pp. 468–76; Terence M. Holmes, 'The real thing: a reply to Terence Zuber's "Terence Holmes reinvents the Schlieffen plan"', *War in History*, 9 (2002), pp. 111–20; Terence Zuber, 'Terence Holmes reinvents the Schlieffen plan – again', *War in History*, 10 (2003), pp. 92–101; Terence M. Holmes, 'Asking Schlieffen: a further reply to Terence Zuber', *War in History*, 10 (2003), pp. 464–79; Robert T. Foley, 'The origins of the Schlieffen plan', *War in History*, 10 (2003), pp. 222–32. For a recent, thorough, and convincing critique of Zuber's revisionist claims, see Robert T. Foley, 'Debate: the Schlieffen plan', *War in History*, 13 (2006), pp. 91–115. For a recent work that incorporates some of Zuber's findings without fully endorsing them, see Hew Strachan, *The First World War, 1: To arms* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 163–80.

Germany's plan was not fixed in stone but remained flexible with much depending on the actions of the French and Russians. More generally, Zuber is right to underscore the point that German military planners before 1914 possessed no magic solution to the basic strategic dilemma of winning a two-front war against superior foes. By contrast, Zuber's exclusive focus on military planning works less well for his second revisionist claim: that Imperial Germany did not plan an offensive war. Indeed, he goes further, asserting that the French and Russians 'had the offensive war plan, not the Germans' (p. 265). There are at least two problems with this claim. First, it relies on a caricature of French and Russian war planning – an approach, ironically, that Zuber denounces in the German case. Regarding French planning, for example, Robert Doughty has recently shown that Joffre's Plan XVII was more supple and reactive than once thought.⁷ Second, and more importantly, it confuses operational and strategic military planning with political intent. Whether or not Germany's leaders in July 1914 decided to risk – or to provoke – a European war is not a question that military planning documents alone can answer. To make a convincing case, Zuber also needs to examine German politics and diplomacy before and during 1914, two elements which are absent from the book. Zuber's insular approach to military planning, moreover, is exacerbated by his treatment of German war planning as a practical, rational enterprise largely divorced from political-ideological considerations. Throughout, Zuber's military planners appear as apolitical professionals, struggling to find responses to Germany's strategic challenges – responses determined by objective factors such as geography, technology, and available resources.⁸ Yet, if German staff officers were certainly highly trained professionals, they were not necessarily apolitical actors – a point evident in Mombauer's study of Moltke. The question then becomes to what extent did the political beliefs of military planners influence war planning?

Robert T. Foley touches on this question in his study of Erich von Falkenhayn, who succeeded Moltke as chief of the German general staff in the early months of the war. If one of Foley's goals is to provide a counterpoint to Holger Afflerbach's more critical portrait of Falkenhayn, he also offers a broader analysis of pre-war German military planning than Zuber.⁹ Casting his gaze beyond the narrow confines of the general staff, Foley examines the ideas of military intellectuals, particularly the historian Hans Delbrück. Here, he detects the 'tentative birth of a new paradigm of warfare' (p. 5), one that differed from the army's. Rather than short, decisive battles leading to the early and crushing defeat of opponents, Delbrück envisaged prolonged wars of attrition waged not between armies but between nations, and whose growing costs precluded any hope of a dictated peace. Wars would be ended by negotiated settlements between exhausted belligerents. Although this paradigm would correspond more accurately than its rival to the reality of war during 1914–18, the German general staff, Foley argues, firmly rejected it beforehand: Schlieffen and Moltke simply refused to accept that Germany could not wage and win a short war. It was only with Falkenhayn's promotion in 1914, following the defeat on the Marne, that the general staff embraced this paradigm and sought to tailor its war planning accordingly. Convinced that the war could not be won by military means alone, Falkenhayn sought to

⁷ Robert A. Doughty, 'French strategy in 1914: Joffre's own', *Journal of military history*, 67 (2003), pp. 427–54.

⁸ An approach also evident in Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen, and Prussian war planning* (New York, 1991).

⁹ Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich, 1994), especially pp. 147–71, which examines Falkenhayn's role during the July crisis.

harness planning to the political goal of achieving a negotiated peace by pursuing a version of what Delbrück termed a 'strategy of attrition' (*Ermattungsstrategie*). The concrete result was Verdun. In threatening the Verdun sector, Falkenhayn aimed to impose on France a 'fatal bleeding' (*Verblutung*): committed to defending Verdun for prestige reasons, the French army would suffer huge losses in repeated attacks against dug-in German troops and artillery. With its army gravely weakened, France would be forced to withdraw from the war, dealing a serious blow to Russia and especially to Britain, who for Falkenhayn was Germany's principal enemy. A negotiated peace on terms favourable to Germany would then be within sight. How a peace along these lines would differ from one imposed by a victorious Germany is an open question. In any event, Falkenhayn's calculations proved flawed, partly because of the gap between strategy on the one hand and operations and tactics on the other. Contrary to the chief of the general staff's hopes, local army commanders often pressed home their attacks on French positions regardless of the cost. Equally important, Verdun served to rally rather than to undermine French domestic support for the war. Growing French resolve, when combined with mounting German losses, called into question a strategy of attrition, leading to Falkenhayn's dismissal in August 1916. His successors, Ludendorff and Hindenburg, would re-commit Germany to a victor's peace achieved through decisive military victories.

