

# Innocent Blood: The Struggle of Small Neutrals to Preserve Their Neutrality in Wartime

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*Why strong states may choose paths toward war is widely studied, but less powerful states have far less agency over their fates when it comes to involvement in conflicts. The truth is, war between major powers threatens with great devastation and sorrow even those countries who have no direct stake in the conflict. Yet, although small neutral states are often dragged into wars between powerful countries, not all are. What factors pull these “small neutrals” into wars sometimes and allow them to avoid wars at other times? By mining existing scholarship concerning small states and the spread of wars, this article delineates eight unique factors situated across three levels of analysis assumed to determine the ability of small neutrals to avoid getting dragged into larger states’ wars. However, seeing a gap in the literature, this article argues that a ninth phenomenon should be added to this list: how individuals within large states are critical to the fates of the small neutrals. The perspective of one individual in a large state may lead to war for a small state, whereas the perspective of another may lead to peace. Through a case study, this article demonstrates how large states’ leaders each uniquely understand the interaction of all of the variables confronting them, a fact that spared neutral Belgium in 1870 from a Franco-German war and doomed it to another in 1914.*

**W**hen powerful nations march to war against each other, small ones watch uneasily. Sometimes, small countries without interest in fighting—what this article refers to as “small neutrals”—are lucky enough to emerge from wider conflagrations unscathed. This, however, is not always the case. Scholars have discovered sources of when and why one or the other outcome occurs, but none have given a comprehensive account of the forces at work when a small country tries to avoid a larger war. This omission of the fate of a whole class of states derives from a general tendency for most scholars to study war with respect to the powerful actors, largely overlooking the weak. Small states may not be as essential to the understanding of conflict as large ones, but one cannot fully appreciate the whole while neglecting certain constituent parts.

This article aims to explore that variance in the outcomes of war or peace for a small neutral state during wars between powerful states—namely, how the quality of leadership in the powerful states affects those small states. This article proposes that existing literature suggests eight phenomena spread across three levels of analysis help to explain why small states do and do not get pulled into larger states’ wars; however, this article argues that a ninth phenomenon, the role of individuals within large states, should be added. Every point in time and place is a unique synthesis of innumerable interlocking historical dynamics, so there can be no list of principles that could consistently predict if or how a small state could avoid war in a given situation. However, if one develops a lexicon, and if one identifies the broad factors that collectively determine war or peace under these conditions—if one builds a rough theory—the scholar and the statesman may at least have some guidance when confronting specifics.

This following section reflects on what scholars have said germane to the topic of this article. The next section lays out the design of the cases and establishes definitions, while the third examines the cases in detail. The fourth and final section considers the meaning of the findings.

## **A Review of Existing Work on Small State Participation in Large State Wars**

From an inspection of scholarship relevant to this topic, one can delineate eight distinct factors situated at three levels of analysis that influence whether a small neutral state can escape a wider war. What scholars have developed

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from the systemic level of analysis—looking at the interplay among multiple states—can be classified into the variables of a small state’s geostrategic location, how wars are fought, and a small state’s policy toward alliances. At the dyadic level—looking at the relationship between two states—existing work cites small state prestige and economic ties. Finally, the monadic level—looking at the internal processes of a single state—can be considered as consisting of the three factors of military capability; the opinion, resolve, and unity of the public; and the skill of the small state’s leaders. Each factor has significant impact on the others.

### *Systemic Level*

#### *Geostrategic Location*

The physical and political landscape of a small state’s region is key to its ability to stay out of wars because it shapes both the perceived value for large states of attacking the small state and the small state’s means to attempt to forestall such an event. Indeed, according to Efraim Karsh, “geo-strategic location is, perhaps, the prime constraint on a state’s survival.” For example, a state that is not near any powerful neighbor has better odds of surviving.<sup>1</sup> Its importance is particularly true for weak states because, more than strong ones, a weak state’s prosperity is in the hands of “regional and global processes and foreign actions,”<sup>2</sup> and what those processes and actions are will largely depend on when and where a small state finds itself. Therefore, geostrategic location greatly affects economic ties and military capability, which will be addressed in turn later. If external factors cause a small nation to struggle economically, it will find itself in a hopelessly weak situation at the onset of war. However, even a small state blessed with the geostrategic-given opportunity to flourish in peacetime and therefore to more likely avoid war during wartime might become a wartime target, again depending on geostrategic location. As Stacy Bergstrom Haldi writes, “initial combatants ... [attack neutrals when] they need the neutral territories or assets in that territory to support their primary conflict against the other initial combatant.”<sup>3</sup>

