

What Caused the First World War?

A dyadic approach to explaining the outbreak of the war in light of the rivalry between Austria-Hungary and Russia

By: Moksha Muthukrishnan University of
Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of

LAS

Political Science & Economics Major, English Minor

mthkrsh2@illinois.edu

Vasquez

PS 300

11 June 2014

Introduction

The events leading up to, as well as the outbreak of, a war are portions of history that are highly discussed and analyzed over time in order to serve a variety of purposes. These purposes involve answering questions and shedding light upon certain patterns that may exist in the circumstances of war, or, essentially, trying to understand how wars occur. Various factors play a role in causing war, and oftentimes, in history, wars are analyzed through the perspective of specific actors (nations or people), in order to discover the nature of these factors, as to attribute a causal relationship between these actors' decisions and the actual outbreak of the war. However, it is important to note that war and its criterion cannot simply be seen through one lens – it must be seen through relationships between actors; for individual decisions oftentimes affect more than just the individual. Thus, war and how it is caused/how it could have been avoided can be understood by examining said relationship between actors. This is an idea that is exemplified by the First World War – a war that initially started out as a localized war between two actors who had a legitimate problem with each other, but later expanded to a continental, then global, scale. The First World War's outbreak had its roots in the relationships national actors had with each other, these being expressed by dyadic relationships, in particular. While any dyad of actors can be analyzed, one of the dyads that hits close to home in terms of the spark of the First World War is the dyad of Austria-Hungary and Russia. The relationship between these two countries had been one that had been simmering precariously for awhile, thus, depicting how the nature of their rivalry in the time leading up to the official start of the war was not unprecedented. Both Austria-Hungary's and Russia's grievances with each other primarily had to do with each one's specific rivals and allies in the more recent years leading up to World War I, the main one being Serbia (Austria-Hungary's rival and Russia's ally), which, in itself,

exemplifies their rivalry with each other as well. Thus, the two countries came to war against each other, not only due to individual discrepancies from years long past, but also due to discrepancies amongst the actors they chose to either align, or misalign, themselves with; proving how, in the end, they fought because of unresolved problems that did not necessarily have to bring about war.

The Issue

The rivalry between these two countries and the main issues they shared, which culminated over time, had started as far back as the 1700s, specifically 1768, according to William R. Thompson and David Dreyer, with both players having similar, but different goals. What they had in common was that they both wanted to expand southwards and westwards, not only in terms of land, but also in terms of influence, especially in the wake of an Ottoman Empire that was rapidly decreasing in power. According to Thompson and Dreyer, “Austria and Russia could cooperate in this endeavor or they could compete with one another, so they did both” (p. 28). This basically meant that pursuing their individual personal interests, while giving them gains in some areas, could also be detrimental for them in other areas. For instance, Russia wanted to move westwards, but doing that would mean infringing on Austria’s role “as the primary protector of German states” (Thompson and Dreyer 28). Infringing on Austria’s said role would subsequently lead to Austria not being amiable to preventing attacks on Russia from the west, which was also something Russia wanted. At the same time though, Austria’s power was no match for Russia and her alliances, meaning that she could not fight Russia even if she tried. Thus, this depicted, from very early on, how Austria and Russia’s relationship could not properly be defined, which inevitably made it very unstable – their dichotomy of being rivals with benefits foreshadowed the rocky road to World War I.

The Rivalry

While this relationship between the countries did exist throughout the 1700s, the relationship that it evolved into post-1815 truly helps to understand why these two countries went to war, and why they were rivals, regardless of how they sometimes pretended not to be. A little prior to 1815, a chain of events took place that would later turn into more than just bouts of tension between the two. As previously mentioned, control over Balkan territory was something that both Austria (for it was only Austria, and not Austria-Hungary, prior to 1867) and Russia wanted. So, when Russia decided to occupy Belgrade in 1811, Austria naturally became flustered, increasing the chances of Austria and Russia having another disagreement. While the French invading Russia did help to temporarily deter those chances in 1812 (“because Russian troops were forced to withdraw from Serbia” (Thompson and Dreyer 30)), it did not get rid of inevitably setting the stage for further Balkan nationalism, and thus, Serbian nationalism, in the future; this meant that, when this did happen, Russia would likely come to the aid of the Balkan states, which would put Austria in a predicament she wanted to avoid. Thus, the nature of their rivalry was inevitable.