Although Foley rejects the contention that the Schlieffen plan never existed, his book, like Zuber's, portrays German military planning before 1914 as a contested and evolving process. But while Zuber focuses on a fairly narrow set of issues (*Westaufmarsch v. Ostaufmarsch*, the ratio between the left and right wings, whether to envelop Paris), Foley widens the scope of enquiry to encompass debates about the very nature of future war. Would a future war be short, characterized by decisive military battles and ending in a victor's peace, or would it be a long, exhausting struggle between nations in which clear-cut victory would prove elusive? As Foley observes, the German general staff opted for the first scenario despite growing evidence that the changing character of warfare, together with the country's limited resources, made it unlikely that Germany could defeat its combined enemies in rapid order. Ignoring this evidence, Schlieffen and Moltke placed their hopes in the Schlieffen plan, whose very purpose was victory in a short war. But if Foley's vision of military planning is broader than Zuber's, both scholars tend to view the efforts of German planners in objective strategic terms independent of political-ideological factors. Foley thus attributes Schlieffen and Moltke's refusal to consider alternatives to a short war to the military's assessment of 'the changing strategic situation' (p. 79). Citing Mombauer's work, he explains that Moltke, convinced by 1914 that Russia would be too powerful to defeat once its military reforms and railway construction programme were completed, had concluded that war was necessary in the immediate future before the military balance shifted even further against Germany. To defeat Russia, moreover, Germany first had to knock out the former's ally, France, before the mobilized Russian army was ready to advance. These calculations, however, better explain Schlieffen and Moltke's commitment to the Schlieffen plan than they do the fixation on a short war. After all, the belief that Germany would be relatively weaker in the future offered no guarantee that it could rapidly defeat its enemies in the present. Earlier in the book, Foley remarks that planners made a virtue of necessity: aware that Germany lacked the resources to win a long war against Russia, France, and (possibly) Britain, they seized on a short war as the only acceptable option (p. 5). Here, unwittingly, Foley alludes to what might be termed the non-military – or even irrational – element in German planning. That German military leaders rejected the

possibility of a short war suggests that they did not calculate their strategic options solely in an objective, professional manner. Political-ideological considerations also intervened. Indeed, as others have shown, assessments of Russia's actual and potential capabilities were shot through with national and racial stereotypes.¹⁰ Interested primarily in Falkenhayn's wartime service, Foley does not elaborate further on this element of pre-war German war planning. But his brief comments do suggest that the subject is one worth exploring further.

Foley and Mombauer both cite Stig Förster's influential 1995 article on the 'myth' of a short war, which questioned the rational basis of German war planning before 1914.¹¹ In recent years, Förster has been engaged in a collaborative enquiry into the meaning of total war from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War, published in five volumes. Covering the period from 1871 to 1914, the second volume, *Anticipating total war*, examines the extent to which Germans and Americans foresaw the experience of 1914–18. The answer, Förster and Roger Chickering affirm in their introduction, is that most American and German observers 'were blind' to 'the manifold forces that were transforming warfare into a protracted, comprehensive, and ruinous ordeal in which civilians were no less essential than soldiers to the outcome, and the very foundations of society were put at risk' (p. 8). Neither nation, accordingly, prepared for total war nor possessed adequate plans for waging it. Interestingly, Förster's own contribution to the book, a restatement of his 1995 article, is slightly at odds with this conclusion, for, as his chapter argues, the German general staff before 1914 feared that a future war might very well be total in nature. Following the Franco-Prussian War, in which the French government obstinately refused to sue for peace despite suffering decisive military defeats, the elder Moltke came to believe that future wars would be lengthy, exhausting struggles between peoples (*Volkskriege*). To win such a war, argued Baron Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, the sometime staff officer and popular military writer, Germany would have to resort to the 'unlimited use of force', which pointed in the direction of total war. The problem, however, was that Germany lacked the strength to prevail against multiple enemies on two fronts. Schlieffen's response was his famous plan – what Förster terms a 'desperate gamble' to avoid the disaster of an unwinnable long war. The plan, he adds, 'made no sense ... it was an old general's dream to prevent a nightmare' (pp. 359, 360). Schlieffen's successor, Moltke (the younger), was more prudent, viewing his modified Schlieffen plan not as a recipe for victory in a short war, which he judged unlikely, but as a means of winning the opening military campaign, thereby giving Germany an initial advantage in a prolonged conflict. Here, incidentally, Förster anticipates elements of Zuber's thesis, thereby attenuating the latter's claims to novelty. In any case, that Moltke did not do more to prepare for a longer war is attributed to the general staff's lack of political influence and imagination. Harder to explain is Moltke's warmongering during (and before) the July crisis, when logic would seem to dictate that he do everything possible to avoid a war which he doubted Germany could win. But Moltke and his military colleagues simply could not admit that they possessed no military solution to Germany's strategic difficulties. In the

¹⁰ For assessments of Russia, see David G. Herrmann, *The arming of Europe and the making of the First World War* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), pp. 130–6. Also see Oliver Lothar Griffin, 'The German army looks east: perceptions of Russia in German military leadership, 1871–1914' (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard, 1998), especially chs. 4 and 5.

