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Moran, Daniel

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School



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Strategic Insight

Preventive War and the Crisis of July, 1914

by [Daniel Moran](#)

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On June 28, 1914, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was murdered by a Bosnian Serb revolutionary named Gavrilo Princep. Five weeks later the Great Powers of Europe embarked on a war whose consequences were only dimly foreseen by those who chose to wage it. The First World War dissolved the three great empires that had maintained social and political order throughout a vast region extending from the Rhine to the Urals and the Euphrates. It made possible the triumph of Communism in Russia, and the rise of Fascism and National Socialism throughout much of Central and Eastern Europe. It encouraged a new spirit of self-assertion and resistance among colonized peoples on the peripheries of the world system, and marked the first appearance of the United States at the center of international politics. It killed ten million people, and maimed twenty million more.

The diplomatic and strategic failures of July, 1914, from which these seminal developments arose, are the subject of an enormous literature. The comments that follow are intended to address only one aspect of a complex picture, albeit a central one: the relative sympathy that the idea of preventive war had come to command in Germany before 1914, and its impact on German conduct during the final crisis that led to the war. The concept of "preventive" war has lately become an object of much confusion because of recent American policy statements that insist on characterizing military action taken to avert a serious future crisis, of greater inherent danger than may exist at present, as "pre-emptive"—a term that has heretofore been used to describe measures taken to anticipate an impending attack, and which critics of current administration policy have rejected on the grounds that, absent clear evidence of such an attack, the claim of pre-emption illegitimately deflects political and moral responsibility for violence from the United States to its adversaries. There is no intention here to contribute to this unedifying war of words, still less to claim any genealogy of descent between German policy in 1914 and that of the United States today. For our purposes preventive war means what it has always meant until a few months ago: war not to beat an opponent to the punch, but to forestall some putatively foreseeable but still somewhat remote threat or disadvantage. This sort of strategic calculus achieved new prominence among the Great Powers in the decades leading up to the crisis of July, 1914, and most decisively so in Germany, whose strategic culture had previously been marked more by opportunism than aggression.

A military strategy is, in the simplest terms, a deliberate course of action in which the use of force is not ruled out. The element of deliberation necessarily requires some estimate of what tomorrow may bring, and to that extent all strategy rests upon humanity's capacity to anticipate and organize against adversity: to detect in a pact of friendship between formerly rival cities, or the arranged marriage of a distant princess to a neighboring prince, or the discovery of new lands overseas, or a thousand other contingent events, some peril to which a forceful response may be required. In these terms all wars not undertaken in a spirit of naked expansionism may be deemed "preventive," and even defended as such for political purposes, at least insofar as they are fought to prevent the future from turning out worse than it otherwise might. Nevertheless, from the point of view of those responsible for preparing and waging war, it is possible to distinguish between wars fought to seize opportunities or avert calamity, and those conducted in anticipation of conditions that do not yet exist, but may. The latter require a combination of factors that are more typical of modern times than of the more remote past: confidence that the future will be different from the present, not just *sub specie aeternitatis*, but as a consequence of developments whose direction

can be anticipated, and which unfold at a pace that intersects with the requirements of military planning; plus military and political institutions sufficiently agile to act upon such premonitions, once they are achieved. The temptations of preventive war rise in the industrial era because the pace of technological and social change accelerate to the point where they prey upon the realm of strategy, such that plans and arrangements a generation in the making may suddenly have to be discounted at a sickening rate, all because they have been overtaken by events.