Russia continued to pursue this Balkan territory by attempting to create a plan that would allow her to create individual states spanning from Moldavia all the way to Greece. Her goal in doing this was to make sure she had a buffer zone to cut off “Austrian access to the...Black Sea” (Thompson and Dreyer 30). Austria tried to counter this preventive measure taken by Russia by creating a plan to capture Constantinople through the tactic of taking Moldavia and another territory of Wallachia before Russia even had to time to take action. Russia, likewise, countered this by threatening to attack Austria through Polish territory (Thompson and Dreyer 30). Eventually Austria backed off and later came to an agreement with Russia in 1833 to maintain

the status quo in situations regarding Poland and the Ottoman Empire, as well as come to the aid of any of the autocracies of Austria, Prussia, and Russia if internal revolts were to take place. However, it must be noted that the game they played during this time period was once again indicative of the rivalry escalating to something more than either of the two countries could have imagined. Their blatant participation in this power play only further depicted how the tensions kept gradually increasing; and the fact that, even though a world war did not occur every time a conflict occurred between these two countries, World War I would occur as a result of these amassed tensions along with their chosen alignments with other countries (Thompson and Dreyer 30).

After this agreement was made between Russia, Prussia, and Austria, Russia took many steps to try and maintain this 'peace.' For example, Russian intervention in Hungary in 1849 helped Austria because it retained the possibility of there being an Austria-Hungary in the future. About a year after that, Russia helped Austria again by threatening Prussia with intervention if she pushed Austria out of the managerial power of having a say in German state concerns. Thus, when the Crimean War broke out in 1853, it was not unreasonable for Russia to expect Prussia and Austria to come to her aid as allies. However, she was met with an unpleasant surprise when she tried to move "into the Danube region [and] was countered by an Austrian-Prussian alliance and the threat of an attack on Russia" (Thompson and Dreyer 30). This led to Russia being forced out of the region due to her unpreparedness and humiliation, subsequently, allowing Austria to take Moldavia and Wallachia. Austria then went on to "join the Crimean coalition opposing Russia" (Thompson and Dreyer 30), and Prussia stayed neutral. Now, by this point, Austria was actually seen as a threat to Russia, specifically militarily. Realizing this, Russia tried to save herself from further humiliation by attempting to make an alliance, or even an agreement

with Prussia by saying that she would protect Prussia from any future Austrian attack, in order to create a buffer for herself in the case of an Austrian attack. However, by that same token, Prussia was not a clueless actor, and, consequently, refused Russia because of the realization that Russian expansion was just as terrifying a concept as an Austrian attack. Russia, thus, was essentially alone during all of this, with no guarantee that her 'allies' would help her at all. Thus, this was the turning point in terms of the two actors' rivalry, and when they really started seeing each other as a force and enemy to be reckoned with – they were reaching the point of no return. The grievances and mistrust that inevitably ensued from all of this ended up playing into the decisions Russia made in terms of who to align herself with, as illustrated through the threat on Austria with “a Piedmont attack in Italy” in 1859 (Thompson and Dreyer 31). During these crises, Austria came to Russia requesting for military assistance against the attack, but this time, Russia did what her 'allies' had done and declined; she also proceeded to militarize on the Austrian border. What Russia did in this situation was essentially what Austria did to Russia only a few years prior, once again depicting the persisting rivalry between Austria and Russia, along with how their alliances exemplified their personal rivalry (Thompson and Dreyer 31).

The years after the Franco-German War of 1870 proved to host the most outward show of tension Austria-Hungary (because Austria became Austria-Hungary in 1867) and Russia had had up until this point. This was most evidently proved through the fact that both nations engaged in what Thompson and Dreyer call “conservative solidarity” (p. 31) due to their inability to cooperate with each other. Austria, Germany, and Russia were all part of what was known as the Three Emperor's League at this time; however, it was less cooperation between the three powers and more of Germany trying to quell Austro-Hungarian and Russian tensions. The problem was, both only had self-interested goals in joining the Three Emperor's League – self-interested goals

that were laden with the intent of putting a cap on each others' ambitions, specifically in terms of territory. However, not long after, a Greater Bulgaria was formed due to the Ottoman Empire's defeat by Russia, which inevitably created a cause for concern for Austria-Hungary, especially since now the Greater Bulgaria would work in tandem with Serbia to pose territorial expansion problems for Austria-Hungary. When news of the Greater Bulgaria came to the forefront, both Austrian and British decision makers were ready to start preparations for war, but the Congress of Berlin in 1878 dissolved this idea by creating a lot of smaller states, instead of a few large states. This benefitted Austria-Hungary greatly because having a few large states would likely mean that those states would be heavily pro-Russian, which would simply put another rut in her territorial plans. From this conference, Austria-Hungary also gained the benefit of being allowed to station troops in Bosnia-Herzegovina, thus, conveying the slow escalation of the rivalry due to benefits for one side and losses for the other, all due to the personal alignments of actors combined with the situation at the time (Thompson and Dreyer 31).