¹¹ Stig Förster, 'Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871–1914. Metakritik eines Mythos', *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 54 (1995), pp. 61–98.

end, they preferred to launch a European war, hoping for the best but fearing the worst. The task of researchers, Förster remarks elsewhere, is to explain why Moltke took 'a so obviously irrational decision'.¹²

Förster's chapter on German war planning raises at least two interesting questions regarding the origins of the war. The first is the value of a comparative approach. After all, Germany was hardly alone in being unprepared for the war that developed. In a recent essay, Förster argues that the 'trends [favouring] war-readiness thinking' were sharper in Germany than elsewhere before 1914. At the same time, however, he maintains that the military leadership of all the great powers operated in the 'realm of the absurd' during this period, exhaustively preparing for the opening battles of a war while eschewing any 'coherent overall war planning' (*kohärente Gesamtkriegsplanung*) which would include some serious thinking about how victory was to be achieved.¹³ Clearly, more research is needed to determine whether other general staffs foresaw the possibility of a lengthy, destructive war extending well beyond the opening military campaigns. If military leaders in other countries did have doubts about the 'short war illusion', why did such scepticism not leave a more obvious mark on war planning? Like Foley and to a lesser extent Zuber, Förster maintains that German planners took it for granted that Germany was weaker than France and Russia combined (not to mention Britain), an assessment which, if accurate, suggests that the French and Russians should have been less apprehensive about the prospect of a long war. But did French and Russian military planners share this analysis of relative strength? Did they assess present and future war potential in the same way as their German counterparts? David Herrmann, in his book on the pre-war arms race, draws attention to the subjective element in estimates of military strength, but more work is needed on the relationships in Paris, St Petersburg, London, and elsewhere between assessments of overall national power on the one hand and of the nature of future war on the other.¹⁴ Only then will it be possible to judge whether pre-war German military planning represents a special case, one that is best treated in a primarily German context.

The second question concerns the links between German war planning and larger political and cultural phenomena. To what extent was the general staff affected by the latter? Elsewhere, Förster has written about social Darwinism, for example, as an important factor in the growing fatalism of German staff officers regarding the inevitability of war.¹⁵ Similarly, in a recently published doctoral thesis, Thomas Lindemann argues that a race-centred (*völkisch*) social Darwinism not only infused German leaders in 1914, colouring their responses to the July crisis, but was also widely diffused within Wilhelminian society.¹⁶ In a slightly different vein, several of the chapters in *Anticipating total war* discuss militarist influences in pre-war Germany, which taken together give the impression that militarism was rampant in various walks of life. Derek S. Linton, for example, describes

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 95. Recently, Mark Hewitson has answered Förster's call for more research by denying that there is anything to explain: German military leaders before 1914, he insists, remained extremely confident of a quick and decisive victory in any future European war. Unfortunately, however, Hewitson largely fails to address Förster's evidence. See Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the causes of the First World War* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 113–37.

¹³ Stig Förster, 'Im Reich des Absurden: Die Ursachen des Ersten Weltkrieges', in Bernd Wegner, ed., *Wie Kriege entstehen: Zum historischen Hintergrund von Staatenkonflikten* (Paderborn, 2000), pp. 250–1.

¹⁴ Herrmann, *The arming of Europe and the making of the First World War*. Also see David Stevenson, *Armaments and the coming of war: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford, 1996), *passim*.

¹⁵ Förster, 'Im Reich des Absurden', pp. 218–38.

¹⁶ Thomas Lindemann, *Les doctrines darwiniennes et la Guerre de 1914* (Paris, 2001).

the growing militarization of German youth, which reached its apogee with the Young Germany Association (*Jungdeutschlandbund*). Initially aimed at immunizing German youth against the dangers of socialism and the degenerative effects of modern life more generally, these associations, in emphasizing the strengthening of body and character through military-style drill among other activities, were in effect helping to train future soldiers. In his contribution on German veteran and reservists' associations, Thomas Rohkrämer shows how the latter promoted virtues – obedience to hierarchy, worship of the state, glorification of the army – which, he adds, became 'an important prerequisite for a total-war effort' (p. 199). A significant source of the increasing militarism of these associations, Rohkrämer explains, was a generational conflict that pitted veterans of Germany's wars of unification against younger members (reservists) who had no immediate war experience, who resented the hero status of their elders, and who were eager to prove themselves on the battlefield. The pre-war militarization of German society is also apparent in Jean H. Quataert's study of women's philanthropic work, which not only helped to reinforce unequal gender and other power structures, but was itself often justified in peacetime by reference to its usefulness in a future war. To be sure, not everyone in Germany was swept along by the rising tide of militarism. As Gerald Feldman argues in his chapter on Hugo Stinnes, German industrialists and bankers, fearing the social and economic consequences of a war, especially a lengthy one, blanched at the prospect of a European conflict and certainly did nothing to prepare for the possibility. Industrialists and bankers, however, appear to have been the exception. Nevertheless, if militarism can be said to have been particularly prevalent in Germany before 1914, there remains the question of its influence on German war planning. Irmgard Steinisch, in her chapter on militarism and imperialism in Germany and the United States, remarks that historians have had difficulty in describing the relationship between the cultural and the political realms in the *Kaiserreich*, with the result that no simple answers exist to the question of what made 'the risk of war such an attractive policy option [for Moltke and others] in the summer of 1914' (p. 36).

