

An Unconventional Approach to the Historiography of World War I ■■■■

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Abstract

Historians have approached the causes of World War I from a multitude of perspectives stressing political-diplomatic, military-strategic, economic, and ideological causes of World War I. This traditional classification is coherent and informative. Still, it depends on one single criterion to analyze historians' approaches to the causes of World War I, namely the subject matter. So as to achieve a more profound understanding of the historiography of the causes of World War I, the issues of causality, agency, and temporality in historians' approaches need to be taken into consideration. Historians' approaches do not only differ in particular subject matters but also differ in historians' understanding of cause and effect relationships, actors, and time. Incorporation of causality, agency, and temporality in studies attempting to understand the ways historians approach the causes of World War I would provide a wider framework and perspective. This article, first, discusses historians' accounts with regard to causality, agency, and temporality, and second, discusses historians' accounts with regard to traditional classification.

Keywords

World War I, Historiography, Causality, Agency, Temporality

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Scholarly interest to the point of academic and intellectual preoccupation with all facets of World War I, or the Great War, has yet to abate.¹ One obvious reason for this unabated interest is the tragic consequences of the War since World War I attested to the truth, in its consequences, of the prophecy of the prominent French socialist leader Jean Léon Jaurès that, stated in 1905, “from a European war a revolution may spring up and the ruling classes would do well to think of this. But it may also result, over a long period, in crises of counter-revolution, of furious reaction, of exasperated nationalism, of stifling dictatorships, of monstrous militarism, a long chain of retrograde violence” (Joll 1990, 195). The war irreversibly altered the political landscape of ‘the old Europe’, devastated the economies of European states, shook the very fundamental structures of European societies, and even transformed the dominant ideologies to a great extent. Another reason is the perennial debate in the historiography of World War I over its causes.²

The English author Herbert G. Wells (1914, 7) began his book *The War that will End War*, a title reflected the overly optimistic mood of the time, published in 1914 with these words: “The cause of a war and the object of a war are not necessarily the same”. This discrepancy, it seems, between the causes of World War I and the objects of the belligerents have sustained an enduring scholarly interest over the causes and the objects of World War I. The vitality of the debate over the causes also derives from the question of ‘war guilt’. At the end of World War I, the victorious Allies included in the ‘Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany’, or the Treaty of Versailles, a clause whereby Germany accepted responsibility “for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed on them by Germany and her allies” (Leonard V. Smith, *et al.* 2003, 176). Henceforth, the question of German war guilt has been a leitmotif in several scholarly accounts of the causes of World War I.

Historians of different persuasions have propounded accounts of the causes of World War I from several perspectives generally emphasizing a small number of causes as the foremost determinants of the outbreak of World War I. In general, these accounts can be categorized according to their subject matters as political-diplomatic, military-strategic, economic, and ideological with their subcategories. It is the contention of this article that even though studying the historiography of the causes of World War I according to these categories is informative, examining each historian’s position over the three issues of causality, agency, and temporality in their individual accounts of the causes of World War I provides a more profound understanding of the causes of World War I, and presents a different analytical framework for the historiography of the causes of World War I. This first part of the article introduces these three concepts and explains them with regard to different accounts of

¹ That a multitude of scholarly works are being published every year about World War I confirms this fact. For some very recent examples, see, Norman Stone (2007), G. J. Meyer (2007), Eric Dorn Brose (2009), Sean McMeekin (2011).

² The historiography of the causes of World War I can be said to start during the war through the propaganda efforts of belligerent sides. See, for example, Peter Buitenhuis (1987).

Causality, Agency, and Temporality

historians. The second part follows the traditional path and discusses accounts of the causes of World War I according to their subject matters.