The gains for Austria-Hungary were increased in quite an unlikely way through the territory of Bulgaria. While it would make sense that Bulgaria catered to Russian demands due to her prominent role in the creation of Bulgaria in the first place, Russia was thrown off guard by Bulgaria being more difficult to control than she would have expected due to antagonistic leaders within Bulgaria herself. Russia, evidently frustrated by this, tried to threaten Bulgaria with military intervention but was countered by the same type of Austrian threats towards Russia. Finally, Austria tried to bring about some amount of peace between Serbia and Bulgaria after they went to war in 1885, all whilst keeping Bulgaria and Serbia in good books. While this clearly worked against Russian interests, at this point in time, Russia did not react because her concerns at the time had to do with her East Asian interests. The fact was, war was not going to

break out at this time even though the tensions and conflict for war were present. This was because while they had a good reason to go to war, the circumstances were not optimal in terms of either side feeling powerful enough to actually initiate a war with each other – thus, they had the “understanding that neither power would upset the Balkan status quo for the next several years” (Thompson and Dreyer 32) and their threats continued to amount to nothing. This concept (and its iteration in other events of a similar nature) is very significant to note though, because it depicted the consistent discrepancies and conflicts between these two actors; however, the fact that they never amounted to war indicates that something was missing in causing a war – this missing element was the strength of the relationship between the actors each side chose to align themselves with. It was these relationships, coupled with the continuously rising tensions and conflicts that would lead to the eventual eruption of the Great War.

The Rivalry (immediately prior to WWI)

In terms of the outbreak of the First World War, Austria-Hungary declaring war on Russia was not necessarily a surprising occurrence. As mentioned previously, tensions had been present for years; they were just simply repressed. This was in part due to Russia’s relatively recent (in terms of the war) weakening in the viewpoint of the public eye in 1908 during the Bosnian Crisis. For a long time, Russia had wanted an unhindered passage through the Straits of Constantinople in order for her warships to be able to pass through. So, in 1908, when Russia and Austria-Hungary’s foreign ministers had a meeting about the Bosnian Crisis (that is, Austria-Hungary’s goal to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina), Russia agreed (at this point, only to the knowledge of Austria-Hungary) to support Austria-Hungary’s annexation, or at least acknowledge it, in return for Austria-Hungary’s support of their usage of the Turkish Straits. However, the first problem arose when Austria-Hungary declared that she had Russia’s support

for the annexation, before Russia's Foreign Minister Alexander Izvolsky had a chance to get the approval for this plan from Russia's possible allies, Britain and Germany, as well as France.

This immediately put Russia at a disadvantage in terms of her relationship with the other great powers, as well as compromised her honor as a power, for Austria-Hungary, quite simply, tricked her (Williamson 113). In addition, Russia was not well equipped to resist Austria-Hungary so far from home, so she simply reneged on her agreement and the Austro-Hungarian annexation continued as per the plan. Thus, the first bud of tension for the outbreak of World War I, in particular, between the rivals was evident (Thompson and Dreyer 32).

The tension in relationship to the Bosnian Crisis did not just end there, though. After Russia's Austro-Hungarian humiliation, Serbia decided to mobilize against Austria-Hungary in the name of taking Bosnia and Herzegovina back. It was then that Serbia turned to her friend and ally, the nation that called herself the "protector of the Slavs" (Williamson 113) for help against Austria-Hungary. Thus, Russia found herself in a predicament that compromised the hand of her public image and her alliance with Serbia. Eventually, Germany threatened Russia and told her to back down. Not wanting another humiliation, Russia (or rather, Tsar Nicholas II and the Foreign Minister Alexander Izvolsky) agreed to do so. This "diplomatic blunder," as Williamson calls it, had severe implications for Russia in terms of Serbia (and, by proxy, in terms of Austria-Hungary as well). Many Russians, even within the country, were upset by Russia's minimization of the Slavs, thus, making Russia not only a fool to the other nations, but a fool within her own country. This discrediting of her honor made Russia even more determined to not be humiliated again, which is why Russia started to further her army with great funds starting in 1910. This set the stage for further issues with Austria-Hungary being brought to light (Williamson 116-118).