Taken together, the chapters in *Anticipating total war* by Steinisch, Förster, and others strongly suggest that the larger political-cultural context of German war planning is a potentially fruitful area of research. The question is how best to approach the subject. One possibility, evident in the work of Förster and even more so in that of Mombauer and Foley, is to focus on individuals in order to show how their beliefs influenced planning decisions. In her study of Moltke, Mombauer argues that the latter's racist, social Darwinist convictions not only contributed to the conviction that an existential war with Russia was inevitable, but also made it easier for him to dismiss the dangers involved in such a conflict (pp. 153, 176). But while Mombauer and Foley demonstrate the value of a biographical approach, this does have its limits, particularly regarding the extent to which a particular individual was representative. In the case of Moltke, at times Mombauer suggests that he was by no means alone in his views, at least among German staff officers, while at other times she stresses the differences between Moltke and others, most notably Falkenhayn. Distinguishing someone's unique contribution from the role of contextual factors is admittedly difficult, but a biographical approach arguably complicates the task due to the understandable tendency to privilege the individual. Another possible approach is to explore the particular culture of military institutions. Recently, Isabel Hull has argued that the Imperial German army before 1914 developed extremist attitudes towards the use of violence in war. The product not of ideological influences but of 'institutional routines and organizational dynamics', the army's 'institutional extremism' increasingly escaped all

political or other constraints – as would become apparent in Germany's colonial wars. For Hull, the Schlieffen plan, characterized among other things by its dismissal of political considerations, its risk-taking, its offensive bent, and its goal of annihilating enemy armies, amounted to 'a codification and intensification of Germany's military culture'.¹⁷ While Hull makes a strong case for the importance of internal institutional dynamics, her focus on military culture assumes a divide between the German army and German society. From this perspective, Moltke and his general staff colleagues appear to have embodied the values and practices of German military officers rather than those of Germans writ large.

There are, however, other possible approaches to the subject of the political-cultural context of German war planning – approaches which do not treat the military as a world apart. One such approach is to concentrate not on planners so much as on their war plans, and to read the latter as cultural documents (or artefacts). As Paul Kennedy has written in this regard:

Any proper inquiry into the war planning of the Great Powers in that [pre-1914] period must in the end concentrate not so much upon the military technicalities as upon the political and ideological assumptions of which they were an expression. Only there can one discover the real meaning behind these carefully prepared, minutely timetabled and inflexibly conceived plans which took Europe over the brink of war in the summer of 1914.¹⁸

In an example of the application of such an approach, Modris Eksteins alleges that military planning reflected a more general longing in pre-war Germany to plunge into the future, to escape the mundane, materialist, and meek world of the present. The Schlieffen plan, he contends, 'was a further fateful expression of the dominance of fantasy and the preoccupation with the Faustian moment in German thought'.¹⁹ Another example is Daniel Pick's *War machine* (1993), in which he identifies two competing images of war in European culture before (and after) 1914: one was of war as a precise, controllable, limited, and purposeful enterprise; the other was of war as a surging, unrestrainable, and nightmarish affair of escalating destruction.²⁰ Although Pick does not discuss particular war plans, German or other, no wild leap of the imagination is needed to recognize that what contemporary German staff officers knew as the Schlieffen plan contained elements of both images, even if one accepts parts of Zuber's (and Förster's) revisionist portrait of pre-1914 German war planning. In its dependence on exact timetables, its meticulous step-by-step charting of unfolding events, and its resolve to leave nothing to chance, the Schlieffen plan reflected the belief that modern war could be tamed; at the same, in its blurring of the line between mobilization and war, in its rejection of all possibilities aside from a two front war, and in its total disregard for neutral rights, the plan all but guaranteed a general European war – a war that Moltke among others feared might prove unmanageable. For someone of Pick's psychoanalytic bent, the tension between these two images of war appears to be the product of a more fundamental conflict in modern society between the quest for order, stability, and rationality ('civilization') on the one hand and collective desires, fantasies, and drives on the other.

¹⁷ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute destruction: military culture and the practices of war in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2005), pp. 1–2, 160, 165–75.

¹⁸ 'Editor's introduction', in Paul M. Kennedy, ed., *The war plans of the great powers, 1880–1914* (London, 1979), p. 19. Also see the chapter by Jonathan Steinberg, 'A German plan for the invasion of Holland and Belgium, 1897', in *ibid.*, pp. 155–70.

¹⁹ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of spring: the Great War and the birth of the modern age* (Toronto, 1989), pp. 89, 92.

²⁰ Daniel Pick, *War machine: the rationalisation of slaughter in the modern age* (New Haven, CT, 1993).

To be sure, the examples cited above are not without their problems. Eksteins's invocation of Faustian moments is extremely vague, and almost any event or phenomenon could be placed, poked, or prodded into this capacious category. One also detects in Eksteins and Pick a tendency to conceive of culture, whether German or European, either as a whole or as something divided into readily identifiable parts, be they images or something else. The reality, however, was arguably much messier. In a recent study, Jeffrey Verhey rejects the notion that a common 'spirit of 1914' existed in Germany. Not only did reactions to the outbreak of war vary depending on such things as class, age, and locality, but one individual could experience the moment in multiple ways. 'Germans', Verhey writes of 1914, 'felt pride, enthusiasm, panic, disgust, curiosity, exuberance, confidence, anger, bluff, fear, laughter, and desperation. All these emotions may have been felt by the same person.'²¹ Yet if one needs to be wary of generalizations concerning the 'mood' of 1914, this is no reason to ignore political-cultural factors altogether. To return to Pick's book, the parallels between the treatment of war's place in pre-1914 European culture and the Schlieffen plan are intriguing. If the plan did embody elements of two pervasive and opposing images of war, then German military planning before 1914 cannot be viewed merely as a response to Germany's strategic challenges. And if, as Förster contends, the Schlieffen plan was a 'desperate gamble' on the part of German planners, its roots perhaps lay partly in the absence of a single image of war – an absence which rendered a coherent war plan difficult if not impossible.