Studying the causes of social phenomena inescapably involves the issue of causality. The very fact that historians have presented peculiar cause and effect relationships in their accounts of the origins of World War I by linking different causes to the same effect, that is, the outbreak of World War I affirms the fact that, despite the pretensions of positivism in social sciences, historians' understandings of 'causal paths' widely differ for several reasons. This differentiation originates mainly in the emphasis each historian gives on different sorts of causes. First, there are what can be called immediate causes, also called proximate causes, which instigates chain reactions usually considered irreversible. Virtually all historians of World War I agree on the point that the immediate cause of the War was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, and his wife on June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina annexed by Austria in 1908, by a young Bosnian named Gavrilo Princip. In other words, it was the spark that ignited the Great War due to the fact that it instigated the July Crisis of 1914.³

Second, there are what can be called principal causes. Historians of World War I have been traditionally prone to ascribe more explanatory value to political-diplomatic causes of the World War I while demonstrating a tendency to treat non-political-diplomatic causes of the World War I as epiphenomenal. Political-diplomatic dynamics, such as the alliance system, the 'old' European diplomacy, realpolitik, and inter-state balance of power are given priority over other dynamics. As an example, James Joll (1985), in his *The Origins of the First World War*, discusses several aspects of the origins of World War I including, militarism, armaments, strategy, domestic politics, international economic factors, overseas rivalry, and social-psychology of European publics. Still, after discussing the July Crisis, in other words the immediate causes of World War I, Joll gives primacy to the workings of the European alliance system and diplomacy. In particular, stressing the centrality of balance of power in European diplomacy, Joll (1985, 34) starts his account by stating that "the Prussian victory over France in 1870 and the creation of the German Empire led to a change in the balance of power in Europe and to an international system in which Germany...necessarily played a leading role". Even historians who tend to emphasize the role of non-political-diplomatic factors in the outbreak of World War I are not unwilling to concede the centrality of political-diplomatic causes. In his analysis of the intricate relationship between 'ideology and the Great War', Alan Cassels (1996, 126) states that "the presence of ideological factors in the prelude to the First World War is undeniable-ethnic sentiments especially Russian and Balkan pan-Slavism; social imperialism operative most clearly in the case of Germany; British isolationism; the idea of progress". Nonetheless, Cassels (1996, 126) affirms, "in the final analysis, the war was fought not for ideological reasons but to repair the balance of power".

³ On the July Crisis, see, for example, Hew Strachan (2003, 64-103).

Third, there are what can be called conditional causes, also called underlying causes. Conditional causes shape and determine the setting wherein the conceived primary causes operate. Gravity would be a good example for conditional causes. Even though gravity rarely prompts action, it effects and thus conditions all the actions performed. In terms of the historiography of the causes of World War I, scholars identify different causes as conditional causes according to their identification of principal causes. Ian Ousby (2002), for example, in his impressive study of the Battle of Verdun, investigates the ideological origins of World War I with regard to the Franco-German antagonism. Ousby asserts that nationalism and social Darwinism, which can be identified as conditional causes in Ousby's account, paved the way for the advent of World War I in social-psychological and political-psychological terms, even though they did not directly cause it. For Ousby (248), "nationalism and science had together done their work in persuading people of the ingrained difference and hostility between nations, and of the outcome to which they led. And so to contemporaries the events of August 1914 carried with them an air of inevitability".

And fourth, there are what can be called cumulative causes. Several historians of World War I tend to identify more than one single cause to explain the origins of World War I by stressing the cumulative effects of these causes in bringing about the War. Although there is a considerable number of accounts devoted to predicate the advent of World War I on a single salient cause, most historians show sensitivity to the constellation of causes that they believe were influential in the outbreak of War. As an example of accounts singling out one cause, Annika Mombauer (2001) contends that the influence of Helmuth von Moltke, chief of the German general staff from 1906 to 1914, on the German political decision-making was decisive and von Moltke played a crucial role in the outbreak of World War I. Increasingly, Mombauer (2001, 288) argues, "the option for Germany under Moltke's leadership had become 'war now or never'," and "from Moltke's point of view, the opportunity offered by the crisis of July 1914 really was a case of 'now or never'." With regard to cumulative causes, David Fromkin's (2005) recent study is an illustrative example. In his account of the origins of World War I, Fromkin discusses the role of a host of causes including imperial contests, class struggles, nationalism and national rivalries, arms race, the situation in the Balkans, and the position of states like France and Italy. Nonetheless, to Fromkin (2005, 295), World War I, composed of two wars, one of Austria and the other Germany, 'was about power', specifically, "about relative ranking among the great European powers that at the time ruled most of the world. Both Germany and Austria believed themselves to be on the way down. Each started a war in order to stay where it was".

