MARTYNAS MAŽVYDAS NATIONAL LIBRARY OF LITHUANIA

Straipsniai / Articles
OPEN ACCESS

Parlamento studijos / Parliamentary Studies
2026, Nr. 37, p. 6–24 / 2026, No. 37, pp. 6–24.

ISSN 1822-749X (Online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.51740/PS.37.1

A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Recent Historiography on the Origins of the First World War

Teodoras Žukas

Vilniaus universitetas
Vilnius University
teodoras.zukas@gmail.com

Abstract. Interpretations of the origins of the First World War have undergone substantial revision, yet their integration into international relations theories remains insufficient. This paper examines recent historiography through variables identified in neoclassical realism, namely the systemic and intervening variables. The systemic dimension considers European diplomatic dynamics between 1904 and 1914, while the intervening level focuses on decision-makers' actions during the July Crisis of 1914. It argues that neoclassical realism and recent research allow the causes of the Great War to be summarised in two aspects: first, a confusing system that sent unclear signals and constrained actors, made it extremely difficult for leaders to manage the post-Sarajevo crisis; second, the mistakes of July Crisis decision-makers—their lack of foresight, faulty assumptions, and the accidents and mishaps that emerged—ultimately caused the war of 1914.

Keywords: First World War, historiography, Neoclassical Realism, Realism, July Crisis.

Neoklasikinio realizmo požiūris į naujausią Pirmojo pasaulinio karo kilmės istoriografiją

Santrauka. Pirmojo pasaulinio karo priežasčių interpretacijos pastaraisiais dešimtmečiais iš esmės atsinaujino, tačiau šios naujos paradigmos integravimas į tarptautinių santykių teorinius svarstymus vis dar nėra pakankamas. Straipsnyje naujausia Pirmojo pasaulinio karo priežasčių istoriografija nagrinėjama pasitelkiant neoklasikinio realizmo teorijoje išskirtus kintamuosius – sisteminį ir įsiterpiantį. Sisteminio kintamojo pagrindu žvelgiama į Europos diplomatinę dinamiką 1904–1914 m. laikotarpiu, o įsiterpiančio kintamojo pagrindu, už tyrimo ribų paliekant kitus tris teorijos įsiterpiančius kintamuosius, analizuojami sprendimų priėmėjų veiksmai per 1914 m. Liepos krizę. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad neoklasikinio realizmo teorija ir naujieji Pirmojo pasaulinio karo priežasčių tyrimai leidžia karo priežastis apibendrinti dviem aspektais: pirma, karas kilo dėl keblios, neaiškius signalus siunčiančios ir veikėjus varžančios sistemos, kuri itin apsunkino lyderių pastangas suvaldyti Europą per po Sarajevo įvykių ištikusią krizę; antra, karas kilo dėl per Liepos krizę išryškėjusių sprendimų priėmėjų klaidų, neįžvalgumo, vadovavimosi neteisingomis prielaidomis, ištikusių atsitiktinumų, nepasisekimų.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Pirmasis pasaulinis karas, istoriografija, neoklasikinis realizmas, realizmas, Liepos krizė.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the historiography of the origins of the First World War has been enriched by many significant new works. Recent explanations of the origins of war seek to rethink old questions from new angles and to provide fresh interpretations. This historiography often questions the established

Received: 12/08/2025. **Accepted:** 02/03/2026.

narratives of the causes of war. In the discipline of international relations, this new historiographical paradigm has been somewhat discussed, and the importance of the new historiography for theoretical considerations of international relations has been emphasised,[1] but these considerations do not include a conceptual analysis of the historiography based on the theory of neoclassical realism. Moreover, although the historiography of the First World War has been considerably updated, international relations theory is still somewhat dominated by the traditional interpretation of the causes of the First World War based on realism theory (classical realism, neorealism, offensive realism), which is not sufficient in light of new historical research and interpretations. For instance, there are still prevailing theoretical disagreements about the start of the war, centred around questions regarding how Germany perceived the changing balance of power to its disadvantage and the rise of Russia; simultaneously, the question of the preventive war nature is also central here, as is the aspect of German fear, observing the changing strategic situation in Europe.[2] On purely theoretical grounds, the debate encompasses issues such as the roles of structure and agency, international versus domestic causation, the impact of personalities and belief systems, the rationality of decision-making, and the security dilemma.[3] This paper seeks to apply elements of neoclassical realist theory, together with recent historiography on the origins of the First World War, in order to suggest an alternative way of interpreting the conflict's outbreak. The primary aim is to demonstrate that neoclassical realism, when combined with the latest historical scholarship, may offer a valuable analytical lens on the questions of inevitability and causality of the war. To date, no published study has applied neoclassical realism to the most recent historiographical debates on the origins of the First World War.

This article does not attempt to answer the historically profoundly complex question of why the First World War began. Instead, its purpose is purely theoretical. At the same time it is a contribution to the ongoing and, as we shall see, renewed controversy among historians, international relations scholars, and political scientists on the origins of the Great War.[4] It is an attempt to reflect on the causes of the First World War within the discipline of international relations on the basis of recent historical work. The paper polemicises with the "old" theories of the realist tradition and seeks to theoretically test the causes of the war based on neoclassical realism.

This paper will first examine classical and recent historiographical interpretations of the origins of the First World War, comparing their authors, perspectives, and key differences. It will then analyse realist approaches in international relations, focusing on neoclassical realism—its methods, core variables, and the hypotheses it generates. Next, it will review the state of the European system and the crucial events of the July Crisis of 1914 using recent historiography. Finally, the paper will present the hypotheses and their logical sequences and evaluate them through the lens of neoclassical realism.

1 Lebow, R. N. What Can International Relations Theory Learn From the Origins of World War I? *International Relations*, 2014, Vol. 28, No. 4, p. 383–404; Lieber, K. A. The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory. *International Security*, 2007, Vol. 32, No. 2, p. 155–191; Vasquez, J. A., Williamson, S. Review of *The First World War and International Relations Theory: A Review of Books on the 100th Anniversary*, by Christopher Clark, Sean McMeekin, Annika Mombauer, Thomas G. Otte, and Russel Van Wyk. *International Studies Review*, 2014, Vol. 16, No. 4, p. 623–644.

2 Levy, J. S.; and J. A. Vasquez, J. A. *The outbreak of the First World War: Structure, politics, and decision making*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

3 Levy, J. S., Vasquez, J. A. Introduction: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Causes of the First World War. In: *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision Making*, p. 4.

4 On the historiographical controversy on the origins of the First World War: Special Issue: The Fischer Controversy after 50 Years. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2013, Vol. 48, No. 2 (April), Entire Issue; Jones, H. As the Centenary Approaches: The Regeneration of First World War Historiography. *The Historical Journal*, 2013; Mombauer, A. Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I. *Central European History*, 2015, p. 541–564; Mombauer, A. Julikrise und Kriegsschuld – Thesen und Stand der Forschung. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 2014; Mombauer, A. *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2002; Paddock, T. *Contesting the Origins of the First World War: An Historiographical Argument*. New York: Routledge, 2020; Röhl, J. Goodbye to All That (Again)? The Fischer Thesis, the New Revisionism and the Meaning of the First World War. *International Affairs*, 2015; Mulligan, W. The Trial Continues: New Directions in the Study of the Origins of the First World War. *The English Historical Review*, 2014; Laurinavičius, Č. Mintys skaitant istoriografiją apie 1914 m. liepos krizę. *Parlamento studijos,* 2024, Nr. 34, p. 28–44; Žukas, T. *Pirmojo pasaulinio karo kaltės ir atsakomybės aiškinimai XXI a. Vakarų istoriografijoje*: daktaro disertacija. Vilnius: Vilniaus universitetas, 2025.

The paper will employ the case study method, focusing on the origins of the First World War as a key case in the history of international relations.[5] It is imperative to delineate the case and its boundaries.[6] The central research question, which will be addressed through the lens of recent historiography and neoclassical realism theory, pertains to the origins of the First World War. The historical or temporal boundaries of this investigation, particularly when analyzing the European international system, extend from 1905 to the summer of 1914, while the decision-making level is centered on the July Crisis of 1914. The historiographical material that will be most rigorously examined is derived from the past two decades of Anglo-American scholarship. Additionally, the study maintains theoretical boundaries, with a primary emphasis on realist theories of international relations. The method is used to define the research objective, which is to challenge established theoretical approaches, such as traditional realist interpretations of the war's origins.[7] By examining the systemic and intervening variables outlined in neoclassical realism, this paper seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors leading to the war, grounded in recent historiography.

