THE PERCEPTION OF POWER:  
Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance

By WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH*

Introduction

INTERNATIONAL relations scholars do not agree on the connection between the balance of power and war. They question whether or not an equal distribution of power among states or alliances leads to stability, whether the preponderance of power in favor of one actor or alliance leads to peace, or whether the key lies in the transition of preponderance from one power to another. Everyone is familiar with these questions; yet, more than twenty years of rigorous elaboration and sophisticated quantitative testing have done little to produce the answers.† Do these inconclusive results suggest that there is no relation between the distribution of power and war?

It would be unwise to draw such a conclusion, because, despite much scholarly effort devoted to the topic, important aspects have not been addressed. One such aspect is the perception of power. If “power” influences international relations, it must do so through the perceptions of those who act on behalf of states.‡ The quantitative measures of power used in the literature to test various power theories are thus estimators of perceived power. It follows that a good way to check the adequacy of the tests is to compare the measure of power used with actual perceptions in a particular case. This is the comparison I shall make with regard to Russia before World War I.

* I am grateful to Bruce Russett for his help in revising earlier drafts and to Paul Kennedy for his helpful comments on the first draft.
In one sense, it is not surprising that this route has not been taken before: uncovering decision makers’ perceptions is a difficult task. The presentation of the major powers’ perceptions of Russian capabilities in the years prior to World War I takes up a significant portion of this article. Furthermore, perceptions as recorded in diplomatic documents are imprecise observations; the best one can expect from even the most extensive historical research is a general sense of contemporary views. Still, the endeavor is worthwhile, for it reveals that indicators of numerical capabilities misrepresent not only Russia’s prewar power, but the system-wide distribution of power. These indicators also fail to capture important dynamic elements in the prewar power balance. Although World War I is only a single case, the disparity between perceptions and estimators discovered for the period is sufficiently large to suggest that the inconclusive results of quantitative analyses of power theories may be more a result of measurement problems than of a lack of explanatory power on the part of the variable itself.

A positive dividend of investigating perceptions of power is the contribution to understanding the onset of war. Perceptions (and misperceptions) help to explain the bellicosity of the major powers in 1914, their unwillingness to take risks for peace, and why the war occurred in 1914 rather than earlier or later. The balance of power emerges from all this as an important variable which should not be ignored in the study of international conflict; its influence is exerted in very complex ways that are difficult if not impossible to capture statistically.

Estimating the Prewar Balance

Before turning to a presentation of perceptions, it may be useful to describe how the prewar balance of power is represented by quantitative indicators. Table 1 shows the measure developed by the Correlates of War project—the most widely used in the field. It is a composite index combining the following indicators with equal weights: total population, urban population, energy consumption, steel production, military expenditures, and military personnel. The figures show England, Germany, and Russia vying for first place among the European powers. Russia and Germany appear approximately equal in power; by 1905, both have surpassed England. France is clearly in the second rank, having a power position closer to Japan’s or Austria’s than to those of the great powers. With regard to alliances, the Dual Alliance between Germany and Austria seems slightly inferior to the Russo-French Entente. When England joins the latter grouping in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, the re-
PERCEPTION OF POWER

Table I
Capabilities of Major Powers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of World Power</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1905</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1913</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


resultant combination massively outweighs the Austro-German alliance on the scales of European power. In a more general vein, the figures indicate that capabilities were fairly well dispersed throughout the system, rather than concentrated in one state or alliance.

The main dynamic element portrayed by the indicators is England's precipitate decline, which is perhaps exaggerated by her demobilization after the Boer War. In most respects, power relationships seem fairly stable. France appears to be slowly losing her battle to maintain a place among Europe's great powers. Russia passes Germany in capabilities in 1905 and 1910, but the latter appears to be gaining relative to Russia in the years just before the war. Because the Entente powers' relative capabilities remain stable in the final prewar period, this German rise leads to an improvement in the Alliance's position vis-à-vis the Entente on the eve of the war.

How do contemporary perceptions compare with this picture of a Russia superior in power to Germany until just before the outbreak of war? To address this question, I shall examine the perceptions of each of the major powers (excluding Italy, but including Russia herself) of Russia's capabilities between 1905 and 1914.

Perceptions of the Powers

Britain

Although Russia's defeat by Japan in 1905 and the subsequent revolution produced a degradation of Russia's power in the eyes of all European
statesmen, its effect was most muted among the British. British military observers, who had great respect for the qualities of the Russian infantryman (though not the officers) and for the vast numbers Russia could field, did not see the Manchurian defeat as a sign of any fundamental Russian weakness. British officers believed, as stated in a 1908 report of the attache in St. Petersburg, that Russia “in a defensive war . . . would render a good account of itself even against a combination of its Western neighbours.” In contrast to 1905, Russia would, first of all, “perform better in a war that enlisted national sympathies.” Furthermore, “there is a strong force already on the frontier and an admirable system of railways from the interior,” again in contrast to the Manchurian situation. And “the elite of the Russian troops are immediately available. These troops were not touched in the last war.” To this must be added the well-known qualities of the Russian soldier who, if “properly led . . . should accomplish anything.”

From 1908 to 1914, British military observers continued to assess favorably Russia’s extensive efforts to absorb the tactical and organizational lessons of the Japanese war and to increase the overall size of the army. An attache’s memo of 1914, which represented the war office’s view and was shown to Prime Minister Grey, took note of continuing problems but concluded that “the army is improving every day . . . [and it is] only a matter of time before [it] becomes a match for all of Western Europe.”

British diplomats were similarly reluctant to draw extreme conclusions on the basis of Russia’s 1905 experience. By 1908, Ambassador Nicholson was ready to assert that in “any war waged by Russia on behalf of her interests, . . . the Russian government would not be hampered, as was the case in the last war, by anxiety regarding internal disturbances.” This optimism was supported by reports from the consulates in the border provinces, which by 1908 noted the virtual absence of overt revolutionary activity and discounted the possibility of uprisings in the event of military


5 Cited by Keith Neilson, “Watching the ‘Steamroller’: British Observers and the Russian Army before 1914,” Journal of Strategic Studies 8 (June 1985), 212. Naval observers were sceptical of Russian naval capabilities, but this had little influence on the overall assessment because Russia was judged not to be vulnerable to blockade. For representative memoranda, see BD (fn. 4), III, 172; V, 84; VI, 247, 261, 281, 282. German assessments may be found in Ivo N. Lambi, The Navy and German Power Politics (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984).


7 Ibid., V, 177; to Grey, 19.11.08.
hostilities. Still, much British optimism was reserved for the future, a view that was bolstered when Russia backed down in the face of a German ultimatum during the Bosnian annexation crisis of 1908. Indeed, Russian Prime Minister Stolypin told Nicholson just after the crisis that Russia “was not yet in a position to meet Germany and Austria combined.” This would only be the case “in two or three or four years.” Consequently, in his introduction to the Annual Report for 1909, Nicholson, while stressing Russia’s “rapid recovery” and her “unlimited resources” and population of “over 150,000,000,” concluded that it was only “in two or at most three years” that “Russia will be in a position to take the place in Europe to which she is rightly entitled.”