If prized, a small state can conduct a policy of appeasement toward the would-be invader, but again only in certain geostrategic locations. There must be one dominant state. Sweden made this work even when, after April 1940 until near the end of World War II, Nazi Germany was the only relevant power in the region. The Swedes granted the Nazis transit rights and iron ore, eliminating short-term incentives for an invasion.<sup>4</sup> So long as others continued the war<sup>5</sup> and it had one clear hegemon, Sweden could accord all the favors necessary to dissuade invasion, even with such a predatory state. Where a rough balance exists between multiple great powers, however, the small state is in a much more dangerous situation because appeasement is much less feasible; the Scandinavian countries faced such a scenario in April 1940, ending in the invasion of Norway and Denmark.<sup>6</sup> Karsh calls a small state caught between multiple great powers a “buffer state.” The buffer state becomes a point of tension, for each strong neighbor always has an incentive to seize it to deny it from the rival.<sup>7</sup>

#### *How Wars Are Fought*

Another variable that impacts the ability of small neutrals is how wars are fought, for small neutrals in different places and times may have more or less difficulty compared to large states fulfilling the requirements specific to that place and time for preparing to wage war effectively. This variable therefore primarily affects another variable: military capability. An increased level of technology being used in a war means less relative power for small states<sup>8</sup> and therefore less of a say about whether to stay out of a war, and the same goes for increased “totality” of war. Maartje

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1 Efraim Karsh, *Neutrality and Small States* (New York: Routledge, 2011 (originally published in 1988)), p. 81.

2 Baldur Thorhallson, “Studying Small States: A Review,” *Small States and Territories* 1:1 (2018): p. 22.

3 Stacy Bergstrom Haldi, *Why Wars Widen: A Theory of Predation and Balancing* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), p. 8.

4 Karsh, p. 100.

5 Michael Palo, *Neutrality as a Policy Choice for Small/Weak Democracies: Learning from the Belgian Experience* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2019), p. 124.

6 Karsh, pp. 99-103.

7 Ibid., pp. 82-83.

8 Robert Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics,” *International Organization* 23:2 (1969): p. 298.

Abbenhuis demonstrates this through the severe decline over the course of World War I of the Dutch military's armament compared to that of both belligerent sides. The Netherlands was too weak industrially to produce and too weak financially to purchase enough of the latest war materiel.<sup>9</sup> The Dutch army therefore became less of a deterrent, leaving the Netherlands with a lower capability to avoid war.

The effect of the "totality" of war is addressed by Haldi, who suggests that great powers widened wars more often in the 1700s than later periods, when and because the political costs of going to war were lower.<sup>10</sup> Haldi defines political costs as the cost of losing a war,<sup>11</sup> so the more decisive nature of and increased state mobilization required in Napoleonic era warfare signaled a decrease in the number of wars, especially predatory wars, that great powers initiated.<sup>12</sup>

The natural extension of this finding to small states, when combined with the effect of technology, is that large states should comport themselves with ever more impunity toward small states. If one accepts Haldi's viewpoint, what holds states back from aggression is the costs of losing; as technology increases, the gap between the weak and the powerful increases, making small states more unable to deter expected increased aggression from the powerful. Thus, how wars are fought affects the variable of military capability relative to powerful states, and different time periods will present different chances for a weak state to fend off war.

#### Policy Toward Alliances

The policy of a small state toward alliances determines whether the state will enter a war necessarily or will have at least a chance of staying out of the war, because if a state chooses to make an alliance during wartime, it will have failed at keeping out of the war. For this reason, one must have a grasp of what incentivizes them to take or not take such a step. Many scholars believe that the inherent vulnerability of small states should compel them to survive through the pursuit of alliances,<sup>13</sup> but this article is concerned with those who decide instead to stay neutral. In the most difficult position, as a buffer state, the options for alliances are limited. As Michael Palo explains regarding Belgium in 1870, Belgium could "balance" or "bandwagon," but either only at great risk. Often, including during that war, mainstream expectations of a war's victor prove incorrect, and the small state's fate would be tied to the side it chose.<sup>14</sup> However, if the small state does not commit to a side, if invaded nevertheless, it will be no more reliant on the success of its resultant new powerful ally than if it had chosen one; if it is not invaded, it has just avoided war. Therefore, neutrality is a solution for buffer states.