II

As is clear from the previous section, a good deal of the recent scholarship on the origins of the First World War focuses on Germany – a focus that testifies to the enduring influence of Fritz Fischer's work. The next three books under review, however, adopt a more global and even comparative approach, examining the decisions and policies of other countries and not just those of Germany. Along with offering a broader perspective, all three books address the question, raised in connection with the scholarship on German war planning, of the proper balance to strike between agent and structure, between contingency and determinism. Interestingly, each book provides a different answer.

Edited by Richard Hamilton and Holger Herwig, *The origins of World War I* is a collection of essays that examine the decision for war in different countries. The book is partly designed for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, an aim underscored by its recent re-issuing in abridged format and without footnotes.²² But Hamilton and Herwig were not simply interested in producing a classroom tool, for the book also makes a strong historiographical statement, which at times resembles a manifesto. The two editors clearly lay out their approach in the introduction: to examine the calculations of the small group of political and military leaders in each country who were responsible for deciding between peace and war in 1914. In the case of the great powers in particular, the decision for war during the July crisis is presented as a clear-headed and deliberate one, reflecting a common resolve to preserve and enhance national power – what is called the 'strategic argument' (p. 41). In focusing on decision-makers, Hamilton and Herwig seek to highlight the importance of the short term, of contingency, and of alternative scenarios. As they

²¹ Jeffrey Verhey, *The spirit of 1914: militarism, myths, and mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 113.

²² Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds., *Decisions for war, 1914–1917* (Cambridge, 2004).

write: 'A decision for war made by individuals, by a small coterie, means that contingency is very likely. Misinformation, weak nerves, ego strength, misjudgement of intentions, misjudgement of consequences, and difficulties in timing are inherent in the process. Put differently, diverse choices are easy to imagine' (p. 15). Hamilton and Herwig contrast this approach with one that dismisses the role of the individual and that privileges instead "'big" events, processes, or structures' such as nationalism, imperialism, militarism, and alliance systems. Insisting that this latter approach dominates the university teaching of the origins of the war, they go on to indict the historical community more generally for its bias against individuals as causal actors and for its 'persistent preference for the "big" thesis' (pp. 11, 35).

The Origins of World War I possesses many strengths. The most obvious one is the number and variety of its case studies, which include not only the usual cast of European powers (France, Britain, Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary), but also the lesser known powers (Italy and the Ottoman Empire) as well as the non-European powers (Japan and the United States), not to mention the often neglected smaller European countries (Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece). Another strength is the book's overall coherence, something that is frequently lacking in collected volumes: generally speaking, all the contributors adhere to Hamilton and Herwig's decision-making approach, which allows for interesting comparisons across cases. Moreover, written by leading scholars on the subject, many of the contributions are excellent. Graydon A. Tunstall Jr's chapter on Austria-Hungary, for example, skilfully summarizes the precise role and political views of each of the Empire's leaders. In his chapter on Serbia, Richard C. Hall emphasizes the influence of past decisions in the deliberations of Serbian leaders, particularly the fact that during the Balkan Wars the government had ceded three times to ultimata from Vienna; in this context, a 'humiliating sacrifice of national sovereignty' of the kind entailed by the Austrian demand in July 1914 to oversee Serbia's investigation into the archduke's assassination was politically impossible (p. 110). A final example is Herwig's contribution on Germany in which he rejects Fischer's claim that the July crisis amounted to a bid for world power, portraying German leaders instead as 'beset by doubts, petty bickering, confusion, and lack of vision' (p. 183). Still another of the book's strengths is Hamilton and Herwig's warning concerning the use of big events or causes to explain the origins of the war. All too often, social Darwinism, militarism, and other 'isms' are invoked as significant factors, while issues of measurement – of prevalence, intensity, and influence – are neglected. More attention, they convincingly argue, must be paid to assessing (or weighing) the "causal impact" of such factors. 'A listing of factors that occurred prior in time is easy'; Hamilton and Herwig rightly remark, 'establishing their causal significance is much more difficult' (p. 41).

Some of the book's strengths, however, can also be viewed as weaknesses. While a common focus on decision-makers during the July crisis lends overall coherence to the project, it arguably comes at the price of unduly circumscribing the proposed subject. Rather than a book on the origins of the First World War, it becomes one on the origins of the immediate decisions to go to war in 1914, which is not necessarily the same thing. Indeed, Hamilton and Herwig's approach is somewhat circular: the importance of short-term calculations by small groups of decision-makers is demonstrated by examining the short-term calculations of small groups of decision-makers. In excluding big causes from their analysis, such an approach makes it impossible to assess the relative weight of different factors.