1. The Historiography of the Origins of the First World War

1.1 Classical historiography: key authors, works and arguments

In the years immediately after the end of the war, states, politicians, and historians have sought to explain why the biggest military conflict in world history to date broke out. Narratives of individual state responsibility, economic competition, the rise of militarism and nationalism in Europe, and the ineffectiveness of secret diplomacy have dominated these explanations. The Treaty of Versailles of 1919 politicised the interpretation of the origins of the war by making Germany the sole culprit.[8] Following the conclusion of the Treaty of Versailles, the Weimar Republic initiated the widespread publication of the documents and correspondence of the July crisis. These documents were censored, but the German publication encouraged the other major powers to publish their documents collections.[9] The publication of documents and the emergence of a vast amount of sources gave rise to a huge number of historiography, which can be characterised by the dispute between revisionists and anti-revisionists throughout the interwar period.[10] This debate led to an emerging consensus in the run-up to World War II that the war was a result of the collective failure of European diplomacy which implied that none of the great powers, no politician or institution, deliberately sought war. [11]

World War II and Hitler's Germany's unquestioned culpability in starting the war did not in itself changed the way historians thought about the causes of the Great War. It was German historian Fritz Fischer who revolutionised historiography with the publication of *Griff Nach Der Weltmacht in 1961,* which was followed by numerous opposing voices and sparked one of Germany's most famous historiographical controversies in the twentieth century (the "*Fischer Kontroverse*").[12] Fischer argued that Germany had systematically planned and pursued the war, and took the opportunity to go to war in the summer of 1914. According to Fischer, German policy was the result of several factors: the military dimension had been of particular importance in Germany since Bismarck,[13] economic players benefited from global expansion and contributed to promoting and legitimising it[14] , and thus economic expansion became

5 Gerring, J. *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 6.
6 George, A. L.; Bennett, A. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005, p. 74–76.
7 *Ibidem,* p. 13–32; 74–76.
8 Mulligan, W. *The Origins of The First World War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 8.
9 *Ibidem,* p. 9.
10 Langdon, J. W. *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918–1990*. New York, Oxford: Berg, 1990, p. 1–50.
11 Mombauer, A. *The Origins of The First World War: Controversies and Consensus.* London: Taylor & Francis, 2002, p. 108–113.
12 Böhme, H. „Primat" und „Paradigma". Zur Entwicklung einer bundesdeutschen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung am Beispiel des Ersten Weltkrieges. In: Hartmut, L. *Historikerkontroversen*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001, p. 89–139.
13 Fischer, F. *Germany's Aims in the First World War*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967, p. 2–4; 7–11.
14 *Ibidem,* p. 19–20.

the pivot of Germany's global policy (*Weltpolitik)*. Germany's economic growth in the second half of the 19th century was extremely rapid, far outpacing other European countries[15] as the country's economic players benefited from the global expansion and contributed to the promotion and legitimisation of the expansion.[16] The German naval expansion programme of the early 20th century, according to Fischer, was the most remarkable expression of Berlin's *Weltpolitik*, and it marked the beginning of Germany's confrontation with Britain.[17] According to Fischer, Germany's rigid diplomacy meant that Austria was Germany's only real ally. Berlin had become dependent on the alliance, and it was prepared to defend the establishment of a balance of power in the Balkans that favored Austria rather than risk losing its alliance with Austria.[18] Fischer's perspective is certainly one of the most obvious in the inevitable war narrative. The formulation of German war aspirations in the early days of the war are taken as a natural outcome of German pre-war policy. In this sense, the existence of a positive path dependency – Germany was a military power from its birth, and the war was therefore the inevitable atomization of German ambitions.

Italian journalist Luigi Albertini's book *The origins of the war of 1914*[19] has long been considered as the most comprehensive study of the outbreak of this war. After the assassination in Sarajevo, Albertini argued, Berlin urged Vienna to take a hard line towards Serbia, supporting the Austrian initiative to intervene in Serbia and sabotaging British mediation efforts. Although Albertini acknowledges the culpability of other countries in the July crisis, he believed that Germany aimed to provoke a localised conflict in the Balkans (between Austria and Serbia), thereby destroying the Russian-French alliance. The decisions of the German and Austrian leaders, Albertini believed, embodied the decades-long atmosphere of great power conflict dominated by offensive military doctrines. This distorted view of the political and military realities of the continent and *reckless* diplomacy, according to Albertini, led to the complete collapse of the European system.

Since its launch in 1962, Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* has long been considered an important study of the eve of the Great War. Subsequently the subject of much criticism and considered a work of popular rather than scholarly historiography, Tuchman's book can still be considered *a classic* for the influence it once had. The study treats the outbreak of the war as caused by the strict mobilisation plans of the great powers and the failure of the leaders to realise that the mobilisation of one country was the *casus belli* of the whole of Europe. Although Tuchman acknowledges the militarism that prevailed throughout Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, she focuses on Germany and the militarism that prevailed there. The Schlieffen Plan, according to Tuchman, brought Germany to a standstill, whereby Germany had to be the first to take military action. Tuchman's perspective is incomplete as she skips the crucial events of the July Crisis, moving from Sarajevo on June 28 to Germany's mobilization on August 1. This omission overlooks more than a month of decisions by European powers, each with significant implications for the conflict that started on August 4.[20]

The studies of the renowned British historian A. J. P. Taylor also belongs to the classical narrative of the interpretation of the beginning of the war. He mentions the broad systemic factors of militarism in Europe and the irrevocable mobilisation plans. In Germany, Taylor argues, the strict conditions of mobilisation shaped Berlin's determination to go to war. Schlieffen was the real culprit of the war, whose rapid mobilisation and war plans made conflict in the July Crisis inevitable. Taylor expressively said: [Schlieffen's] "dead hand automatically pulled the trigger.".[21] The war, according to Taylor, was a product of the railway timetables introduced by the statesmen. In addition to these aspects, the factor of Germany's unconditional

15 *Ibidem,* p. 11–15.
16 *Ibidem,* p. 19–20.
17 *Ibidem,* p. 8–9.
18 *Ibidem,* p. 22–23.
19 Albertini, L. *The Origins of the war of 1914*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.
20 Tuchman, B. *The Guns of August*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004 (1962), p. 26–33; 41–42.
21 Taylor, A. J. P. *The First World War: An Illustrated History*. London: Penguin Books, 2012 (1963), p. 20.

support for Austria is acknowledged by Taylor when, as early as 5 July, seven days after the assassination of the Archduke, German Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg assured Vienna of Germany's support.[22] In another more detailed study covering 1848 to 1914, Taylor argues that the breakdown, not the existence, of the balance of power increased the likelihood of war in the early 20th century. According to him, leaders lacked a clear understanding of the international political landscape and couldn't foresee the consequences of their foreign policy decisions. In 1914, German leaders, as per Taylor, believed their situation was more favorable and entered the war with hopes of winning.[23]

While each author examines Germany's perceived aggressive policies in the early 20th century, they vary in attributing blame for the war, with Fischer notably asserting Germany's sole culpability. The crucial aspect is that this historiography prioritizes structural conditions and overarching factors that make war inevitable, relegating the decisions of specific actors during the 1914 crisis to a secondary role. References to these authors and this interpretation of the causes of the war can be found in many subsequent theoretical considerations. [24]

1.2. The Recent Historiography

The key divergence between the new historiography and its predecessor lies in the former's departure from the narrative of an inevitable war. The contention is that scholars have historically laden the scales with a multitude of causes, transforming the war from a probable outcome to an inevitable one and this narrative, it is argued, has neglected the examination of contingencies, choices, and individual agents in the process.[25] Recent studies suggest that human error, *muddle,* or simply ungrateful timing should not be ruled out in assessing the causes of war.[26]

The recent historiography provides a detailed analysis of the most important personalities in European politics – kings, tsars and presidents – as well as the personalities around the key decision-makers: foreign ministers, advisers, ambassadors, diplomats and others who had any influence on the top decision-makers.[27] The circle of Europe's highest monarchs consisted of competing patrons seeking the monarch's favour and this hampered the possibility of objective thinking and the formulation of foreign policy decisions, which were essential in the face of impending crises.[28] Thus, in this era, individual leaders of varying abilities were at the forefront of decision-making, operating in dysfunctional political systems. At the same time, historiography has attempted to dispel myths about certain leaders, such as the often popular narrative of Wilhelm as the quintessential aggressor, who started a naval rivalry with Great Britain, threatened other European powers, and thus caused the collapse of Europe's diplomacy.[29] The analysis underscores decision-makers' failure to recognize the all-encompassing nature of the impending conflict and the reluctance of European statesmen who perceived war as the only viable option in July 1914.

