

# Origins of world war 1



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The phenomenon of chain-ganging has been used to explain the outbreak of World War I. Is chain-ganging a convincing explanation for the onset of the war? In what ways? Are alternative explanations more compelling, and if so, how and why? The First World War was the first total war and can be seen as a contingent catastrophe or rather a unique event.

It cost the lives of more than 10 million people and the involvement of more than 40 states. Even 100 years later scholars still search on it, intending to explain this horrific event in history (Hooch 2011: 9). There are several explanatory theories for the outbreak of the war. In this work I will analyse different explanations with a focus on Christensen and Snyder's chain-ganging theory and give a comparison of their different approaches.

I argue that the chain-ganging theory is not a convincing explanation for the onset of the war for three main reasons: Firstly some of the theory's basic assumptions are questionable, secondly the evidence the authors present can be interpreted in different ways and hardly the misconception that the authors intended to use their theory as an explanation for the outbreak of the war. Hence theories such as the coordinated action, misconception and the security dilemma are more compelling.

The term 'chain-ganging', which is an acknowledged explanation for the outbreak of World War I by most realist scholars, was introduced by Christensen and Snyder although their theory is based on Waltz' theory of balance-of-power in the Theory of International Politics. Waltz's basic assumptions on the behavior of individual states in multipart systems are

that their strategy seeks to attract and hold allies in the quest for security to avoid a military defeat (1979: 165-166).

He describes this process as a vicious circle "because the date or the detection to a major ally would have shaken the balance, each state was constrained to adjust its strategy and the use of its forces to the aims and fears of its partners" (Walt 1979: 167). According to Christensen and Snyder the phenomenon of chain-ganging describes the process of different nations acting in a similar way due to the existence of certain alliances "chain[long] themselves unconditionally to reckless allies whose survival is seen to be indispensable to the maintenance of the balance" (1990: 138).

They develop their theory by adding the variables technology and geography to Serves' security dilemma theory to explain offensive or defensive advantages that affects a states behavior in an alliance. As evidence for their theory they quote Waltz example of World War 1 "If Austria-Hungary marched, Germany had to follow If France marched, Russia had to follow." (Waltz 1979, cited in Christensen and Snyder 1990: 141). Tierney questions in his work two basic assumptions of the chain-ganging theory.

Firstly the presumption that defection is a profound fear that causes chain-ganging 1 Off significantly depends on the extent of support of his ally. On the one hand he argues that tight alliances rather tend to defection due to the fact that they often reflect basic conflicts of interests between states, war plans are premised and defection would cause high transaction costs and the decrease of the reputation and trustworthiness of a state defected once.

On the other hand he criticizes the assumption that countries blindly trust their allies when it comes to their support in AR suppressing that “defensive pacts often do not apply if one ally initiates the war” (Tierney 2011: 288-290). He also criticizes the premise that alliance dynamics can only take form of chain-ganging. In his view the outcome of tight alliance systems relies on whether the allies share the same interests regarding war and therefore provides three different scenarios.

The first is chain-ganging in the style of Christensen and Snyder, assuming that the allies' interests vary. The second scenario is one he names 'restraint' in which the ally favoring peace has more influence and once is able to hold back its associate from going into war. The third option is the 'coordinated action'. Thereby both allies share the same interests and therefore act within the alliance individually following their own strategies (Tierney 2011 : 287-288).

In his opinion the second and the third option are more likely to happen and explains that the outbreak of World War I was a coordinated action since Austria-Hungary and Germany were both in favor of war emphasizes by the fact that Germany gave a blank check of support to its ally (Tierney 2011: 299-301). According to Tierney “the issuance of blank checks is a sign of the convergence of interest, and impeding coordinated aggression, rather than chain-ganging” (2011 : 291).

Christensen and Snyder in return use the fact that Austria-Hungary's actions forced Germany to follow unintended as evidence for their chain-ganging theory (1990: 141). If you see the chain-ganging theory as an explanation “

why wars in Europe escalated to a continent-wide scale" linked to the premise that this phenomenon is more likely to happen in conflict-driven environments as Christensen and Snyder emphasize in their later work (2011: 305-306), it delivers an interesting point of view on the dynamics of 1914 rather than being an explanatory theory for the onset of the war.

From my point of view Tierney identifies significant gaps in the argumentation of Christensen and Snyder but also oversimplifies his argumentation by dividing countries into 'hawks' and 'doves', countries favoring rather war or peace. In my opinion a state can also transform from a hawk into a dove and vice versa respectively develop certain interests in war or peace in the dynamics of the course of action. I argue that in a multipart system every state is a potential hawk if there is clear evidence for benefits for the state since the leading forces are continuously in an international struggle for power.

The position of the United States is often discussed in these terms since it is not always clear what course its foreign policy will follow. Germany was considered being in favor of peace before taking action in the unique, favorable situation it saw itself for the attack on France in 1914. Another point of critique is if both Germany and Austria-Hungary did share broader interests in a war why did they need a catalyst such as the assassination of archduke Franz Ferdinand? Austria-Hungary in former actions since it was not the right time for Germany to go to war (Tierney 2011: 298) but if 1914 was the right time why did not anything happen earlier?

Another theory used by scholars to describe the outbreak of World War I is misconception and security dilemma. Van Vera argues that the conflict aroused from several misconceptions dominating in the in the years before the war: the cult of offensive', the overestimation of the hostility of neighboring states, the imagination f a bandwagon world by European leaders, the exaggeration of economic and social rewards territorial expansion could provide, the believe the war was beneficial in terms of domestic tranquility, all harming cooperation and causing aggression (1985: 81).

Serves introduces the term security dilemma, explaining that “ by increasing it's own security a state decreases (the security) of other states” (1978: 169). A “ states drive for security will also produce aggressive actions” leading to an arms race situation such as between Britain and Germany before World War I. And if there is he believe that “ the state striking first will have a defense advantage” the “ security dilemma can provide dynamics triggering war” (1976: 64-67).

Snyder ; Christensen combine the theories using the security dilemma as a variable to predict if chain-ganging or buck-passing will happen (1990: 144). In my opinion these theories seems to be more compelling since there is clear historical evidence rather than assumptions on the way how states may or may not act depending on the behavior of their ally. Misconceptions in the pre-war period for instance can be proven by literature. General Alfred von Schlemiels emphasized by saying that “ attack is the best defense” (Van Vera 1985: 83) Germany's offensive strategy.

The arms race between Germany and Britain is also a clear evidence of the security dilemma and the misconception of the hostility of other states.

Germany started to build a powerful Ana and “ Britain thought it can only be an offensive weapon aimed at her” dervish 1978: 170). As a critique you may refer to the fact that security and survival cannot be seen as the only ambition for states to initiate war – greed and ambition can also be triggers. In this work I analyses different explanatory theories of the onset of the First World War.

The first part introduced the theory of chain ganging. Looking at several aspects of the argumentation of the authors it becomes clear that the theory lacks a deeper analysis of alliance behavior due to the fact that there is historical evidence that alliance dynamics tend to cut both ways chain-ganging and restraint. Chain-ganging intents to explain why wars in Europe escalated, but does not give the explanation for the onset of World War 1. There is clear evidence that states interfere driven by cantonal interests as the pursuit of power and security.

Thus theories such as coordinated action, misconception and the security dilemma are more compelling. There exists a complex web of variables that leads to war. Hence chain-ganging cannot be seen as the only explanation for the outbreak of World War 1 .