#### *Dyadic Level*

##### Prestige

The prestige of a small neutral state in the eyes of a larger neighbor is critical, because for the powerful countries to decide that respecting a small country's neutrality is in their best interest, they must believe both in the small country's evenhandedness and in its value in its neutral status. Large states therefore judge every action of small states, meaning that small states' abilities to convince larger states of their honest commitment to neutrality remain an important factor in their abilities to dodge unwanted wars. For example, involvement in international organizations might help small states create their desired images "as neutral, trustworthy, honest, compliant, and useful brokers and contributors,"<sup>15</sup> but involvement in regional organizations can have the opposite effect, as with Austria in the eyes of the USSR, when the former was considering entering the European Economic Community.<sup>16</sup>

9 Maartje Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral: The Netherlands in the First World War, 1914-1918* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 197-198.

10 Haldi, pp. 2-4.

11 Ibid., p. 13.

12 Ibid., pp. 5, 8.

13 Thorhallsen, p. 20.

14 Palo, p. 28.

15 Thorhallsen, p. 21.

16 Karsh, pp. 121-122, 126-127.

The fact that Sweden, Switzerland, and Spain forfeited much of their credibility as neutral states to accede to Nazi demands in World War II<sup>17</sup> does not speak against the validity of prestige as a factor; none did so while a buffer state. The buffer state is most likely to try to enhance its prestige precisely because it does not have the surer methods of ensuring peace for itself that a state near only one great power has.

#### *Economic Ties*

How a small state constructs economic ties with other countries helps dictate whether it can stay out of a war because it may give one party some power over the other. When there is only one major power nearby, a small state can use its economic assets to help escape direct involvement in a war, as in the World War II Swedish case shown earlier. However, Sweden could only hand over its iron ore to the Nazis, thereby successfully appeasing them, when the British were no longer near.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, in certain situations, even buffer states' economic ties can influence their chances at avoiding war, if more precariously. As Abbenhuis shows, owing to the status of the Netherlands as a neutral in World War I, Dutch ports provided Germany a key lifeline into the North Atlantic trade network through an otherwise efficacious British blockade.<sup>19</sup> The Netherlands was a bottleneck through which much trade that Germany depended upon came; Britain would have blockaded it, too, and cut off the bottleneck had Germany taken those ports for itself. However, there was a cost to Dutch power over Germany. The Allies were seizing Dutch ships by March 1918.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Monadic Level*

##### *Military Capability*

The military capability of a small neutral state in comparison to that of large states is important because the relationship of force determines how much the small neutral can make its invasion undesirable. Thus, the job of a small neutral state's military is to communicate to a belligerent that it would suffer costs for violating neutrality disproportionate to any likely gains.<sup>21</sup> For example, the Germans' original Schlieffen Plan included an invasion of the Netherlands, but the Dutch army comprised 200,000 soldiers, a fact that in the end prompted that part of the Schlieffen Plan to be canceled.<sup>22</sup> In the lead-up to World War I, the Dutch military overcame the challenge posed by the Netherlands' geostrategic location, which was tempting to possible invaders.<sup>23</sup> The Netherlands did not have to deter the entire German army, only enough to make the expected cost too high for the expected benefit.

##### *Public*

The public is also a major consideration in leading to war or peace for small neutrals because how the public acts or is prepared to act can either improve or impair the favorability for the small neutral of the status of many of the other factors. Moreover, "the public" need not necessarily mean the majority. For example, many ordinary Dutch people hurt the credibility of their country's neutrality by smuggling goods illegally during World War I.<sup>24</sup> In order to prevent the activity from going too far, the military was used to limit the freedoms of speech, movement, and assembly, inflicting real harm on its capability for deterrence.<sup>25</sup> Without the military focused on defense, the military capability of the Netherlands decreased. The Netherlands became more vulnerable to violations of neutrality, as demonstrated above with the Allied seizure of Dutch ships near the end of the war.

