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French Foreign Policy in the July Crisis, 1914: A Review Article

Marc Trachtenberg, UCLA

When I was getting ready to take my Ph.D. exams forty years ago, I had a meeting with my advisor, Raymond Sontag. What, he wondered, should he examine me on? “Why don’t you ask me something about the origins of the First World War?” I said. “I think I understand that now.” His reply was devastating: “Oh really? I’ve been studying it for fifty years and I still don’t understand it.” But over the years I’ve come to feel the same way. The whole question of what caused that war, for me at least, remains deeply puzzling. To be sure, we’re still learning new and important things, even about what happened during the July Crisis in 1914. But with every new insight, new problems come into focus, and ultimate answers remain as elusive as ever. In fact, the deeper you go into the issue, the more puzzling it becomes—or at least that’s been my own experience in grappling with this particular historical problem.

Stefan Schmidt’s new book on French foreign policy in the July Crisis is a good case in point. He begins by arguing that the French government—and above all, Raymond Poincaré, President of the Republic, and the key French policy maker at the time—took a hard line during the crisis, and in particular in the important meetings held with the Russian leadership in St. Petersburg from July 20 to July 23. In itself this argument is by no means new. Luigi Albertini, in his great work on origins of the war, took much the same line. But given the limited evidence on that episode that was available when he wrote that book, Albertini’s interpretation was necessarily somewhat speculative. “The St. Petersburg conversations,” he wrote, “*must have dealt* above all with the Austro-Serbian tension and the eventualities that might result from it.”

But that interpretation was by no means universally accepted, and for years there was a certain tendency in the historical literature to play down the role that France had played during the crisis, and especially to minimize the importance of the St. Petersburg talks. France was often portrayed as caught up in events she was scarcely able to control. As John Keiger, author of the most important English-language study of the subject, put the point: “Far from believing any more that France played a crucial role in the events leading to war, recent scholarship suggests that she was the most passive of the great powers, following events rather than creating them.” That was certainly Keiger’s own view, and in recent years many scholars have taken much the same line.

That argument about the passivity of French policy is supported by a particular interpretation of what went on in the St. Petersburg meetings. “There is no evidence,” Keiger said flatly, “that during his visit to Russia Poincaré did anything other than reaffirm the Franco-Russian alliance. He did not offer *carte blanche* in the event of a Balkan war.” To the extent that Poincaré did anything at all, he pursued a relatively

moderate strategy: French policy in the crisis, according to Keiger, was “predicated on the notion of restraining Russia to avoid giving Germany a pretext for war.” Indeed, referring to a report that came in late in the crisis to the effect that Russia had decided to advise the Serbs not to resist an Austrian invasion, Keiger writes: “This was the kind of restraint which Poincaré believed should be reinforced.”

But all this was to no avail, that argument runs, and the French were overwhelmed by forces they could not control. Poincaré, Keiger says, “was finally constrained into taking his country into war—a defensive war.” The French could scarcely control what was happening. Indeed, they could scarcely affect the behavior of their own main ally. “Russian decision-making,” says Hew Strachan in the first chapter of his magisterial study *The First World War*, “was remarkably little influenced by France.” The result was, as Eugenia Kiesling, for example, writes, that “almost regardless of what it did, France would be dragged into an unwanted war.”

Schmidt, however, takes issue with all these claims. French policy, in his view, was by no means passive or irrelevant. Very important choices were made. Above all, the French government—and that meant essentially Poincaré—made it clear to the Russians that France would support Russia if an armed conflict broke out over the Serbian question. The policy could have been different. France could have tried to restrain Russia, but Poincaré especially chose not to. René Viviani, who served as both prime minister and foreign minister at the time, although utterly out of his depth, in fact leaned toward a moderate policy: he very much disliked the idea of going to war for the sake of Serbia. But instead, Schmidt argues, Russia was in fact given the equivalent of a blank check at the St. Petersburg talks and after. France was not “dragged into” the war. As Maurice Paléologue, the French ambassador to Russia at the time, wrote in a 1936 letter to the historian Pierre Renouvin (published in a relatively obscure journal in 1997), what the French were afraid of at the time was not that they would be “dragged in” by Russia, but rather that France would be “poorly supported by Russia, in the event of a German attack.” And that basic French decision to support Russia unconditionally was of profound importance. Schmidt argues—and here again he follows in Albertini’s footsteps, but with a somewhat stronger argument—that Russia would scarcely have pursued the policy she did if the French had taken a more moderate line.