Major attention is devoted to the pre-war crises in current historiography. In the context of the crises between 1905 and 1914, the interests of almost all the major European powers collided at various points. The historiography asks the fundamental question of why Europe did not go to war during these crises but went to war during the July 1914 crisis, which in many ways was even less dangerous than the previous ones. This question is not answered articulately, but another important thesis is put forward: in July 1914, the decision-making was undoubtedly based on the crises that had preceded it.[30] Understanding

[22] *Ibidem,* p. 16–25.
[23] Taylor, A. J. P. *The Struggle For Mastery In Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 (1954), p. 526–531.
[24] Van Evera, S. The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War. *International Security*, 1984, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 62–69; 80–84.
[25] Clark, C. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War in 1914*. London: Penguin Book, 2013, p. 362.
[26] MacMillan, M. *The War That Ended Peace*. Toronto: Allan Lane, 2013, p. XXXi.
[27] Clark, C. *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 173–185.
[28] *Ibidem,* p. 185.
[29] *Ibidem,* p. 63.
[30] Macmillan, M. *The War That Ended Peace*, p. 645.

the outbreak of the war therefore requires, among other things, an attempt to understand the genesis and outcome of these crises and what the statesmen might have learned from them.

This historiography is dominated by the narrative of war as an unexpected tragedy and the war is seen as a tragedy, not a crime. The July Crisis of 1914 was multipolar and involved a series of actors, which is why it has been described as one of the most complex events in modern history.[31] It is argued that no European state wanted a wide-scale war in July 1914, but each was willing to accept the possibility of war if the vital interests of each power were threatened. In this crisis, the vital interests of Austria-Hungary and Russia were directly challenged, while those of Germany and France were challenged indirectly, but in the era of the alliances, these interests were seen as interlinked. Britain entered the conflict thanks to the *Entente Cordiale* being unable to ignore a potentially radical shift in the balance of power in Europe.[32] The paradox here is that in the last phase of the crisis, existing alliances constrained the potential choices of states, even though, according to William Mulligan, alliances were designed to stabilise the international system. [33]

In July 1914, European leaders resolved to fight a war for which every European country was ready, for which some countries were willing to take risks, but which no European country wanted. This overview of recent historiography does not discuss other literature which analyses other contexts of the outbreak of the war (for example, analyses of the July Crisis exclusively), and recent academic articles in the history of international relations, which deal with various elements of the origins of the First World War: the role of individual diplomats, the dynamics of bilateral relations, the role of new technologies, etc. However, this literature will be referred to in the body of the study.

Unlike the historiography of previous eras, the studies of the last fifteen to ten years focuses on domestic politics, changes in national foreign policies, pre-1914 international crises, key decision-makers, and, most importantly, the July Crisis itself. It emphasizes the role of unfortunate coincidences and mishaps during the July Crisis, which either brought the war closer or, at critical moments, averted a path toward peaceIn contrast to earlier interpretations, it stresses contingency, error, and the unexpected rather than an inevitable outcome. The start of the First World War is referred to as a *cataclysm*[34] , and decision-makers are seen as *sleepwalkers*, with the underlying message being that they did not know the horrors of their decisions. The inevitability of war is therefore, of course, rejected.

Significantly, the question of the origins of the First World War remains a subject of ongoing disagreement among historians, generating controversies since the end of the war itself. This enduring controversy stems from the perception that the causes of the First World War are still viewed as unresolved, prompting the search for new theoretical approaches to explain the event.

2. Realist Perspectives on the Causes of the First World War

Hans Morgenthau in his seminal work *Politics Among Nations* talks about the phenomenon of imperialism in the second half of the 19th century, which guided all the great European powers. According to Morgenthau, the fear of imperialism gave birth to an imperialist reaction, which in turn became the object of a further increase in the original fear[35]. An atmosphere of fear and insecurity encouraged the formation of alliances aimed at countering rivals or expanding their ranks. Morgenthau argues that war became inevitable once each side feared the other would upset the balance of power to its advantage. He identifies 1890—when Kaiser Wilhelm II abandoned Bismarck's Realpolitik for Weltpolitik—as the decisive turning point. This shift made Germany the central actor, undermined the existing European order, and ushered in an alliance-based system. For Morgenthau, the war stemmed from anxiety over

[31] Clark, C. *The Sleepwalkers*, p. XXVII.
[32] Mulligan, p. 225.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 229–234.
[34] Stevenson, D. *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*. New York: Basic Books, 2004.
[35] Morgenthau, H. *Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 1997, p. 81.

the balance of power, intensified by Germany's new course and the Kaiser's provocative rhetoric.[36] For Morgenthau, fear of a collapsing balance of power made war unavoidable, as the prospect of imbalance triggered anxious and reactive behaviour by the European states.

In *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz argued that pre-war alliances were formed to ensure security. With both blocs possessing roughly equal capabilities, neither could dominate in peacetime, and the loss of an ally would have critically disrupted the balance of power. While Waltz highlights this rigidity, there was some cooperation between alliances and scope for future adjustments. States did not always follow alliance logic in the pre-war crises. Waltz also notes that such cooperation—e.g., German-British interactions in 1912–13—created tension among allies but encouraged more effective crisis management by Berlin and London during the July Crisis of 1914. According to Waltz, it was the instability of Balkan politics and the rigidity and immobility of the system, which prevented the resolution of the issues of Balkan policy, which led to war.[37]

John J. Mearsheimer, considered to be the pioneer of offensive realism, also attributes the beginning of war to Germany's role. According to offensive realism, states operating in an uncertain international system will seek to increase their power as much as possible in order to protect themselves. Accordingly, for Mearsheimer, it was German leaders who were responsible for starting the war, as they set themselves the goal of overcoming the other European great powers in their quest for dominance, and thereby securing Germany's long-term hegemony. Germany started the war to crush the *Entente*, to stop the rise of Russia and to achieve total domination. It is true that Mearsheimer admits that while German rise is a predictor of the war, the theory of offensive realism fails to explain why the war broke out in 1914 and not, for example, in 1905, when Germany was in a much more favorable position than in 1914.[38]

While these theories tend to emphasize rational choice, empirical evidence suggests that factors like honor and revenge motivate state leaders more than security or material gains. Richard Lebow advocates moving beyond abstract views dictated by these theories. He contends that recent historical literature on the war's origins offers valuable insights into decision-makers' motives, fears, and expectations, clarifies the relationship between fundamental and immediate causes, and underscores the significance of actors and contingency. Lebow doesn't present an alternative theory but highlights the inadequacy and bias of prevailing theories in analyzing the new historiography of the war's origins.[39]

3. Theory. Neoclassical realism

Neoclassical realism, departing from classical and neorealism, integrates internal and external factors to analyze state behavior in the international system. It contends that a state's actions are influenced by its international position and material capacity, but this influence is intricate and indirect due to domestic policy variables. According to Gideon Rose, neoclassical realism recognizes the absence of a straightforward *transmission belt linking* the state's material capacity and foreign policy. The theory emphasizes that foreign policy decisions are shaped by how political leaders perceive a state's power, capabilities, or ambitions. With its focus on the connection between a state's power and domestic politics, neoclassical realism underscores the importance of analyzing the processes involved in formulating and making foreign policy decisions.[40]

