

6. Group Mindset – in July, 1914

Overview: By definition, the mindset of a group is a pre-evolved structure both material and cognitive which it brings to the current situations and suggestions that it faces. We take it that the mindset of any human group is built around (at least) six sectors of activity:

- *Inhabiting*: the process of surviving and dwelling in a given physical environment or niche
- *Producing*: the re-working and alteration of this inhabited niche with human labour. This will include technology (a repertoire of skills and know-how for the accomplishment of human purposes) and infrastructure (the whole inventory and grid of constructed facilities that we impose upon a geographic landscape to render it serviceable and convenient for human purposes.
- *Cognizing*: the mental activities of feeling, conceptualizing, planning, and every other mental activity.
- *Interacting*: all processes of human communication, cooperation, commerce and conflict.
- *Valuing*: the activity of prizing something, working toward and going after it – competing or fighting for it, perhaps – in order to achieve or obtain it.
- *Managing*: the activity of governance, administration and coordination of activity, with its crucial outcome of policy.

We review the outbreak of the First World War as a spectacular example of group mindset (that of European society as a whole) which produced a thoroughly insane response to a relatively insignificant trigger.

I am a psychological and historical structure. Along with existence, I received a way of existing, or a style. All of my actions and thoughts are related to this structure . . . And yet, I am free . . . for that [structure] does not restrict my access to the world; it is rather my means of communication with it.

The Phenomenology of Perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty

The problem of discovering the origins of the First World War is therefore not one of discovering 'the aggressor.' It lies in the nature of a progressively deteriorating international situation which increasingly escaped from the control of governments.

- E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* p.312

In July 1914, European society made a collective choice to fight a suicidal war. About seventeen million people were slaughtered.¹ Four empires were

¹ [Wikipedia estimates](#) around 17 million deaths and 20 million wounded, counting military

destroyed. The global power of Europe's empire was broken. After this first world war ended, a second followed, even more terrible than the first, with only a 20 year intermission. Europe's global hegemony was broken; and though the rising United States picked up some of the pieces (and has been struggling with them ever since), a wave of liberation movements commenced around the world – in Africa, India, Iran and China – which would eventually put paid to European colonial power. The final results aren't in yet, and we still don't know how the story will turn out. But it is already clear that the West's monopoly of wealth and power has been broken, and that its relative advantage vis-a-vis the rest of the world – especially over the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China) – can only decline further.

The point to stress here is that this self-defeating conflict was out of all proportion to the event that triggered it: the [assassination](#) of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, by a Serbian nationalist. Though he had been heir presumptive to the Habsburg throne of Austria-Hungary, the chief significance of Franz Ferdinand's death was the opportunity it gave Austria to teach Serbia a lesson. Austria's humiliating ultimatum to Serbia – to submit or be conquered – was an opportunity for Russia to assert her influence in the Balkans, and to compensate in this way for her [humiliating defeat by Japan](#) in 1905. Russia's involvement was an opportunity for Germany to revise the balance of power in Europe. Germany's mobilization was a mortal threat to France, but also an opportunity to recover the territory of Alsace-Lorraine, lost to Germany in the [Franco-Prussian War](#) a generation earlier. The invasion of France through Belgium was seen as a mortal threat to Britain. No one desired or expected a general war until they found themselves in it.

The deep [causes of World War I](#) are exceedingly complex and have been debated up, down and sideways by historians of every stripe and view-point.² We have no need to enter their debates, but their basic question is the best, and certainly the most spectacular example I can find of the role of collective mindset in a group's minding and behaviour. The puzzle is that between the [Franco-Prussian War](#) of 1870-71 and the [Great War](#) of 1914, there had been at least [six wars or diplomatic crises](#) of greater intrinsic importance than the assassination at Sarajevo:

- the [Russo-Turkish War](#) of 1877
- the [Fashoda Incident](#) of 1898
- the [First Moroccan Crisis](#) of 1905
- the [Bosnian Crisis](#) of 1908
- the [Agadir Crisis](#) of 1911
- the [Balkan Wars](#) of 1912

and civilian casualties together.

2 The account in this chapter is based on Christopher Clark's excellent book, [The Sleepwalkers](#).

Yet all of these were resolved without a general war, while the [July Crisis](#)³ which followed the Archduke's assassination, for some reason, could not be settled diplomatically. For a month, the statesmen of Europe exchanged telegrams, and memoranda and ultimatums, and then mobilized their armies and started a general European war. There is no way to explain how this happened without some concept, if only tacit, of group mindset. The murders at Sarajevo merely *triggered* the conflagration. What 'caused' it was a whole, deeply troubled mindset through which that assassination was perceived – though, as we'll see, the notion of 'cause' is scarcely meaningful in a system of this complexity. As we review the details of how this trigger worked, the components of group mindset come into view, and we can see how they influence and organize (not 'cause' exactly) the minding and responses that follow.

6.1 Group Mindset and the European Background

This was one of the central problems confronting all the foreign policy executives (and those who try to understand them today): the 'national interest' was not an objective imperative pressing in upon government from the world outside, but the projection of political interests within the political elite itself.

Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers* (p.190)

By definition, mindset is the abstract structure that a minding system evolves to meet, process and respond to the events it faces. While identical to the personal mindset of individuals in the role it plays, a group's collective mindset is different in several interesting ways: First, it is typically more conflicted, more divided against itself, than a viable individual's mindset can afford to be. As individuals, we all know what it is to be double-minded about something, but sane people (almost by definition) can make up their minds when they really need to. By contrast, a group or whole society may be pulled in any number of ways, and may be stalled in some respects without becoming dysfunctional in the crucial respects. It can struggle along and survive for many years, while seriously divided against itself.

At the same time, the leader(s) of a group cannot afford to give vague orders. They must command their subordinates in precise terms; they must say and write exactly what these underlings are expected to accomplish. They can leave subordinates some freedom in their choice of means – in fact, they must do so – but they must be as clear as possible about objectives. For a nation or a big corporation, there may be contingency plans, but these too will have to be precise – and implemented with some precision once they are triggered. For this reason, paradoxical as it may seem, a group will usually need to make itself more rigid than most of its members will be: It may show greater diversity of desire and opinion than any individual will have, but the instructions finally given to its officers and members will need to be clear.

Finally, the mindset of a group is usually more constrained, more characterized by its architecture and infrastructure – its current stigmergic plant –

³ See Section 6.3 below.

than is the case for individuals. Generally, we feel that individuals can move to a different house, or take up a new job, without changing fundamentally as they do so. For groups and societies, 'means of production' and physical plant matter much more. Thus, for example, the mindset of European society was radically transformed by the introduction of printing in the mid 15th century, and of steam locomotives and railroads in the 19th. While we think of individual mindset chiefly in terms of desires and values and long term goals, for groups we feel these to be secondary though certainly important. As a rule, groups are shaped more by what they can and cannot do than by what they want to do – because collective desires tend to change with the economic capabilities and the political winds.

With these adjustments, the mindset of a group, like that of a single person, shapes that system's perceptions and responses to the suggestions it receives. In the case of Europe in 1914, it was collective mindset which led the continent to respond to the murder of two people with a global war that slaughtered 17 million. The assassination at Sarajevo was just a spark. Without the tinder, sticks and fire logs of Europe's mindset, there could have been no war on such a scale.

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How to approach the study of group mindset? In the previous chapter on group learning, we followed the anthropologists' idea of culture under their three rubrics of artifacts, mentifacts and sociofacts, breaking each of these down into its changeable components. Here, viewing collective mindset as a single abstract, self-altering structure, it will be more convenient to discuss this structure with reference to six action verbs, domains of human activity, each with a logic of its own: *inhabiting*, *producing*, *cognizing*, *valuing*, *relating*, *managing*. If mindset is the structure through which a group receives, weighs and responds to suggestions, then each of these verbs points at a sector of any group's suggestion processing activities: a sector in which minding is performed. They overlap and mutually influence each other to comprise what anthropologists call a 'culture.'

In this section, I want to expand a little on each of these categories of mindset and behaviour, and use them as a handy way to summarize the situation in Europe in the first years of the 20th century – especially, in July of 1914 after the Sarajevo murders. By treating Europe's mindset in this way, it becomes easier to see how this relatively insignificant event could have had such devastating consequences. It becomes possible to form a grounded, justifiable opinion on the competence and *sanity*, of Europe's collective mind.