The evidence that Schmidt gives to support that interpretation, which he found in all sorts of places, is in fact really quite extraordinary, and it’s marshalled very effectively in the book. The two sections developing that argument about French policy during this key phase of the crisis (pp. 65-104) are in fact a model, to my mind, of what historical analysis should be. What evidence exactly is given here that goes beyond what Albertini had presented? Schmidt shows, first of all, that Poincaré had come to understand, shortly his arrival in Russia, how serious the Austro-Serbian dispute was, and how in fact Austria was about to present the Serbs with a sort of ultimatum—a “démarche comminatoire,” to use Poincaré’s own term at the time. This implied that in the St. Petersburg talks, Poincaré and the Russian leaders would have had to talk

seriously about what Russia would do in such a case and the degree to which France would support those actions. And indeed it seems quite clear that this was exactly what happened. As Paléologue pointed out in his 1936 letter to Renouvin: “ ‘war’ was certainly discussed in these talks, but only defensive war. M. Poincaré, at the time, by no means concealed the fact that in these conversations he was thinking about the possibility of a conflict. Later on, in the context of the campaign about ‘Poincaré-la-guerre,’ he thought it would be better to give a different version.” Louis de Robien, in 1914 the attaché in the French embassy in St. Petersburg, made the same point: by July 22, he wrote, the French and Russian leaders were “talking openly of a war, which no one had even dreamt of a few days earlier.”

And what had Poincaré said in his talks with the Russian leaders? It seems quite clear, from the evidence Schmidt presents, that Poincaré used very firm language in a meeting he had with the Tsar just before leaving St. Petersburg. It is hard to avoid the conclusion, reading this section, that Poincaré had given the Russian monarch the assurance that France would support his country unconditionally, not just diplomatically, but militarily as well. The Tsar, for example, would scarcely have been as grateful as Schmidt shows he was if Poincaré had merely urged the Russians to stand firm, without making any commitment of his own.

The basic point here is supported by some additional evidence Schmidt presents about Poincaré’s worries about Russian weakness in the crisis. He was particularly upset—and this point directly contradicts one of the Keiger claims noted above—when he heard that Russia had decided to advise the Serbs not to resist an Austrian invasion, but to trust their fate to the great powers. He considered this an “abdication,” a “black day” for the Franco-Russian alliance. He was worried also by all the emphasis the Russians were placing on the importance of making sure that Britain was on their side. He wondered whether this was a “dérobade”: the Russians, it seemed to him, might well be trying to evade their responsibilities. He was clearly not trying to restrain Russia. If anything, to his mind the Russians were not tough enough—and that was his impression even when he was in St. Petersburg. But if he was worried about Russian weakness, then that implies that he would have wanted to do what he could to make sure the Russians would stand firm in the crisis—namely, by taking a tough line himself.

It is in this context that one has to try to figure out what to make of the assurances that Paléologue gave the Russians right after the French leaders left St. Petersburg and news of the Austrian ultimatum was received in that city. The French ambassador gave the Russians a “formal assurance that France placed herself unreservedly on Russia’s side.” But was Paléologue simply acting on his own? That was Keiger’s view: “it is clear that Paléologue was acting independently of Paris.” But Albertini found it hard to believe that the ambassador’s promises were to be understood in such terms. And in fact it seems quite likely, given everything that Schmidt was able to show about Poincaré and especially about the line he took in St. Petersburg, that Paléologue was carrying out what he knew to be the French president’s policy—a policy, to be

sure, which he was personally in sympathy with. If Paléologue kept Paris in the dark—and he certainly did not give an adequate account of what he had told the Russians and of what he was learning from them—that was not because he was temperamentally inclined to play the lone cowboy. Schmidt thinks that his aim in doing so was to keep Viviani from pursuing a more moderate policy, not to act independently of Poincaré—and that interpretation seems quite plausible.