Another problem concerns the question of what constitutes convincing evidence. Although Hamilton and Herwig's call for more rigour in spelling out the 'causal significance' of big causes arouses sympathy, at times their admonishments amount to a quest for the impossible. The standards of evidence they invoke not only vary, but also can be too demanding. Reflecting perhaps Hamilton's social science training, the two editors insist on the need for precision, which they often define in quantitative terms. Speaking of social Darwinism, nationalism, and imperialism, they insist that one must be careful to measure the prevalence and intensity of such forces among the public. But, as Hamilton and Holger admit, this is no easy task in the absence of adequate data such as public opinion surveys. One possible solution is to examine the role of pressure groups, which often sought to mobilize popular support behind nationalist, imperialist, and other programmes. But the two editors are sceptical about this possibility, remarking that for every member of such groups there were a hundred (if not more) non-members. While no doubt true, this objection ignores the disproportionate political influence that well-organized minority groups can sometimes exert – a dynamic political scientists have investigated under the label of collective action problems. At other times, Hamilton and Herwig demand direct proof of the influence of big causes on the decisions for war in 1914, whether it be evidence of the physical presence of bankers, industrialists, press lords, etc., among decision-makers; evidence that decision-makers consulted such people; or evidence that decision-makers in their deliberations explicitly referred to forces such as nationalism or imperialism. Absent such evidence, they imply, no causal role can be assigned to big causes in the origins of the war.

While Hamilton and Herwig's evidential tests are worth keeping in mind when examining decision-making during the July crisis, the absence of the kind of evidence they demand does not necessarily demonstrate the irrelevance of big causes. Many years ago, James Joll urged scholars to be sensitive to the 'unspoken assumptions' of decision-makers, the traces of which could not always be found in the written record. Decision-makers, Joll speculated, were especially liable to fall back on 'instinctive reactions, traditions and modes of behaviour' in crisis situations, when time was pressing and incoming information partial at best. By way of example, he pointed to Grey's 'schoolboy sense of honour', which the British foreign secretary applied to the messy world of international politics, and to the social Darwinist notions regarding the value of war prevalent among German political and military leaders. While aware of the difficulties in linking 'the general ideological background of the time' to the 'particular actions' that resulted in war in 1914, Joll suggested that one might begin to do so by examining such subjects as the education of decision-makers or the nature of middlebrow culture at the time.²³ Interestingly, several of the contributions to Hamilton and Herwig's collection make some effort to link the general with the particular, which suggests other possibilities. Mention has already been made of Hall's chapter on Serbia which discusses the resolve of Serbian leaders not to be humiliated once again by Vienna – a resolve that highlights the role of values such as honour and reputation. An even more striking example is Frederick Dickinson's chapter on Japan in which Foreign Minister Kato Takaaki's decision to enter the war is placed in the larger context of political struggles over the future course of Japanese domestic and foreign policies. Ironically, Kato's motives stemmed from his hope that Japan's participation on

²³ James Joll, '1914: the unspoken assumptions', reprinted in H. W. Koch, ed., *The origins of the First World War: great power rivalry and war aims* (London, 1972), pp. 309, 313, 314, 321, 321–5.

the Entente's side would work to block his colleagues' more expansionist ambitions in Asia, a hope rooted in his admiration of Britain and its political institutions. In Dickinson's telling, the decision for war cannot be separated from the realm of domestic politics, which itself was a battleground for very real, if unspoken, competing interests and ideological visions of Japan.

Whether one talks, as does Joll, in terms of the general and the particular or, as do Hamilton and Herwig, in terms of immediate, contingent factors and longer-term, more determinist ones, the relationship between the two is far from straightforward. Hamilton and Herwig tend to view the relationship as mutually exclusive, with the truth to be found on one side alone. Thus, in his chapter on Germany, Herwig writes that '[i]t does an injustice to the "men of 1914" to suggest that they were all merely agents ... of some grand, impersonal design' (p. 451). But this is a false dichotomy. It is true that decision-makers were not agents or puppets; the decisions for war in 1914 were not pre-determined. As Avner Offer has noted, '[w]ar must be caused by human agency ... someone had to pull the trigger'.²⁴ But this does not mean that decision-makers were exemplars of the untrammelled exercise of free will. Perhaps the best way to approach the subject is through the perspective of choice. Decision-makers doubtlessly had choices in 1914. As Hamilton observes, Tsar Nicholas II could have refused to sign the order for mobilization on 31 July (p. 470). Yet at least equally pertinent is the question of why he chose to sign the order. The answer lies partly with the tsar himself, his personality and world view, and partly with what might be termed his environment, the intricate nexus of political, social, economic, cultural, and other factors interacting with one another over time and which, while unique to each individual, overlaps to varying degrees with the environments of others. As with any individual, the tsar could not fully grasp the world around him in all its complexity, which meant that he was capable not only of influencing his environment, but also of being influenced by it. In terms of choices, the tsar's environment favoured some possibilities but not others, opened some doors while closing others. It is impossible to say whether someone else might have refused to sign the mobilization order, but how Nicholas II understood the choices before him in 1914, how he perceived his freedom of action, cannot be discerned merely by examining the tsar and his advisers. More generally, to explain the origins of the First World War scholars must cast their nets as wide as possible to encompass not only the immediate calculations of decision-makers, but also the environments in which they operated.