6.1.1 *Inhabiting*

Inhabiting, the first of these action verbs, is the process of living and surviving in a given physical habitat, and thus appropriating it for human needs. By inhabiting a given landscape, a group *harvests* its natural and stigmergic fea-

tures, converting these into human commodities and goods: the wherewithal of its collective existence. In biology, inhabiting is the active process of turning the physical location into a life-sustaining [niche](#) or [habitat](#). For human societies, it is the object of study for the field of [economic geography](#). As I use this term, ‘inhabiting’ also includes the *history* of a group's occupation and use of an environment. It figures as a feature of group mindset in several ways:

First, inhabiting a place or a facility creates a pragmatic and sentimental attachment to it – with feelings of [patriotism](#), ‘home, sweet home,’ and the like. Inhabiting also supports a network of relationships (see below), through which the specialists of different productive activities create value. Inhabiting thereby motivates some institutions of governance – eventually, the systems of [extraction and coercion](#) that sustain a formal government. It configures a landscape for military operations aimed at the acquisition and defence of habitat and infrastructure, as sources of [economic rent](#). Finally, inhabiting transforms this given bit of earth into a landscape for history. It becomes a stage or setting for the stories that groups tell about themselves: about who they are, and how they came to be. Such activities will shape the mindsets and identities of persons and groups who engage in them. The other features that we’ll discuss do so too, of course, but it can be argued that identity begins on the ‘turf’ one occupies now, or has occupied in the past. In this way, habitat functions as an icon of group identity and solidarity.

One source of antisemitism has been the charge – valid to some extent – that Jews are wanderers, ‘[rootless cosmopolitans](#)’ who lived by wandering from place to place, without attachment to a nation or a plot of land. Jews were perhaps the most prominent ‘wanderers’ in medieval and more recent times, but there are many such peoples now, living in [diasporas](#) of their own.

As habitat changes relatively slowly in response to human activities, we tend to think of it as a given – a fixed resource which does not change at all. What results is a zero-sum game in which rival groups (peoples, nations) contend for as large a share of land and other resources as they can grab and hold. Obviously, this competition does not make for peace.

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In connection with the origins of the World War, there are several crucial facts about the inhabiting of Europe by the numerous tribes which fought to occupy it – to enjoy its fertile land and propitious geography:

- The first of these is that at the start of the 20th century, the whole of Eurasia, Africa and Australia was being treated as a part of the European habitat, while the whole Western hemisphere was so treated as habitat for the United States. The imperial scramble had reached a climax of sorts because, for purposes of habitation, the whole world had been taken and divvied up.
- A second fact is that the boundaries of Europe are unclear in places. Britain is split off from the continent by a few miles of water, but is it

a part of Europe or not? Worse, no natural eastern boundary exists between Europe and the rest of the Eurasian landmass. There are cultural gradients, but the creation of a political boundary has been and remains a vexed question. Europe is also divided within itself by a [big mountain chain](#) in the middle. Facing such difficulties, empire-builders since ancient times, have tried and failed to conquer and unify the European peninsula. In the ancient world, the Romans tried. Then Charlemagne tried. Napoleon and the French tried. In the early 20th century, the Germans gave it a try. As I write, it remains uncertain whether the [European Union](#), a current, voluntary attempt at unification, will succeed. (Just last night, as I was writing these words, [Great Britain voted to withdraw](#).)

- A third fact of great historic importance is the geography of Russia: first, that it is so vulnerable to invasion from the East, across the open steppe; and next, that it is essentially a land-locked country, with no assured access to any Western warm-water port.
- For Germany, recently unified and with eastern, western and southern aspirations, the key geographic fact is its vulnerability to invasion on two fronts – and thus the likelihood that it will find itself in the middle of any general European war. For this reason, one goal of its diplomacy must be to avoid a two- or three-front war with France, Austria and Russia; and, in case of war, to strike first and quickly before it can be encircled.
- In the Balkans, the boundaries of Europe are especially vague, as the empires of three very different civilizations – Slavic, Ottoman and European have overlapped and fought there, for influence if not for actual possession. For this reason, as Churchill once said, this region “produces more history than it can consume.” This has been true since ancient times, and never more so than in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In July of 1914, that fact became both tragic and pathological.

In at least these ways, the geography of Europe contributed to an incoherent mindset, riven by rival tribes and cultures, for that peninsula as a whole.

6.1.2 Producing

The second verb, [producing](#), (or sometimes *manufacturing* or simply *making*) is the re-working and alteration of this inhabited world with human labour. It thus includes existing [technology](#), a repertoire of skills and know-how for getting things done. And it includes the existing [infrastructure](#) which, (in my usage), means the whole stigmergic grid of artifacts and facilities (many of them portable, much of it not) that we impose on a geographic landscape to render it amenable and convenient for human purposes: the tools, buildings, roads, sewers, irrigation systems, and whatever else.

We need to keep in mind that technology and infrastructure are closely related, but do not always coincide, and do not always advance in lockstep. The building of infra-structure will always lag behind the introduction of new technology, and may be delayed for decades when economic conditions don't support such development. But conversely, it is possible for the existing infra-structure and social structures in one place to create demand for a technology that has not yet been invented. A tool not only performs its function, not only offers suggestions for its use,⁴ but also carries suggestions as to how it might be improved – made more effective, or more convenient – for some current purpose. It may carry suggestions about further tools that are now feasible but not available, not even invented, that could be used to advantage alongside.

A first way that technology functions to shape the mindset and behaviours of a group has to do so with the individuals who use it. The way we speak of smiths, carpenters, plumbers, and so forth, suggests that people's identities are closely bound up with the tools that they habitually use, and with their applications. We adapt to the environments in which we work; and we become habitual, skillful users of the tools and weapons that we work with. Along with the person who uses it, the tool creates a joint system in which its user is constrained and shaped as a component. Anyone who doubts that tools can be life-distorting as well as life-enhancing is urged to read Chuang Tzu's [parable of the well-sweep](#) and then watch what the machines do with Charlie Chaplin in [Modern Times](#).

Technology and infrastructure shape group mindset in another way: by revising people's desires and expectations, their sense of what is feasible and normal. Before the Wright Brothers, the human desire to fly was just a fantasy or wish; and the concept of '[air power](#)' was almost meaning-less, except for [a few balloons](#). Within a few years, air power was something that every nation had to have; and by the late 1950s, air travel was cheap, safe and routine for everyone. When I was a student, the few computers that existed filled large, well air-conditioned rooms, and cost millions. Today, it is scarcely possible to be a student without a lap-top of your own.

Today we send each other email messages as people once used drums and smoke signals. We walk in the streets, not through the forest. We cross rivers where there are bridges. We carry freight via railroads, ports and airports designed and built for that purpose. In particular, the routes that bring soldiers and supplies into combat are features of infrastructure, as are the foxholes, fortifications or trenches in which they fight, and the weapons that they use. Most of the military objectives that soldiers fight and die for are not just bare habitat but its existing productive features and its potential.

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The Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century were fought with muskets, and horse-drawn artillery. World War I in the 20th involved machine guns, rail-

⁴ As we saw in connection with the concept of *stigmergy* in Section 2.1.6.

roads, aircraft and submarines. In the hundred years between, there had been a scientific and [industrial revolution](#). The new technologies were politically obligatory, in the sense that any nation that did not keep up with them soon found itself at a hopeless disadvantage. They were also disruptive: replacing obsolescent industries and rearranging social hierarchies. Europe in its west and north was largely adapting to these changes, and keeping up with them. The European east and south was trying to do so, but with less success. This developmental gradient was a key feature of the context in which the July Crisis and World War I occurred – as is still the case for geopolitics today. Especially, it was an element in the decay of the Ottoman Empire, and thus of the power vacuum in the Balkans, where Russia and Austria-Hungary contended for influence.

New technology and infrastructure, in place by the early 20th century, had destabilized the European scene in at least the following ways:

- Germany, now united, became an industrial power, definitely stronger than France, and seriously rivalling Britain. Envious of Britain's naval pre-eminence and of her global empire, she took steps to challenge both, with a program of railroad construction that conferred economic and military advantages on the Continent, and a program of ship-building to match Britain on the seas.
- Russia, which had been trying to modernize and westernize since the days of [Peter the Great](#) was plagued by political unrest. Its economy was huge but sluggish, and there was no consensus at all on the direction the country should take.⁵ Permanently cursed by autocratic, top-down governance, a modern civil society had little chance to develop.
- The building of railroads completely altered the problems of military mobilization. Now detailed plans and timetables had to be made for summoning huge numbers of reservists from their peacetime jobs and moving them and their equipment to the front, and for supplying them once there. Mobilization for war became an all-or-nothing proposition which could not be halted or even delayed, once set in motion.
- Breech loading rifles, machine guns, long-range artillery and other novel weapons ensured that war would be fought in a new way when it came. Now it would be trench warfare – nothing like the marching armies and pitched battles of Napoleon's time. Also stockpiles of these new weapons, capability to make them and training in their use had to be organized and paid for long in advance.
- Thus, another impact of the new technology and infrastructure was in the area of economics, government administration and civilian society. In the future, war would be '[total](#)' if it came – a contest not just of armies and navies, but of technology and industrial production as well. This would require that whole populations, their factories and their agriculture, be rapidly placed on a war footing. Women would be re-

⁵ See discussion of *working dispensation* below, in Section 6.4.

cruited to replace men at the front. Governments would have to become much more powerful and efficient than they had been at any time in the past. The world war that followed would finish off a reactionary social and political order in Europe, that had been re-imposed by the [Congress of Vienna](#) after Napoleon's defeat.