Agency occupies a critical place and performs a fundamental role in the accounts of historians scrutinizing the causes of World War I since it is essentially linked to the causality of the accounts. World War I was a disaster but it was not a natural one; it involved decision-making of some actors. In the historiography of the causes of World War I, historians' conception of actors vary according to their understandings of causes. As a result, actors considered influential in the origins of World War I include alliances, or the Triple Alliance

and the Triple Entente, individual states, mainly those that are parts of alliances, agitation groups like *Narodna Odbrana*, domestic political parties like *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) in Germany, statesmen including heads of states, prime ministers, chancellors, minister of foreign affairs, and ambassadors, military leaders like Alfred von Tirpitz, and assassins. The emphasis on particular actors changeS in line with the individual accounts of historians. For example, in *The Pity of War*, Niall Ferguson's (1999) emphasis in explaining the origins of World War I is noticeably on Britain. Ferguson persuasively argues that British policies especially regarding Germany contributed to a considerable extent to the outbreak of World War I. Ferguson (1999, 80), for example, argues that Britain's continental non-commitment was a strategically adverse policy since "the uncertainty about Britain's positional probably made a continental war more rather than less likely, by encouraging the Germans to consider a pre-emptive strike". Samuel R. Williamson, Jr. (1991), on the other hand, focuses on the role of Austrian political and military elites, within the 'domestic context of Habsburg foreign policy', in gradually making the Austrian foreign policy aggressive and confrontational. Williamson (1991, 68) argues, for example, that "Conrad's [Conrad von Hötzendorf, the chief of general staff] insistent pressures and the rapidly shifting international situation meshed with Aehrenthal's [Lexa von Aehrenthal, foreign minister] own desire to revive the monarchy's prestige". The efforts of the heads of army and foreign ministry, Williamson (1991, 68) continues, culminated in "the Bosnian Crisis of 1908-1909 in which the foreign minister successfully annexed the two provinces, destroyed a decade or more of Austro-Russian cooperation and brought Austria and Serbia to the brink of military confrontation". In addition, the role of individual and yet influential statesmen in the process leading to World War I has also been subject to inquiry. As an example, Catrine Clay (2007) contends that the three royal cousins, King George V of Britain, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, are the main actors 'who led the world to war'. In particular, the place and the role of Kaiser Wilhelm II in the foreign policy of Germany has been subject to close scrutiny.⁴

Historians of World War I differ in their understandings of temporality in their accounts of the causes of World War I as well. Some historians follow a unilinear time path in their accounts of events preceding the outbreak of World War I. Norman Rich (1992), for example, in his account of 'coming of World War I', explains the preceding developments in an action-reaction pattern. First, Austria appealed for German support as a precondition for "exploit[ing] the general horror aroused by the assassination of Francis Ferdinand and Sophie throughout Europe to take punitive action against Serbia" (Rich 1992, 440). Then came Germany's 'blank check' followed by the Austrian decision for war and the ultimatum to Serbia. After Serbia's reply, Austria declared war and as a response Germany spent futile efforts to draw back but to no avail. Next, Russia mobilized and in response Germany mobilized. Then, Rich mentions the policies of France and Britain and ends with the final events that pushed the Europe 'into the abyss' (Rich 1992, 440-461). At variance with this sort of unilinear temporality in explaining the causes of World War

⁴ As a recent study, see, Annika Mombauer and Wilhelm Deist (2003).

I, some historians have preferred to employ multilinear temporality highlighting the simultaneity of different causes during the period before the outbreak of World War I. While the unilinear temporality is found in studies exclusively examining the political-military causes of World War I, multilinear temporality is found in studies that incorporate economic-social causes into their accounts of the origins of the World War I.⁵