Such apprehensions afflicted the soldiers and statesmen of all the Great Powers at the turn of the twentieth century, but most consequentially those of Germany, whose reactions to an increasingly fluid strategic environment would be marked by deepening frustration and pessimism. Despite the unparalleled reputation of its armed forces, the German way of war had not theretofore been marked by any particular tendency to anticipate the next turn of history's wheel. The Prussian monarchy, around which the German nation state had been assembled, had risen to European prominence in the 1740s when its young king, Frederick the Great, had taken advantage of a succession crisis in the Habsburg Empire to lay hold of the Austrian province of Silesia, an act of pure piracy no doubt, but one more suggestive of quick reflexes than a desire to force the pace. Prussian arms would afterward be cast into the shade by the rise of Napoleonic France, from which they emerged in the 1860s through a series of short, violent, opportunistic wars—against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866), and France (1870-71)—by which Prussian hegemony in Central Europe was affirmed, and the German Empire created. Although the last of these wars might well count as a "preventive," the onus of having precipitated it fell firmly upon France, which had sought to anticipate and block an emerging peril—the unification of Germany—but lacked the military wherewithal to do so. German policy, in contrast, was guided by one of the most accomplished statesmen of any age, Otto von Bismarck, a man of blood and iron, as he so famously proclaimed, but nevertheless one whose outstanding characteristics were patience and timing. "We can wind our watches," he once observed, "but the time will not pass any more quickly, and the ability to wait while a situation develops is one of the prerequisites of practical politics."

This cautious spirit would be lost on Bismarck's successors, who would gradually reinterpret his achievements as a warrant to use force, should the Gordian Knot of diplomacy become too densely tangled to tease apart. By July of 1914, their sense of being ensnared had been growing for some time. The first twist of the rope had come twenty years before, in the conclusion of a defensive alliance between France and Russia, two countries that Bismarck had striven to keep apart, but which were finally joined together by a variety of shared economic and geopolitical interests, above all a common rivalry with Great Britain in the race for empire. Russia in particular harbored no evil designs against Germany, though it did against Germany's only important ally, Austria-Hungary, whose influence in Southeastern Europe affronted Russia's claim to be the champion of all Slavic peoples. Besides, there was no way to guarantee that Russia might not somehow be drawn into a French scheme to avenge its defeat in 1871; nor, more realistically, that France would not seek to exploit a limited conflict in Eastern Europe to regain its lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, secure in the knowledge that Germany's response would be limited by the need to take precautions elsewhere. German strategy was thus fixated upon the possibilities of simultaneous conflict on its eastern and western frontiers. In response its General Staff would devise perhaps the boldest strategic conception of modern times, the so-called Schlieffen Plan, by which the French army was to be enveloped and defeated before that of Russia could be brought into play.

The Schlieffen Plan, it must be emphasized, was not a plan for preventive, nor even necessarily for aggressive war. It did, however, incorporate a strong pre-emptive element by virtue of its overwhelming initial attack against France, a move predicated on the assumption that France would seize any opportunity to strike at Germany, once German forces were tied down elsewhere. This attack in turn was critically dependent on the speed with which Russian forces could be brought to bear against Germany's exposed eastern provinces, which were to be left virtually undefended in order to mass all available forces in the west. Russian military inefficiency would create the window of opportunity during which the decisive stroke in the west could be delivered. The more quickly Russian forces could be mobilized for war, however, the less time would be available to defeat France. It is from this operational calculus that the German disposition to preventive war would arise. By the time the July crisis broke upon Europe,

German planners were increasingly persuaded that, because of the speed with which Russia's armed forces were improving themselves, the window on which they had been counting was about to slam shut.

Signs of strain were already evident during the First Balkan War (1911-12). Although Bismarck had declared that the Balkans were "not worth the bones of a Pomeranian grenadier," the region had been a focus of concern even in his day because of the prospect that trouble there could lead to war between Austria and Russia, whose client, Serbia, was a thorn in the Austrian side. In all of the many crises that had erupted in the Balkans since the 1870s, Germany had adopted a consistent policy of restraining its Austrian ally, while cautioning Russia of the dangers of adopting an excessively confrontational line. Now, however, patience was wearing thin. Helmuth von Moltke, the Chief of the General Staff, had become convinced, as he said, that "war is inevitable, and the sooner the better." This observation was made at a high-level meeting in December of 1912, and inspired widespread assent, but only limited action, since it was felt that the time was not yet right. Even in 1914, Moltke calculated that it would be "two or three years" before Russia's national railway network—the critical missing link in its military infrastructure—would be sufficiently developed to thwart Germany's plans. It would in any case be necessary, as the Emperor emphasized, to prepare public opinion, so that people would become "accustomed to the idea of such a war beforehand." A few months later, Moltke explained to his Austrian counterpart, Conrad von Hoetzendorf, that Austria should refrain for the moment from provoking a show-down with Serbia, because in present circumstances it would be difficult for Germany to "find an effective slogan" for a major war.