The evidence, as it flowed into London from the St. Petersburg embassy, seemed to bear out Nicholson’s judgment: from 1910 on, the Annual Reports document a steady stream of record harvests, excellent finances, military growth and reform, and industrial development. Still, Britons on the scene did not view Russia, even together with France, as offsetting German power on the Continent. Assessing the power balance in light of all the military measures taken by France, Germany, and Russia in 1913, Nicholson’s replacement in St. Petersburg, Ambassador Buchanan, acknowledged the “temporary advantages which Germany has secured by her Army Bill of last year.” These, however, “will in a few years time be eclipsed by the counter measures which Russia has been obliged to take in self defense.” It appeared to him that,

unless . . . Germany is prepared to make still further financial sacrifices for military purposes, the days of her hegemony in Europe will be numbered; as, even without the co-operation of England, Russia and France combined will then be strong enough to confront the united forces of the Triple Alliance. There are, however, still three critical years to pass before that result is achieved.

Diplomatic and military observers thus agreed in seeing Russia capable only of defense until 1910, regaining the potential for offensive warfare sometime between 1910 and 1912, and by 1913 becoming fully war-ready as the term was understood in those days—that is, capable of mounting offensives on the key fronts. There is no reason to believe that these views

8 Risto Ropponen, Die Kraft Russlands [Russia’s power] (Helsinki: Historiallisia tutkimisk-sia, 1968), 113. This work by a Finnish historian, based on extensive archival research, is the most extensive treatment of perceptions of Russian power during this period.

9 BD (fn. 4), V, 282; to Grey, 07.05.09.

10 Ibid., 332.

were not shared by the top decision makers. Grey, although he probably thought in terms of power, was reluctant to express himself publicly in this way, preferring instead more moralistic pronouncements on foreign policy in tune with Liberal sensitivities. The precipitate reduction in Russian power in 1905/6 and its deleterious effects on the European balance were crucial elements in the argument for a “continental commitment” and the initiation of staff talks with the French. Grey did express his desire to see Russia “re-established as a factor in European politics.” The 1907 Anglo-Russian entente, designed to accomplish this end (as well as to arrange the two empires’ affairs in the East), seemed based on confidence in eventual Russian restoration. Those policy makers around Grey who thought in terms of the balance of power—for example, Nicholson and Sir Eyre Crow—were likely to rate Russia a serious factor, but by no means Germany’s equal. This was also true of the forceful director of military operations, General Henry Wilson. It is probably fair to say that Wilson’s view of Russian power was a function of his argument for a continental commitment; that is, he expected that Russia, in addition to cancelling out Austria, would draw away from the Western front just sufficient numbers of German divisions to make the contribution of the small British Expeditionary Force appear decisive. Russia had to be just strong enough to make the plans of Wilson and the French look realistic, but not so strong as to make the B.E.F.’s contribution superfluous.

Although Grey did indicate to several interlocutors that he rated Russia as a formidable military power, at no time did he contradict his experts’ assessment that only in the future would Russia, with France, be an effective counterweight to German power.

France

From 1905 until 1910/11, the French completely discounted Russia as a factor restraining Germany. As General Moulin, the military attaché in St. Petersburg, saw the situation in 1906, Russia would require at least

---

14 Quoted by Kennedy, ibid.
15 Ropponen (fn. 8), 287.
16 See incidents of Wilson’s dismissive view of the Russians as recounted by Kennedy (fn. 13), 427, and Ropponen (fn. 8), 245, n. 126.
17 See the incidents reported by Kennedy (fn. 13), and Erwin Hölzke, Die Selbstentmachtung Europas [The self-entombment of Europe] (Frankfurt-Zürich: Musterschmidt Göttingen, 1975), 235, 300.
three years of peace to present any threat to Germany. After a visit to the western theater, Moulin said of his three-year estimate, “add to this the Russian coefficient . . . , by which anything we at home or the Germans could do in one year takes two years in Russia.” In the event, his off-the-cuff prediction of recovery by 1912 was quite close to the mark in terms of French perceptions.

International crises in 1908, 1911, and 1912 gave French decision makers glimpses of the Russians’ sense of their own capabilities. In each instance, the Russians told them they needed more time. During the Agadir crisis in 1911, for example, the French general staff was informed by its Russian counterpart that, because of its military unpreparedness, “Russia will clearly not be ready for war with Germany with confidence of success before at least two years.” This may have been what prompted Prime Minister Calliaux to remark during the crisis, “you forget that the Russian army is worth nothing.” During the Balkan War of 1912, the Russians again told their French allies, “even if Austria should attack Serbia, Russia will not fight.”

Two factors contributed to the rise in the French perception of Russian power after 1912. The first was impressive Russian improvements of a material kind, including increased army size, new and greater numbers of weapons, and vast improvements in the strategic railroad network. All of these were dutifully reported by the military attaché in St. Petersburg. Even more important, however, was the Russians’ shift from a defensive to an offensive strategy, a shift stemming both from an increased estimate of their own capabilities and from the conclusion reached by the Russian general staff that Germany would devote the bulk of its army to the western front at the outset. This knowledge essentially forced the Russians to accept the French argument on the prime importance of a rapid offensive against Germany: if France fell, Russia herself would be at the mercy of Germany, and, even if the struggle in the west were in-

---


19 Quoted by A. V. Ignat’ev in *Russko-angliiskie otnosheniia nakanune pervoi mirovoi voiny* [Russian-English relations before the First World War] (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoi literatury, 1962), 116. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the present author.


22 Ropponen (fn. 8), 96, 231.

conclusive, Russia had an incentive to strike early at Germany’s weaker front to end the war quickly and on favorable terms. Because Russian defense-mindedness had long been considered by many French advocates of the offense a shortcoming more serious than any in the material realm, this rise in Russia’s offensive spirit cannot be overestimated in explaining the French change of view.

Still, as late as 1913 some Frenchmen had doubts about their ally’s capabilities. In a memorandum prepared early in the year, Chief of Staff Joffre questioned whether Russia could mobilize and implement her war plan without being paralyzed by internal disturbances.24 He noted that workers’ organizations were strong and were located in key industrial centers, where strikes and demonstrations could most upset the machinery of mobilization. In late 1913, however, the military attaché sent home a relatively optimistic report in which he rated Russian power as lying somewhere between France’s overoptimistic assessment in 1904 and her overpessimistic one in 1906.25 By 1914, the mood in official Paris was more upbeat than at any time since 1905. Russia’s recently adopted “Great Program” of armament was expected to increase her military capabilities relative to Germany’s. In May 1914, Ambassador Paleologue submitted a long memorandum countering Joffre’s contentions on every point.26 He maintained that the balance of forces remained in favor of the tsar and that the wide masses of the people remained loyal to him; that the revolutionary forces, though strong in many industrial centers, were divided and unable to cooperate; and that the outbreak of war would produce a rise in patriotism. “In this huge army,” Paleologue wrote, “discipline is excellent.” The regime was still able to “drown the revolutionary forces in blood.” On the question of Russia’s ability to mobilize and implement her war plan, Paleologue had no doubts: “In order for the alliance to be effective, we need a powerful Russia. And, I think I can certify that she is powerful . . . in her own manner.”27

Germany

For the majority of German officials whose thoughts on the subject are in the historical record, the revival of Russia’s power and the realization of her obvious latent potential were factors greatly to be feared, but they were expected to happen in the future. This relegation of the revival of Russian power to the future seems to have been nearly as true in 1914 as it was in 1905.