So the basic argument Schmidt develops in the first part of the book strikes me as very solid. The French government—and that meant essentially Poincaré personally—did take a hard line in the crisis: Russia, in fact, had effectively been given a blank check. But how is that policy to be understood? To show what French policy was was just a beginning. The real problem has to do with the question of motivation. Why, exactly, did the French pursue the policy they did?

Fully half of the Schmidt book is devoted to that question, and more than half of that part of the book—over a hundred pages—deals with the question of whether French policy was essentially shaped by military considerations. Here he addresses himself directly to arguments made by American political scientists like Stephen Van Evera, Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder, about the political implications of offense-oriented military strategies. And Schmidt's view is that military considerations played a fundamental role in shaping French policy at that point. The French, as is well known, were committed to a strategy that placed an extraordinary premium on rapid, offensive action. The problem was that the French army had to be superior to the German force it faced if the offense was to have any hope of succeeding. French military leaders thought at the time that their prospects would be brightest if they could take the initiative and be the first to violate Belgian neutrality—indeed, the General Staff thought in 1912 that that was the *only* course of action that might succeed—but an invasion of Belgium at the beginning of the war was ruled out for political reasons. It would alienate the British, and the French wanted to do what they could to bring Britain into the war on their side. They thus planned instead for an offensive into Lorraine, even though they knew full well that that strategy, even in purely military terms, did not make much sense. Schmidt, in this section, quotes the conclusion the French military historian Guy Pedroncini reached in his study of Chief of Staff General Joseph Joffre's strategic planning. Joffre, Pedroncini wrote, in the final analysis had decided upon a plan—the famous Plan XVII—“the ineffectiveness of whose strategic solutions . . . he himself had demonstrated.”

The French nonetheless remained committed to the idea of an *offensive à outrance*. Given that commitment, the German force France had to face needed to be as small as possible. Russia therefore had to attack Germany as quickly as possible, and in a way that would force the Germans to move a large part of their army east. That meant that Russia would have to launch a large attack in the direction of Berlin. But the French military authorities were far from convinced that the Russians intended to do any such thing. Many signs, in fact, pointed in exactly the opposite direction—and indeed

the archival evidence Schmidt presents on this point is quite remarkable. Nor was it clear that the Russians could launch such an attack even if they wanted to. Indeed, just a few months before the war the French general staff had reached the conclusion that the Russian army was simply incapable of mounting the sort of attack the French considered essential.

And all this, according to Schmidt, was of absolutely fundamental political importance. It meant that France was dependent on Russia; it meant that French policy was more anti-German, more incapable of accommodating Germany's own security needs, than it would otherwise have been. It was largely for military reasons of this sort, in his view, that people like Poincaré and Paléologue felt that France had to take a hard line in the crisis. The basic idea here, evidently, was that the way to get Russia to move quickly and massively against Germany, in order to shift the balance in the west in France's favor, was to make it clear to the Russians how far France herself was willing to go. Given how tough France herself was on the Austro-Serbian question—that is, on an issue of primary interest to Russia—the Russians themselves might have felt under a certain pressure to give France whatever military support they could in exchange.

But there is another way to look at this whole business, a way that to my mind in a rational world should have carried far more weight. The French could have looked at the military situation, seen how unsatisfactory it was—that is, how hard it would be to implement successfully the *offensive à outrance* strategy they had adopted—and thought about whether it really made sense under such circumstances to actually go to war. If the military situation was so deeply unsatisfactory, then wasn't that a reason to avoid war and press for some sort of compromise?