6.1.3 *Kenning*

In this third sector, we'll speak of [ken](#) and cognition. To ken something means to perceive, feel, interpret, understand and deal with something in some particular way.⁶ But ken is also a noun. A group's ken, in our usage, includes its system of mentifacts, its mental repertoire of concepts, language, beliefs, theories and so forth – all its stock of 'memes' and its mental baggage. It also includes its so-called '[conventional wisdom](#),' [rumour](#) and the flux of opinion in its media and at its social gatherings.

As an active verb, 'to ken' is what Nietzsche and the post-modernists were on about in their dictum that “There are no facts, only interpretations.” But we must be clear too that 'ken' *also* implies a viable understanding – a submission to one's actual experience of something. Some perceptions are just too urgent, too compelling or too widespread to be interpreted out of existence.

The kenning of groups and people is always done, and can only be done, with their pre-existing concepts, language, beliefs, desires and values, and so forth – with the 'memes' and mental baggage that mainly come to mind when we think of mindset. It is done with the stories that we tell each other about nature, society, history and everything else. It is done with scientific [theories](#) that we use to explain, anticipate and predict. Above all, kenning is done in response to the questions that people have learned to ask, and to the tasks and responsibilities on their shoulders.

The knowledge of a group, and also its ignorance or insanity, are already present in the questions it asks. The empirical questions of science can usually be answered in a fairly consensual way. The questions of religion and philosophy can only be answered in personal and group-defining ways. There are also crazy-making questions which become compulsive and contentious, and which distract a group from coping with its reality. Here a crucial distinction is needed, between the routine questions that are asked and answered every day to keep a group or whole society in being, and those divisive, preoccupying questions – *issues*, as we call them – which draw public attention, threaten a group's smooth functioning, and often lead to violence.⁷

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6 To some extent, 'ken' has been replaced in common usage by Heinlein's verb '[to grok](#).'

7 Issues are non-routine questions which cannot be contained within existing institutions, and which provoke conflict outside such institutions. For more on this point see Section 7.4 on issue-driven history, and the discussion of modernity in Chapter 8.

Apart from the scientific advances which led directly to new technology and infrastructure, the 19th century also saw significant changes in public mood and worldview and philosophy; and it saw a few ideas, (or ideologies), with big political implications. At one end of the spectrum, there was [fascism](#), an anti-liberal ideology which defended property rights and capitalism, desired a strong, authoritarian state, and resisted all concessions to socialism and democracy. At the other extreme was [Marxism](#) with its technocratic, international focus on '[the means of production](#),' and its dialectical theory of history as a [class struggle](#).

There was a mood and aesthetic of [romanticism](#), a movement that values passionate engagement, but resists the norms and rules of an increasingly technocratic society. The great romantics of Europe (e.g. Shelley, Rousseau and even Goethe in some moods) valued Feeling over Reason, allowed themselves to be stirred by mystery more than persuaded by clarity, preferred rebellion to acceptance in politics, and sought to follow the promptings of private sentiment and conscience over public duty.

Most significant of all for the coming war was the sentiment of [nationalism](#), and with it the ideals of unification and [self-determination](#). These led directly to the Great War – first, by unifying Germany and Italy, then by strongly motivating the other Great Powers, and last, by being tragically impossible [in the Balkans](#).

- The unification of Germany came at the expense of France in the [Franco-Prussian War](#), and left a smouldering French desire for revenge and a permanent tension (if not outright hostility) between these nations. It was also a challenge to Britain and a potential threat to Russia.
- Nationalism too was a large factor in the run-up to war. It was a factor in the [imperialist game](#) which drove the competition between the European powers. Frustrated by the dynastic Habsburg empire in the Balkans, it was the cause that [Gavrilo Princip](#), for one among many others, were ready to kill and die for.
- Finally, it turned the multi-ethnic Balkans with its mixed population of ethnic [Albanians](#), [Bulgarians](#), [Croats](#), [Greeks](#), [Macedonians](#), [Montenegrins](#), [Serbs](#), [Slovenes](#), [Romanians](#), and [Turks](#) (among others) – partly Muslim, partly Eastern Orthodox, and partly Roman Catholic in their religions – into a cauldron of discontent and hate.

Finally, among the ideological roots of the Great War, we should mention [social Darwinism](#), and Nietzsche's '[Will to Power](#).' Not direct causes of anything, they were nonetheless influential for the *zeitgeist* in which policy options and other ideas were argued and justified. They contributed to the sentiments of nationalism and racism that were fashionable at the time. They contributed to and were used to justify imperialist domination of other peoples and cultures. They were used as ammunition against socialist ideas of class interdependency and class struggle.

By 1914, Europe's cognitive ecology of moods, sentiments, anxieties and theories had whipped itself to lethal intensity. While this did not make general war inevitable, it did pose innumerable issues which would have required in-human wisdom and patience to be resolved without violence. We are in much the same condition today, with the only difference that general war is now widely and correctly understood to be a very literal collective suicide.

6.1.4 *Valuing*

The fourth verb, *valuing*, is the basis of motivation. It includes all group activities of desiring or wanting something, working toward it, going after it in whatever way in order to achieve or obtain it. We could treat *valuing* as an aspect of *ken*, but choose to separate it for convenience. Where a group's *ken* is centred on its current reality, *valuing* is about its hopes and aspirations beyond that reality. It's also about anxieties and fears. For groups as for individuals, desire and knowledge are closely intertwined, but it is useful to think of them as separate categories.

A Hebrew proverb comes to mind: "Nothing can stand against desire." The English equivalent, I suppose, would be "Where there's a will, there's a way," but this version stresses determination, where the Hebrew points at *valuing* as such: the immense cognitive power of really wanting something. When people are at the point of being willing to kill and die for something, it will be difficult keep it from them; and many deaths are just to be expected.

Wanting, desiring or giving *value* to something, is surely the most direct connection there is between mindset and intended action. This link may be broken by a belief that what we want is too difficult or dangerous, or bad for us in some other way, but, by and large, to desire some outcome is to reach for or go after it, or grab it when it is there for the taking. While there is no *prima facie* reason why desire should lead to conflict, in practice it often does, because some goods cannot be jointly enjoyed and shared – or can be shared only with super-human wisdom. Their pursuit by two or more parties tends, therefore, to create a *zero-sum game* in which one player's gain must be another's loss. Fortunately, such games can often be settled through negotiated compromise and compensation, as when you work for someone in exchange for agreed wages, or are allowed to take something from a store after paying its stated price. In great power diplomacy of the pre-war period, settlements of this kind were well understood and common.

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For example, the [Fashoda Incident](#) of 1898 ended with an agreement between the British and French that the sources of the [Nile](#) and the [Congo](#) rivers should define their respective spheres of influence – that France would respect British claims in Egypt, while Britain would respect French claims to the Congo. The [Agadir Crisis](#) of 1911 led to a similar agreement in which Germany accepted French control of Morocco in exchange for a grant of territory by France in

the [Middle Congo](#). However, in the July Crisis of 1914, there were at least four prizes at stake in the Balkan peninsula, which did not lend themselves to *quid-pro-quo* resolution of this kind.

- First, there was the territory of Alsace-Lorraine, lost to France by the [Treaty of Frankfurt](#) (1871) which ended the [Franco-Prussian War](#).
- A second prize, control of the strategic [Balkan peninsula](#) was jointly coveted by Austria-Hungary, Russia and Ottoman Turkey – three competing empires.
- A third prize was the independence of South-Slavs (*Yugoslavs*) and the formation of a Yugoslav state under a single regime. This would almost necessarily be Serbian in character, as the Serbs were the largest, most inclusive and most powerful of [Yugoslav ethnicities](#). This, obviously, was incompatible with the mutually incompatible ambitions of the three empires in the region. Especially, it was incompatible with the claims of Austria-Hungary as the current *status-quo* power.
- Finally, for Germany at this time, there were prizes of security, European hegemony and freedom of diplomatic maneuver. Germany needed *both* a strong alliance with Austria-Hungary for these reasons, but also a secure *detente* with Russia with which it has no natural Eastern border. Unfortunately, these two desires found themselves in conflict at this time, and the need for *detente* with Russia lost out.

6.1.5 *Relating*

The fifth verb, *relating*, is a very broad one. It includes all processes of human interaction, the ways we talk to each other, trade with each other, collaborate, contend and fight with each other, to build and maintain our functioning groups. The outcome or result of a group's relating is a [social structure](#) of inter-personal relationships: sub-groups, institutions, [organizations](#) etc. governed by the group's evolved customs and conventions or by a formal system of law.

In Section 2.2.4 we introduced Alan Fiske's theory that all such interactions involve some combination of only four fundamental modes:

- *Communal Sharing* (CS) which treats all members of a group as equal, and tries to distribute both tasks and goodies on an equal basis,
- *Authority Ranking* (AR) which recognizes asymmetric status in a hierarchy in which subordinates owe deference, respect, loyalty and obedience to their superiors, who in turn accept responsibilities of leadership, protection and care for their subordinates,
- *Equality Matching* (EM), in which people keep track of favours and slights to deal with each other on a tit-for-tat basis, and
- *Market Pricing* (MP) in which people exchange goods and services at a negotiated ratio of exchange.

