

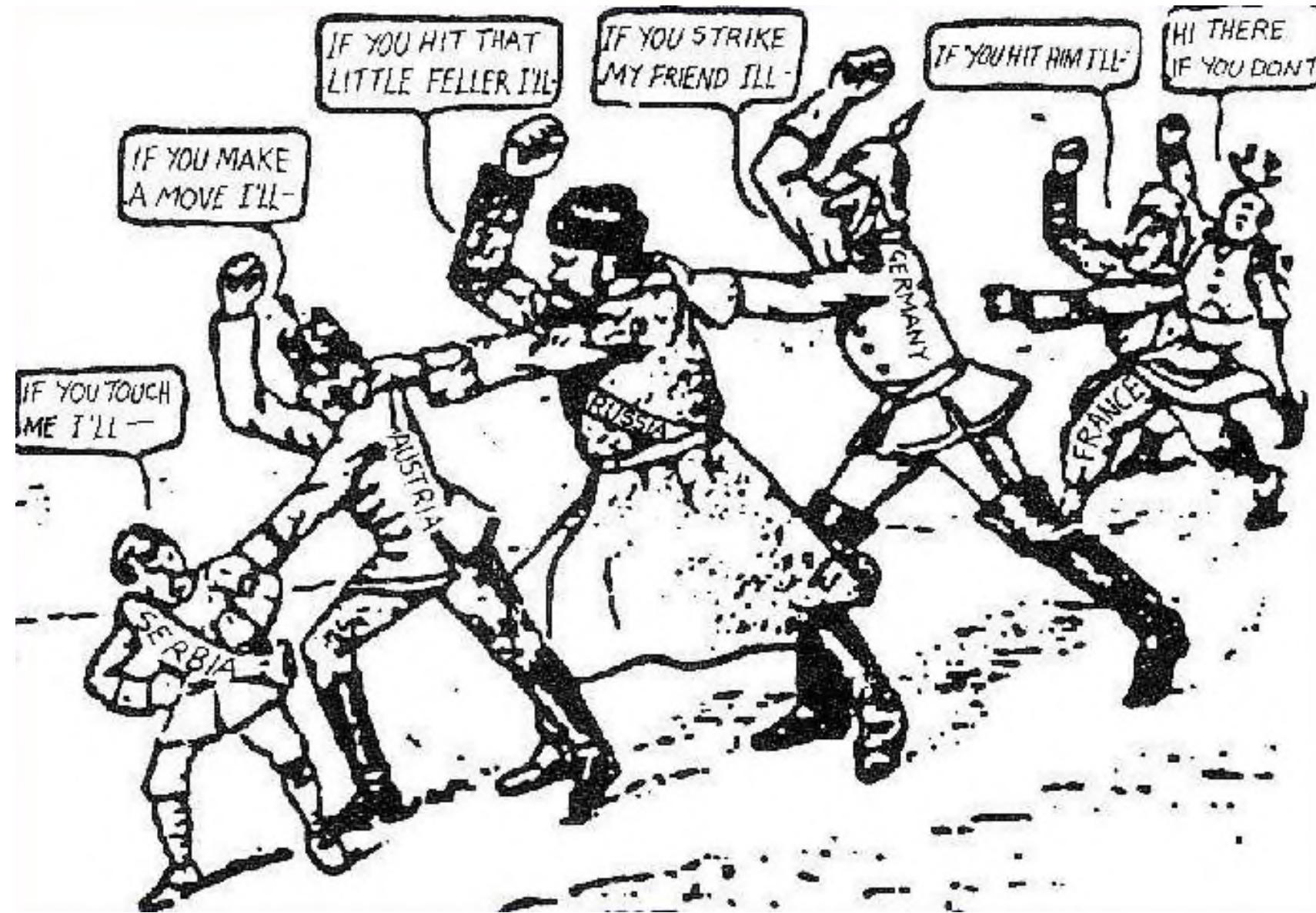
3. World War I: Origins

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How It Happened



How It Happened

In the early twentieth century, two coalitions held the balance of power in Europe:

The Triple Entente (wartime Allies)

- France, UK, and Russia

The Triple Alliance (wartime Central Powers)

- Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy

In 1914:

- A Bosnian Serb assassinated the crown prince of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.
- Russia began to mobilize.
- **Germany attacked not only Russia but also Belgium and France.**
- Russia attacked Germany and British forces landed in France and Belgium.