G. Rose outlines the causal relationship in neoclassical realism, where a state's foreign policy is primarily shaped by systemic variables (its position in the international system and material power). Internal factors, such as decision-makers perceptions and motivations, act as intervening variables. These include

[36] *Ibidem*, p. 71–81; 113.
[37] Waltz, K. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979, p. 166–167; 208–209.
[38] Mearsheimer, J. J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003, p. 215–216; 335.
[39] Lebow, R. N. What Can International Relations Theory Learn From the Origins of World War I?. 1, p. 5–6; 19.
[40] Rose, G. Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy. *World Politics*, 1998, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 144–172.

state leadership, strategic culture, state-society relations, and internal institutional structure.[41] Thus, the result of the interrelationship between these two strands is the foreign policy of the state. Rose recognises the complexity of this causal link. Methodologically, according to Rose, neoclassical realism emphasises informative analyses that seek to answer the question of how a state's position in the system and the country's material capacity are translated by specific decision-makers into the state's foreign policy.[42]

3.1. International system

Neoclassical realism agrees with neorealism that states formulate their security and foreign policies in response to structural fears and opportunities. However, neoclassical realism does not accept the neorealist thesis that states respond to systemic change smoothly and mechanically, as structural realism's balance of power theory would suggest.[43] Neoclassical realism bases this on the claim that foreign policy decisions taken by states often contradict the logic of systemic functioning, because four fundamental limitations prevent a smooth response to structural change: leaders are unable to grasp systemic dynamics adequately; the problem of clarity of the international system – it is not clear what a particular systemic shift means or can mean; the likelihood of irrationality, when state leaders will not always respond rationally to systemic change; and the problem of resource mobilisation, when not all state decision-makers have the capacity to pursue policies on their own, as they are faced with domestic interest groups, veto-players etc.[44]

The *clarity* of the international system is of particular importance in theory. Changes in the international system sends signals to states that they need to understand and process. The clarity dimension is characterised by several components: the extent to which threats and opportunities are identified; whether systemic changes provide information in the time dimension about threats and opportunities[45]; and whether there are optimal solutions to respond to systemic changes. The clarity of the international system is a critical systemic variable in neoclassical realism. The less clarity there is in the international system, the more chances there are for leaders, parties or groups to pursue unique solutions based on their preferences, interests or strategic culture.[46] *Ergo*, the less clarity, the more important the intervening variables.

The state of a country's strategic environment is an additional systemic variable that neoclassical realism treats the international system according to. The state's strategic environment can be *restrictive* and *permissive*. The more imminent the threat to the state and the greater the threat, the more restrictive the state's strategic environment. Conversely, the more distant the threat and the less intense the threat, the more permissive the state's strategic environment.[47] Clarity and the state of the strategic environment are the two key systemic variables on which neoclassical realism approaches the international system.

3.2. Intervening variable

Neoclassical realism identifies four categories of intervening variables: the role of leadership, the country's strategic culture, state-society relations, and internal institutions. These are essentially the transmission belts, as identified by Rose above, through which the perception of the international system is transmitted and which determine the state's response to systemic change. [48]

The first and most important intervening variable for this paper is the factor of political leaders. According to neoclassical realism, this is the foreign policy *executive*. This can be the president, dictator, emperor, king, prime minister, minister, foreign policy advisor, etc. This political actor has private

41 *Ibidem*, p. 154.
42 *Ibidem*, p. 168.
43 Ripsman, N. M.; Lobell, S. E.; Taliaferro, J. W. *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 19.
44 *Ibidem*, p. 20–25.
45 *Ibidem*, p. 48.
46 *Ibidem*, p. 50.
47 *Ibidem*, p. 52–56.
48 *Ibidem*, p. 59–61.

information about the other country, and therefore the leader can be a key object of analysis in explaining foreign policy or strategic developments in the country. Psychological issues may also be relevant here, such as the cognitive abilities of the leader in crises, when he must cope with scarce information, information overload or conflicting information. In such situations, each person's core values, beliefs and images are manifested, which determine the leader's interactions with the outside world.

The intervening variable can be extracted by two methods: the deductive method, in which the variable is extracted from existing theories; and the inductive method, in which the essential variable is derived from empirical material.[49] In this paper, the intervening variable will be identified inductively – empirics, i.e. the recent historiography of the First World War, dictates that the decision-maker must be the essential point of analysis.

One of the key objects of analysis in recent historiography is the July Crisis of 1914, a pivotal period between the assassination of Franz Ferdinand on June 28 and Britain's declaration of war on Germany on August 4. It is this period, and more specifically the long week between Austria-Hungary's ultimatum to Serbia (23 July) and Britain's decision to take part in the war, that is the most extensively studied period. In this short period, specific personalities in the royal palaces, cabinets, foreign ministries, general staffs or diplomatic services played a key role.

The theory suggests that decision makers are most influential in the short term when rapid decision-making and secrecy prevail. In a low-clarity and constrained international system, the greatest leader influence can be expected. In an international system with a high likelihood of threat in the short term and a narrow range of possible choices (political manoeuvres), it will crowd out social actors, forcing leaders to ignore social demands in exchange for maintaining a favourable strategic position of the state.[50] Neoclassical realism theorists place the July Crisis of 1914 in the category of crisis decision-making and rapid reaction to unforeseen events. Decision-makers could not change alliances or modernise their military forces in the short term but had to make abrupt decisions and calculations in response to the existing balance of power to understand their rivals' short-term intentions. [51]

The other intervening variables emphasised by neoclassical realism are less relevant in the context of the phenomenon under study and the epoch of the research. The theory suggests that state-society relations and domestic institutions will have the least influence on short-term political decisions. State-society relations and domestic institutions are more influential in the longer term when foreign policy strategies are formulated, and when economic interests or domestic political struggles are most pronounced.[52] Strategic culture can influence decision-making in both the short and the long term.[53] Although one can find moments of discussion of it in the historiography under study, strategic culture is discussed in the long or medium term, and the focus of the analysis in this paper will be the July crisis, in which, as mentioned above, individuals played a central role.[54]

Getting acquainted with the features of historiography and the variables distinguished by the theory of neoclassical realism allows us to formulate a few hypotheses that were tested. **H1**. The war was caused by the alliance system, which was rigid and immobile, limited the freedom of manoeuvre of the states involved in the alliances, and encouraged states to stick to the alliances. **H2**. The war was caused by the decisions of specific decision-makers, which were risky, based on false assumptions, individual preferences, violation of the rules of subordination, and lack of sufficient information. These hypotheses are not necessarily competing, i.e. no attempt will be made to test which of these hypotheses was more

[49] *Ibidem*, p. 117.
[50] *Ibidem,* p. 61; 91; 94–95; 119.
[51] *Ibidem*, p. 83.
[52] *Ibidem*, p. 92–93.
[53] *Ibidem*, p. 91.
[54] Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that by omitting the three other intervening variables mentioned, this article does not fully exploit the analytical potential of neoclassical realism. Therefore, it tests only a portion of the theory, rather than the entire framework.

important for the outbreak of the war. Hypotheses are complementary, and the paper will seek to assess them against the criteria of 'necessity' and 'sufficiency'. Also, hypotheses **H1** and **H2** are "compound" hypotheses – they consist of several elements that can be connected by logical sequences, and it is these elements and the sequences that will be tested in more detail in the research part of the article.

4. European system from 1904 to 1914

Drawing on recent scholarship, the condition of European politics in the years 1904 to 1914—marked by recurring crises, pivotal diplomatic settlements, and volatile geopolitical dynamics—may be characterized as deeply ambivalent on the eve of the summer of 1914. On the one hand, there were various tensions between the different European capitals, ethnic or political differences in specific regions threatened to escalate into a more serious conflict, the European powers were pursuing a broad policy of armaments, and the colonialism of the great empires threatened to clash in certain points far from Europe. There were two alliance blocs based on which it became possible to imagine the coming war. The cultural-intellectual milieu saw war in Europe as a possibility. In every capital, influential decision-makers could be found who saw the war as an opportunity to resolve their countries' geostrategic or domestic policy dilemmas.