There are also love relationships in which the act of giving is its own reward. All such relationships will need to be defined and regulated by custom and/or law as discussed briefly in Section 3.2.5. With such regulation in place, the outcome will be a ‘social fabric’ of habitual relationships, [organizations](#) and [institutions](#), which gradually build, for and around themselves, all the facilities that they require. With such facilities in place, the social structures provide any number of distinctive channels for competition and conflict between groups and individuals, and also for their joint decision-making and collaboration. As a whole, they give institutional shape to the processes of politics and governance through which interpersonal understandings and expectations are negotiated, and the group’s business is carried on. Over and above its individual members, such regulations and facilities, and the other features of collective mindset, define the group as we know it – a ‘sociostructure’ in which the members are embedded like raisins in a cake. More on this embedding in Chapter 9 below.

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In the early 20th century, Europe was a system of sovereign states with most of the institutions that we know today: of government, manufacturing and commerce, and with numerous institutions of ‘[civil society](#)’: families, news media, universities, religious communities, social clubs, etc. It even had [a few NGOs](#) (notably, in connection with the [anti-slavery movement](#) and [women’s suffrage](#)), though that term had not been coined yet. These sought to influence government in some way, or provide some public service independently of government. For example, a number of [Red Cross Societies](#) were already active, which were to play an enormous role when the War came.

All over the world at that time, not just in Europe, modern technology and ideas were having social impact – in fact, contributing to the pathology that Hobsbawm diagnosed:⁸ “a progressively deteriorating international situation which increasingly escaped from the control of governments.” This ‘progressive deterioration,’ I’d suggest, was not just in the international situation, but in the whole collective mindset of the European (now increasingly global) society. This amounted, in fact, to a ‘crisis of modernity’ which needs a section (6.2) to itself. At this point, all we need do is note a general conclusion: that by the early 20th century, modernity had, so to speak, outgrown itself – was making large changes to existing patterns of human relationship that could not be accommodated without some huge political upheaval. When people can’t sit down, talk an issue through and negotiate a ‘working consensus’ that most can live with, they’ll need to kill a number of each other first.

8 In the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter.

6.1.6 *Managing: Laws, Regulations, Plans and Policy*

The sixth and last of these sectors is [managing](#), the activity of governance, administration and coordination of the group's activities. Managing works as a constraint on the activity and interaction of subgroups and individual members. Its crucial outcome is [policy](#) which guides the intentions and actions of subordinates in their treatment of the public, and their relations with other entities, at home and abroad. Another crucial outcome is the store of [administrative data](#) that managers collect, rely on and continually update – *the Database* as we might call it, giving it a capital letter. Along with [military might](#) and political [authority](#), this Database is one of the three prime sources of governing power.

Law and policy, and projects to implement and extend these, are largely the work of rulers who take decisions on the group's behalf. For example, the Wikipedia article on [policy](#) defines it as a 'statement of intent' and as "a deliberate system of principles to guide decisions and achieve rational outcomes." If we think of law and regulation as a form of policy, this definition will serve. For our purpose, we can think of policy as the whole body of group decisions, taken through politics and governance, that are currently extant and operational, and that guide the rulers, their subordinates, and thus indirectly the subjects ruled in their conduct of daily business.

All the other features of group mindset appear to the governing regime as givens of an existing situation, which evolve but slowly, through organic processes of social change largely outside its direct control. By contrast, policy is a direct output of governance, which may be altered swiftly by the political process. Policy can and should take account of more organic features, but has no way directly to control them.⁹ Governments have sometimes tried to alter society directly through their policies, but nearly always fail, killing a lot of people and ruining a great many lives in the process. (One thinks, for example, of Robespierre's '[Cult of the Supreme Being](#)' in revolutionary France, of the [residential schools](#) for native peoples in Canada and Australia, of Hitler's '[National Socialism](#),' of the Soviet and Chinese programs to create a new kind of '[Socialist Man](#),' and various Utopian or totalitarian programs elsewhere. When you get right down to it, for any government at all, the implements of policy are limited. Governments can try to persuade people to do something, pay them to do it, or punish or kill them if they don't do it. They have no other means at their disposal.)

For our purpose, the important thing about policy is that it attempts to bind the future – especially people's future behaviour – with a system of rules and promises. If it seldom achieves exactly what it intends, if it nearly always has unintended consequences, it is still remarkably effective most of the time at gaining obedience from the officers who are charged to implement it, if not always from its whole target population. In this way, the marks written on sheets of paper may control how millions of people live or die. Habitat issues power-

⁹ As discussed in connection with 'windage' in Section 4.2.1

ful suggestions. So do technology and infrastructure and the other features of collective mindset. But in the July Crisis, the interplay of national policies was decisive.

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For the July Crisis, the interplay of policies is reviewed in Section 6.3 below. The only point to stress here is that no single country was to blame. The Great War was made by all the great powers working together, and not by any on its own – though the victorious Allies sought to blame the Germans. The war was not something that any nation caused, but something that Europe did to itself.

6.1.7 Europe's Collective Sanity

We must not confuse the mindset of Europe as a whole with the conflicting mindsets of the European nations. These were related, of course, but only in a paradoxical way, because the slaughter that came about was no one's desire or intention. It was, however, a logical and likely outcome of what these nations and their statesmen collectively desired and planned. Each power saw itself in relation to the other powers and made its choices – played its game – accordingly. In retrospect, everyone behaved more-or-less rationally and did approximately what was expected of them. Yet the result was collective madness for the system as a whole:

- [Austro-Hungary](#) was struggling to hold its multi-ethnic, dynastic empire together,¹⁰ trying to modernize industrially and intellectually without significant changes to its ancient [Habsburg regime](#).
- The [Ottoman Empire](#) was also trying to modernize, while struggling to save what it could of its [formerly vast holdings](#).
- Between 1904 and 1906, [Tsarist Russia](#) had lost a humiliating [war with Japan](#) and had put down [a revolution](#). Its autocratic regime had good reason both to fear for its future and (like Austro-Hungary) to insist that it was still a great European power.
- The French had good reason to fear Germany. The [Franco-Russian alliance](#), formed in 1891 to defend both nations from German attack, was rational enough. It was rational for the French to want Alsace-Lorraine back, and for the Russians to want influence in Turkey and the Balkans. That Serbia thereby became the trigger for a global war was just an unintended consequence.
- The recent [unification of Germany](#) had changed the balance of power in Europe. As a late-comer to the colonial game and feeling its new industrial strength, it was rational enough for Germany to seek [naval parity](#) with Great Britain. Fearful of being crushed between France and Russia in a two-front war, the desire for a firm alliance with Austro-Hungary was also rational enough as was the famous [Schlieffen Plan](#),

¹⁰ This [ethnic map](#) of that empire is worth a glance.

designed to ensure that the war, if it came, would be fought on someone else's soil.

- Finally, while it was rational for Britain to [resist entanglement in European wars](#), she had good historical reasons to fear the domination by any other great power of the English Channel coastline. In the July Crisis, we can understand why Britain dithered, but finally joined with France and Russia in opposing Germany.

When we think of Europe as a whole, it is a different story. All the above interests were well-understood in 1914, But the policies resulting from them were not nearly so clear as they appear now, in hindsight. If they had been, the players could have calculated each others' interests and taken account of these in their planning. As it was, the statecraft of each power was partly a guessing game, as no one could be sure how the other players were figuring their own interests, or making policy to further them. They could not even be sure *who* was making policy in foreign capitals, because the monarchs, senior diplomats and senior military officers of each power were not always on the same page.

A special problem of the time was that the monarchs were all kin to one another, and had a tendency to make policy and send each other messages that were often in conflict with the policies and messages of their diplomatic and military bureaucracies. With the autocratic rulers of Russia and Germany, (Nicholas II, the Russian Tsar whose throne was already tottering, and Wilhelm II, the erratically ambitious German Kaiser), this problem was particularly acute. For this reason, the collective policy of each power was not entirely coherent, never mind predictable to the others. In particular, Russia and German came across to each other as more consistently belligerent than they really were. The result was that in 1914, Europe found itself [rigidly polarized](#) between two power blocs: The [Triple Alliance](#) (Germany, Austro-Hungary and Italy) and the [Triple Entente](#) (Britain, France and Russia).

Though Europe-as-a-whole had no formal organization to govern itself, it did have informal governance. The diplomatic chanceries were in regular telegraph communication, and they had a whole month to draw back from the abyss that they saw opening before them. What they took, therefore, was a collective decision – if a disastrously bad one. We want to ask not just how this came about, but why it did so – why they could do no better? Why did the governance of Europe draw ever closer to disaster, until there was no way that general war could be avoided?