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Not finished yet! Next (still in 1914):

- The Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers.

In 1915:

- Italy changed sides, entering the war **against** the Central Powers.

In 1917:

- America entered the war against the Central Powers.
- Russia had a revolution and left the war.

In 1918:

- The Central Powers gave up fighting and Germany and Austria had revolutions.

Millions died.

That's how – but why?

Why?

Many good stories (Hamilton and Herwig 2005; Harrison 2016). But which of them are true?

Deep forces?

- Imperialism: Capitalism led to empires; imperialist rivalry led to war.
- Nationalism: Globalization went too far, provoking a nationalist backlash.

A mistake?

- Unintended consequences: Alliance commitments and a hair-trigger war plan led to a war nobody wanted.
- Over-optimism: Everybody expected a short war that they would win.

A rational decision?

- The consequences of the war were anticipated and the war was planned in spite of this.

Deep Forces: Imperialism?

Hauner et al. (2017) – in the tradition of Hilferding, Hobson, Lenin, and Luxemburg.

“High inequality begat high foreign assets, which begat incentives for military control and protection, which begat armaments and militarization.”

In favour:

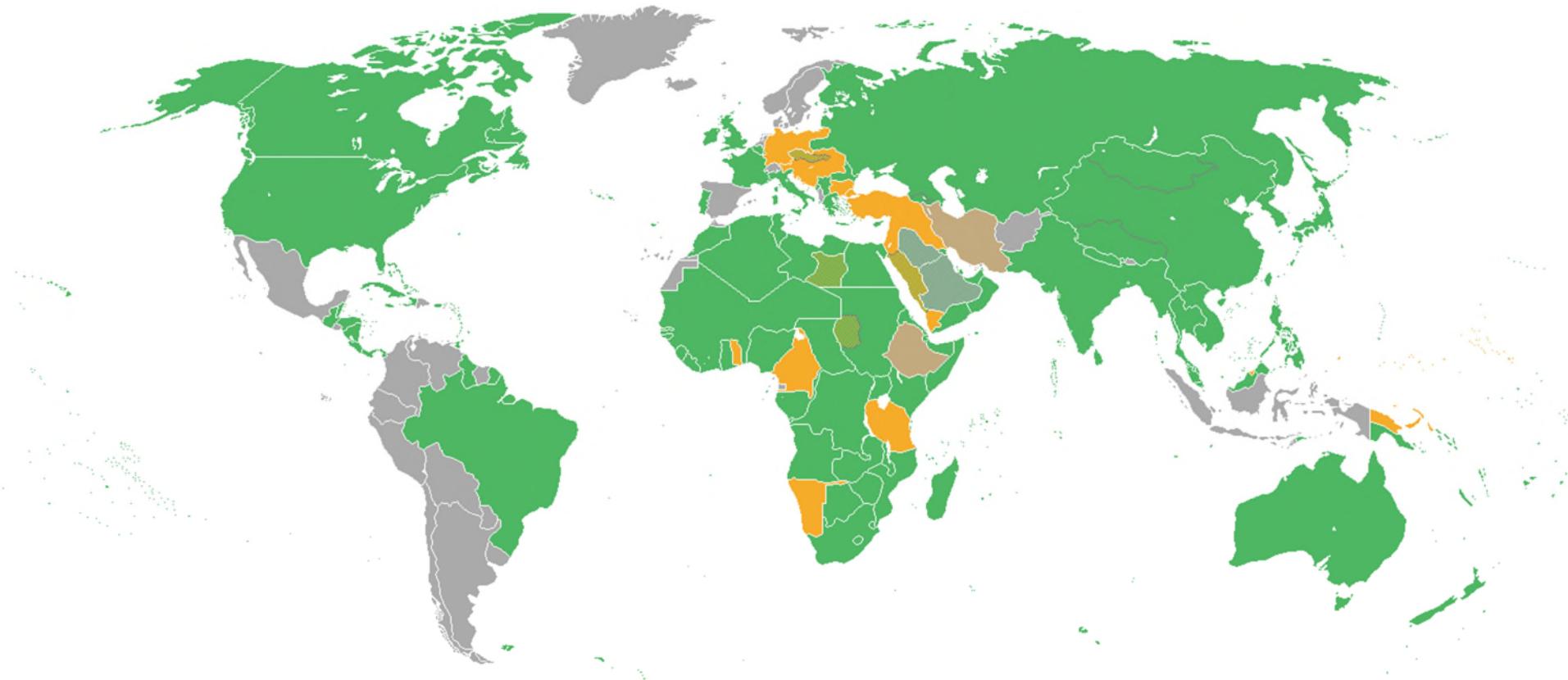
- In Britain and France, national wealth inequality measures were high and rising.
- Higher-wealth households held more foreign assets relative to domestic assets.
- Returns on foreign assets were higher than on domestic assets.
- Countries with more foreign assets/GDP had larger armed forces – other things being equal.