24 Ropponen (fn. 8), 168.
25 Ibid., 281.
26 Ibid., 167.
27 Quoted by Bovykin (fn. 21), 35, 191.
From 1905 to 1908, reports from diplomats and military attachés stressed Russia’s weakness on all three scales of the 1914 view of power: military forces, economic-financial position, and societal cohesion. Even Moltke’s general staff reports, which stressed Russia’s strong points more than the attachés’ reports from St. Petersburg, were, before 1912, uniformly dismissive of Russian power. Political observers shared this dim view, although they placed more importance on societal weakness in Russia and the “specter of revolution.” During the Bosnian annexation crisis in 1908/9, the operative assessment in Berlin was that no rational Russian would risk war in view of the country’s unpreparedness and weak internal condition. Chancellor Bülow affirmed to the Austrian foreign minister, Count Aerenthal, “Concerning Russia, I am in agreement with you that she is at present hardly in a position to inaugurate an active policy.” Moltke wrote his Austrian counterpart, Conrad von Hötzendorf, that the opportunity for war was “unlikely to reappear under such favorable conditions.”

The operative perception of Russian power remained the same in 1912, when the First Balkan War raised the possibility of a Russo-Austrian war. The St. Petersburg embassy, as well as the foreign minister, chancellor, war minister, general staff, and the kaiser, all thought Russia too weak to take action. Moltke’s 1912 memorandum to the chancellor on the Russian situation concluded: “At the moment Russia is behind in the reorganization of her army and its equipment and weaponry. . . .” The chief of staff wrote to Conrad that “war is unavoidable, and the sooner the better.” In October 1913, Berchtold reported on a long discussion with the kaiser. He related that, in the midst of an extended diatribe on Russia’s irredeemably hostile intentions, the kaiser maintained that

for the time being Russia does not inspire [him] with any worry: for the

See Ropponen (fn. 8), 222, 270 for the attaché’s and Moltke’s 1908 reports. The British attaché noticed “the exceedingly unfavorable opinion that my German colleague holds of the Russian army.” BD (fn. 4), V, 177; Wyndham to Foreign Office, 19.11.08.

Ludwig Bitter et al., eds., Österreich-Ungarns Außenpolitik von der Bosnischen Krise 1908 bis zum Kriegsausbruch 1914 [Austria-Hungary’s foreign policy from the Bosnian crisis in 1908 to the outbreak of war in 1914] (hereafter cited as Ö-UA) (Vienna and Leipzig: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1930), I, p. 15; 23.07.08.


Ropponen (fn. 8), 249-50.

Quoted by Ropponen, ibid., 249. Naval assessments in this period paralleled Moltke’s, with huge increases in Russian naval capabilities envisaged for the future. Lambi (fn. 5), 395-96.

next six years one can be certain on that account. He had discovered this in March when, after a war council at Tsarskoe Selo, a German from the Baltic provinces known to him repeated Tsar Nicholas’s pronouncement: *Dieu soit loué, nous ne ferons pas de guerre, avant six ans c’est impossible.* Until then the army will not be ready for action, and furthermore [Russia will be] haunted by the specter of revolution.\(^4\)

Although most German officials in 1914 retained their disdainful view of existing Russian power, Russia’s seemingly strong financial position and growing economy, and the adoption of the four-year “Great Program” of rearmament, did make Moltke and other military leaders increasingly pessimistic about the future. In May, Moltke told Conrad that “to wait meant to lessen our chances; it was impossible to compete with Russia as regards quantity.”\(^3\) Secretary of State Jagow reported a conversation with Moltke that same month:

The prospects for the future weighed heavily upon him. In two or three years Russia would have finished arming. Our enemies’ military power would then be so great that he did not know how he could deal with it. Now we were still more or less a match for it. In his view there was no alternative but to fight a preventive war so as to beat the enemy while we could still emerge fairly well from the struggle. The Chief of Staff therefore put it to me that our policy should be geared to bringing about an early war.\(^3\)

The Russian component of this argument was virtually the same in 1908 and 1912. Only the stridency of the argument was new, based on recent salient evidence of Russia’s capability to recover. Bethman-Hollweg, who had been pessimistic about the future in 1912, was still so in 1914. The day after Austria was given the “blank check” by Germany, he told his private secretary that “the secret intelligence gives a shattering picture. . . . The military might of Russia is growing fast. . . . The future belongs to Russia, which is growing and growing and is becoming an ever increasing nightmare to us.” Similarly, Jagow wrote to Lichnowsky, the German ambassador in London, that “in a few years Russia . . . will be ready. Then she will crush us on land by weight of numbers, and she will have her Baltic fleet and her strategic railways ready.”\(^3\)

According to Jagow, however, the crux was that at present Germany was ready, while “Russia fundamentally was not.”\(^3\) The kaiser himself considered Russian intervention unlikely “because Russia is, at the pres-

\(^{34}\) Ö-UA (fn. 29), VII, p. 515, report to Foreign Office, 26.10.13.


\(^{36}\) Quoted in Fischer, *ibid.*, 402.


\(^{38}\) Quoted by Fritz Fischer in *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1967), 159.
ent moment, militarily and financially totally unprepared for war.” 39 Pourtales relates that, “in case of external complications, [the revolution-
yary organizations in Russia] would create a difficult position for the gov-
ernment.” 40 The Austrian ambassador in Berlin, Szögyény, reported in
July on a conversation with Chancellor Bethman-Hollweg concerning a
“radical solution” to the Serbian question. “From an international point
of view,” the Austrian reported, the chancellor “considers the present
moment more favorable than a later one.” In reponse to Emperor Franz
Josef’s note on Austria’s plans, Kaiser Wilhelm offered Austria Ger-
many’s full support if Russia fought for Serbia. “In any event,” Szögyény
reported the kaiser as saying, “as things stand today, Russia is far from
being prepared for war, and will think twice before taking up arms.”
Szögyény continued: “Should we really perceive the necessity of a mili-
tary action against Serbia, he [the kaiser] would regret it were we to allow
the present moment, so favorable to us, to go unused.” 41

Austria-Hungary

Until 1911/12, Austro-Hungarian perceptions of Russian power mir-
rored those of Germany. In their confrontation with Russia during the
Bosnian annexation crisis, Austro-Hungarian officials based their policy
on the assumption, as Foreign Minister Aerenthal wrote to Bülow, that
“Russia is hardly in a position to inaugurate an active policy.” 42 Chief of
Staff Conrad von Hötzendorf, the main source of military advice in the
cabinet, supported this view, arguing for a preventive war while Russia
remained “in an inferior state of war readiness.” 43 By 1912, however, im-
provements in Russia’s internal situation, military reforms, and reduction
in the time needed to mobilize sowed uncertainty among Austro-Hun-
garian officials. Although some, including influential general staff offi-
cers, continued to stress Russia’s weakness and Austria-Hungary’s ability
to prevail against her, 44 many diplomatic representatives thought Russia
capable of serious offensive action. 45