Another significant aspect with regard to historians' understandings of temporality in discussing the causes of World War I is the temporal starting points in their accounts. Each historian prefers to identify a specific time that could be regarded, for the historian, as the departure point of the period or process that ultimately was to culminate in the outbreak of World War I. In accordance with particular accounts with their peculiar emphases on different causes, these temporal departure points vary. For example, while acknowledging that "the road which led the major powers of Europe to war in 1914 was long and tortuous, with many complex and interwoven factors eventually combining them to draw into a protracted and cataclysmic struggle," Simkins *et al.* (2003, 21) argue that "perhaps the most important and obvious turning point towards a general European conflict was the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71" since this war "brought about a fundamental shift in the European balance of power".⁶ On the other hand, to Alan Cassels (1996, 114), "there are plenty of reasons to regard 1890 as a more realistic point of departure for the new century" as "it was in 1890 that Europe started on the road to the First World War" since, for Cassels, Bismarck's forced resignation in that particular year and the accession of Wilhelm II to the throne radically altered the course of German foreign policy. The salient point in these sorts of identifications of temporal departure points is that they are essentially linked to the historians' own understandings of the causes of World War I. To William Mulligan (2010, 22), the temporal departure point was 1911 since "to try to answer why war broke out", Mulligan suggests that "the long peace 1871 became increasingly frayed from 1911, as the Second Moroccan crisis triggered a series of wars in the Mediterranean and in Balkans, which in turn prompted further crises, arms races, and press wars".

A final point with regard to the issue of temporality in the historiography of the causes of World War I pertains to historians' identifications of crucial temporal junctures in the periods and the processes leading to World War I. In line with the reasoning inherent in their accounts, historians tend to stress the importance of different temporal junctures. The main reason of this variance in highlighting different temporal junctions is the intricate relationship between causality, agency, and temporality. Each historian's understanding of the causes and cause-effect relationships, and of the key actors in these relations informs his preference of temporal junctions which, for the historian, mark the periods and processes that ultimately led to World War I.

⁵ See, for example, Gordon Martel (1987).

⁶ In a similar vein, Hew Strachan (2003, 4), concurring with this temporal identification, also begins his analysis of the origins of World War I with the declaration of the king of Prussia, Wilhelm I, as the emperor of a united Germany on January 18, 1871 at Versailles Palace.

Causes of World War I

Bearing in mind the essential elements of causality, agency, and temporality in the historiography of the causes of World War I, the approaches of historians to these causes and their accounts can be categorized according to their subject matters as political-diplomatic, military-strategic, economic, and ideological with their subcategories.

Political-diplomatic causes can be divided into two subcategories, international and domestic. In terms of international politics, scholars have put emphasis on the role of the shifts in the balance of power in European politics, the associated shifts in the alliance system among the European powers, and the internal dynamics of 'old' diplomacy that characterized the political relations among the European states of the time. G. Lowes Dickinson (1926, 5) traces the origins of World War I in the balance of power that, to him, essentially conditioned European politics since the emergence of sovereign state at the end of the 15th century which "is a turning point that marks the defeat of idea of a world-order and the definite acceptance of international anarchy". Contending that neither the Triple Alliance nor the Triple Entente was "in origin and purpose aggressive", Dickinson (1926, 9) specifies European anarchy, coupled with the balance of power and the alliance system, as the ultimate cause of World War I since it was impossible in the European anarchy "that any arrangements should be made between any States which do not arouse suspicion in others". In brief, Germany "believed that she was being threatened by an aggressive combination, just as, on the other hand, she herself seemed to the Powers of the Entente a danger to be guarded against" (Dickinson 1926, 9). By the same token, according to A. J. P. Taylor (1988), in brief, World War I was the ultimate consequence of 'the struggle for mastery in Europe' in the period preceding 1914. Taylor's detailed analysis depends on the close scrutiny of shifts in the power configurations among European powers in the period prior to World War I, especially the relative changes in the positions of Austria and Germany. In simplest terms, "Austria-Hungary was growing weaker; Germany believed herself at the height of her strength. They decided on war from opposite motives; and the two decisions together caused a general European war" while, on the other hand, "the Powers of the Triple Entente all entered the war to defend themselves" (Taylor 1988, 527). Taylor (1988, 527-528) repudiates the contention that "the war was caused by the system of alliances, or more vaguely, by the Balance of Power" and instead asserts that "it would be truer to say that the war was caused by its breakdown rather than by its existence".⁷

Some historians, on the other hand, instead of making structural analyses of the causes of World War I, have emphasized the centrality of rivalry and confrontation in the regional policies and politics of European states. The most crucial region, in this sense, was the Balkans where the policies of the Austria and Russia, two members of opposing alliances, endured periodical tensions. However, for most of the historians of World War I, Austrian-Russian rivalry in the Balkans passed an irreversible threshold and entered a confrontational phase with the Bosnian Crisis of 1908-09. The intransigent diplomatic position of Austria during the crisis, represented by its foreign minister Count Aehrenthal, owes to the Austrian confidence in its relative diplomatic and military position against Russia because by late

⁷ Also see, Richard Langhorne (1981).