It turns out, however, that French policy *was* rooted in an assessment of the military situation—but in an assessment that scarcely made sense given the real military situation in which the French found themselves. French leaders, it turns out, viewed their chances in a European war that broke over the Balkan conflict as “extraordinarily favorable.” Even in 1912, the French General Staff thought a war that broke out over an Austrian intervention in the Balkans would put the Germanic powers “at the mercy of the Entente.” On July 30, 1914, on the very eve of the war, a prominent French general wrote his son that “a better occasion would never be found”—a view echoed at the time by both Doulcet in St. Petersburg and the French military attaché in Berlin. And Poincaré himself wrote in his diary on August 6, just after the fighting had begun, that an early negotiated peace would be just about the worst thing that could happen, because it would deprive his country of the fruits of a victorious war.

All this is deeply puzzling, given all the problems of a military nature Schmidt had discussed earlier in the book. There was obviously something wrong here—an enormous disconnect between the hard-headed technical military analysis and the rosy overall assessment of the military balance that people had come to accept. One

thinks in this context of Fritz Fischer's comment at the very end of his chapter on the July Crisis in his famous book *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, published in English under the title *Germany's Aims in the First World War*. He referred there to "Germany's real 'guilt,' her constant over-estimation of her own powers, and her misjudgment of realities." But by that measure, wasn't France equally "guilty"?

And indeed it makes sense to revisit some of the key arguments Fischer made to support his basic claim about Germany's responsibility for the war in the light of what we now know about French policy in the crisis. The German military, Fischer pointed out, talked a lot about the need for a preventive war, about how it was a question of "now or never." This was certainly true, but the French military made the same sorts of arguments. Schmidt cites a number of British reports to the effect that many people in France, and especially in the French military, were thinking in preventive war terms; one leading French general told an important British officer in 1913 that he "was in favour of a war now as being a good opportunity, France [and] Russia being ready [and] Austria in a state of confusion." Other scholars, in fact, had argued years ago that French military leaders were thinking along those lines at the time.

Fischer, to support his general argument, had also pointed out that German officers were delighted when they heard that war had broken out, and he argued that the German leadership had been more interested in making it seem that Germany was fighting a purely defensive war than in avoiding an armed conflict—a policy he views as successful, at least in internal political terms. He quotes a diary entry dated August 1, 1914—that is just as the storm in its full fury was about to break—written by an important German naval officer, Admiral von Müller: "The mood is brilliant. The government has managed brilliantly to make us appear the attacked." But again it is quite clear that the same sort of thing was happening on the French side. On July 30, for example, the Russian military attaché reported on feelings within the French general staff: he referred to the "unconcealed joy" that France could now take advantage of the strategically favorable position in which she now found herself.

The French, moreover, were certainly concerned with making it seem, again both with an eye to Britain and for domestic political reasons, that they were fighting a purely defensive war. That goal was clearly more important to them than avoiding an armed conflict. People like Poincaré were under no illusion that the French people would happily go to war for the sake of Serbia; the fact that the war began with a German attack on France and that Germany declared war on their country before they had to declare war on Germany, was exactly what they wanted. Poincaré noted the reaction in the French cabinet when on August 3 news of the German declaration of war was received: "never has a declaration of war been greeted with such satisfaction." Other scholars have taken much the same view. Robert Doughty, for example, quotes some notes of the July 30 cabinet meeting—"for the sake of public opinion, let the Germans put themselves in the wrong"—and then goes on to point out how successful that strategy was. And John Keiger writes that Poincaré's strategy in the crisis "did not

waver from ensuring that France should appear the injured party to unite the country in a defensive war and to ensure that she obtained the necessary diplomatic and military support from countries such as Britain and Italy.”

Finally, Fischer, especially in the *Germany's Aims* book, blamed Germany for having “deliberately faced the risk of a conflict with Russia and France.” (By the time he wrote *War of Illusions* his views had hardened, and in that book he made the more extreme claim that the Germans had deliberately engineered the war.) But again, as Schmidt makes quite clear, French leaders also accepted the risk of a European war with open eyes. None of this meant that Poincaré and others of his ilk actually wanted a war, and indeed no one thinks they did. If, however, the sort of evidence I’ve been talking about here does not warrant that kind of conclusion in France’s case, you have to wonder about whether similar points about Germany really bear out Fischer’s claims about that country’s responsibility for the war.