But this is far from implying that there were no opposite phenomena. European monarchs continued to participate in common ceremonies (weddings, funerals) before the summer of 1914, and until the outbreak of the war, there was a serious debate among European political elites at large about the maintenance of peace on the continent. The fact that all the crises that had followed had been resolved by then gave a real hope that a diplomatic solution would be found in future crises. From 1912 onwards, there was an emerging consensus between Germany, the largest continental power, and Britain, the largest maritime power, and during the Balkan wars, both countries demonstrated their ability to moderate the escalations in the region. At the beginning of 1914, the newly appointed German Secretary of State, Gottlieb von Jagow, spoke of a British-German *detente*. He argued that the recent tensions are Berlin's fault and that London and Berlin need to move towards reconciliation. In parallel, in London around 1914, there were several changes in the appointment of British diplomats to the various European embassies. There was some thought of changing the course of British foreign policy over a few years, potentially turning away from Russia, seeking to find a compromise with Germany, and perhaps even a somewhat more relaxed view of alliance with France.[55] Serious peace initiatives could be discussed at length: the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Rothchilds' efforts to avoid war, or the Vatican's constant calls for peace. European financial markets remained calm until 27 July 1914 (just 4 days after Austria's ultimatum to Serbia), and did not predict or expect European war.[56]

The discussion of the structural variable should be concluded by analysing, based on neoclassical realism, whether the European system before the war was *restrictive* or *permissive*, and what were the characteristics of the systemic environment, whether the system had clear or unclear signals.

Neoclassical realism says that the state of a country's strategic environment can be *restrictive* and *permissive*. The more likely and the greater the threat to the state, the more restrictive the strategic environment. Conversely, the more distant the threat and the less intense it is, the more permissive the state's strategic environment will be. Since the unification of Germany in 1871, the European system can be described as restrictive. Germany became the strongest power on the continent, which posed dilemmas for France and Russia. These countries agreed on an alliance in 1894, and since the formation of this alliance, Germany began to fear war on two fronts. After the launch of Germany's *Weltpolitik* programme in the

[55] Otte, T. G. *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy 1865–1914*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 382–388.

[56] Ferguson, N. *A Pity of War*. London: Allan Lane, 1999, p. 192.

1890s, British dominance at sea was threatened, raising the question of whether Germany might actually try to deny British sea power through concrete action.

The theory states that changes in the international system send signals to states, which they need to understand and process. The level of clarity is "measured" by the extent to which threats and opportunities are recognised in the system, whether systemic change anticipates the adversary's capabilities and intentions over a time horizon, and whether there are optimal solutions to respond to systemic change. One way to put it is to say that the threats in Europe in 1914 were clear: two alliances were competing against each other for European dominance. However, the diplomatic reality in the period of 1904 to 1914 illustrates that states often acted in ways that were not what the alliance agreements implied, and that a dynamic that transcended alliances prevailed. The systemic uncertainty was exacerbated by the mixed signals of the crises and incidents that preceded 1914: in some cases, states pursued a more aggressive policy, in others the opposite; in some cases, states tended to support their allies, in others not.

The period leading up to 1914 was a volatile one, with signs of both war and peace, and despite the existence of alliances, systemic changes did not provide clear opportunities, intentions or solutions for states. Systemic signals were therefore unclear, and the state of the European system in 1914 can be described as a constraining system of unclear signals. Neoclassical realism says that in an international system of uncertain signals, there are more chances for specific leaders, parties or groups to pursue unique solutions based on their preferences, interests or strategic culture.[57] In other words, structural conditions limit states' possible courses of action and create ambiguous signals, which in turn increases the influence of the intervening variable—in this case, the decision-maker.

5. The July Crisis of 1914: the decision-makers

The July Crisis, as a set of events, has been described in great detail in the recent historiography.[58] Indeed, a prominent trend in contemporary historiography is the increasing emphasis on the short-term causes of the Great War, focusing meticulously on the intricate details of the July Crisis of 1914.

A view of the key events of the July Crisis in recent historiography reveals that the crisis was characterised by a very high intensity, uncharacteristic of the diplomacy of the time. The crisis was extremely confusing, giving decision-makers very little time to make decisions. The most important period of the July Crisis was from 23 July 1914, when Austria issued an ultimatum to Serbia, to 4 August 1914, when Britain declared war on Germany. Within these twelve days, the speed of events was particularly high, which opened the room for highly individual action by decision-makers. Furthermore, the crisis was marked by numerous mistakes and incorrect assumptions made by decision-makers[59]; the crisis occurred at an especially inopportune time, particularly in the first half of July, when much of the government and foreign ministry staff were away on holiday.

[57] Ripsman, N. M.; Lobell, S. E.; Taliaferro, J. W. *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, p. 50.

[58] The most recent historiography, on the ground of which the sum of events and decisions in Appendix 2 is given, and on the basis of which, in accordance with neoclassical realism, the analysis of logical sequences is carried out in the next section: Clark, C. *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 480; 502–512; Clark, C. Sir Edward Grey and the July Crisis. *International History Review*, 2016, Vol. 38, No. 2, p. 332; Fromkin, D. *Europe's Last Summer*. New York: Knopf, 2004, p. 218–221; 230; 235–242; Young, J. W. Ambassador George Buchanan and the July Crisis. *International History Review*, 2017, Vol. 40, No. 1, p. 8; Leonhard, J. *Pandora's Box: A History of the First World War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014, p. 93; Macmillan, *The War That Ended Peace*, p. 597–611; McMeekin, S. *July 1914: The Countdown To War*. New York: Basic Books, 2013, p. 123–166; 206–225; 313–324; Martel, G. *The Month That Changed The World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 215; 228–9; 319; 369; 382–383; Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War*, p. 213–222; T. Otte, G. *July Crisis: The World's Descent Into War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, Epub version, p. 534–543; 701–714; 577–8; 1288; Stevenson, D. *The Outbreak of the First World War: 1914 in Perspective*, London: Macmillan Press, 1997, p. 30.

[59] One of the most frequently cited concrete errors occurred when Archduke Ferdinand's driver missteered, bringing the car close to Gavrilo Princip. However, from a strictly theoretical perspective, this mistake cannot be attributed to a decision-maker.

Drawing on the most recent historiography, the subsequent section of this paper will examine both the systemic context of 1904–1914 and the July Crisis of 1914 from a theoretical perspective.

6. Hypothesis testing: logical sequence analysis

The analysis of the European system of 1905-1914 and the July Crisis of 1914 will be followed by a discussion of the hypotheses and the logical sequence of theses that emerge from them, the interconnections of which will detail which decisions and how led to the further escalation and the totality of the decisions taken at the outbreak of the war.

Based on the content of the recent historiography and the theoretical approach of neoclassical realism, the first hypothesis (**H1**) – The war was caused by the alliance system, which was rigid and immobile, limited the freedom of manoeuvre of the states involved in the alliances, and encouraged the states to stick to the alliance matrix/scheme – has to be confirmed. The existence of the alliance system in 1914 was a precondition for the outbreak of war. Alliances forced countries to react in one way or another to the crisis that followed the assassination in Sarajevo, and they created a structural framework for the crisis and obligations that countries had to respect, primarily for their own security. Alliances constrained the potential political choices of countries and reduced their room for maneuver. However, **H1** is more accurately described as a necessary but not sufficient condition for war. Alliances began to emerge as early as 1882, with the beginnings of the alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Franco-Russian alliance dates back to 1891, followed by the *Entente Cordiale* in 1904 and the British-Russian agreement in 1907. The existence of the two alliance blocs can thus be traced back to 1891, 23 years before the outbreak of war. However, the alliances did not take Europe to war during this period. An analysis of the European system before 1914 shows that states often acted differently from what the alliance agreements implied, in some cases tending to side with their allies and in others not, thus creating a dynamic that went beyond alliances. A series of crises before 1914 would have led one to believe that the war would have started sooner, but the alliances in these episodes proved to be adaptable to the situation at hand, and the scheme imposed by the alliances could be, and at times was, transgressed in the interests of preserving peace. Alliances, by constraining the system and limiting states' freedom of action, were a necessary but not sufficient condition for war, as they had existed for nearly a quarter-century and faced multiple crises that, by their logic, could have triggered conflict.