And:

- Yes, World War I was a clash of **global empires**.

Deep Forces: Imperialism?

World War I was a clash of global empires.



Green: the powers and colonies of the Triple Entente and allies.

Orange: the Central Powers and their colonies.

Source: wikipedia.org.

Deep Forces: Imperialism?

OK, but what does this have to do with WW1?

Where were global hotspots before 1914?

- China, where Russia and Japan were competing for influence and fought a war in 1904/05.
- Africa, where Germany had a few colonies and hoped a bigger Navy would help them negotiate for more at Britain's expense (Berghahn 1973).

That's not where Britain and France held most foreign assets (in Europe and the Americas).

That's not how World War I started.

World War I started from the decline of the **Austro-Hungarian** and **Ottoman Empires**:



Source: The Economist.

Deep Forces: Imperialism?

World War I started from the decline of the **Austro-Hungarian** and **Ottoman Empires**:

- Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia had seceded from the Ottoman Empire.
- Serbia emerged as the main Balkan power, threatening influence of Austria-Hungary.

This was the trigger for rivalry between Russia and Germany.

- Russia was allied to Serbia; Russian leaders saw opportunities to expand at the expense of both Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire.
- German leaders wanted to ensure preservation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and to prevent the spread of Russian influence.

Is this local power struggle what was meant by “imperialism caused the war”? No.

Deep Forces: Nationalism?

Globalization was under way.

Then as now, not everyone welcomed it; there were signs of **nationalist backlash**.

In trade, nationalism took the form of tariff protection (Findlay and O'Rourke 2007: 395-402):

| | | | |
|---------------|------------------|-------------|------------|
| United States | 1816 | Italy | 1878, 1887 |
| Mexico | 1821, 1823 | Germany | 1879 |
| Argentina | 1822, 1836 | Brazil | 1879 |
| Canada | 1846, 1878 | Sweden | 1888, 1892 |
| Australia | 1865, 1893 | New Zealand | 1888 |
| Russia | 1877, 1885, 1891 | France | 1892 |

Why protection?

- Globalization brought more distant risks nearer to home.
- Then what?
- Either accept integration, favouring **consumers** (and **exporters**).
- Or “take back control,” protecting **incumbent domestic producers**.

Deep Forces: Nationalism?

McDonald and Sweeney (2007: 397) study 1,288 “revisionist” militarized interstate disputes between 1865 and 1914. They find:

- Military conflict is predicted by protectionism.
- (While protectionism is not predicted by military conflict).

In this version of deep forces, war might be explained not by business interests generally, but by incumbent businesses threatened by new global competition.

But there's no sign of this in how the war started.

Did business interests favour war? No.

- In every country, business interests were against war and wanted peace to be maintained.
- The end of peace caused a major adverse shock to business confidence (Ferguson 1999: 174-211; Hamilton and Herwig 2005: 241-249).

Did insurgent nationalists force the war on reluctant governments? No.

- The war began in the Balkans, the least globalized part of Europe (Gartzke and Lupu 2012).
- While deciding to start the war, the German governments considered public opinion only to try to present Germany as a victim of Russian aggression.

A Mistake: Alliance Commitments?