January 1909 Austrian officials were “assured of full military support from Germany if Russia mobilized: an unlikely event since the latter was in no condition to wage a major war until it had recovered from its defeat [against Japan] in 1905” (Lowe 1994, 187). Nevertheless, to several historians, the consequences of Austria’s ‘accomplishment’ in the Bosnian Crisis of 1908-9 were to contribute to a considerable extent to the outbreak of World War I. First, John Lowe (1994, 187) states, “Serbian propaganda and terrorist activities directed against the Dual Monarchy intensified, making the South Slav problem more intractable than ever”. Second, Fiona K. Tomaszewski (2002, 26-27) argues, though disputable, that “the annexation crisis destroyed the basis of Austro-Russian cooperation in the region, which had functioned well for thirty years and caused Russia to turn to the Balkan powers themselves”. In addition, Tomaszewski (2002, 26) continues, even though “Germany had attempted to use the crisis to split the Entente,” “the Bosnian crisis served to strengthen the Entente as it convinced Russia of the need to tighten ties with Britain and France so Russia would not be left unsupported again”. Finally, to James Joll (1990), the humiliating concession of Russia in the Bosnian Crisis generated a sense of loss of Russian position and influence in the Balkans in the Russian leadership which prompted them to act uncompromisingly in the July Crisis of 1914. The Russian leadership, Joll (1990, 183) argues, was prepared “if necessary to go to war, since it was felt that a failure to back Serbia this time would mean the abandonment of Russia’s claim to influence in the Balkans”.

Some historians, on the other hand, have studied bilateral relations between European states in the period preceding World War I and traced some causes for the outbreak of war in these bilateral relations. Paul Kennedy’s (1980, 410) contention, in his elaborate analysis of the rise of antagonism between Britain and Germany before World War I, is that “the colonial quarrels, naval rivalry and disagreement over the European balance of power” drove Britain and Germany apart, and these “were in effect the strategical and geopolitical manifestations of the relative shift in the economic power of these two countries between 1860 and 1914”. In other words,

The Anglo-German antagonism basically arose from the fact that in the half-century under scrutiny Germany grew out of its position as ‘a cluster of insignificant States under insignificant princelings’; from the further facts that this growth gradually threatened to infringe perceived ‘British interests’, that these economic shifts increased the nervousness of British decision-makers already concerned about ‘saving the Empire’ (Kennedy 1980, 466),

To Kennedy (1980, 477), British and German governments’ decisions to enter into World War I originated in the antagonism between them: “the wartime struggle between London and Berlin was but a continuation of what had been going on for at least fifteen or twenty years before the July crisis itself”. In a different vein, George F. Kennan (1984) examines the relations between France and Russia in the early 1890s, especially the establishment of the ‘fateful’ alliance between the two states, and attributes a crucial place to Franco-Russian military agreements and the resulting alliance between the two states in the subsequent course of European politics and the consequent outbreak of World War I.

In addition to international politics, regional politics, and bilateral politics, the effects of the foreign policies of individual states on the outbreak of World War I are put under scrutiny as well. Studies of this sort emphasize the decisive role of decision-making, and thus decision-makers, in the conduct of states' foreign policies. To Mark Hewitson (2006, 229), for example, "the readiness of German readers to use the threat of a European war distinguished them from those in other countries". Hewitson (2006, 209) argues that the decision of the German leadership, especially Chancellor Bethmann, to pursue a strategy of brinkmanship was the basic cause of the outbreak of World War I as, for one example, "mediation failed during the July crisis largely because the German Chancellor and Foreign Office were more willing to risk a European war than to renounce the idea of a 'local war' between Austria-Hungary and Serbia". In analyzing Russia's decision to enter the World War I, after mentioning the favorable changes in Russia's economy, armed forces, and foreign policy, Keith Neilson (1995) underlines personal evaluations of Russian policymakers about Russia's position in international politics, and in particular about the July Crisis. Of crucial importance, the Russian Council of Ministers met on July 24, 1914 wherein "Sazonov [the foreign minister] argued that Germany was determined to establish a paramount position in Europe" while "Krivoshein [minister of agriculture] stated that Russia's position had improved since 1905 and that, while war should be avoided if possible, Russia must now take a firmer stand" (Neilson 1995, 111). A consensus was reached and reaffirmed at a second meeting the next day. In short, accounts of the causes of World War I that focus on particular states' foreign policies always involve the decision-making processes. Accordingly, they emphasize the political understandings of influential statesmen in explaining the political outcomes of these domestic political processes, or simply, foreign policies of particular states, which in turn caused in varying degrees the outbreak of World War I.