After the Bosnian Crisis, Russia was evidently in a weakened state – a state that Austria-Hungary and Germany would have no qualms taking advantage of. Thus, Russia, in an aim to be ready to show her power if the time arose, aggressively pushed for a risky Balkan policy – one that encouraged the creation of a Balkan League in order to combat the Turkish government. The Slavs saw many successes in the Balkan Wars, which led Russia's Foreign Minister, Serge Sazonov to enthusiastically support the expansion of Serbia, as well as allowing her to use the Adriatic. Now, this clearly posed a problem because Austria-Hungary did not want Serbia to have this access to the Adriatic, subsequently, increasing the already heated tension between the two countries. Both countries continued building their militaries along their shared front in an attempted power play in order to scare the other into backing down. This usage of coercive diplomacy eventually resulted in the two countries calling for negotiations. For the time being, war was prevented, but even still, neither side agreed to easing up on her part in the power play, and the tensions continued (Williamson 116-118).

Peace continued to outwardly be pursued by Austria-Hungary and Russia in 1913 during the Second Balkan War. This was due to the fact that Russia did not want the Balkan League to break up, and Austria-Hungary wanted to put a cap on the expansion of Serbia. Unfortunately for the two countries, neither had anything positive to take away from the outcome of this war, which left them with unsettled grievances that would eventually impact their decision-making processes before the Great War.

The assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo was the spark that eventually led Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov to make the quick decisions that he did – a series of decisions that led to an inevitable downwards spiral. When Austria-Hungary's threat to Serbia became almost imminent, Russia, but specifically Sazonov, was determined not to back down from

Russia's role as protector of the Slavs. Thus, the domino effect began. Russia said that if Austria-Hungary was going to put demands on Serbia, Serbia would inevitably turn to Russia for support, which Russia would give. But then Austria-Hungary told Russia that if she chose to attack Austria-Hungary, Germany (who had issued Austria-Hungary a blank check) would attack her. To this, Russia responded with the notion that if Germany attacked her, France would attack Germany; and if Germany attacked France, Britain would attack Germany. Thus, the series of events depicted a power play even greater than what it had started with, all dependent on whether someone would back down. The grievances had started specifically between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, which, by proxy due to Russia's relationship with Serbia, had eventually involved Russia as well. Subsequently, Russia and Austria-Hungary's relationship with the countries around them only further solidified their own personal rivalry, leading them down the path of a world war – a war which, if it had been contained, could have been avoided. Thus, the personal underlying issues between the dyad countries of Austria-Hungary and Russia were crucial in understanding the motives behind going to war (Williamson 128).

In terms of the rationale behind going to war, the concepts and ideals can be explained through the theory of Hensel. "Hensel (1999: 119) argues that changes in adversaries' relations are a function of three factors: the outcomes and consequence of prominent crises and wars, the issues at stake and the difficulty in resolving them to both parties satisfaction, the influence of external actors." These three factors are clearly illustrated through the dyad of Austria-Hungary and Russia, the first point being specifically depicted through their disputes over territoriality. Their rivalry was largely brought about by the outcomes and consequences of territorial wars that they chose to fight and the allies they chose in the process of doing that. There was the obvious discrepancy between Russia's support of the Balkan States (and their revolts against Turkish

command), and Austria-Hungary not wanting large Balkan regions to be formed that would challenge her power. Thus, in terms of the outcomes and consequences of these crises (as mentioned earlier in more detail), Hensel's theory for what brings about rivalries (or a change in relations), is clearly exemplified. In addition, his second point is also met due to the fact that both parties realized the decisions they made were a matter of marginal costs versus marginal benefits. They knew they had something to gain, at least initially, from competing and cooperating with their 'ally,' but the fact that both sides could never be happy only further justifies Hensel's idea that both parties may not necessarily be satisfied with the way issues are solved. Finally, his third factor regarding external actors playing a large role in affecting a rivalry is evident simply because of the nature of the outbreak of the Great War in this dyad. These two actors went to war, not only because of a buildup of their tensions, but because of the actors they allied themselves with at the time (Austria-Hungary with Germany, and Russia with Serbia). These external actors played a big part in convincing both actors involved that war was what was necessary. Their influence spanned not just their alliances, but also had an inevitable effect on accentuating the rivalries. Thus, Hensel's theory for a change in adversaries' relations is evidently depicted by the rival dyad of Austria-Hungary and Russia.