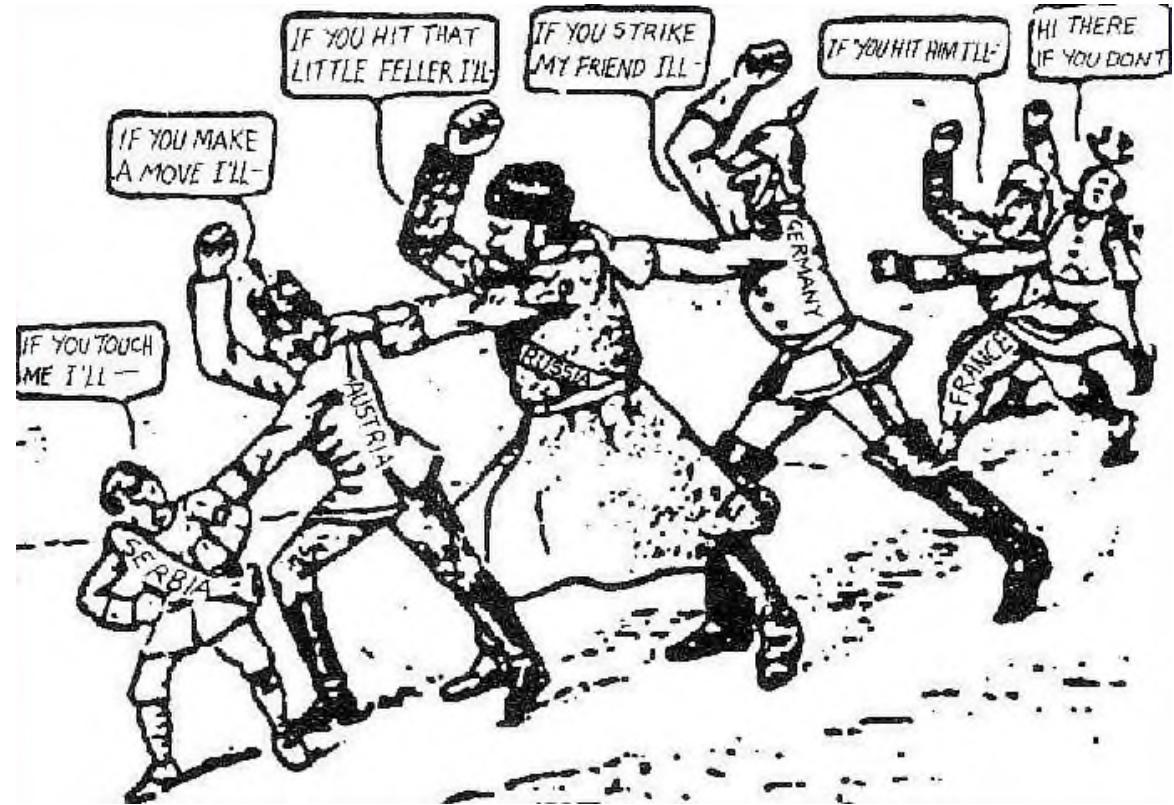
Did prewar alliance commitments pre-determine actions?

In this story, everyone was forced to act:

- Austria-Hungary was forced to act against Serbia by the Sarajevo assassination.
- Russia was forced to respond to Austria-Hungary by commitment to Serbia.
- Germany was forced to respond to Russia by commitment to Austria-Hungary.
- Britain was forced to respond to Germany by commitments to Belgium and France.

Was Germany forced into an unwanted war? No.

- Prewar alliances were defensive.
- **Except** for Germany's commitment to Austria-Hungary, undertaken in as recently as 1909.
- The "blank cheque" Germany gave to Austria-Hungary in July 1914 went far **beyond** alliance commitments.
- Prewar alliances did not even decide on which side the powers would fight, e.g. Italy.



A Mistake: The Hair-Trigger?

German plans for war with Russia were based on a 1906 memorandum of Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of general staff:

- In case of war with Russia, France would attack.
- Germany should not try to fight both at once.
- The key: France would mobilize immediately; Russia would require six weeks to mobilize.
- Therefore, Germany could fight them both in sequence.

The “Schlieffen Plan”:

- Stage 1: Attack France through Netherlands and Belgium; secure the Channel coast against a British landing; defeat the French Army within six weeks.
- Stage 2: Transfer forces from west to east; attack Russia and defeat the Russian Army.

Adoption of the Schlieffen Plan set up a **hair-trigger** (when a gun’s trigger is pre-tensioned so that it will fire at the smallest additional pressure).

- In order to finish Stage 1 in time to begin Stage 2, France must be attacked at the first sign of **either French or Russian mobilization**.



A Mistake: The Hair-Trigger?

In this view, any crisis could force Germany into war.