The need to look beyond decision-makers and their decisions during July 1914 is illustrated by Martin Mayer's comparative study of the first Moroccan crisis, *Geheime Diplomatie und öffentliche Meinung*. Mayer's principal interest is in the relationship between the government, parliament, and the press in regards to foreign policy in Britain, France, and Germany; his principal argument is that the crisis significantly altered this relationship in all three countries, effectively ending the era of secret diplomacy. Before 1905, the three governments enjoyed something close to a free hand in foreign policy. Ironically, given Germany's more authoritarian regime, its leaders possessed somewhat less independence than their French or British counterparts, but the differences were marginal. Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow and his advisers were thus able to prepare in secret the kaiser's landing in Tangier in March 1905, which triggered the crisis. As for the press, which was

²⁴ Avner Offer, 'Going to war in 1914: a matter of honor', *Politics and Society*, 23 (1995), p. 213. See also the comments in David Stevenson, *The outbreak of the First World War: 1914 in perspective* (Basingstoke, 1997), p. 53.

often the sole source of information on foreign affairs for parliamentarians (and the wider public), it is true that its influence and reach had expanded during the nineteenth century, prompting some astute government officials to view this medium not simply as a growing nuisance but also as a potential instrument to exploit. Nevertheless, as Mayer argues, the press's overall foreign policy role was limited before the Moroccan crisis, with the leading British newspapers generally deferring to the government, the French ones displaying scant more interest or independence in foreign affairs despite the gadfly pretensions of some editors, and prominent German journalists showing themselves to be susceptible to the government's efforts to co-opt them.

Aroused into action by the bombshell of the kaiser's visit to Tangier, the press in all three countries covered the unfolding diplomatic events in detail. The reports, revelations, and rumours published in newspapers reverberated inside the British, French, and German parliaments, stirring the interest of parliamentarians which in turn further encouraged the press's interest. This ping-pong effect between press and parliament helped to thrust a diplomatic dispute, traditionally the preserve of a select few operating behind closed-doors, into the unfamiliar light of public scrutiny. But Mayer's bigger argument is about the after-effects of the Moroccan crisis. In all three countries, the crisis produced what he calls a 'militarization of politics' (p. 331) characterized not only by increasing parliamentary interest in foreign policy, evident in demands for a greater voice, but also by suspicion of the government's commitment to defend the nation against its rivals as well as by a newly found focus on Europe as the centre of international relations. Together, these three factors contributed to rising tension levels among the European great powers before 1914. In the case of Germany, the disappointing outcome of the crisis, symbolized by German isolation at the Algeciras Conference, stimulated fears that the Reich was encircled by enemies while undermining confidence in the government's ability to devise an effective (and vigorous) response – doubts that parliament came to share with several extra-parliamentary associations. Faced with a credibility gap, German governments would be tempted to use foreign policy as a tool to win parliamentary and public legitimacy. For France, although the crisis did lead to the downfall of the foreign minister, Théophile Delcassé, whose provocative foreign policy parliament now judged to be too risky, the longer-term result was to re-centre attention on the German threat, which, Mayer insists, had an 'exceptional integrationist effect' in rallying deputies from diverse political camps in support of a forceful stance towards Germany (p. 329). Needless to say, this political front limited the room for manoeuvre of subsequent governments when it came to Franco-German relations. Finally, in Britain, the crisis put an end to parliament's deference to the government over foreign policy; afterwards critical issues, such as relations with Germany or Britain's military commitment to France, were no longer exempt from debate (and criticism), undercutting Grey's ambitions to manage the continental balance of power.

In addition to the relationship between government, press, and parliament in the three countries, Mayer is interested in the ties between democracy and peace. Consistent with recent work in political science, he is sceptical of the liberal claim that the free exchange of opinion will necessarily produce beneficial effects.²⁵ The opening of foreign policy to parliamentary and press debate as a result of the Moroccan crisis – an opening which can be

²⁵ For example, see Jack L. Snyder, *From voting to violence: democratization and national conflict* (New York, 2000); and Fareed Zakaria, *The future of freedom: illiberal democracy at home and abroad* (New York, 2003).

considered as part of a larger process of democratization – exacerbated more than it assuaged international tensions by fostering public suspicion of and hostility towards other countries. For Mayer, if the crisis promoted democracy, at least in terms of foreign policy, it also strengthened the contradictory principle of national unity, which demanded that the nation come together against its enemies, real and imagined. While some might find Mayer's scepticism about the dark side of democracy excessive, his book does offer convincing proof that public opinion, which is to say parliament and the press, was becoming an actor of growing importance in foreign policy before 1914. Although this public opinion might not have been visible on stage during the July crisis, decision-makers in London, Paris, and Berlin knew that it was there, off stage but not far off. For Grey, Poincaré, and Moltke, no one needed to spell out the obvious: that in this crisis, as in earlier ones, public opinion would judge their actions.

Appropriately, the last book under review is David Fromkin's *Europe's last summer*, for the author seeks to place the July crisis in a larger historical context. Likening Europe in 1914 to an airliner hit by an invisible storm, Fromkin nevertheless insists that the outbreak of the war was not a random event even if the passengers on board were taken by surprise. 'The European world already was buffeted by high winds', he writes. 'It had been traversing dangerous skies for some time' (p. 4). Fromkin begins his discussion of the origins of the war with what Hamilton and Herwig would term big causes: imperialism, class struggle, nationalism, arm races, and dominant ideas. Referring to the widespread fascination with the irrational, he writes:

It may be that the European sense of frustration – the sense of stalemate in life, art, and politics – led to a violent sense of abandon, of letting go: a sense that the world ought to be blown up, and let the consequences be what they may. Europe's Nietzschean mood seemed to play some sort of role in making the Great War possible. (p. 40)