39 Quoted in Berghahn (fn. 37), 189.
40 Cited in Hölze (fn. 17), 238.
42 Ibid., I, pp. 8, 12.06.08, and 856, 20.02.09.
43 Ibid., II, p. 389, 2.07.09.
44 The Austrian military attaché’s views are reported by the German ambassador: Johannes
Lespius et al., eds., Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette [Grand policy of the Euro-
pean cabinets] (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1927–1932),
XXXVI, 379; Pourtales to Bethmann Hollweg, 19.11.12. Chief of Staff von Auffenburg (tem-
porarily replacing Conrad) asserted that “our chances of success would be in no way unfavor-
able even in a war which we fought out alone against Russia.” General Staff Report cited by
Ropponen (fn. 8), 243. Auffenburg also believed that the two central powers “would remain
victorious even against a coalition consisting of Britain, France, Italy and Russia.” Quoted by
Fischer (fn. 35), 144.
45 See Ambassador Thurn’s memos to the Foreign Office, Ö-UA (fn. 29), IV, 794, 822.
By 1913, when the Council of Ministers met twice to consider the international situation during the Balkan wars, the lines of debate had changed; whereas in 1908 Russia’s very ability to intervene was questioned, now only her intentions were discussed.\textsuperscript{46} Conrad admitted that the chances for success had diminished since 1908, but thought it was still possible to prevail against a Russian intervention on behalf of Serbia, though “every delay, from a purely military standpoint, worsens the situation.”\textsuperscript{47} Some of this confidence in the face of recognized Russian improvements was due to a belief in the potential for revolution: the military made plans to distribute arms to rebels in Poland, where, it was hoped, an uprising would clear the way to Warsaw for Austro-Hungarian troops.\textsuperscript{48}

The perception of a steady relative increase in Russian power, inexorably continuing into the future, was held by a majority of Austrian decision makers by the eve of the war. They viewed the existing distribution of power as marginally in favor of the Central Powers. A foreign ministry memorandum distributed after the murder at Sarajevo asserted: “The goal of the Dual Alliance is to break the military superiority of the two monarchical powers through the assistance of Balkan troops.”\textsuperscript{49} The putative superiority was, of course, somewhat tentative, for it could be reversed by the addition or subtraction of some small Balkan states. This was essentially acknowledged by Conrad when, in a note on the importance of Rumania, he stated that, with Rumania in the enemy camp, the monarchy’s military position would be “very unfavorable.” The army was “not in a position to offset the additional increment of power which Russia would achieve by virtue of her new army bill, as well as by the forces previously needed against Rumania.”\textsuperscript{50}

Only Hungarian officials, particularly Hungarian Prime Minister Tisza, who, for domestic reasons, opposed the monarchy’s anti-Serbia policy, argued both that the existing balance was unfavorable and that Russia could get relatively weaker in the future.\textsuperscript{51} The majority position—the assessment upon which the council based its policy of reducing Serbia—was expressed by the war minister: “... it would be more advantageous to wage war immediately, as the power balance will in the future shift disproportionately to our disadvantage.”\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., VI, 333-34; Council of Ministers (COM) minutes, 05.02.13.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 403; COM minutes, 3.10.13.
\textsuperscript{48} Ropponen (fn. 8), 11.
\textsuperscript{49} Ö-UA (fn. 29), VIII, 254.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 269; to Berchtold, 02.07.14.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 343 (COM minutes, 7.07.14); and 371.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 348.
The most important part of the second meeting, Conrad’s long discussion on Austria-Hungary’s chances in a war, was unfortunately not included in the minutes. The chief of staff asserts in his memoirs that he told the Council of Ministers that war with Serbia alone was no problem, and “also one [that is, war] against Russia, if Rumania remains neutral, and Germany is on our side.” But he quotes himself as telling the meeting that, in “case of a war with Russia, Rumania, Serbia and Montenegro, the chances are not advantageous.” In other words, he maintained that Austria could prevail over Russia in the most likely scenario. Still, Conrad was considerably less confident than he had been in 1908, or even in 1912. At one point, he is reported to have said: “In the years 1908-1909 it would have been a game with open cards. In 1912-1913 the chances were in our favor. Now it is a sheer gamble [ein va-banque Spiel].”

**Russia**

In no other country—with the possible exception of Germany—was the assessment of Russian power lower than in Russia herself. It was the Bosnian annexation crisis that awoke those Russian diplomats who were not already aware of it to the fact of Russian weakness. At the height of the crisis, the war minister told a meeting of top officials convened by the tsar that, because of budget cuts forced upon the ministry by Russia’s financial crisis and because of the regime’s use of one-third of the army for internal security, Russia’s forces “were completely unfit for battle.” The tsar and his ministers consequently never seriously considered war. Nicholas lamented to his mother in a letter in March that “we could not help [Serbia] at all in case of an Austrian attack.”

Although by 1911 major military programs were finally under way, the assessment of Russian capabilities prevailing during the Agadir crisis of that year had changed little from that of 1909. When the French ambassador indicated in an audience with the tsar that Morocco represented a threat to France’s vital interests, Nicholas replied: “Try to avoid conflicts. You know that preparations have not yet been completed by us.”

---

53 Baron Conrad von Hützendorf, *Aus Meiner Dienstzeit* [From my service days], IV (Vienna: Rikoin Verlag, 1923), 571.
56 V. A. Sukhomlinov, *Vospominaniia* [Memoirs] (Leningrad/Moscow: Gosudarstvenoe Izdatel’stvo, 1926), 146.
58 Cited by A. S. Avetian, *Russko-germanskie diplomaticheskie otnosheniia nakanune pervoi**
Chief of Staff Zhilinskii informed the French that Russia could not be ready for two or three years.59 At the same time, Izvol’skii, the ambassador in Paris, was being instructed to remind the French that “from the point of view of our military preparedness, the present moment cannot be seen as advantageous for military action.”60 A paragraph, later deleted, instructed Izvol’skii to tell the French that a German mobilization might call forth a Russian one, but an offensive could not be promised.

In 1912, the First Balkan War provided another opportunity for the Russians to engage in self-assessment. The evidence, once again, indicates extreme Russian scepticism about the country’s capabilities. As noted above, the French military attaché was told at general staff headquarters that “Russia would not fight” if Serbia were attacked by Austria. The same passive posture was advocated by Finance Minister Kokovstov and Foreign Minister Sazonov at a special conference with the tsar in November, and at a Council of Ministers meeting a few weeks later. At both meetings, War Minister Sukhomlinov argued that extensive measures be taken in response to Austria’s preparations, which, the Council minutes say, could allow her “to force war at an unfavorable moment.”61 At both meetings, Kokovstov and Sazonov opposed the war minister, arguing that his proposed measures could escalate to war with Austria-Hungary and, hence, Germany:

War with Germany would be an absolute disaster; moreover, we do not have active military forces on the Baltic, the army has not been brought to a sufficient state of readiness, and the internal condition of the country is far from the kind of enthusiastic and patriotic mood which would permit counting on a powerful rise in national spirit.62

In both instances, the tsar supported the more restrained option.63

As the French observed, by 1912 and 1913 Russian military plans began to take on a more offensive character: the 1913 plan envisioned offensives against both Austria-Hungary and Germany. This was partly