The propulsion came, as we have seen, from a collective mindset which made decision for war at some point increasingly likely. On 29 June, war was not yet inevitable. By 24 July it probably was. There had been no place or point in time when a decision for war was taken, but the last chance for peace probably vanished when the British offer to mediate a settlement was declined by Kaiser Wilhelm.

It is easy to blame him, and the Allies were not loathe to do so. The immediate trigger for war was the decision of Habsburg Austro-Hungary to crush

Serbian nationalism, and that of Germany to support Austro-Hungary without limit. But the decision for war was not made by any single individual, nor any single country. The march to war was like a game of [Chicken](#), in which neither player will swerve to avoid the suicidal collision. Or it was like a hand of [Poker](#) in which the players all bluff and seek to call each others' bluffs, only to discover, in the end, that no one will fold and that the hand will have to be played. Once this was recognized, several last-minute efforts to avoid a general war all met with failure. By that point, the mobilizations were irreversible.

The collective policy of fin-de-siècle Europe was to become ever more 'modern,' to enjoy the fruits of doing so, and to impose its interests and its modern ways on all the '[lesser breeds](#)' elsewhere, who could not change or didn't want to. It wished to avoid confronting its own divisive social issues (apart from a scattering of token reforms). To avoid doing so, governments encouraged the wave nationalist sentiment – clearly preferable (from their perspective) to the internationalism of the socialists.

Further, Europe continually sought the clarification of its internal status relationships by playing '[King of the Hill](#),' as a game of nations. In this way, her policy was profoundly ambivalent, pressing *both* toward a profitable balance of power, *and* toward some definitive test that would settle its internal terms of association: its socioeconomic relationships of dominance and submission.¹¹

Between 1914 and 1945, such a test occurred, with Japan and the United States emerging as new great powers in the second phase of this game. It is a striking irony that after two world wars fought to prevent Germany from becoming the hegemonic power of Europe, that country is now the hegemonic power of a [European Union](#) whose relationship with Russia is still precarious, while the role of Britain is still uncertain.

6.2 A Crisis of Modernity

The only aim of Europe today is to obtain a moratorium. England, France, Germany are doing their best to put off war; they make no attempt to abolish the danger of it. They do their best to put off social reform; they make no attempt to solve the problems of its necessity.

- [Europa](#), Robert Briffault p14

One way to understand the outbreak of World War in 1914 is to see it as a product of the clashing interests of the European powers, and of some short-sighted and wishful choices by the statesmen who served them. From this perspective, each of the Great Powers is seen as an autonomous, minding entity with its own mindset and evolving policy. Another way is to dig beneath that surface of national interests and choices, to narrate the course of the July Crisis as a series of decisions and actions by specific individuals. But there is a third way, which has merit also. It is possible to see the Great War as a desperate response, partly conscious, but mostly not, by the whole continent, to

11 See [International Relations of the Great Powers \(1814 – 1919\)](#).

its collective existential predicament: a social system's sense and understanding of its systemic needs.

By now, that predicament can be recognized as a crisis of modernity itself; it was dimly perceived so, even at the time. Contemporaries were aware, as we today are even more so, that modernity on its own terms had been a howling success in some respects, but a failure in others. It had distributed its benefits very unequally, and had brought certain intractable problems in its wake. It had made life very much more pleasant, comfortable and convenient for all who could afford its pleasures, comforts and conveniences; but it had greatly increased tensions with those who could not afford them. It had shifted the power arrangements of the whole society both within nations and between them. It had made life richer and easier in many respects, but also very much more complicated. It had aroused 'great expectations,' thus raising possibilities of corresponding alienation and disappointment. In short, modernity was taking a new turn to what we now, for want of a better name, call '[postmodernity](#).' In retrospect, the Great War can be seen as a key step in that transition; the July Crisis can be seen as Europe's desperate choice to take that step: to resolve the political issues which had arisen in connection with certain technological and cognitive changes that had already taken place. To understand the July Crisis in this way requires some review of modernity's intrinsic nature, and of its previous crises and turning points.

6.2.1 *Modernity*

The modern mindset was (and still is) the product of a cultural explosion that began in Europe in the mid 15th century when several lines of development – individualism, secular humanism, intellectual skepticism and several technological developments – came together in a relatively small, but fragmented and highly competitive region of the globe: a western peninsula on the vast Eurasian land mass. For its onset, we can take the advent of firearms, the new art of the Italian Renaissance, Atlantic navigation and the introduction of movable type by Gutenberg as the crucial marker events. When printed Bibles became available, people could read it for themselves and pit their own interpretations against their priest or anyone else. With the recovery (through Muslim intermediaries) of classical philosophy and literature a new [humanist spirit](#) came to challenge and reject the otherworldly asceticism of the Medieval Church. With the voyages of Columbus and Da Gama about one generation later, a whole New World was opened up. From that point on, the changes came thick and fast, partly driven by, but also encouraging a new faith that critical Reason could improve society and make people's lives better. That program succeeded beyond its founders' wildest dreams, but it has had its problems, and imposed some large costs as well.

If we want a single individual to represent the early changes of this period, I think of no one better than [Michelangelo](#), who was born in 1475 and died at the age of 88 in 1564, the year that Galileo was born. Thus he was formed by

the first waves of modernity and lived through the time of Columbus and Vasco da Gama, of Martin Luther and John Calvin and the [Council of Trent](#). He was a devout Catholic, and a favourite of the Renaissance popes, but was also a thoroughly modern man both as an artist and an architect. The grandiosity and cost of his designs – of his patrons’ pet projects, and their scandalous methods of fundraising – were among the causes of the [Protestant Reformation](#).

From Michelangelo’s time to the present, the whole world has been rocked by successive waves of change – in religion, art, science, technology, business methods and politics – which embroiled first Europe and then the whole world in waves of cultural change, punctuated by lethal political crises and power struggles. The Reformation and [Counter-Reformation](#) were a first such crisis of collective mindset, which shaped the history of Europe with its first great wave of imperial expansion, its [Wars of Religion](#) and the imperial wars that followed. The [French Revolution](#) and [Napoleonic Wars](#) were a second crisis of mindset, accompanied by economic and political struggles. [The World Wars](#) of the 20th century (including [the Cold War](#)) have been a third that is still unfinished. Modernity has been, among other things, a program of perpetual innovation with lots of benefits, but many casualties as well.

Whether we call modernity’s 20th century crisis ‘post-modernity,’ or see it merely as a new phase of modernity, doesn’t matter much. Either way, it’s clear that modernity, in the late 19th century, was entering a new phase in which new verities and ways of doing things were making the social edifice unstable. The new knowledge had not simply replaced the old; it had shown that there could be no certainties anywhere:

- that the different species of life forms, as Darwin showed, were not eternal thoughts in the mind of God but mutable recombinations of intricate molecules (the genes);
- that space and time were relative as Einstein showed; and that matter itself was highly surreal, as quantum physics was showing;
- that the ‘sweet reason’ of the Enlightenment, as Freud and his followers showed, was only a thin veneer over the drives and seething energies of the unconscious;
- that the relative abundance of industrialization had left pollution, teeming cities, pervasive ugliness and brutalizing poverty as its side-effects;
- that “there are no facts, only interpretations,” as Nietzsche was to say; and
- that the dignity, splendour, and intrinsic *worthiness* of Europe’s governing aristocracy was a sham.

For thirty years beforehand, there had been signs that Europe’s ‘proud tower’ was tottering. In the Great War a good part of that tower fell down; and we can see the July Crisis from one perspective as a collective decision to kick it over. What a child might do to a structure of building blocks, Europe as a

whole did to its old civilization, acting from moods, desires and beliefs which are not hard to discern.

6.2.2 *Collective Issues*

To tell the story in this manner, I want to point at several issues – most left over from the French Revolution, but some more recent. These issues cannot be considered *causes* of the World War; rather they were items on a social agenda that Europe was pondering at that time – seeking to resolve through its political processes and, when these failed, through violence. Admittedly, my choice of issues is partly subjective and my treatments of them are sketchy. Fat books have been written about questions and movements that here receive a paragraph or two. But the point I wish to emphasize is that these were not national issues but continental and even global ones, though each nation handled them (or failed to do so) in its own way. That said, readers are invited to follow up on this selective background as they see fit.

Democracy

The phenomenon that exercised de Toqueville in his classic, [*Democracy In America*](#) continued as a divisive issue in Europe throughout the 19th century. [Liberal democracy](#) empowered the prosperous bourgeoisie; and it freed the slaves and serfs; but it did little to lift poor workers and farm hands out of poverty, never mind subsistence farmers and pastoralists in what we'd now call 'the developing world.' Everywhere in Europe, it left in place a land-holding aristocracy– still doing very nicely, but with good reasons to be fearful. Capitalism, meritocracy and republican government were existential threats to this class, and these ideas were on the rise. The aristocracy could see that time was not in its side.

This was especially the case in parts of southern and eastern Europe and in Turkey where liberalism and industrialization had as yet made little headway. If these nations, despite attempts at modernization, remained relatively backward, it was in part the '[old regime](#)' which kept them so.