This is why **H2** is necessary alongside **H1** – The war was caused by the decisions of specific actors, which were risky, made based on false assumptions, individual preferences, in violation of the rules of subordination, and in the absence of sufficient information. The choices made by individual decision-makers during the July Crisis brought the war closer and made it possible; the decision-makers "activated" the mechanism of alliances, which is why **H2** is a necessary condition for the outbreak of the war, but could only have been formed under the conditions defined by **H1**. In other words, without the system of alliances, the decision-makers would not have been able to make the decisions they did in the July Crisis, so **H2** could not have existed without **H1**, but equally **H1** alone (!) was not in itself sufficient to start the war. In the crises that had unfolded in Europe up to 1914, the decision-makers were operating within a constraining system, the logic of which was almost identical to that of July 1914. But in these crises, the decision-makers, or the most important and influential part of them, did not choose the war option. On the contrary, these crises were often followed by some sort of relaxation of tensions. However, in the July Crisis, unlike in previous crises, leaders made risky decisions, in some cases based on false assumptions and insufficient information; important officials acted without foresight, with recklessness, and in violation of the principles of subordination, all of which were human factors that were necessary for the outbreak of war. Thus, there is no objective evidence to suggest that **H1** would have taken Europe to war without the existence of **H2.** The existence of the alliances provided the structure within which the

war was possible, but it was the decision-makers at the time of the July 1914 crisis who made decisions based on this structure.

From hypothesis **H1**—which holds that the alliance system was a necessary factor in the outbreak of the war—several logical sequence theses **(H1(1)**, etc.) emerge from the analysis of the July Crisis of 1914, each reinforcing the hypothesis and functioning as key variables in the crisis.

First, **H1(1)** German support for Austria is the first domino of the crisis. Berlin's *blank cheque* to Vienna on 5-6 July 1914, i.e. Germany's decision to support Vienna in its military manoeuvres against Serbia. This promise by Berlin gave the basis for Austrian aggression against Serbia, thus taking the first step towards escalation. This was a necessary but not sufficient factor at the beginning of the war. Without Germany's support, Austria would probably not have risked to start a war against Serbia, knowing that Russia might side with Serbia. Germany's choice to support its ally in this case was in anticipation of a localised Austro-Serbian conflict, with no clear expectation of Russian intervention and no expectation of a wider continental conflict.

The second thesis **H1(2)**, which emerges from **H1**, is that French support for Russia was a key motive for Russia's reaction. Again, the pattern of alliances can be seen when after Russia learned of Austria's plans for an ultimatum to Serbia and decided to first deter Austria and then to react, France provided support for Russia's actions. **H1(2)** must be seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the start of the war: it is hard to believe that Russia would have unilaterally defended Serbia without French support, but then again, the decision to take military action was taken not by Paris or St Petersburg, but by Vienna, which was already aware of Russia's ability to respond.

The third thesis **H1(3)** deals with Britain's position among the alliances in the context of the July Crisis. Britain's uncertain position introduced more uncertainty into the European system. Britain's choice to mediate the July Crisis until the last days of peace, while being in an alliance with France and an agreement with Russia, introduced more fog into the system and undermined the chances of London's successful mediation. The signals from the major capitals towards London bear witness to this: France and Russia expected Britain's support for formal agreements, while Germany, in the spirit of British mediation, hoped for its neutrality. Thus, for most of the July crisis, Britain's position in terms of allies and mediation was unclear, making it more difficult to contain the crisis, but not necessary for war. Therefore, although Britain's position in the alliance system can be described as a particularly important factor, it was not a necessary condition for the outbreak of war.

Hypothesis **H2**, which highlights the role of decision-makers in the context of the July crisis, leads to a logical sequence of theses that will be grouped into three segments: necessary conditions; necessary but insufficient conditions; and necessary and sufficient conditions. First, the necessary conditions will be discussed. This category will include circumstances related to specific decision-makers, their decisions, contingencies, timing or other factors that made the resolution of the crisis more difficult and brought the war closer, but were neither necessary nor sufficient for the outbreak of war.

H2(1) is a simple detail: when Poincaré and Viviani travelled by boat from Russia to France, from 23 July to 28 July, communication between Paris and other capitals deteriorated considerably, decision-making in Paris was in a vacuum, and the French ambassadors in European capitals were given more autonomy. This led to little French involvement in the unfolding of the crisis, and a clear lack of communication with Russia about its upcoming actions.

H2(2) is another coincidence related to decision-makers: in the first phase of the crisis, most of European leaders, decision-makers and foreign policy officials were on holiday, which led to a very fragmented perception of the potential risk in capitals. For instance, three days after Austria's ultimatum to Serbia, with Russia's unofficial mobilisation already underway, and four days before Germany's ultimatum to Russia to call off its mobilisation, Europe's capitals were busy enjoying themselves. Almost the entire British Foreign Office (including Foreign Secretary Grey) was on holiday, the Russian ambassadors in Berlin,

Paris and Vienna had not yet returned from their holidays, Kaiser Wilhelm was sailing on his yacht in the North Sea, Franz Joseph was on a hunting holiday, Viviani and Poincaré were taking their time to get back to Paris and were visiting Stockholm, and the heads of the German and Austrian general staffs were also on holiday.[60] The initial phase of the July crisis was marked by a general carelessness on the part of the leaders and a lack of anticipation that the situation might escalate.

H2(3) relates to the role of British Foreign Secretary Grey whose delayed, inconsistent and mixed signals during the July Crisis made it difficult for London to manage the current crisis. For example, Grey's hesitant call for mediation, for a London ambassadorial conference after Austria's ultimatum to Serbia, was particularly striking.

H2(4) is the issue of the reports sent to Berlin by Pourtalès, the German ambassador to Russia: the reports sent by Pourtalès on the situation and the prevailing mood in St Petersburg were biased, painting the situation in a more favourable light than it was. Berlin, at least until the official news of the Russian mobilisation, was, thanks to Pourtalès's reports, in the dark about the positions in the Russian government and the current military preparations.

Actions of Russia's Foreign Minister Sazonov is a **H2(5).** After Russia declared a secret partial mobilisation, Sazonov systematically concealed this information from the British and French ambassadors. On 26 July, when the secretly decided pre-mobilisation phase was already underway, British Ambassador Buchanan was told that these military measures were being taken in response to protests in St Petersburg and Moscow.[61] Naturally, this fact made it impossible for the French and British ambassadors to convey to their capitals precise and certain information about the measures taken by Russia and its plans.

Finally, thesis **H2(6)** also concerns the British ambassador to Russia, Buchanan. From 28 July onwards, Buchanan no longer provided London with objective information about Russian plans, but did everything to ensure that his position would be fulfilled and that Britain would support Russia in the upcoming war. By 28 July, Buchanan was seeking to collect information in St Petersburg on Russia's true intentions and to pass this material on to London. However, from 28 July onwards, once he had passed a certain point, or possibly convinced himself that war was inevitable, Buchanan did everything he could to get Britain to join the war on Russia's side. In effect, from 28 July Buchanan allowed individual interpretations of British interests to override each ambassador's imperative to provide his government with the widest and most accurate information possible.[62]

The logical sequence of theses derived from hypothesis **H2**, which played the role of necessary but insufficient conditions at the beginning of the war, will be discussed below. **H2(7)** is the Austrian Foreign Minister Berchtold's firm decision to attack Serbia at the risk of wider escalation. Berchtold's pivotal decision, despite awareness of the potential for a broader conflict, played a key role in triggering the crisis. He promoted aggressive actions against Serbia, risking a continental war, and was the primary decision-maker in Vienna from the Sarajevo events to the outbreak of the war.

In the first days of the July Crisis, the German Kaiser and Chancellor gave Austria a *blank cheque*, i.e., unconditional support for any Austrian decision on Serbia, and that is a **H2(8).** On July 5-6, Kaiser Wilhelm and Chancellor Bethmann assured Austria of a support without thorough discussion or consultation in Berlin, committing to aid Austria without fully considering the consequences.

The Austrian capital's key factor in deciding actions against Serbia was Hungarian Prime Minister Tisza's shift from opposing military action to supporting it after the assassination. Tisza's decision to support the military solution is **H2(9)**. Without Tisza's decision, Vienna couldn't have declared mobilization or military action due to the dualist monarchy's constitutional structure, requiring Hungarian government approval.