61 Quoted by Snyder (fn. 23), 248, n. 98.
62 Cited by Bovykin (fn. 21), 153.
63 One of these meetings is recounted by Kokovstov in his memoirs, Out of My Past, trans. Laura Matveev (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1935), 345. It forms part of Turner’s argument (“Russian Mobilization,” in Kennedy, fn. 20) stressing the importance of the Russian mobilization in the origins of the war. See the rebuttals by May (fn. 30), 23, and Avetian (fn. 58), 186.
the result of the Russians’ increased confidence in their capabilities as re-
form and rearmament programs progressed. Even more, however, it was
the result of the reaction of two different Russian military groups to in-
creased knowledge of the Schlieffen Plan; one imperialistically minded
group, which wanted to strike at Austria–Hungary, and one European-
oriented group, which wanted to fulfill alliance commitments by attack-
ing Germany first. The rivalry of the groups, which lacked an effective
organizational basis for its resolution, produced the offensive war plan of
1913. In fact, the arguments of both factions were based on scepticism
about Russia’s power in comparison with that of Germany.64

During the Russian-German diplomatic crisis over the latter’s dispatch
of General von Sanders to command the garrison at Constantinople (an
area Russia sought to keep free from the influence of other Great Pow-
ers), France—as she had during the First Balkan War—urged Russia to
take a strong stance. There was some sentiment in Russia to do just that.
Sazonov, for example, argued on many occasions that, were English sup-
port guaranteed, Russia could risk a showdown with Germany:

Russian action with the support of France is not especially dangerous for
Germany. Both powers are scarcely capable of dealing Germany a mortal
blow even in the event of success on the battlefield, which is always uncer-
tain. But a struggle in which England took part might be fatal for Ger-
many.65

At a special conference of top ministers held in 1914 on the Sanders crisis,
Sazonov’s view prevailed against War Minister Sukhomlinov’s argu-
ments for a more forceful posture. Stressing the potential for revolu-
tionary unrest and military unpreparedness, the conference members decided
to continue negotiations in Berlin, but to employ methods of influence
that would raise the risk of war only in the event of “active participation
by both France and England in joint actions with Russia.”66

The Sanders crisis reveals that Russia and her allies now considered
themselves strong enough to adopt a policy of deterrence or containment
of Germany, rather than one of continued conciliation. Ministers like Sa-
zonov—who had long been convinced of Russia’s inability to act—now
maintained that a more forceful policy was a surer way to peace, or at
least peace on acceptable terms. This argument carried the day during the
July crisis. At the Council of Ministers meeting called by the tsar on July
24 to consider the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, the council chairman’s

64 See Snyder (fn. 23), 164–66, 175; Norman Stone, The Eastern Front (New York: Charles
Scribners’ Sons, 1975), 33–34.
65 Quoted by Lieven (fn. 55), 48.
66 Bovykin (fn. 21), 176; Avetian (fn. 58), 231.
speech, regarded by a participant as the most influential of the meeting, followed this line. The chairman admitted that

our rearmament had not been completed and it seemed doubtful whether our Army and our Fleet would ever be able to compete with those of Germany and Austro-Hungary as regards modern technical efficiency. [But] the only hope of influencing Germany was to show them, by making a firm stand, that we had come to the end of the concessions we were prepared to make. After the chairman’s speech, the opinions of the two service ministers, Sukhomlinov and Grigorovich, were sought. They noted that the rearmament program was not complete, and that superiority over the Central Powers could not be assumed. Although later they both retracted their assessments of Russian readiness in private, they asserted at the meeting that “hesitation was no longer appropriate. . . . They saw no objection to a display of greater firmness in our diplomatic negotiations.”

The participants eventually agreed to a partial mobilization, and to support Serbia even at risk of war.

**Perceived versus Estimated Power**

**Static Aspects**

It is clear that the indicators in Table 1 vastly overstate Russian power: no one thought of Russia as superior in power to Germany or England in the prewar years. In fact, Russia feared subordination to France which, according to the figures, was only half as powerful. The discrepancy is not limited to the Correlates of War index. In all the quantitative studies consulted in the preparation of this article, the estimators used—whether composite (like the Correlates of War index), based on military expenditures, or based on gross national product—were at least as far off the mark in estimating Russia’s power as the Correlates of War figures.

---

67 Lieven (fn. 55), 142.
69 *Ibid.*, 186, n. 125. Sukhomlinov later told an aide to Sazonov that, “even with the support of France, we would find ourselves until 1917, and perhaps even until 1918, in a position of indisputable inferiority with respect to the combined forces of Germany and Austria.” N. A. Bazilii, *Memoirs* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1973), 91.
70 Lieven (fn. 55), 143.
In the case of the Correlates of War figures, the underlying mis-
estimation can be explained by disaggregating the data (see Table 2). Estimates of military expenditures and personnel were scrutinized by pre-1914 decision makers, and clearly influenced the formation of per-
ceptions. Thus, the figures on the two first lines of Table 2 probably par-
allel perceptions fairly accurately. Russia’s great expenditures and huge army, however, were discounted by many because of her inefficiency; users of these estimators generally assume that the latter is captured by
the other figures (low energy consumption, steel production, and urban population). Two factors, more than any others, account for the discrep-
ancy that nevertheless obtains. First, the estimators overstate the impor-
tance of Russia’s huge population in comparison with perceptions. Al-
though doubtless a factor in pre-1914 eyes, the tsarist empire’s sizable population tended to be discounted because of the prevalent belief that the coming war would be short. Only in a long war would the Russian masses have a military effect, through the calling up of reserves. The Rus-

sian population was also discounted because it was perceived as lacking in societal cohesion. This is the nonmilitary variable most often cited in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th><strong>Disaggregated Estimators for Russia and Germany</strong> (1905)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Russia</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military expenditures (pounds sterling)</td>
<td>51,539,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military personnel</td>
<td>1,160,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy consumption (millions of tons coal equiv.)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steel Production (millions of tons)</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban population (millions)</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population (millions)</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Correlates of War data made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan.
analyses of pre-1914 decision makers; in general, it had a significant dampening effect on perceptions of the influence of Russia’s huge military and population.

One could argue that this focus on perceptions is misguided; that the “objective” distribution of capabilities that must exist at any given time somehow influences state behavior regardless of the perceptions of decision makers. Or one might argue that in most cases “real” power will approximate perceptions, which are difficult to gauge in any precise way. Indeed, the design and use of quantitative indicators seem to rely on such assertions, for they are often based on variables—like steel production—that did not appear in contemporary calculations. The figures seem to be estimating “real,” not perceived power. For this reason, it may be useful to compare estimators and perceptions to Russia’s “real” power.