Contagion

The war, specifically from the perspective of this dyad, spread to them mainly due to the unstable and constantly fluctuating relationship Austria-Hungary and Russia had with each other. These two went to war because of the actors they either supported or did not support, and their previous bottled tensions only proved to be an effective platform for that outbreak. The fact was, they had these tensions for centuries, yet they were not constantly at war, even if they were at odds. The element that changed in this scenario, then, was the outside relationships these

actors had. This, in turn, meant that war could have been avoided, if it were not for the diffusion mechanisms that aided its spread. Diffusion mechanisms are mainly defined by alliances, rivalries, and contiguity. At some point in time, if not all the time, Austria-Hungary and Russia fulfilled all of these criteria for aiding in the diffusion of a war. They started a loosely bitter ‘alliance’ (when they supported each other, it was not necessarily formally), proceeded to fall more into their roles as rivals, and almost always were having a dispute relating to contiguity (they were both neighboring countries who wanted the same territory – Balkan territory). In addition to this, the countries fulfill Thompson and Dreyer’s definition of rivalries, which argues about the existence of rivalries from more of a qualitative sense than a quantitative sense by stating that, specifically in the case of this dyad, policy issues in tandem with spatial and positional issues truly solidified these two countries as rivals. By fulfilling this definition, it helps support this theory that the contagion in terms of the involvement with outside actors was what truly pushed this war to spread (the spatial and positional issues relating specifically to Balkan territory – or said outside actors). This idea slides straight into the “Slide Into War Thesis,” which argues that each country became involved in the war because of her respective rivals and alliances. This is something that is blatantly exemplified through Austria-Hungary and Russia in terms of their original causes for tension, versus their motivations before the start of the war. The relationships they made were what dragged them into war. Also, as mentioned before, war soon became inevitable because their usage of coercive diplomacy no longer led to coercion, for each side’s show of strength only proceeded to make the opposing side more frustrated, thus, increasing the already blazing tensions. Finally, in relationship to the idea of contingency, there is the obvious fact that the outcomes were contingent on a decision that did not have to happen. As is evident with Austria-Hungary and Russia, if they had made certain choices and decisions a bit differently, war could have possibly been avoided, or, at the very

least, it could have been contained to a localized war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. Thus, the fact that contingency and agency produces uncertainty allows the perception of an avoidable conflict to become plausible; however, in the case of this war, the contagion and diffusion mechanisms proved to dominate any form of peacemaking (Levy and Vasquez).

The Path to War

The path to war, as explicated throughout the previous descriptions of this dyad, could thus be explained as happening at first due to a conflict that was purely personal, but finally escalating to something beyond the control of any individual power. Their rivalry stemmed at first from territorial ambitions, which eventually led to specific alignments being formed prior to World War I. These alignments led to certain agreements and promises being made, and these agreements and promises eventually led to the inevitability of these two powers entering the war. Each conflict, or step, led to the next, and if it was not for the ambition driving these conflicts, there would be no reason to fight. However, since they did have ambition, each power made decisions that affected the outbreak of the war. Thus, the path to war was a long and difficult one, with many obstacles and hindrances along the way, but the rationale behind the decisions made at each checkpoint had an enormous influence on the final decision that would be made to go to war at the outbreak of World War I.

Conclusion

In the end, this dyad fought, not only because of underlying tensions due to their strained relationship throughout a few centuries of history, but because of that coupled with the actors they chose to support or not support. What started out as a personal territorial issue between two

actors eventually evolved into a conflict involving not only other actors, but other actors and their unique conflicts. As in the case of Russia and Serbia, Russia had an interest in Balkan territory, but that eventually turned into full-fledged support for those in that area if sovereignty was infringed upon – that is, Serbia. This depicts how, as an offshoot of Russia's attempted gains with Balkan territory, they became involved in a continental, and then global, war. Thus, what could have been a localized war inadvertently brought in more players due to alliances – this, in turn, exemplifying the rivalry of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian dyad.

Works Cited

Jack S. Levy (1990/91) "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914." *International Security* 15, pp. 151-186 (online through library UIUC).

Thompson, William R., and David R. Dreyer. *Handbook of International Rivalries: 1494 - 2010*. Washington, DC: CQ, 2011. Print.

Williamson, Samuel R., Jr., and Russel Van Wyk. *July 1914: Soldiers, statesmen and the Coming of the Great War*. Boston-New York. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. Print.