Aristocratic anxieties were especially significant in Habsburg Austria-Hungary and even more so in Tsarist Russia and Ottoman Turkey, but were more or less a factor everywhere. Even in France, the Paris Commune of 1871 showed that revolution was still in the air. Even in Britain, the fears of revolution were no less real than on the Continent. If Britain managed to avoid the revolutionary upheavals that plagued Europe in 1830 and 1848, and the continuing threat of it throughout the century, this was more a matter of good luck, good police work, the distractions of empire and a few judicious reforms, than of any supposed British genius for compromise.¹² Effective means to manipulate democracy (which was still mostly for property-owning males)

12 See Prof. Eric Evans article of 2011, [A British Revolution in the 19th Century](#) on the BBC History Web Page.

had not yet been invented, and it remained a threat to ruling classes everywhere.

Alienation and Ressentiment

[Alienation](#) is a sociologist's concept, developed by Marx, Simmel and Tönnies, among others which points at a poverty of social inter-relationship marked by distance or isolation between individuals, by a sense of powerlessness, and by a weakening or failure of social norms and values. Two lines in [A.E. Housman's poem](#): "I, a stranger and afraid/In a world I never made" capture the feeling. Matthew Arnold's poem [Dover Beach](#) gets at similar feelings, as does Chekhov's play, [The Cherry Orchard](#). We can see this mood of alienation as one unfortunate side effect of the industrial revolution, of urban life, and of the failure of idealism in the French Revolution. We can point to [Marx's theory](#) of the worker's alienation under capitalism as one aspect of this concept, and to Emile Durkheim's notion of [anomie](#) as another. There was a lot of it going around.

'[Ressentiment](#)' is the French word for 'resentment,' but has acquired a philosophical and sociological meaning that the English lacks. It too figured significantly in the politics of the time. Nietzsche saw it as a psychological defence whereby the weakness of an oppressed people is transformed into a virtue, while the power and strength of an oppressor are now considered evil and self-defeating. In this way it becomes productive of new concepts and new values, to compensate for feelings of inferiority and shame:

In the period that concerns us, *ressentiment* became significant in the politics of relatively backward nations vis-à-vis the more advanced ones:

- Germans (and almost everyone) felt it for the British at that time;
- Russians felt it for the Germans and French, and for Western Europe, in general;
- the Serbs felt it for the Austrians;
- the Jews felt it for all the gentiles who in turn felt it for the Jews.

Feelings of alienation and *ressentiment* were major factors in the nationalisms and jingoisms of the pre-war world. They were (as they remain today) a fertile source of identity politics. In the mobilizations that followed the July Crisis, they also help explain a striking *eagerness* for war by nearly all the civilian populations, as a relief from the boredom and emptiness of their peacetime lives. In the trench warfare that followed, millions would learn that the meaning of their lives was to be [cannon fodder](#). But this revelation came somewhat later, and by then it was too late.

Nationalism

Unlike the Chinese, for example, Europeans have never learned to think of themselves as a single people. One reason the European Union is having a rough time of it today is that they still don't. Not even the individual nations truly see themselves as united peoples, never mind the continent as a whole.

While the dozen or so ethnicities in France have mostly come to think of themselves as French, the British are more likely to think of themselves as English, Irish, Scots, or Welsh; and we have already mentioned the populations of [Albanians](#), [Bulgarians](#), [Croats](#), [Greeks](#), [Macedonians](#), [Montenegrins](#), [Serbs](#), [Slovenes](#), [Romanians](#), and [Turks](#) (among others) in the Balkans: in former 'Yugoslavia.' From this perspective, '[self-determination](#),' the supposed 'right' of ethnic groupings to be governed as a united entity and by rulers of their own kind was and remains an impossible, dangerous idea. And yet, [nationalist sentiment](#) had been on the rise in Europe at least since the [Peace of Westphalia](#) in 1648, or since the [Hundred Years War](#) before that. Modern nations have knitted themselves together, partly under pressure from alien groups, in a permanent quadrilemma: between conflicting wishes for centralized power, for self-determination, for unimpeded commerce, and for natural, defensible borders. Many nations today, even the well-established ones, have yet to resolve this conundrum in any stable or satisfactory way.

In pre-war Europe, nationalism was promoted by governments and by the media as the more desirable alternative to class warfare. It was taken up by peoples as an easy solution to their feelings of alienation and their search for identity. As a factor in the unification of Germany, it shifted the balance of power in Europe. As a factor in the unification of Italy and its frustration elsewhere, it contributed to the decline of Habsburg power, and to Austrian nervousness. In the July Crisis, it shaped the choices made by each of the powers. None of them wanted peace more than they they feared the loss of national prestige.

Industrial Capitalism

By the mid 19th century, it was clear to everyone that nations which failed to industrialize would be doomed to poverty and military impotence. Indeed, this remains the case today. But technology and industrialization were threatening the power of a landed aristocracy, and would exacerbate certain other social problems as they had in England, the most industrialized nation of its time, and where the industrial revolution had first occurred. Also, industrialization could not be for everyone. It was only possible where it could be competitive, and where a number of prerequisites were already met.

Technology and industrialization shaped the war that would be fought and, more than anything, the [overall character of that war](#). They introduced a number of new [weapons](#) – notably airplanes, tanks, poison gas and submarines – and made improvements to the old ones – notably the Maxim machine gun, the hand grenade and the bolt action rifle. They made the war total by turning it into a contest of economies and social systems, not just of armies and navies. The Franco-Prussian and Crimean Wars were still fought with cavalry charges and marching lines of infantry. World War I was fought in trenches, behind barbed wire.

More relevantly for us, industrial capitalism influenced the background to this war in at least four ways: It reduced the power, prestige and relative

wealth of Europe's landed aristocracy, thereby contributing to the aristocratic nervousness, already mentioned. Next, as a central factor in the growth of cities, industrialization also contributed to the mood of alienation; while the inability or failure to industrialize made for *ressentiment*. Third, industrialization intensified the competition for raw materials and (still more) for markets – as businesses could now produce much more than they could easily sell. Finally, most critically for the July Crisis, the use of railroads turned the drift to war into a race which could not be halted once it was started.

Social Darwinism

In the run-up to war, a bit of ideology derived from science also played an insidious role. To many sub-groups and persons ranked highly on the social totem pole, Darwin's theory of natural selection seemed to have political implications. Herbert Spencer and others drew from it a self-congratulatory moral philosophy, later attacked and discredited as '[social Darwinism](#)' – that social existence is and must be a struggle for survival, through which all progress is made. The crucial point here is that in biology, Darwinian '[fitness](#)' is about successful reproduction, and not necessarily about advantage over others. In fact, intra-species sociality and inter-species [symbiosis](#) may contribute as much to 'fitness' as swift legs or sharp claws and teeth. Thus the argument (for example), that government regulation and social welfare programs are misguided because they distort the natural and necessary competition in human society is flatly mistaken.

However, what the intellectual climate of social Darwinism contributed to the July Crisis was:

- first, a fallacious justification for imperialism – that the 'lesser breeds' should be governed by more advanced races for their own good;
- more directly, an intellectual climate of bellicosity in which aggression and violence were seen as 'natural' and ultimately beneficial; and finally,
- a racism which contributed to nationalism and to the feelings alienation and *ressentiment* mentioned above.

This climate encouraged a steadfast resolve among the statesmen and politicians, and among their populations, a misguided concept of 'manliness,' pushing them toward the brink of war, instead of helping them pull back.

Imperialism

Finally for this brief survey of the pre-war mindset, the role of imperialism in the July Crisis was very real, but not so easy to assess. On one hand, there is no doubt that imperial rivalries, arms races and local wars were among the factors which polarized Europe into mutually hostile alliance systems. There is no doubt either that the aspirations and resentments of imperialized peoples, in the Balkans and elsewhere, helped to destabilize great power relationships. In the Balkans especially, Ottoman decay made the whole region an object of

contention for the other European powers – especially for Russia, Austria-Hungary and Germany. Yet we must also keep in mind that other conflicts which arose in connection with rival imperialisms – e.g. the [Fashoda Incident](#), the [Morrocan Crisis of 1905](#), the [Bosnian Crisis](#) and the [Agadir Crisis](#) – had, up to that point, been settled diplomatically, without a general war. Mutual accommodation was possible when the interests at stake were only those of rival empire. For the Great War, something more was needed.

Working from that metaphor for mindset in Chapter 1 – of a wooden structure with kindling, tinder and fire logs, painted with kerosene and waiting for the match to light it – then we can see those rival empires as the logs. It needed more than a match to get them burning, but without those structural logs, the fire could not have been a large one. The arms race and diplomatic maneuvering that preceded the archduke’s murder (including those polarizing treaties) provided tinder, kindling and kerosene. It was this whole collective structure, arranged in such a way that the blaze would spread instead of dwindling, which turned the Balkan confrontation into a global war.