The best measure of Russia’s capability may be its actual performance in the war. By this standard, Russia’s power was overrated by pre-1914 decision makers, although not by as much as some accounts hold, and not at all to the extent implied by the indicators. Russia was correctly expected to be able to defeat Austria and to help defeat Germany. That reality should not be obscured by the fact that the war tore Russian society apart and helped to pave the way for revolution. From 1914 to 1916, the Russians tied down over 100 Alliance divisions on the eastern front. As late as mid-1917, Russia held down 1,528 Alliance battalions, as compared to 1,314 German battalions that were deployed on the western front.⁷⁴ Although the German component of the Alliance was unquestionably the most formidable and the majority of German forces were always deployed in the west, the amount of German power drawn off by the Russians should not be underestimated. Until 1917, Russia capatured more German prisoners than Britain and France combined.⁷⁵ After their defeat by the Russians at Gumbinnen in 1914, the Germans transported several corps east just when the crucial Marne battle opened. In early 1916, the Germans deployed 48 divisions in the east (compared to 120 in the west). Alliance casualties on all three fronts are presented in Table 3.

The Russians inflicted casualties largely on Austro-Hungarians rather than on the more formidable Germans; the substantial aid of Britain and France must also be taken into account. It is further true that Russia was never able to develop an offensive capable of threatening Germany, as had been expected prior to the war. Nevertheless, her huge size represented a latent threat the Germans had to consider, and her reduction of Germany’s Austrian ally drew away considerable German forces because

⁷⁴ Stone (fn. 64), 93.
⁷⁵ Ibid., 12.
PERCEPTION OF POWER

Table 3

Casualties of the Central Powers on Various Fronts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number in Thousands</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western front</td>
<td>4,668</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern front</td>
<td>1,858</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian front</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These are casualties produced in major battles. Deaths were a greater percentage of German casualties in the east than in the west. Italy’s figure overstates that country’s war potential because her armed forces were simply on the scene during the Austro-Hungarian collapse.


Berlin felt that Austria had to be supported. Russia’s collapse in 1917 had an immediate effect on the course of the war: by shifting forces to the west, Germany was able to mount a huge offensive in 1918 which could well have been beyond the capacity of the western Allies to contain if it had not been for the aid of the United States. In short, these casualty figures indicate that Russia’s role in preventing a victory by the Central Powers was by no measure a minor one. Perceptions, while off the mark, were not widely so, given the delusions that most decision makers entertained about a future war.

Russia’s power, and particularly the country’s possible contribution to a long war (which was held to be unlikely), was indeed overrated, but not nearly to the degree implied by the quantitative indicators. Because they took societal cohesion into account, contemporary observers were more accurate than the indicators. The indicators thus misrepresent both perceived power and what we now can suggest was the real power relationship. Because the three different ways of conceiving of power (real, perceived, and estimated) led to such different characterizations of Russian power (and hence the balance of power) in this case, it is important to be clear about the causal link between power and state policy. It matters, in short, whether the indicators are attempting to gauge real or perceived power. There is a disconcertingly common tendency in the literature to equate “power” with estimated power, which can lead to a misunderstanding of the pre-World War I atmosphere.\(^6\) That tendency may well

---

\(^6\) One article, for example, notes that, based on the Correlates of War estimators, “in 1905, the major power subsystem was still in a general state of equilibrium. By 1910, that equilib-
be similarly misleading with regard to other important periods of international history.

Quantitative studies of the relation between the system-wide distribution of power and the onset of war do not generally specify how “power” is translated into policy. They do not indicate whether the quantitative indicators estimate real or perceived power. Their main purpose is simply to test for a relation and, if one obtains, whether it supports the equality-equals-war or the equality-equals-peace hypothesis. With regard to World War I, the misestimation of Russian power (of either kind) leads to an inaccurate specification of the system-wide distribution of power. With regard to the alliances of the period, the figures suggest an imbalance in favor of the Entente powers. A more accurate representation of perceived power would surely show a less powerful Russia and a more powerful Germany, implying something closer to balance between the blocs. This would affect not only the relation between the blocs, but the nature of the distribution of capabilities itself: to the extent that the figures overrate Russia at the expense of Germany, they understate the degree of concentration of power in the system.

The effect of this particular discrepancy on statistical results is hard to evaluate. It depends on the number of cases and on whether the “war” variable is operationalized in a way that accounts for the importance of the war. If the set of cases is limited to major wars, or if such wars are accorded particular weight in the analysis, doubts increase as to whether discrepancies in the estimation of power will be randomly distributed across all the cases (or across all the heavily weighted cases). Even if—unrealistic though this may seem—all wars by major powers are treated equally (if war is coded as a dichotomous variable), there could conceivably be systematic bias in power estimation. Germany, for example, constituted a defining factor in the European balance from 1870 to 1945. It is
PERCEPTION OF POWER

quite possible that Germany's central geographical position, her advantage in having interior lines, and her oft-noted organizational superiority had a multiplying effect on the perception of her power. Germany's geographical position may also suggest vulnerability; but, because Germany was a revisionist state for most of the period, her geography was not likely to occupy a high priority in the calculations of her opponents. It is also quite conceivable that technology changes in ways that could bias even composite indicators. The development of the railroad, for example, increased the importance of land power in relation to sea power.78

In short, the evidence presented here raises the suspicion that contending propositions about the balance of power have not been adequately tested, for the operative balance can differ from the estimated one in fundamental ways over long periods of time. As far as estimated power balances are concerned, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita may be right in concluding "that any effort to infer anything about the likelihood of war from the presence or absence of a particular power distribution is likely to yield no better results than random guessing."79 One cannot yet, however, draw final conclusions on the usefulness of studying perceived distributions.

Dynamic Aspects

The proposition that changing power relationships lie at the root of international war is older even than the various balance-of-power formulations. Dynamic theories range from Gilpin's hegemonic transition, to Organski's power transition, to Doran and Parsons' "inflection point" model.80 All these theories explicitly rely on perceptions of power and power trends for their causal explanation. How do they fare in the case of World War I?

In the prewar period, perceptions of trends undoubtedly were of crucial importance. Rising German power had, of course, been an issue for a generation. But the evidence presented here indicates that decision makers on both sides perceived Russian power as increasing more quickly than German power—a perception that affected the calculations of the various countries in fundamental ways. The case of World War I provides evidence to support the importance of expectations about future power relationships. The expectation that Russian power would increase

78 This factor, of course, has further implications for Germany's power in comparison with England's. See Paul Kennedy, "Mahan vs MacKinder" in his Strategy and Diplomacy: 1870-1945 (London: Fontana, 1983).
79 Bueno de Mesquita (fn. 1) 566-67.
80 Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Organski and Kugler (fn. 73); Doran and Parsons (fn. 71).
more quickly than German power in the future—essential for understanding the onset of the war—was clearly related to past power trends, but it also had a logic of its own. As is indicated by de Tocqueville’s observation in 1830 that Russia and America each will “one day hold in its hands the destiny of half the world,” there was a venerable historical tradition of assuming that the vast Russian resources would eventually translate into world power. Thus German decision makers—even those who dismissed existing Russian power—always assumed that Russia’s power would increase relative to Germany’s.