Thus, these studies are close to those accounts of the causes of World War I which exclusively link the outbreak of the War to domestic political causes. As a famous example, Fritz Fischer (1975), causing an enduring controversy and also generating a school of analysis known as 'primacy of domestic politics' (*Primat der Innenpolitik*), quite convincingly argues that World War I was a deliberately provoked and instigated act of aggression by the German elites, and thus was an extension of German domestic politics. Fischer's account rests on the claim that the German leadership had already decided to embark on a war long before the outbreak of World War I. To substantiate his argument, Fischer draws attention to the War Council of December 8, 1912 which convened on the call of Wilhelm II and only included military command. The Kaiser was in favor of an immediate war against France and Russia and was confirmed by von Moltke, the chief of German military staff, who famously stated: "I believe a war to be to unavoidable and: the sooner the better" (Fischer 1975, 162). Fischer identifies three domestic causes for the German elites' aspiration for an immediate war. The first is the discrepancy between rapid economic expansion and the shortage of capital and markets. The second is perceived socialist threat to the supremacy of 'conservative elements' in Germany, mainly Junkers and industrialists, a threat aggravated with the elections of January 12, 1912 as a result of

which the Social Democrats became the strongest party in Reichstag with 110 deputies. The third reason is the shift in the German elites' mindset from a claim to be a great power to a claim to be a world power with the consequent endorsement of 'world policy' (*Weltpolitik*) (Fischer 1975, 3-44). Accordingly, Fischer (1967, 3-50) argues, these developments led to expansionist foreign policy objectives and as a response, and a solution, to the internal and external constraints against these objectives German leadership opted for the decision of instigating a war, that is, World War I. In a similar vein, extending the scope of analysis to include the elites of other major powers Russia, France, and Austria-Hungary, Holger H. Herwig (2003) stresses the centrality of domestic 'coteries' in the initiation and expansion of World War I. In each of the four states, Herwig (2003, 443) contends, "the decision-making coterie saw their nation as in decline or at least seriously threatened. To halt the decline or to block the threat, the decision makers felt that some demonstration of strength was imperative." However, while German elites acted offensively in Fischer's analysis, in Herwig's analysis elites acted for defensive purposes since, to Herwig (2003, 443), "it was the sense of threat and the resultant need to address that decline that led them to the key decision, namely, to participate in the coming war".

Military-strategic causes of World War I have also been subject to careful assessments. In particular, the excessive expansions of arms industry and the resulting arms race among European states, naval arms race especially between Germany and Britain, and military planning of the European powers are put forward by historians as the causes, or at least some causes, of World War I. In terms of arms race among the European powers that gradually intensified in the period before World War I, David Stevenson (1996, 13-14) argues that before the 'breakdown of equilibrium' among the European military structure in 1908, arms races, though present, "had not usually led to bloodshed, and not all wars had been preceded by armaments competition"; yet, "the fearful climax to the 1912-14 race suggests...that in this instance armaments did inhibit crisis management and helped to bury the long European peace". Stevenson places arms race within the general context of confrontational European politics after 1904, which influenced the defense policies of all European powers which, in turn, increased their military capabilities and military preparedness. Finally, with the breakdown of the balance among European armies in the period of 1908-1912 started 'the great acceleration' in 1912. Stevenson is wary of not presenting armaments competition as the cause of World War I. Instead, he gives a cyclical account stressing the interaction between militarization and diplomacy. "Diplomacy failed to regulate the arms race," Stevenson (1996, 417) argues, and arms race failed to regulate diplomacy. In brief, arms race among European states prevented diplomacy from preventing World War I. David G. Herrmann (1996, 199), on the other hand, is more precise as he argues that "the shifting balance of military power in Europe and the new sense of urgent competition in land armaments strongly influenced the great powers' decision to go to war."