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My claim, then, is that we can see the European society of that time as a cog-nizing entity with a functioning, but deeply troubled mindset – capable of managing the European economy, of mobilizing and supplying armies and navies, of holding colonies and ‘[spheres of influence](#)’ around the world, but not of arranging tranquility and decent livelihood for its own peoples. The broader claim is that social science may find it useful to think about historical events and trends in such intentionalist terms – as choices made by minding social systems. In the present case and elsewhere, that perspective invites some pointed questions about the system’s competence and sanity. We are led to ask: Why did European society fail so terribly to perceive and avoid the peril that it was in?

Three broad answers might be given: that it was preoccupied with other matters – looking elsewhere, and thus not able to see the trap under its feet; that apt resolution of its problems would have cost more than its ruling elites could accept and pay; and that resolution would have required some new ideas – economic, political or technological – which had not yet been invented or even conceived. All three of these answers are true to some extent, and each might be documented in detail. But we can also be more specific. We can point at certain collective desires and beliefs which must have thwarted possible measures to avoid such dangerous crises, or to resolve them peacefully if they occurred:

- the effective desire (effective because it was shared by most of those making the big decisions) to maintain and extend the exploitation of non-Western peoples for Europe’s benefit;
- the effective desire to maintain the privileges of a landed aristocracy while keeping the lower orders in their place;

- the effective desire to establish and maintain a global trading system, under European domination, under a uniform, business-friendly regime of finance and commercial law;
- the effective belief in science, technology, progress and Christianity, with an effective contempt for all other beliefs and practices;
- the effective belief in certain ‘natural rights’ of property and trade, unencumbered by political interference;
- the effective belief that war is glorious, inevitable and socially desirable, and that victories could be achieved quickly, at an acceptable cost.

The Europeans of 1914, like persons at any time, lived their own lives as best they could. At the same time, they were lived through and used by a collective mindset which had its own desires and beliefs and plans.

6.3 A Road to Hell: The July Crisis

The Balkans generates more history than it can locally consume.
- attributed to Winston Churchill

With two shots, fired at Sarajevo on the morning of 28 June in 1914, Gavrilo Princip set off what came to be known as [the July Crisis](#), a sequence of diplomatic exchanges and events that would lead to general European war by the first days of August. What interests us is the way that each successive event resonated with existing mindset in the various capitals to shift that mindset in some way, and thereby trigger some collective response – first by each nation, but then by Europe as a whole. As of 27 June, the day before the assassination, war was only a remote possibility that no one was expecting. By 3 August, Europe had irrevocably chosen war and committed itself to a slaughter. Our problem is to understand why this self-defeating decision went the way it did. We can do so by considering the relevant groups and key individuals as minds embedded in the larger mind of their whole society. Knowing what we do about the mindset of Europe at the time, we can imagine what it suggested: first to Gavrilo Princip and his group, and then to the other significant actors and their groups as the events unfolded. Below are a series of questions that we will need to answer. To do so, we must estimate the likely desires and beliefs of the key groups as best we can. Then we must consider why the choices they made were ‘rational,’ given the desires and beliefs that drove them. Lastly, we must observe the phenomenon that Hegel famously saw as “[the cunning of Reason](#)”: how the mindset of European society, working through individual human persons, configured their rational interests, plans and choices toward mutual disaster – how behaviours that are individually rational can be collectively insane.

6.3.1 *What Were They Thinking?*

Why did Gavrilo Princip kill Franz Ferdinand?

If it hadn't been him it could have been somebody else, perhaps on some other occasion, doing something equally nasty and self-defeating. Princip did not act alone. He and his team emerged from a political culture of national sentiment and violence. They received their weapons and instructions from a political organization called the [Black Hand](#), formed and led by Serbian army officers linked, but (it was hoped) deniably so, to the Serbian monarchy and regime. Inspired by the prior unifications of Italy and Germany, its aim was to unite all the territories with a [South Slav](#) majority and achieve independence from Austria-Hungary. To the Austrians, they were terrorists. To the Russians and themselves, they were freedom fighters.

Princip himself was just 19 years old in 1914, a studious boy from a peasant family who had been expelled from school two years before for his involvement in a demonstration against the Austro-Hungarian authorities. A member of [Young Bosnia](#), a Serbian nationalist organization devoted to freeing Bosnia from Austro-Hungarian rule, and already sickly with the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him in prison, he was armed by the [Black Hand](#), and sent with two other men to assassinate the Archduke. We can imagine him as very young, ambitious, shame-ridden and desperate to do something important. On that June morning, he did.

Why did Austria choose to provoke a war with Serbia?

As we've seen, the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary was a multi-ethnic conglomeration; at the same time, it was anything but a melting pot. Still one of the great powers of Europe, what was left the Habsburg Empire had almost no national identity to speak of. Loosely governed by a competent civil service, by the early 20th century, its regime was under stress from recently united Germany, from Russia, from its own disaffected minorities, and from what was left of the Ottoman Empire. With good reason, it felt itself to be in imminent danger of coming apart.

Thus, when a band of disgruntled Serbs assassinated the heir presumptive and his wife, the regime felt that a strong response was necessary, to show everyone (including themselves) that they were still an effective government. But there was no immediate consensus on exactly what to do: Some Austrian officials argued for prompt unilateral invasion and crushing of the rebellious Serbs. Others wanted to do the same, but only after some investigation of responsibility for the assassination plot, and with support from Germany in case the Russians should intervene. Tisza, the Hungarian Prime Minister, [foresaw the coming of world war](#) and argued for a milder response. The compromise was to seek German support, and to send the Serb regime an ultimatum with demands so extreme and humiliating that they would be refused. This was supposed to prove to European public opinion that the Serbs were unreasonable and that the Austrian invasion was justified. It took several weeks to

reach this decision, to obtain a promise of German support and to draft and approve the ultimatum, but on 23 July it was duly issued.

On Russian advice, the Serb regime crafted a conciliatory response, accepting all but one of the Austrian demands. This recalcitrance was sufficient to give the Austrians the excuse they wanted. On 28 July they declared war on Serbia; on the 29th, the first shots were fired. But it was still just a local war.

Why did the Germans promise Austria its unconditional support?

Some Germans felt that another war with France and Russia was inevitable, and that it would be better to fight now than in a few years when Russia would be stronger. Many others, probably including Kaiser Wilhelm did not really want a general war, but felt that it was important to give strong support to Austria (which was Germany's sole ally at this time), and believed that this would deter Russia from military action. As the German regime as a whole did not want to see the Dual Monarchy dismembered by its ethnic tensions, the decision was to give Austria its notorious 'blank cheque,' exerting no influence at all on the terms of its ultimatum to Serbia, and no constraints on its military follow-up. In effect, Germany was hoping for a local war that would suppress Serbian nationalism, and miscalculating that the Russians would not feel ready to take on Germany in Serbia's support. But there was a strong feeling too that if worst came to worst, a general war would be more winnable at that point than later.

Why did Russia undertake to defend Serbia?

Russia too miscalculated badly. Opinion was divided between those who wanted to back the Serbs (their fellow Slavs and 'little brothers'), and those who felt, (correctly as it turned out), that after its humiliating defeat in the [Russo-Japanese war](#) of 1905, Russia was not yet ready for another war. But there was widespread feeling too that Russia, allied with France, had a lot to gain from a successful war with Germany and Austria, and its 'hawks' were making policy. Thus, the collective decision was that this opportunity was too good to let pass, and that the Germans would back down rather than accept a two-front war. Russia, it was believed, would then have a free hand to pursue its interests in the Balkans: security in the Black Sea and assured maritime and naval access to the [Sea of Marmara](#) and the Mediterranean. Without active German military support, Austria would either back down, or be defeated.

This was a case of collective wishful thinking at its worst. In the event, the thinking in Germany went quite the other way: that if there was going to be a general war, Germany was better prepared for it than any of her adversaries, and that there would be no better time to fight it.

Why did France choose to join Russia in the coming war?

The French statesmen and military had been hoping for an eventual replay of the Franco-Prussian war, in which the territory of [Alsace-Lorraine](#) would be regained. They knew that united Germany was a stronger industrial and milit-

ary power than France, but believed too that Germany could be defeated with Russian assistance, if forced to fight a two-front war. But they under-estimated the length and cruelty of the war, and the weakness of the Tsarist regime. [In 1917, Russia fell apart](#) and dropped out of the war; Germany was finally defeated, but at a horrendous cost that no one had foreseen. Early on, she was fought to a stalemate – but only with the help of Britain whose involvement was far from certain at the time when France declared war; she was finally defeated only with the help of the US, which did not enter the war until 1917, provoked by Germany's resumption of unrestrained submarine warfare against neutral shipping, and by the ludicrous [Zimmermann Telegram](#) which urged Mexico to join the war as Germany's ally against the United States, for an empty promise (which Mexico wisely declined) of German assistance and financing in recovering its former territories of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. So the French declaration of war, like the Russian, was also a product of collective wishful thinking.