60 Martel, G. *The Month That Changed The World*, p. 215.
61 Clark, C. *Sir Edward Grey and the July Crisis*, p. 332.
62 Young, J. W. *Ambassador George Buchanan and the July Crisis,* p. 11–12.

H2(10) is a unilateral decision by the French ambassador Paléologue to Russia to give support to Russia, which gave Russia a reason to defend Serbia. After the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, with the French top brass at sea Paléologue confirmed his country's support for Russia in its defence of Serbia. Most importantly, Paléologue took this decision unilaterally, without any instruction from Paris. This decision by Paléologue gave Russia the freedom to threaten Austria and to declare a partial mobilisation.

It is Russia's decision to mobilise that has to be considered as a **H2(11),** i.e., the decision of Sazonov and the Tsar to launch a partial mobilisation. This was a very risky decision, taken before Austria had even started mobilising. The decision by Sazonov and the Tsar was *de facto* the first step in Russia's preparations for war and was recorded by the intelligence services of Russia's neighbours, making it undoubtedly more difficult to stop the crisis from escalating.

After Serbia's surprisingly moderate response to Austria's ultimatum, the Kaiser, who had just returned to Berlin, was convinced that Austria's hostilities against Serbia were unnecessary and had to be called off. The Kaiser conveyed this directive to Vienna through Chancellor Bethmann and Secretary of State Jagow, who were to instruct Vienna to refrain from military action. Kaiser's directive was not conveyed to Vienna, which makes Bethmann's and Jagow's defiance of the Kaiser an **H2(12).** In parallel, Moltke encouraged Vienna to take military action as soon as possible. This episode was the last time that the Kaiser directly tried to deter Austria from military action.

H2(13) is the last necessary but not sufficient condition for the outbreak of war, which is German Chancellor Bethmann's offer of British neutrality to the British ambassador in Berlin. Bethmann, acting entirely individually, proposed to the British ambassador that if Britain remained neutral, Germany would maintain the independence of the Netherlands in the war and would not seek to annex French territories. In the overall context, this was a tragic strategic move by Bethmann: at the same time, Berlin was still trying to deter Austria from military action, and in parallel the German Chancellor was making such an offer to the British representative. Grey firmly rejected the Chancellor's offer. Bethmann's move discredited Germany's image in London as a country seeking a way out of the crisis.

Finally, the key theses of the logical sequence that emerge from the **H2** hypothesis will be discussed, which were necessary and sufficient for the outbreak of the war. Again it is worth recalling that these theses of the logical sequence can only be considered necessary and sufficient in the presence of **H1** (i.e., the alliance system); without **H1** there would not have been a basis for the decisions that were crucial in the context of the July crisis.

Russia's Foreign Minister's Sazonov's decision to defend the Serbs after the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia is a **H2(14)**. This was a crucial decision that removed the possibility of a localised war between Austria and Serbia. Sazonov, ever since the rumours of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia appeared in St Petersburg, was the figure who consistently sought the support of Russia's allies to deter Austria, but at the same time prepared Russia for war. This necessary and sufficient condition had a direct link to the necessary but insufficient conditions identified above: if the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia or the French promise of Russian support had not preceded it, this condition could not have existed.

Directly following from the latter logical sequence is **H2(15),** which is Austria's Foreign Minister's Berchtold's decision to go ahead with military action against Serbia anyway, despite the obvious indications from Russia (Sazonov) that Russia would defend Serbia. Aware of the risks and dangers, Berchtold continued the policy of military decision he had started.

H2(16) is a series of calls by German leaders, Bethmann, Jagow and Moltke, for Austria to take military action as soon as possible after Russia had already indicated that it would not stand aside. The Germans rushed Vienna into believing that if the Austrians dealt quickly with Serbia, Russia would not have time to intervene and the war would therefore remain localised. However, these proactive calls were already taking place in the context of Russia's partial mobilisation, of which Berlin was aware, albeit

unofficially, but certainly. It was undoubtedly a policy of extreme risk which, in the last days of the crisis, the Germans in question pursued without Kaiser's knowledge.

Back in Vienna, on 31 July, the Emperor, persuaded by Berchtold, supplemented the mobilisation order against Serbia with a mobilisation order against Russia, and that is **H2(17)**. This decision by Franz Joseph and Berchtold already *de jure* removed the possibility of the war remaining local. Of course, this necessary and sufficient condition could not have existed without the earlier fact of the partial mobilisation of Russia and the later announcement of a full mobilisation, which were identified as necessary but not sufficient conditions. On that day the German Kaiser still made a direct attempt to detain Vienna, to which the Emperor replied with a polite refusal.

The last necessary and sufficient condition – **H2(18)** – is the decision of the Tsar and Sazonov not to call off the mobilisation after Germany's ultimatum to Russia to call it off. After the Kaiser officially learned of the Russian mobilisation through correspondence with the Tsar, Berlin sent an ultimatum to Russia to halt the mobilisation, or Germany would start mobilising. Nicholas II and Sazonov decided that war was inevitable at this stage and no reply was sent to Berlin before the deadline, which led to German mobilisation.

On the basis of the hypotheses advanced in this paper, and the logical sequence of sub-theses derived from them, it may be concluded that war was not predetermined or inevitable. Hypothesis **H1** underlines the complexity, immobility and dangerousness of the European system based on alliances. Such a system has existed for almost a quarter of a century, has gone through several crises or localised wars, which, while threatening the strategic interests of one or another power, did not involve any of the five great powers in the conflict. Therefore, one cannot talk about hypothesis **H1**, and the theses that follow from it, without talking about **H2** and the theses of the logical sequence that follow from it. **H2** is made up of the coincidences that brought the war closer, the reactions of leaders to systemic dynamics, the actions of states and the evolution of the crisis. First of all, it is a coincidence that the events preceding the Sarajevo assassination brought three very important leaders (Bethmann, Berchtold and Sazonov) closer to a military solution. The Sarajevo assassination itself was an unfortunate coincidence, resulting in the death of the pro-peace leader in Vienna. The subsequent decisions of leaders made during the July Crisis were influenced by various coincidences, transnational dynamics, and a mix of rational calculations and misguided assumptions, leading to a range of responses to the crisis.

It is worth considering whether additional conditions might have prevented or delayed the war. At the systemic level, London stands out: in British circles, on the eve of 1914, there was growing discussion of a new foreign policy course and of a possible high-level accommodation with Germany—an arrangement that could have altered the European balance of power and reshaped alliance structures. Within the context of the July Crisis, several further contingencies might also have changed its trajectory. Had key European leaders attended the Archduke's funeral, it could have served as an informal diplomatic forum. Likewise, earlier and more forceful intervention by Foreign Secretary Grey, an earlier return of Kaiser Wilhelm to Berlin, agreement among the powers to reconvene the London Ambassadors' Conference, or a prompt Austrian decision to act once Berlin pledged support—potentially drawing European-wide solidarity—might each have reshaped events.

Conclusions

European states prior to 1914 operated in a system of confusing signals. Although the threat map was different for each state, the overall environment and the constellation of power led to a state of constraint. Neoclassical realism says that the greatest influence of a particular leader is in the latter conditions of low clarity and restrictive environment, facing crisis situations and time constraints. In July 1914, decision-makers faced complex systemic conditions. Initially, they underestimated the danger, and when the

risk of a continental conflict emerged, they had to act quickly amid inadequate information, unclear intentions, and poor communication. The extremely fragmented decisions made by leaders during the July crisis clearly show that the crisis was characterised by information overload, some decisions were made in the dark and cognitive limitations of the leaders emerged. This is exemplified by the contradictory actions of figures like Bethmann, Sazonov, Grey, and the Tsar in late July. Ambassadors' actions, such as Paléologue, Buchanan, and German envoys, further contributed to the crisis's complexity. Neoclassical realism suggests that, in short-term situations, leaders' psychological portraits and individual motives play a significant role, leading to the chaotic decisions observed during the July crisis. The complex European system of 1914 and the functioning of the leaders in this crisis were further complicated by a number of unfortunate coincidences.