Naval arms race between Germany and Britain is indicated by some scholars as an important cause of World War I. Especially after Admiral von Tirpitz became the secretary of state of the German imperial naval office, Germany embarked on a massive naval

construction program. In addition to domestic repercussions of the program, it resulted in “the realignment of British foreign policy. It also led indirectly to a radical change in British strategic thinking” (Joll 1985, 63). In his impressive study *Dreadnought*, Robert K. Massie (1993) explains the realignment of British foreign policy. Britain, Massie (1993, xxv) argues, “could not afford to be left to face single-handed a power which dominated Europe” even though “German shipbuilding would be met by British shipbuilding”. Following its basic foreign policy of throwing “its weight against the dominance of one power or group of power which might threaten her existence,” Britain “became, if not a full-fledged ally, at least a partner of her erstwhile enemies, France and Russia” caused by the fear of the German fleet (Massie 1993, xxv). Shift in British strategic thinking, which increasingly stressed the permanent naval primacy of Britain ahead of other powers, was to be reflected in the words of Winston Churchill, the First Lord of Admiralty, in March 1913: “I must explicitly repudiate the suggestion that Great Britain can ever allow another naval power to approach her so nearly as to deflect or to restrict her political action by purely naval pressure. Such a situation would unquestionably lead to war” (Woodward 1964, 408). In brief, Anglo-German naval arms race is considered by the historians of World War I as an important factor in the origins of the War as it exacerbated bilateral relations between Britain and Germany, intensified arms race in Europe, deteriorated the general political situation of European politics, and finally caused the formation of the Triple Entente by pushing Britain more to the side of France and Russia.

To several historians, military planning of European states had a considerable impact on the outbreak of World War I.⁸ Barbara Tuchman (1962), for example, makes a critical analysis of the war planning and war plans of four European powers, Germany, France, Britain, and Russia before the outbreak of World War I. German war plans about the invasion of France, Tuchman (1962, 26) states, were “as rigid and complete as the blueprint for a battleship” as the Germans “with infinite care had attempted to provide for every contingency”. Still, against the unexpected “every precaution had been taken except one-flexibility” (Tuchman 1962, 26). The French, on the other hand, fixed on the offensive by “their hearts and hopes, as well as their training and strategy” enabled themselves “to reject defense of the Belgian frontier by insisting that if the Germans extended their right wing as far as Flanders, they would leave their center so thinned” (Tuchman 1962, 26). Besides indicating that all the states of Europe were in conscious anticipation of a war, their fatal mistakes based on false assumptions in military planning gave them a hallow confidence in their military strength and an impression that war would be short. Norman Rich (1992), concurring with Tuchman, severely criticizes the Schlieffen Plan of Germany and considers it as a crucial factor in the outbreak of World War I. The Schlieffen Plan, Germany’s general strategic plan for the execution of a total war, for Rich (1992, 455), “was fatally flawed plan from a military and above all from a political point of view”. Rich holds Schlieffen Plan responsible to a great extent for the outbreak and expansion of World War I. First, Rich (1992, 456) indicates, due to the requirements of Schlieffen Plan which involve simultaneous fighting

⁸ See, for example, John H. Maurer (1994).

against both Russia and France and thus full mobilization, the Schlieffen Plan “did not allow for mediation, which the German government desperately seeking in the final days of the crisis, or for any other peaceful resolution of the problems”. Second, despite the desire of Kaiser Wilhelm II for a partial mobilization against Russia, the Schlieffen Plan necessitated a full mobilization, and accordingly involved France into the conflict (Rich 1992, 456).⁹ In accordance with Rich, A. J. P. Taylor (1969, 121) is succinct over the role of the Schlieffen Plan in the outbreak of World War I: “When cut down to essentials, the sole cause for the outbreak of war in 1914 was the Schlieffen Plan”.

Economic causes of World War I, it seems, have not received as much attention as political-diplomatic causes, and even as military-strategic causes in the historiography of the causes of World War I. Linking economic imperialism and international conflict, studies examining economic causes of the World War I usually depend on the arguments declared at the end of the Second International of July 1889 that “wars between capitalist states are as a rule the result of their rivalry for world market, as every state is not only concerned in consolidating its own market, but also in conquering new markets”, and that “wars are therefore inherent in the nature of capitalism” (Joll 1974, 206). Accordingly, several prominent socialists, such as Lenin and Bukharin, attributed the causes of World War I to imperialism ‘as the highest stage of capitalism’.¹⁰ Joll (1985, 145) summarizes the essential argument of historians stressing the role of economic causes in the ultimate outbreak of World War I that the war resulted “from the imperial rivalries caused by the capitalists’ need to maintain their profits by materials and cheap labour and new markets”.