Quantitative tests, which must rely on simplified assumptions, cannot account for the influence such historical “traditions” exert upon expectations. Instead, they assume that expectations are based upon an extrapolation of existing trends. As should be clear, however, trends in the quantitative estimators do not correspond to perceived trends. The Correlates of War figures in Table 1 show Germany and Russia vying for first place, with Germany’s capabilities increasing relative to those of the dominant Russia on the eve of the war. Table 4 shows why: German increases in steel production and military expenditures eventually outweighed Russian population increases. The figures alone do not, however, reflect three very important determinants of the perception of rising Russian power. First, the diplomatic documents indicate that Russia’s power was felt to be rising quickly in part because it was perceived to have sunk to such a low point. The curve of Russian power, as it appeared in the minds of prewar statesmen, did not slope upward from, say, 10 or 11 percent to 12 percent. Rather, it shot up from effectively zero in 1905/6 to its traditional level in the years between 1910 and 1914. Russian capabilities in this period resembled a massively deflated economy going through its first Keynesian reflation. The country was simultaneously increasing its overall capacity and the proportion of capacity it utilized. The other powers were merely increasing their overall capacity. The upward-sloping curve of Russian power thus seemed steeper, and represented a far more dramatic and dynamic factor in the changing power configuration, than the figures imply.

A second and related aspect not captured by the indicators is the fast-increasing confidence in the cohesion of Russian society as evidence of discontent faded under the reform and repression of the Stolypin regime. Finally, although Germany and the other powers increased the size of their total military forces as fast or faster than Russia, the percentage of the latter’s forces that could be deployed at the front in the first few weeks

---

81 This is the approach taken by Doran and Parsons, *ibid.*
of war increased at a much faster rate than did their overall size. Again, Russia was starting from a lower mobilization base than any other major power: the reduction of Russia’s mobilization time greatly increased the real effect of large Russian numbers on pre-1914 minds, ruled as they were by short-war assumptions. Because the figures do not capture these important nuances, however, they misrepresent prevailing trends. A better representation of perceptions and the expectations built upon them would show Russian power increasing more quickly from a considerably lower base.

Any quantitative test of a dynamic theory, or any casual analysis of numerical indicators of power, will therefore miss an important dynamic element: the perceived rapid decline and rise of Russia. The problem is greater than that, however. Many dynamic theories are concerned with power transitions (points at which the power of one state surpasses that of another) or “inflection points” in the power growth of states (at which there is a shift in the velocity of rise or decline or the direction of change). In any quantitative test of such theories, not only the change in but also the level of relative power has to be related to the occurrence of war. Unfortunately, the levels of relative power can be grossly misestimated by numerical indicators. In The War Ledger, for example, Organski and Kugler found that war occurs “only if one of the contenders [the most powerful states in the system] is in the process of passing the other.”

In statistical analysis, the Russian-German dyad conforms to the theory in the pre-World War I case, but it does so only because the measure (GNP)
shows Russia as the dominant power, not passed by Germany until 1911. War then occurs on schedule in 1914. As far as perceptions are concerned, however, Germany probably passed Russia in the 1870s. In another instance, Doran and Parsons, in testing their hypothesis that war is more likely to occur at inflection points in the long-term cycle of a state’s relative power, develop a composite index of power that, unlike the Correlates of War indicators, does capture prewar trends (Russia rising, Germany falling behind). But, as Doran and Parsons expect, their identification of low and high points in power in the prewar period does not seem to correspond to perceptions. This lack of correspondence does not invalidate the theories themselves, but it does suggest the difficulties in testing.

**The Perceived Balance and War**

Some common themes run through this discussion of testing power theories—most of them suggesting a relationship between perceived power and war. In this final section, I shall consider three of them in turn: differences in perceptions, the volatility of perceptions, and the capriciousness of perceptions.

**Differences in Perceptions**

Risto Ropponen, in his detailed study of the perception of Russian power in the prewar period, discovered a systematic dichotomy between France, England, and Italy (all of which overestimated Russian power) and Germany and Austria (which underrated it). My own less extensive research supports his general conclusion, with the added observation that British decision makers seemed to be most positive, the French somewhat less so, and the Germans (as well as the Russians) more dismissive of Russian power than the Austrians. In most cases, the perceptual disparity supported a particular policy line. For Britain, a strong Russia implied a balance of power and no need for intervention. For France, Russia had to be strong enough not to make her position hopeless, but certainly not so strong as to obviate the need for a military build-up. For Germany, a Russia temporarily weakened but on the verge of assuming her full potential fit the preventive-war argument.

81 Doran and Parsons (fn. 71) have the Russian low point in 1894, when by most accounts it rose steadily after the reforms begun in the wake of the Russo-Turkish war of 1879 until 1904. See Laguiche Memo in Ropponen (fn. 8). Doran and Parsons set the German high at 1902, when the evidence presented here would suggest the period from 1906 to 1909 as more likely.

83 Ropponen (fn. 8).
Differences in perception cannot be captured by quantitative estimators, but they may reveal much about the onset of war. The fact that Russia’s opponents saw her as weaker, and her allies viewed her as stronger, suggests that decision makers on both sides may have thought they had the margin of superiority. Thus, Moltke and Conrad based their actions in July 1914 on the assumption that the Central Powers still had the edge over the Entente, whereas Sazonov, the Russian foreign minister, assumed that, with England firmly on board, Germany could be beaten. The existence of this “dual” balance of power has several implications. The first is that the “objective” distribution of capabilities in 1914 probably came as close to equilibrium as ever occurs in international relations. Thus, it was possible to draw different conclusions about power relationships from essentially the same evidence. It hardly makes sense to speak of the Entente’s overwhelming superiority when four years of struggle, the harnessing to the Entente of American economic power, and, eventually, American intervention were necessary to bring victory.

Second, this dual balance of power adds to the discussion on the origins of the war. It helps explain Germany’s bellicosity and the Entente powers’ refusal to back down. The willingness of all to go to war, or the unwillingness of all to take risks for peace, which is often attributed to organizational imperatives, can in part be explained by the conviction of each side that, “if things came to it,” it could win. There is support here for Geoffrey Blainey’s notion of war as “a dispute about the measurement of power.”85 Obviously, there are purely aggressive wars forced by the strong upon the weak, but there is some appeal to the proposition that war is often “the outcome of a diplomatic crisis which cannot be solved because both sides have conflicting estimates of their bargaining power.”86 In the case of dynamic theories, this dual balance of power helps to explain why power transitions often cannot be achieved peacefully. If power relationships were completely transparent, it is difficult to see why a weaker challenger would provoke war or a weaker dominant nation would insist on defending the status quo. Because power relationships can be opaque and because each side can see a different distribution, each can see the other’s demands as illegitimate and unjustified by the existing distribution of power.

The clarity of the balance of power undoubtedly varies over time. It is often suggested that it is likely to be most transparent after major wars, for, as Gilpin contends, “a hegemonic war is the ultimate test of change in the relative standing of the powers in the existing system.”87 However,

86 Ibid.
87 Gilpin (fn. 80).
as the case of prewar Russia shows, even smaller wars can have a clarifying effect: from 1905 until after 1910 everyone was more or less aware of Russia’s weakness, and hence of the weakness of the Entente’s position. Therefore, in the crises of 1905, 1908/9, 1911, and 1912, Russia and her allies adopted conciliatory policies. It was only after Russian reforms really got under way after 1910 that one detects significant differences of views on Russian power in the documents.