Question: was Germany forced into an unwanted war by an unforeseen crisis and a **hair-trigger**? No.

- Before Sarajevo, Austrian leaders **had already decided** to attack Serbia.
- After Sarajevo, but before Russian mobilization, German leaders encouraged Austria-Hungary to attack Serbia, knowing that Russia was Serbia's ally, because they **had already decided** to start a war with Russia.

In Vienna and Berlin, war was an **intended** outcome.

A Mistake: Over-Optimism?

War was what they intended, but did they foresee what could happen next?

Germany's war plan was for a short, victorious war, and this is not how it turned out.

Even before 1914, influential observers argued that **any war would be terribly costly**.

Ivan Bloch (1899: 294-297):

- The industrialized states were now so dependent on imported food and materials that a protracted war would bring them to collapse.
- Russia's large peasant agriculture would give her the advantage.

Norman Angell (1910):

- With economic growth, capital was now more valuable than land, and business was more profitable than conquest.
- With rising wages, standing armies were increasingly expensive.
- The interdependence of industrialized economies and their businesses had made war an instrument that was too costly to use.

A Mistake: Over-Optimism?

Were the great powers drawn into war by the **illusion** that no war could last long? No.

In each country, the political rulers knew the **war plans** of other countries and understood how the other countries would respond (Macmillan 2013: 314–352).

- Austria-Hungary: Foreign Minister Berchtold promoted aggression “even though our operations against Serbia should bring about the great war.”
- Germany: Wilhelm told Vienna to count on “Germany’s full support,” even if “serious European complications” resulted; not to “delay the action” against Serbia; and that Germany fully expected war with Russia and for years had made all preparations with this in mind.
- Moltke stated repeatedly that a general European war was inevitable.

In every country, most notably in Germany, military leaders predicted “a murderous European war,” a “massacre, at whose horror one could only shudder” (Moltke, quoted by Herwig 2002).

Realistic expectations were embodied in actions, not just words:

- The German army attacked France through Belgium, bypassing Netherlands, so that neutral Dutch ports could provide a “windpipe” for German trade.
- German civil servants made plans for agriculture to supply food for a war that would be fought under British blockade and would last for years (Lee 1975).

A Mistake: Over-Optimism?

Did those who started the war simply **overestimate** the chance of victory? No.

Those who initiated the war were **not** confident of winning.

- Chief of Austrian General Staff Conrad: “It will be a hopeless struggle, but ... such an ancient monarchy and such an ancient army cannot perish ingloriously.”
- Austrian Kaiser Franz Joseph: “If we must go under, we better go under decently.”
- German war minister Falkenhayn: “Even if we go under as a result of this, it still was beautiful.”

While the **option value of war** was low, they believed the **option value of peace** was even lower.

- Chief of German General Staff Moltke: “To wait any longer means a diminishing of our chances.”

In fact, only the ignorant masses expected a short, victorious war.

And the masses had no influence on the decision to go to war.

Rational Agents

Was there agency? Yes.

- In every country a handful of five to ten people made the decision for war (Hamilton and Herwig 2005).
- These were the agents.

Did the agents decide consistently with their preferences? Yes.

- They followed what they saw as the national interest.
- Based on identity, values, and beliefs about how the world worked and how the adversary would respond.

Consistently with their beliefs about how the world worked? Yes.

- They characterized the world by strategic rivalry, a zero-sum game.
- They saw national existence at stake.

Consistently with their beliefs about how the adversary would respond? Yes.

- Full information of others' war plans.
- Backward induction of the adversary's best response.

With unbiased expectations? Yes.

- High probability of a great war.
- Low probability of victory.

What Have We Learned?

Deep forces were in the background, but do not explain the war.

- Competition for colonies mattered but **was irrelevant** to the decisions that led directly to war in 1914.
- The war began with a crisis among countries that were **less exposed to globalization**.
- Alliances mattered but **did not determine actions** or even the side on which countries fought.
- Hair-trigger war plans were fully anticipated and discounted.

The decisions that led to the Great War were intentional and calculated.

- The war was not about nothing; it was about **great power status and influence**.
- There was **backward induction** at every stage.
- There was **foresight** of the likely consequences.
- Vienna and Berlin did not lose control but **seized an opportunity**.

Nobody stopped them, because they made their decisions in secret and they were not sufficiently deterred.

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