Here, the reader is tempted to join in what he imagines to be Hamilton and Herwig's mutual groan at the mention of something as vague as 'Europe's Nietzschean mood'. In an effort to provide some precision, Fromkin argues that such big causes are important not because of their hold on public opinion, since 'the masses' did not share the values attributed to Nietzsche, but because the latter inspired the tiny group of Europe's political and military leaders who made 'war-and-peace decisions' – those men who piloted the airliner in 1914. These leaders, he continues, 'lived in a world of their own, and it was a world in which war and warriors were glorified' (p. 42). The problem, then, was not contemporary European culture, whether high or low, but the divorce of Europe's political and military elites from the world around them. But this thesis sits somewhat uneasily with Fromkin's discussion of big causes such as nationalism and social Darwinism. Are we to believe that Europe's leaders were alone in reading Nietzsche, whether in the original or vulgarized form? In any case, Fromkin soon shifts attention to his rather immodest claim to have discovered the 'key' to the mystery of the war's origins: the German plan to substitute a general war against Russia and France for a local conflict in the Balkans between Austria and Serbia. During the July crisis, he avers, German leaders strove to provoke 'the preventive war of which they had long dreamed' (p. 260). While the novelty of this discovery is certainly open to question, Fromkin narrows his sights still further, eventually pinning primary responsibility for the outbreak of the war on the younger Moltke. The latter, he charges, 'started the world war, and he did so deliberately' (p. 287). Thus, an analysis of the origins of the war that opens on a grand note with Nietzschean moments closes somewhat limply with the machinations of the chief of the German general staff.

As a study of the origins of the First World War, *Europe's last summer* does not succeed in the end in combining the short term with the long term, the role of contingency with that of determinism. While Hamilton and Herwig favour one approach to the exclusion of the other, a choice that Mayer's book indirectly challenges, Fromkin presents a case for the importance of both approaches without, however, paying much attention to the relationship between them. The obvious question is how to integrate the two approaches. Unfortunately, there is no stock answer. Rather than follow a formula, scholars will have to proceed by trial and error, examining decision-makers and their decisions while striving to place both in a larger context or environment. That attention needs to be paid to decision-makers is beyond dispute. Scholars should continue to investigate the calculations of these pivotal individuals, the way in which they conceived of their choices and the stakes attached to them, the information they possessed (or lacked), and their interactions with others. But decision-makers and their decisions cannot be examined in a void; whether as individuals or as members of a group, they always operate within a larger environment – an environment that is neither a prison (or puppet-house) nor a world in which free will is unfettered. People do have autonomy, but it is always circumscribed.

Although no ready formulas exist for combining the two approaches, several scholars have proposed helpful ways of thinking about the challenge. In an article on the origins of the First World War, the political scientist Richard Ned Lebow points to the role of 'catalysts' as possible links binding together what he calls structural and contingent causes.²⁶ However determined Moltke and Bethmann Hollweg might have been to bring about a European war, they were dependent on a catalyst, on an event or events that they could exploit. In this sense, the unanticipated assassination of Franz Ferdinand proved to be a godsend. But if the archduke's premature demise was fortuitous, it was not just any event that could trigger a reaction that ended in war. For, to be effective, a catalyst had to act upon the various factors present in 1914 that made a conflict possible and perhaps even likely (but not inevitable), factors that included Hamilton and Herwig's big causes. If German leaders possessed the ability to act decisively, they did so only in certain situations – situations, moreover, whose creation lay partly beyond their control. In another effort to chart a middle course between structure and human action, David Lindenfeld speaks in terms of constraining and empowering factors. In chaotic, as opposed to stable, historical situations, he argues, the domestic and international contexts work not only to limit the options of decision-makers, but also to increase the likelihood that any decisions they do take will have consequences far beyond those expected.²⁷ Although Lindenfeld uses the month preceding Hitler's appointment as German chancellor in January 1933 as a case study, his framework can be applied to Europe in 1914, when the international situation – not to mention the domestic political situation in various countries – appeared particularly tense (or unstable). If so, it is possible that during the July crisis decision-makers in Berlin and perhaps in other capitals did not risk a European war solely by deliberate design. In addition to facing a narrow range of choices, decision-makers could not fully grasp the impact of the choices they did have.

²⁶ Richard Ned Lebow, 'Contingency, catalysts, and international system change', *Political Science Quarterly*, 115 (2000), pp. 591–616.

²⁷ David L. Lindenfeld, 'Causality, chaos theory, and the end of the Weimar Republic: a commentary on Henry Turner's *Hitler's Thirty Days to Power*', *History and Theory*, 38 (1999), pp. 281–99. But see also Henry Turner's response, 'Human agency and impersonal determinants in historical causation: a response to David Lindenfeld', in *ibid.*, pp. 300–6.

In the effort to integrate decision-makers and their environment, still another possibility is to conceive of the challenge in terms of striking a balance between the two. And here counter-factuals can be a useful tool. For example, did it matter that Moltke was the chief of the German general staff in 1914? More to the point, would someone else – someone who could reasonably be expected to have occupied the post – have acted differently? If there are good reasons to answer yes to this question, then one should concentrate on Moltke more than on his environment. But if there are good reasons for answering no, then the opposite is more appropriate. The problem, of course, is that it is rarely a case of one or the other. Even if one agrees that it is important that Moltke and not someone else was chief of the general staff, the decisions he took or did not take in 1914, his influence on events, were themselves shaped by his environment. It is, in short, impossible to ignore the latter in any historical enquiry into the origins of the First World War. And here the problems only begin, for a decision-maker's environment will never be captured in such a way as to satisfy every scholar. In addition to the labile nature of the historical enterprise, subject as scholarship is to continual challenge and revision, there is the simple fact that any individual's environment is incredibly complex, providing material for endless debates about which element or elements to privilege. But then no one said that explaining the origins of the First World War would be easy.

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