Volatility of Perceptions

A large conceptual breach divides long-term power studies from the “crisis management” approach to the study of international war. To the theorist of hegemonic war, a difference of five or ten years in international history hardly seems important. Similarly, specific antecedents to war fade into insignificance next to the fundamental power shifts that make war likely. Proponents of crisis studies respond that war occurs as the result of particular decisions at particular times, and the analysis of these decisions reveals that in many cases the absence of certain perceptual or organizational pathologies could well have prevented war from occurring. Most analysts would admit, however, that neither group of scholars is entirely wrong; that the immediate and long-term causes of war are related. The present case study suggests that the medium-term perception of power captures, to a certain extent, a confluence of the two approaches.

The decisive decline in Russia’s perceived power occasioned by the war and revolution of 1905 was a catalyst for solidifying the Triple Entente: Britain began staff talks with the French and concluded an entente with Russia, despite a century of antagonism between the two empires; and France and Russia tightened their alliance. As noted above, for Entente decision makers, including the Russians, Russia’s obvious weakness demanded conciliatory policies toward the central powers in the crises of 1905 and 1908/9. Only after several years of active Russian reforms and an improving financial status did the situation become more ambiguous. By 1912, France pushed for a “forward” Russian policy in the Balkan Wars. By 1914, Russian leaders agreed that they were in a position to face down Germany. On the German side, German leaders thought, for a host of reasons, that their country’s interests demanded war; yet the kaiser and the chancellor were reluctant to make an unambiguous decision.88 Thus, the Entente’s conciliation frustrated German plans for war in 1905 and

1908, just when the Central Powers’ relative capabilities were probably perceived to be at their highest. Only the Russian decision to oppose the Central Powers in Serbia, based on an internal estimate of increased Russian power, allowed the kaiser and the chancellor to perceive the decision for war as forced upon them by the actions of others.

It is, in short, misleading to discuss the timing of the war solely by reference to systemic shifts in power as measured by numerical indicators. An explanation for the coming of the war that entirely ignored the power variable would also miss important aspects. “Crisis management” studies on the origins of the war have focused on factors like faulty decision making, military strategy and plans, the cult of the offensive, time pressures, communications overload, and so forth. Such studies attempt to show why the July crisis ended in war, and that it need not have done so had some of the factors mentioned not been present. The implication is that power is not an important explanatory factor; that, with incorrect organization, strategy, or communications, any power dynamic or distribution could lead to war, and that with sound organization, strategy, and communications, no power configuration is likely to lead to war. Yet all these phenomena surely also were attributes of earlier crises—as, for example, the Bosnian crisis, which did not end in war. What was different in 1914 was the perceived distribution of power. Bureaucratic and organizational factors undoubtedly affected the proclivity of states toward war. But it may lead to misplaced emphasis on such factors to ignore that, at least in the case of World War I, the willingness of states to go to war was related to their capability for doing so. These capabilities were perceived to be changing rapidly before 1914, thus affecting the war-proneness of the system in fundamental ways.

The Capriciousness of Perceptions

Fritz Fischer has called the First World War “the war of illusions.” Another apt description would be “the war of misperceptions,” for, as Stephen Van Evera has observed, “misperceptions were the taproot of the war.” Van Evera focuses on six misperceptions: the cult of the offensive; overestimation of opponents’ hostility; belief that forceful policy would reduce opponents’ resistance; belief that empires were profitable; belief in war’s positive effects; and nationalistic versions of history that reduced

---

80 See ibid.; Holsti (fn. 54; Snyder (fn. 21).
81 Fischer (fn. 35).
the ability of elites to perceive that the actions of their country might be the cause of the anxieties of others. He shows how these mistaken beliefs so skewed perceived payoffs that cooperative policies were ruled out.

One more misperception could easily be added to Van Evera’s list: that of power. True, perceptions of the static balance, despite pre-1914 delusions about the nature of future war, were not far off the mark. But how accurate was the almost universal pre-1914 belief in inexorably increasing Russian power? This question is particularly important in explaining German imperatives. Although all major states had revisionist goals before the war and were more or less disposed to go to war in order to achieve them, Germany is generally regarded as having been the most likely to do so. Van Evera notes that his six misperceptions were most acute in Berlin. The same is true of the perception of rising Russian power, which weighed so heavily on German decision makers that it created one of Gilpin’s “preconditions for hegemonic war”—namely, “the realization that the law of uneven growth has begun to operate to one’s disadvantage.”

At first glance, this extrapolation of perceived prewar trends looks accurate, for Russia’s power did surpass that of Germany after World War II, as all quantitative indicators show. But these indicators are skewed by the partition of Germany. In fact, the pre-1914 argument that Russia must grow relative to Germany did not necessarily fit true potential; as Paul Kennedy notes in an analysis of the real distribution before 1914 and beyond, “[h]ad it continued to] occupy its 1937 borders, the united German nation would today be a larger industrial and economic force than the Soviet Union.” Even in the near-to-medium term, Kennedy concludes, “the figures suggest that Russia would do well to maintain its position vis-à-vis Germany, let alone improve it.” Of course, this is counterfactual (though well-researched) speculation, but from all we now know of Germany’s actual power in 1914, and of the demands that modern war places upon the economy and organization of a state, it seems quite likely that, for Germany, war was a tragic mistake even within the confines of all the pre-1914 misperceptions about international politics. A correct calculation of power trends would have led to a German decision

92 Ibid., 81.
93 The consensus among those who study the war may now be considered to rest here, after decades of acrimonious controversy, debate, and copious research sparked by the so-called “Fischer School.” See John A. Moses, The Policy of Illusion: The Fischer Controversy in German Historiography (London: George Prior, 1975).
94 Gilpin (fn. 80), 202.
96 Ibid.
for peace, for, as A.J.P. Taylor observed, “peace would have brought Germany the mastery of Europe within a few years.”97

The upshot is that the perception and misperception of power is also a “taproot” of the war. Changes in the perceived balance help to explain the timing of the war; why earlier crises were peacefully resolved whereas the July crisis was not; why the Entente powers decided to stand up to Germany; why German decision makers felt they had to make a “now or never” stand for the mastery of Europe. But one can at least question the inevitability of all this, for the perception of rising Russian power, necessary for the preventive/hegemonic war argument, may well have been incorrect. The best explanation for the onset of the war may require a combination of the perceptions and the “grand theoretical” power approach. The calculation of relative power was crucial in explaining the onset, and it proceeded in ways that conform to the main power-transition theories. But calculations and expectations were skewed in ways that can only be understood by reference to prevalent misperceptions of the age, such as those analyzed by Lebow, Van Evera, and Snyder. Only these considerations explain why it was that so many decision makers, and not just Germans, foresaw great relative gains for Russia in the next few years.

Conclusion

The calculation of the balance of power is thus important, but not always accurate. Policy-related perceptions of power that do not correspond to numerical indicators or to our best analytical estimate of the real situation must be taken into account when theorizing about the balance of power. Perceived power is clearly an important medium- and short-term explanatory variable. In some ways, it links long-term changes in the distribution of power with short-term perceptual explanations of the onset of war. Whether further research along these lines can produce anything at the “grand theoretical” level is open to question. What such research can do is induce awareness about the importance of numerous mundane historical influences bearing on power and war—an awareness that, although it makes theorizing more troublesome, should also make it more productive.

97 The Struggle for Mastery of Europe (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 528.