This last problem was solved in decisive fashion by Princep's bullet. By then, the idea of preventive war arising from Russian intervention in the Balkans had become commonplace in German military circles. Less so among German diplomats, however, whose initial reaction to Francis-Ferdinand's murder was once again, as Germany's ambassador to Vienna reported, to "take every opportunity ... to advise quietly but very impressively and seriously against too hasty steps." One need only consider the Emperor's marginal notation to this well-meaning but misguided dispatch to see what had changed: "Now or never! Who authorized him to act this way? That is very stupid! ... Let [the ambassador] drop this nonsense! The Serbs must be disposed of, and that right soon!"

Far from urging caution and restraint, Germany would now push its Austrian ally toward swift and decisive confrontation, offering a "blank check" guarantee of military support should Russia come to the aid of Serbia, as it was certain to do. German war plans in turn ensured that any conflict with Russia must begin with an attack against France, a scheme driven by military calculations that were entirely independent of whatever political attitude the French might adopt. Afterwards, the victors at Versailles would declare that the Great War had begun as a consequence of aggression by the Central Powers, a judgment that has survived scholarly scrutiny better than most such triumphant pronouncements; though if it is taken to mean that Germany willed the First World War, and actively planned or sought to bring it about, it is obviously absurd. Germany did not wish for the Great War any more than any of the other belligerents did. But Germany did wish to force a local confrontation in the Balkans that it could use to break the Franco-Russian alliance, and for that purpose it was willing to risk war on a continental scale, a risk that could be averted only by Russian concessions of a kind that no one in Berlin seriously imagined would be forthcoming. Among the Great Powers, Germany was the one best situated to forestall the escalation of a regional crisis into a continental catastrophe. It had in fact done so in the past, and it did not do so now because its most senior military and civilian leadership had become convinced that violent confrontation was inevitable, in which case German interests dictated that it be sought sooner rather than later, before the modernization of Russia's armed forces rendered Germany's long-matured strategy for a two-front war infeasible.

What, then, was Germany trying to "prevent" by going to war in the summer of 1914? Not war itself, obviously, for that was the policy of choice. Nor was it seeking to avert defeat by striking first. No one in Europe sought war with Germany in 1914, a fact that was perfectly apparent in Berlin. Germany was at least arguably seeking to prevent the humiliation of its Austrian ally by Russia and Serbia; though humiliation is an awfully strong word under the circumstances. Even the Russians accepted that Serbia was complicit in terrorism, and agreed to the far-reaching concessions Belgrade had offered by way of

recompense for the Archduke's murder. In any case, few countries are willing to risk their national existence to spare an ally hurt feelings, particularly one that, as Germany's leadership fully realized, was scarcely able to function any longer as a Great Power.

In the end, however, the stakes for Germany were less about war and peace than about freedom and autonomy. By 1914, Germany's soldiers in particular had become convinced that, unless they took the bull by the horns soon, they would lose their future freedom of action. Preventive war, after all, is by definition about the future, and what cast a pall over the future in this case was the conviction that Germany would, within a few years, be required to adopt a less assertive and more defensively oriented strategic posture, because it would no longer be able to venture on the bold, high-risk offensive operations required by the Schlieffen Plan. Germany went to war in 1914 because it did not wish to see its military options limited by the continued modernization of a likely adversary, even one that had scant prospect of, or interest in, attacking Germany itself. What was inevitable in 1914 was not war, but a gradual erosion of German military preponderance on the continent. Or so it seemed. Thus, "Now or never"—"never" being a most intimidating choice indeed, though one, it is fair to say, that sometimes merits more consideration than it receives.

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