Finally, historians have called attention to the influence of ideological factors, especially the influence of nationalism pervasive in the Balkans in the period preceding World War I. Nationalism, compounded with pan-Slavism, constituted a fatal threat to the very foundations of multiethnic Austria-Hungary, and engendered a serious nationality problem for Vienna (Pleterski 1990, 77-100). For several scholars, in the Austrian threat perception, Serbia as the center of pan-Slavic movements and envisaging a greater Serbia represented the gravest threat (Lafore, 1971). Since a large portion of Southern Slavs inhabited Austria, “a Greater Serbia was a direct threat to Austria-Hungarian integrity, it was to forestall Serbia playing the role of ‘Piedmont of Southern Slavs’” (Cassels 1996, 121). On the relationship between Austria’s nationality problem, the Serbian question, and the outbreak of World War I, James Joll’s (1990) account is incisive: “Austria-Hungary had decided that the assassination gave her the best opportunity to deal with the Serbian question, and rightly or wrongly felt that a reduction of Serbian influence was a question of life or death for the monarchy if it was to deal with the problem of nationalities at all.” In consequence,

⁹ For Rich (1992), the Schlieffen Plan also involved Britain into the conflict as it presupposed an occupation of Belgian territory, which meant violating its neutrality, and thus provoked involvement of Britain to protect Belgium’s neutrality.

¹⁰ See, Vladimir I. Lenin (1999 [1917]), Nikolai I. Bukharin (2010 [1918]).

Conclusion

World War I started, as some historians indicate, as ‘the third Balkan war’, and then turned into a general war.

Historians have approached the causes of World War I from a multitude of perspectives stressing political-diplomatic, military-strategic, economic, and ideological causes of World War I. This traditional classification is coherent and informative. Still, it depends on one single criteria to analyze historians’ approaches to the causes of World War I, namely the subject matter. So as to achieve a more profound understanding of the historiography of the causes of World War I, the issues of causality, agency, and temporality in historians’ approaches need to be taken into consideration. Historians’ approaches do not only differ in particular subject matters but also differ in historians’ understanding of cause and effect relationships, actors, and time. In conclusion, incorporation of causality, agency, and temporality in studies attempting to understand the ways historians approach the causes of World War I would provide a wider framework and perspective.

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Özet

Tarihçiler, 1. Dünya Savaşı'nın siyasi-diplomatik, askeri-stratejik, ekonomik ve ideolojik nedenlerine odaklanarak, savaşın nedenlerine farklı bakış açılarıyla yaklaşmıştır. Bu geleneksel sınıflandırma tutarlı ve aydınlatıcıdır. Tarihçilerin 1. Dünya Savaşı'nın nedenlerine dair yaklaşımlarını analiz etmek halen tek kriter olan "konuya" bağlı kalmaktadır. Tarihçiliğin, 1.Dünya Savaşı'nın nedenlerine dair çalışması hakkında daha derin bir anlayışa sahip olmak için, tarihçilerin nedensellik,aktörlük, zamansallık konularındaki yaklaşımını dikkate almak gerekmektedir. Tarihçilerin yaklaşımı sadece konular üzerinde değil aynı zamanda bağlantılara, aktörlere ve zamana dair algılamaları dolayısıyla da farklılaşmaktadır. Nedensellik, aktörlük ve zamansallık kavramlarını dahil ederek 1. Dünya Savaşı'nın nedenlerini anlamaya odaklanan çalışmalar, daha geniş bir çerçevede ve bakış açısı sağlayabilir. Bu makale, öncelikle tarihçilerin nedensellik, aktörlük ve zamansallık kavramlarına dair tutumlarını, ikincil olarak da tarihçilerin geleneksel sınıflandırmaya ilişkin açıklamalarını tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

1. Dünya Savaşı, Tarih Yazımı, Nedensellik, Aktörlük, Zamansallık.