The original intent of the Franco-Russian alliance had been to establish a detente in the Balkans, balancing the alliance of Germany and Austria with that of France and Russia. But in the July crisis, this detente failed – to become instead, a trigger for the general war that followed.

Why did the Germans launch the war by invading Belgium?

If the sole German war aim had been to defend Austria against Russian intervention, allowing this ally to deal with the Balkan crisis in its own way, it could have prepared for and fought a purely defensive war in the west, until France was exhausted, while using its military to deter Russia from attacking either Austria or itself. But German war aims were more ambitious than that, though not in any well-focused or coherent way. Since its unification, Germany had become a great power – second only to Great Britain, the current European hegemon. At the same time, Germany felt isolated and encircled: fearful of being crushed between France and Russia in a two-front war, with only unstable Austria as an ally. Its only chance (it felt) was to export war if it came – to fight it on foreign soil, not on their own, and to defeat France first, and as quickly as possible, before turning eastward against the Russians who would be slower to mobilize. To avoid direct assault against frontier fortifications, the attack on France was to come through Belgium per a modified version of the original [Schlieffen Plan](#). The possibility that invading Belgium would draw Britain into the war was certainly foreseen, but was discounted for some reason – by a further case of wishful thinking.

Why did Britain join in with France and Russia against Germany?

Britain was the *status quo* power wanting peace and stability above all else. Throughout the July Crisis, it was more concerned with Irish nationalism than with the Serbian kind, or any other. As late as the afternoon of 4 August, it remained uncertain whether Britain would enter the war. In the end, with scarcely any interest in the Balkans but fearing to be left isolated if France and

Russia should be defeated, it felt that it had no choice. Only after Germany had declared war on France and turned down a British ultimatum that Belgium must be kept neutral did the British reluctantly join in. The war might actually have been prevented if it had been clear from early July that Germany would be facing the whole [Triple Entente](#) in a long war of attrition – not just France and Russia, in what was hoped might be short war. But the Germans had reason to hope that Britain would stay neutral, and the British hoped to the end that neutrality might be possible. So here too, the outcome was a result of wishful thinking.

6.3.2 *Was the Great War an Accident?*

A question remains then: To what extent was the Great War an accident?

It's easy enough to imagine how Europe might have resolved the July Crisis without a general war, and there are a number of ways it could have done so:

- If the Serb monarchy and government had promptly and sincerely apologized to Austria, prosecuted military officers in the Black Hand society, and offered closer ties to Austria, instead of hoping for Russian support and waiting for the Austrian ultimatum, the July Crisis might have been forestalled.
- If the Russian Tsar and statesmen had fully recognized the fragility of their regime, its unpreparedness for war with Germany and the solidarity of German support for Austria, they might have shown more prudence. They might have limited support for their Slavic 'little brothers' to a sharply worded telegram, and stopped short of mobilizing for war.
- If the Germans had set conditions on their backing of Austria Hungary, the latter might have chosen a more cautious policy and designed their ultimatum for Serbian acceptance and for Russian quiescence. In this case too, the July Crisis might have been ended peacefully.
- If the French had been a little less eager to revenge its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, it might have been somewhat more cautious about a hard-and-fast alliance with Russia. It might not have offered Russia its unconditional support in the Balkans in exchange for Russian support in regaining the lost territory of Alsace-Lorraine. Even in 1914, it might have reneged on the alliance, and warned early on that it would not fight with Russia in an aggressive war.
- If the British had been clearer to Germany that an attack on France through Belgium would bring Britain (and the British Navy) fully into the war, then Germany could have had little hope of quick victory on the Western Front. German statesmen might then have been deterred from entering what would more obviously have become a prolonged two-front war.

Thus we cannot say that the war was unavoidable – that the assassination in late June made war inevitable. Nor have we any way to estimate the numerical probabilities for war or peace, given the murder at Sarajevo and the European situation. What we can say is that a mindset for general war was well in place in the Europe of 1914, and that a sufficient trigger existed in the Balkans. In general, this is the best that we can ever do in assessing the likelihood of future events.¹³

Why were European statesmen thus trapped into a general war?

This final question remains. Once it had become clear that nobody would fold from fear of war, there was still some theoretical opportunity for a negotiated solution. But in practice, it was too late by this point. The logic of mobilization required that the railroads and other facilities be used as planned and, in any case, as rapidly as possible. To be slower than the enemy was to invite defeat. To modify the plans ‘on the fly,’ in response to current conditions was to invite chaos and then defeat. In 1914, partial mobilization was not a feasible option for any of the powers; mobilization for modern war had become an all-or-nothing proposition. Nor, as yet, was there such a thing ‘[mutually assured destruction](#),’ and thus no very effective deterrence. Up to a certain point the statesmen of the various powers were bluffing and hoping for the best. At some point, probably by 30 July, it became clear that no one could fold now even if they wanted to, and that mobilization (and the German invasion of Belgium) must proceed as planned.

6.3.3 *The Global Dispensation*

No single nation had wanted a general European war, but Europe as a whole chose to fight one, collectively preoccupied by issues of modernity, and by unfinished business from the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the Franco-Prussian war, and the German unification. From this perspective, the two world wars of the 20th century, are better seen as a single [civil war of European civilization](#) – and this war itself as one episode in a vast collective meditation on at least five global questions – still with us, and still troubling world peace today; all clearly visible in the run-up to the Great War, and clearly at stake in the wars that followed:

- 1) The first and most obvious of these questions concerned hegemonic power in the European state system, and therefore leadership of Western civilization. Which state would have this power, and what direction would it give to that system as a whole?
- 2) A second question concerned the place of this dynamic, insatiable Western civilization (its concepts, values and worldviews) as against other civilizations and peoples, and in the world as a whole.

¹³ See discussion of the distinction between prediction and anticipation in Section 7.1.3.

- 3) A third question concerned the use and management of a swelling population, already stressing both the growing cities and the countryside – providing a surplus of human energy and labour, but intensifying the ancient competition for arable land, water and resources.
- 4) A fourth challenged the very unequal distribution of civilization’s benefits, granting to some a life of privilege, luxury and satisfying work, while condemning most others to a life of bitter toil, and having no use at all for many more.
- 5) A fifth question was about the uptake of change. For Western civilization was not only alien to a majority of the Earth’s peoples, but was changing ever more rapidly and bewilderingly for Western peoples themselves.

All these questions had been on Europe’s agenda from the beginnings of modernity in the 15th century. On a continental scale, they had exploded several times already: in the religious wars of the Protestant Reformation, in the imperial wars of the 18th century (notably the [Seven Years War](#) from 1756 to 1763), and in the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars that followed. Today, they are as virulent as ever, while great power warfare is no longer feasible either as an outlet for political tensions or as mode of discourse – which leaves the world today with a set of problems too large even to be perceived clearly, never mind discussed or debated sensibly in political channels or the media. The idea of groups as minding entities may help, at least, to bring these problems into focus.

By 1914 it could be seen that Europe’s old dispensation¹⁴ was breaking down, and that a large change was needed. By 1945 it was clear that the issues at point were no longer just European, but global. The two world wars and the cold war have been a test of relative power and much else: a strong negative judgment against some ideas (e.g. National Socialism, Soviet Communism, racism) that were originally proposed. Our global society surely did not intend or want this civil war, but it did want a settlement of certain critical issues that could be managed (to whatever extent they have been) in no other way. The question of a stable and viable dispensation for a hi-tech, postmodern, global society is still very much at issue.

In this way, we can see the world wars of the 20th century, including the Cold War, as a global thought process. If Clausewitz was correct that “war is the continuation of diplomacy by other means,” then we can also say that violence is the collective thought process of last resort – or that it was so before the age of nuclear weapons. For, when negotiations break down, when neither side will let the other have its way, when neither will walk away and let the matter drop, then violence has been and still remains the only recourse.

To say that the war which follows is a kind of thought process is not exactly to say that “might makes right.” What it does say is that trial by combat

14 See Section 3.3.3.

is a way of reaching a collective decision based on some decisive advantage – superior numbers or firepower, superior administration or financing, superior logistics or strategy – or, at least, superior luck. But even luck, in the long run, is largely a premium on judging the odds correctly, anticipating possible opportunities and disasters, and wisely hedging one’s bets. Victory in combat is rarely a matter of pure chance. Usually the victors will in some way have earned or paid for their victory, though the losers may not see it that way. They won. Therefore, they were doing *something* right.

Before the 20th century, war worked fairly well as a collective thought process. Cruel and destructive as it was, it did adjust collective mindset sufficiently to admit some viable resolution of the conflict. It was a way of restoring conditions in which more rational negotiations could occur – either because one party had been eliminated or because the distribution of power had been established. Both sides had suffered and bled enough so that they were ready to accept the terms on offer, or agree to some terms or other. After a war, there could be peace for a time. Life could continue. Unfortunately, with modern weapons the costs of war have become prohibitive. Even proxy war, the basis of great power conflict throughout the Cold War period, is becoming too expensive and dangerous.