And if not, we still have to confront the very basic issue of how war could come if no one really wanted it to. People try to get at that kind of problem by talking about the role of the “system”—about how the “system” can lead to outcomes that no one at the start of the crisis really wanted. People talk in particular about the role the military system that was in place at the time played in bringing on the war. But the great premium that was placed on the offense in prewar military planning, especially in the French case, meant that the bar was placed very high—that it was very difficult to generate the sort of military superiority that would allow such plans to succeed. And if they had little chance of success, one would think that (if they were rational) there would be a certain reluctance to go to war in such a world—that in other words, a world in which military planning was based on the belief that offensive military action was essential in the event of war might be more stable than many people think.

But when people talk about the “system,” what they often have in mind is the political system that existed in Europe before World War I—a world in which no one could feel totally secure, and in which everyone therefore struggled for power political advantage. It is often assumed that serious problems were bound to develop in such a world—that the struggle for security put states at odds with each other, that states responding rationally to the pressures they felt in that kind of world would pursue policies that could easily lead to war.

It’s in that context that it makes sense to ask some basic questions about French policy in 1914—about whether the hard-line policy pursued by Poincaré was rational in power political terms, about whether it was in some sense natural, given the kind of great power political system that existed at the time, for France to pursue the sort of policy she did. Is Poincaré’s policy, in other words, to be understood in realist terms? Or should one criticize it for not being realist enough?

To get at that issue, one has to begin with a somewhat different question: in the

circumstances in which France found herself before the war, what would a realist policy have been? The French, like the Germans, were dazzled by what they saw as the rise of Russian power. They felt that improved relations with Germany might compromise their relationship with their great ally to the east, and with the British as well. If France were cut off from the other powers in that way, she would be at the mercy of Germany. It would mean the end of French independence. But was that the sort of calculation a realist would have made? Wouldn't both Russia and Britain have had an interest in maintaining France as a great power no matter what, so that France could serve as a counterweight to Germany, and couldn't the French count on them pursuing policies based on that fundamental political interest—policies that would have provided a certain basis for French security and independence? Didn't France have an interest in better relations with Germany, if only to avoid too much dependence on Russia, a country which was viewed as having less and less need for France? Didn't France have an interest, above all, in avoiding war with Germany, since German power might serve as a counterweight to growing Russian power in Europe? In other words, from a realist point of view, didn't France have an interest in balancing between the other powers, and avoiding excessive dependence on any of them?

That's the sort of yardstick you can use to see whether French policy made sense in realist terms. And what's quite striking, judging from the analysis in the Schmidt book, is how little of this was present in French thinking before the war. One gets the sense that that policy was rooted not in cold power political analysis but in a visceral dislike of Germany. Instead of adopting the realist view that tends to take political conflict philosophically, French leaders like Poincaré tended to view the Franco-German relationship in black-and-white terms: what France wanted was just, and German goals were essentially illegitimate. There was little sense, for example, that France did not have a God-given right to take over Morocco, or that Austria might have had a real case against Serbia and that it was in some measure understandable that Austria might want to deal with the problem on her southern border before it was too late. After all, as Schmidt shows, the French government knew quite well what Serbian policy was—that is, it knew from the reports of its own representatives in Belgrade how violent and warlike that policy was. But a sense for this sort of thing played little role in shaping French policy during the July Crisis, or toward Germany more generally.

Albertini, after spending years of his life trying to understand the coming of the First World War, concluded that the “utter lack of political horse-sense” was the “main cause of European disorders and upheavals.” The Schmidt book leaves you with much the same impression. These people in 1914 were not the victims of forces they were unable to control. The tragedy did not come because they were reacting in the only way they reasonably could to the situation in which they found themselves. It came because of decisions they made, decisions that could easily have been different—decisions, in fact, that remain deeply puzzling.

Marc Trachtenberg, a historian by training, is currently a professor of political science at UCLA. He is the author of a number of works on twentieth century international politics, most notably *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (1999).

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