

The Outbreak of World War I as a Case Study in Testing Theories of Causation

Dependent variable: Germany's declaration of war against France and Russia.

| Distant Causes (permissive conditions) | Intermediate Causes I (facilitating factors) | Intermediate Causes II (facilitating factors) | Proximate Causes (triggers) |
|---|--|---|--|
| Rapid shifts in the international distribution of power; Norms favoring war as a solution; Economic imperatives of the industrial revolution. | Emergence of societal actors who would benefit from war; Rise of government actors beholden to interests that would benefit from war. | Concentration of authority in governmental institutions capable of launching war; Creation of organizational routines that allow government bureaucracies to rapidly initiate war. | Rejection of discomfiting information by psychologically impaired leaders; Confusion; Lack of information; Fatigue; Willingness to allow bureaucracies to put into place war plans that could not be revoked. |

Theorizing the independent variable(s) (What follows is only a suggestive overview of possible theories that could be developed from all the hypothesized causal variables and paths of causation; the list is not exhaustive of all possibilities):

A. Mono-causal theory with a distant cause (parsimonious theory; only one independent variable is necessary and sufficient to bring about the dependent variable):

Rapid increase in the power of Germany → Germany initiates war to assert its power in the European balance of power system

Hypothesis: As Germany increased its power more rapidly following German unification in 1870, the likelihood of war increased.

Evidence to test this hypothesis: Measures of German power from 1870 to 1914. Hypothesis would be confirmed if German power increased more rapidly between 1909 (the so-called “first Bosnian crisis”) and 1914 than between 1870 and 1909.

B. Multi-variate theory with two distant causes (eclectic theory; both variables are necessary and together they are sufficient to bring about the dependent variable):

Rapid increase in the power of Germany ↘

→ Germany initiates war to assert its power in the European balance of power system and to secure access to economic resources overseas

Economic imperatives of German industry ↗

Hypotheses: As Germany increased its power more rapidly following German unification in 1870, the likelihood of war increased; As European countries increased their competition for resources in the periphery (e.g., Africa), the likelihood of war increased.

Evidence to test these hypotheses: Measures of German power from 1870 to 1914. Hypothesis would be confirmed if German power increased more rapidly between 1909 (the so-called “first Bosnian crisis”) and 1914 than between 1870 and 1909. Statistics on extraction of resources from European colonies. Hypothesis would be confirmed if the returns on investments were decreasing because of increased competition among European economic interests as time progressed.

C. Multi-variate theory with an intervening variable (both variables are necessary; the more distant of the two causes is necessary for the more proximate cause to occur; together they are sufficient to bring about the dependent variable):

Industrialists, remnants of the feudal elite, and

religious leaders increasingly benefit from a strong government in Germany → Creation of strong bureaucracies in Germany → Germany initiates war to meet the demands of influential interest groups

Hypotheses: As interest groups in Germany benefitted from government control of economics and society the creation of powerful government bureaucracies became more likely; As German government bureaucracies increased their control of political decision making they were better able to formulate unassailable plans for war.

Evidence to test these hypotheses: Tangible gains of societal interest groups. Hypothesis would be confirmed if interest groups increased their material gains as government bureaucracies were strengthened. Insularity of government bureaucracies. Hypothesis would be confirmed if government bureaucracies were increasingly able to make decisions without oversight from elected bodies, courts, etc.

D. Multi-variate theory with several proximate causes (highly determined causal model; the extent to which each variable is necessary, and collectively they are sufficient, may not be completely ascertained)

Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany tells advisors not to bother him
with information aside from what he tells them he wants to hear ↘

News from Russia is difficult to obtain ↘

Germany declares war because no other options seem viable

German leaders engage in diplomacy at an exhausting pace ↗

German leaders do not question the military's war plans ↗

Hypothesis: As decision-making in Germany became less rational the likelihood for war increased.

Evidence to test this hypothesis: Contemporaneous accounts of decision-makers (e.g., journals and diaries, notes by leaders, public or private pronouncements, etc.). Hypothesis would be confirmed if accounts of decision-makers indicate that as time went by fewer efforts were made (consciously or not) to weigh all the information available about the consequences of a decision to declare war.

Summary of the Four Models of Causation Outlined Above:

| Nature of Causation | Schematic Representation |
|---|--|
| A. Mono-causal theory with a distant cause | Rapid increase in the power of Germany → Germany initiates war to assert its power in the European balance of power system |
| B. Multi-variate theory with two distant causes | Rapid increase in the power of Germany ↘ <div style="text-align: right;">Germany initiates war to assert its power in → the European balance of power system to secure access to economic resources overseas</div> Economic imperatives of German industry ↗ |
| C. Multi-variate theory with an intervening variable | Industrialists, remnants of the feudal elite, and religious leaders increasingly benefit from a strong government in Germany → Creation of strong bureaucracies in Germany → Germany initiates war to meet the demands of influential interest groups |
| D. Multi-variate theory with several proximate causes | Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany tells advisors not to bother him with information aside from what he tells them he wants to hear ↘ <div style="text-align: right;">News from Russia is difficult to obtain ↘</div> <div style="text-align: right;">Germany declares war because no other options seem viable</div> German leaders engage in diplomacy at an exhausting pace ↗ German leaders do not question the military's war plans ↗ |