The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics and Decision-Making
Edited by Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez

A Review by Bruno Binetti

Bruno Binetti is a Master’s candidate in International Affairs at the Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. He holds a B.A. in International Studies from Torcuato Di Tella University in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He focuses on conflict resolution, Latin American affairs, and history of International Relations.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War I, the first military confrontation that affected nearly every corner of the globe. The Great War was great not just because of its geographical reach, but also due to the unprecedented loss of life it caused, and the structural transformations of the international system that followed it. Indeed, as European armies marched to war in August 1914, they were leading the way toward what British historian Eric Hobsbawn coined “the short twentieth century,” that would end with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This centennial has generated renewed academic interest on the conflict, which has led to the publication of new books and the reediting of classics. In this crowded field, The Outbreak of the First World War stands out for bringing together a distinguished group of historians and political scientists to explain the origins of the war in 1914. This interdisciplinary effort, coordinated by editors Jack Levy and John Vasquez, reflects on the historical importance of World War I and highlights the fact that it was the cradle for most of the current theories of international relations.

The sequence of events that led to World War I is widely known. The murder of the heir to the Austrian-Hungarian throne in Bosnia led to an Austrian ultimatum to Serbia. Russia responded with a full mobilization, followed by that of its ally, France, after which Austrian ally Germany declared war on both. This occurred in a context of great power rivalry, arms races, and fixed alliances that had been developing for decades,
which made conflict almost inevitable after the mechanisms of mutual reassurances and guarantees were set in motion. During these decisive days, governments from all major European powers exchanged telegrams, visits, and informal messages, as they mulled their reactions to each other’s threats and military movements.

The Outbreak of the First World War effectively uses historical documents to sustain different perspectives about what drove Europe and the world to this conflict. Telegrams, newspapers, and official reports are analyzed in depth by all authors in search for the deep reasons and perceptions behind every major power decision. Diplomatic positions and military orders usually changed on a daily basis before the beginning of the war, which makes these efforts even more noteworthy.

The main theme of this book is what Samuel Williamson calls in his chapter the “German paradigm”: the prevalent perspective that Germany was the main (and for some authors almost sole) instigator of the war. This view states that the war was a direct consequence of German fears about its relative decline, combined with the opportunity presented by the events in Sarajevo. Dale Copeland’s chapter explains the origin of the war in terms that are absolutely in line with this vision. In recent times, however, this view has been challenged by alternative explanations that do not ignore the role of Berlin, but consider it to be just one of many factors leading to war. The nature of this debate is very relevant, as by many accounts, the massive war reparations that the Treaty of Versailles imposed on a defeated Germany because of its alleged responsibility in initiating the war originated a profound resentment among the German people that would subsequently lead to Nazism and a second global war just twenty years later.

In that regard, one of the strongest qualities of this text is that it brings new perspectives to the debate without seeking to impose a definite conclusion regarding German responsibility. Historical analysis usually suffers from bias, as authors seek to sustain their own views rather than search for new knowledge. This is not the case in The Outbreak, and the lack of homogeneity provides a diversity of opinion that contributes to the
The explanatory power of the book as a whole. The chapters by Mulligan, Levy, and Vasquez all confront the German paradigm from different points of view, seeking to explain whether Germany intended to launch a preventive war in 1914 or not. For all explanations of the origin of the conflict, and especially for those that subscribe to the German paradigm, the prognoses in Berlin about the nation’s future and its relative decline in the face of a rising Russia are critical. Many authors claim that decision-makers in Germany, including the Kaiser and the chancellor, believed that the crisis that erupted in 1914 gave them the best opportunity to confront Russia before its power capabilities became far greater than those of Germany itself. Of course, this vision of a strong Russia would eventually fall, along with the Romanov Dynasty, in 1917.

Nevertheless, this book goes beyond the debate about Germany’s responsibility. Karen Rasler and William Thompson study the interconnection of the multiple rivalries between European powers as a key factor for the outbreak of the war. Ronald Bobroff and J. F. V. Keiger analyze the domestic situations and interests of Russia and France, respectively, from a point of view that is not far from the German paradigm previously described; both countries are portrayed as reluctantly drawn into a war they did not choose. Although briefly mentioned in several chapters as an important aspect in the calculations of other great powers in 1914, none of the contributors directly address the role of Great Britain in the beginning of the war. Future works on this matter should explore the reasons why London decided to unequivocally back Paris and Saint Petersburg in the July crisis, a position that became clear to Germany in the days prior to the war. It is likely that this support from Great Britain played an important role in French and Russian decisions to mobilize their troops as tensions rose. Moreover, Great Britain joined the war as the primus inter pares among the European world powers, a position that makes its reasons to enter the war all the more important.

The depth and academic rigor of the Outbreak of the First World War makes it an indispensable book not only to comprehend the origins of World War I, but also to bring the lessons of this conflict to the twenty-first century. Ultimately, to study the outbreak of World War I is to
analyze the interaction between the structure of the international system and the impact of human agency. Powerful men and women immersed in an international context make decisions based on their personalities and perceptions; this is the core of international relations. Timeless lessons can be drawn and applied by modern-day scholars from the factors that influenced European major powers in 1914. In particular, as American power in the international system continues to be challenged by emerging states such as China and Russia, debates about balance of power in a multipolar world, relative decline and even preventive war will become increasingly frequent and relevant. It will be crucial for decision makers to understand that rigid positions, armed standoffs, and geopolitical confrontation can be extremely dangerous in a context of uncertainty, and elude their control. In that sense, the outbreak of World War I is the story of an unintended tragedy into which nations entered at full speed. To prevent history from repeating itself, it is crucial to remember what happened in 1914 during the weeks that forever changed the world.