An advantage of neoclassical realism is its ability to bring together the systemic and intervening variables. Neoclassical realism allows us to look simultaneously at the systemic level and to observe how the conditions of this variable influence the decision-makers who determine a country's foreign policy. Based on neoclassical realism, it could be argued that the outbreak of war was a synthesis of two aspects: the existing systemic state of Europe, which was unstable and dangerous; and the crisis situation triggered by the events in Sarajevo, where decision-makers had to make quick decisions in the face of an uncertain systemic state, partly based on a systemic logic, but also, significantly, on the basis of personal interpretations of events and preferences, and based on an individual sense of national interest, or erroneous assumptions.

From hypothesis **H1**, which emphasises the level of the European system and states that the war was caused by a system of alliances that was rigid, constrained states and encouraged them to stick to alliances, the logical sequence theses follow. **H1(1)** is the uncompromising support given by Berlin to Austria in the early days of the crisis, according to the alliance matrix. In parallel goes **H1(2)** when, according to the same logic, the Franco-Russian alliance was activated, giving Russia a basis for reacting to Austria's actions. As argued, these decisions to follow the logic of alliances were a necessary but not sufficient condition for the beginning of the war. Meanwhile, **H1(3)** – Britain's presence in alliance with France and in convention with Russia, which added uncertainty to the crisis, but attempted to act as a mediator during the crisis – was not a necessary condition for the outbreak of the war, although it did make it much more difficult to contain the crisis.

The second hypothesis **H2**, focusing on the role of decision-makers in the July Crisis, also puts forward a multilevel thesis. At this stage, the differences between the necessary conditions, the necessary but insufficient conditions, and the necessary and sufficient conditions for the outbreak of the war will be highlighted in brief. Necessary conditions are crucial but not decisive in a crisis, influencing its course without being sufficient for war.

These are the decision of Berchtold to act against Serbia; the German *blank cheque* to the Austrians; the change in Tisza's position; the unilateral action of Paléologue; the unofficial mobilisation of Russia; the defiance of Bethmann, Jagow and Moltke to the Kaiser; and the offer of neutrality by Bethmann to Britain. These were necessary but not sufficient to start the war. They did not in themselves prevent the war, but without them the most important necessary and sufficient conditions could not have existed. The latter were the most important turning points in the crisis, which led to the start of the war in the form in which it began: Sazonov's decision to defend Serbia; Berchtold's choice to continue his aggression against Serbia given the possibility of Russian intervention; the calls for military action by Bethmann, Jagow and Moltke on Vienna, after Russia had already indicated that it would not remain passive; the decision of the Austrian Emperor and Berchtold to mobilise against Russia; and the decision of the Tsar and Sazonov to not call off the mobilisation after the Germans had threatened to do the same with their own.

Concluding the differences between historiographical paradigms and theoretical approaches, firstly it is worth emphasizing that traditional historiography largely blames Germany for the outbreak of war,

viewing the war as inevitable due to complex relations between European powers. Secondly, traditional realist theories also emphasize systemic issues and suggest the inevitability of war. Thirdly, a new historiographical paradigm challenges the old historiography, emphasizing the European system's ability to manage crises before 1914. It focuses on short-term causes, mainly, the July Crisis of 1914. Fourthly, the analysis notes that, despite various tensions, the European system avoided war until the crisis of 1914, triggered by events in Sarajevo, led to the collapse of the European order.

The paper aimed to provide an explanation of the causes of the First World War based on neoclassical realism and the new historiography. It is a theory that allows us to summarise the total causes of this war in a coherent way: the war was the result of a confusing system that sent unclear signals and constrained the actors, which made it extremely difficult for the leaders to manage the crisis that had hit Europe after Sarajevo, and a series of accidents, misfortunes, mistakes, lack of foresight, and wrong assumptions of the decision-makers. Theory allows us to at least try to resolve the fundamental historical dilemma of how to reconcile the *general* and the *particular*.[63] Both recent historiography and the theoretical framework employed here suggest that there was a possibility of avoiding war in the summer of 1914, although the theory does not aim to quantify this likelihood or prescribe a method for determining it. The theoretical framework outlined here may offer a potential methodological avenue that could, in time, encourage further research and contribute to new perspectives on the origins of the First World War.

Bibliography

Albertini, Luigi. *The Origins of the war of 1914*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Böhme, Helmut. "Primat" und "Paradigma". Zur Entwicklung einer bundesdeutschen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung am Beispiel des Ersten Weltkrieges. In: Hartmut Lehmann, *Historikerkontroversen*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001.

Clark, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War in 1914*. London: Penguin Book, 2013.

Clark, Christopher. Sir Edward Grey and the July Crisis, *International History Review* 38, no. 2 (2016).

Ferguson, Niall. *A Pity of War*. London: Allan Lane, 1999.

Gaddis, John Lewis. *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

George, L. Alexander and Andrew Bennet. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.

Gerring, John. *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 6.

Joll, James. *The Origins of the First World War*. Gosport: Longman, 1984.

Jones, Heather. As the Centenary Approaches: The Regenaration of First World War Historiography. *The Historical Journal*, 2013.

Journal of Contemporary History. Special Issue: The Fischer Controversy after 50 Years. *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (April 2013).

Langdon, John. *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918–1990*. New York, Oxford: Berg, 1990.

Laurinavičius, Česlovas. Mintys skaitant istoriografiją apie 1914 m. liepos krizę. *Parlamento studijos,* 2024, Nr. 34, p. 28–44.

Lebow, Richard. What Can International Relations Theory Learn From the Origins of World War I?, *International Relations*, 2014.

Leonhard, Jörn, *Pandora's Box: A History of the First World War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Lieber, Keir. The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory. *International Security 32,* no. 2 (2007).

[63] Gaddis, J. L. *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 11–15.

Levy, Jack.; Vasquez, John A. *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision Making* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

MacMillan, Margaret. *The War That Ended Peace.* Toronto: Allan Lane, 2013.

Martel, Gordon, *The Month That Changed The World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

McMeekin, Sean. *July 1914: The Countdown To War*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.

Mearsheimer, John. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003.

Mombauer, Annika. Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I. *Central European History*, 2015, p. 541–564.

Mombauer, Annika. Julikrise und Kriegsschuld - Thesen und Stand der Forschung. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 2014.

Mombauer, Annika. *The Origins of The First World War: Controversies and Consensus*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2002.

Morgenthau, Hans. *Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 1997.

Mulligan, William. *The Origins of The First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Mulligan, William. The Trial Continues: New Directions in the Study of the Origins of the First World War. *The English Historical Review*, 2014.

Otte, Thomas. *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy 1865-1914*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Otte, Thomas. *July Crisis: The World's Descent Into War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Paddock, Troy. *Contesting the Origins of the First World War: An Historiographical Argument*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

Ripsman, Norrin; Lobell, Steven; Taliaferro, Jeffrey. *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Rose, Gideon. Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy. *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998).

Röhl, John. Goodbye to all that (again)? The Fischer thesis, the new revisionism and the meaning of the First World War, *International Affairs*, 2015.

Stevenson, David. *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*. New York: Basic Books, 2004.

Stevenson, David. *The Outbreak of the First World War: 1914 in Perspective*. London: Macmillan Press, 1997.

Taylor, Alan John Percivale. *The First World War: An Illustrated History.* London: Penguin Books, 2012 (1963).

Taylor, Alan John Percivale. *The Struggle For Mastery In Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 (1954).

Tuchman, Barbara. *The Guns of August*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004 (1962).

Van Evera, Stephen. The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War. *International Security* 9, no. 1, 1984.

Vasquez, John A., and Samuel Williamson. Review of The First World War and International Relations Theory: A Review of Books on the 100th Anniversary, by Christopher Clark, Sean McMeekin, Annika Mombauer, Annika Mombauer, Thomas G. Otte, and Russel, Van Wyk. *International Studies Review* 16, no. 4 (2014).

Waltz, Kenneth. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979.

Young, J. W. Ambassador George Buchanan and the July Crisis. *International History Review* 40, no. 1, 2017.

Žukas, Teodoras. *Pirmojo pasaulinio karo kaltės ir atsakomybės aiškinimai XXI a. Vakarų istoriografijoje*: daktaro disertacija. Vilnius: Vilniaus universitetas, 2025.