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17 Ibid., pp. 43-44.

18 Ibid., p. 100.

19 Abbenhuis, p. 32.

20 Ibid., p. 261.

21 Karsh, pp. 33, 64.

22 Abbenhuis, pp. 31-32.

23 Ibid., p. 25.

24 Ibid., p. 266.

25 Ibid., p. 175.

### Small State Leadership

How a small neutral state's government handles these variables is in itself a factor in whether the country becomes embroiled in a wider war because, as seen within discussion of the other variables, although a small state cannot completely determine any of the other variables, it can influence most; it could help or harm its chances of remaining out of the war by how adroitly it uses what influence it has to advance its wish to remain neutral. Because the other variables determining war and peace are dependent on specific details and the complex interaction thereof, the small neutral's interpretation of the situation can vary. Because the small neutral can affect the other factors, that variance matters. As Karsh concludes about the neutrals of World War II, "those states that read the map of environmental constraints and limitations well, and skillfully relied on the component, or combination of components, best suited to the circumstances, succeeded in maintaining their neutrality, while the less adept states were dragged into the war against their will."<sup>26</sup>

### **Pushing Forward the Literature on "Small Neutral" Scholarship:**

#### **A Ninth Variable: Judgment Skills of Large State Leadership**

Put together, existing scholarship on this subject has pointed toward eight independent variables that affect a dependent variable, the variability between war and peace in the above-mentioned circumstances. However, just as most scholars seem to consider events exclusively from large states' perspectives, the smattering of small state scholars seem to do so only from that of small states. For small state scholars, this may make some sense if the goal is to develop prescriptive policy measures. If the small state can incentivize the large state, the small state should be able to manipulate the large state's behavior. However, this article intends to formulate a description of the forces that threaten to drag small states into larger wars, whether the small states can do anything about those forces or not; according to Aviv Shoham, administrators do not make completely rational decisions, but bounded rational decisions. There are too many variables and uncertainties in the international environment for someone to take everything into account.<sup>27</sup> Although he speaks about firms, the same logic applies to international politics. Different actors will act differently given the same set of circumstances, thereby reducing predictability.

Recognizing this, some scholars have begun grappling with the ways in which different leaders in powerful states might bring about different international outcomes. Elizabeth Saunders does so by considering their causal beliefs about threat.<sup>28</sup> This article does so by considering the accuracy with which they perceive their situation. The skill of the decision-makers in large states at assessing their situation with regard to small states will affect the small states' chances of avoiding war. After all, the actions of the weak can increase or decrease the odds of the strong deciding to destroy it, but ultimately, the decision does rest with the strong. The individuals in power in the powerful state and the aggregation of each of their skills at situational appraisal determines the weak state's fate. For example, an invasion of a neutral that is clearly beneficial for a large state in the short term would not occur with a statesman who foresees high costs further down the road. A less skilled one, even one understanding immediate costs and benefits, just not the later consequences, would drag the neutral into the war even though that would eventually harm their own nation. Of course, the situation could be reversed, in which case it would be the more skilled statesman who would violate the neutrality of the small state. The point is that in any case, decision-makers in powerful states with different skills make different decisions, which can determine if a weak state remains out of a war or not.

Therefore, whereas, as shown at the end of this article's literature review, Karsh claims that war or peace for a small neutral state depends on the skill of its government in assessing what the situation calls for, this article argues that the same is true for potential violators of those neutrals, the large states. This article proposes a ninth independent variable based on what is missing in the other eight—namely, the judgmental skill of the leadership in the large countries.

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26 Karsh, p. 33.

27 Aviv Shoham, "Bounded Rationality, Planning, Standardization of International Strategy, and Export Performance: A Structural Model Explanation," *Journal of International Marketing* 7:2 (1999): pp. 30-31.

28 Elizabeth Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security* 34:2 (2009): pp. 119-161.

### Summary of Variables

	Systemic Level of Analysis	Dyadic Level of Analysis	Monadic Level of Analysis
Small State Has Some Degree of Control	-policy toward alliances	-prestige -economic ties	-military capability -the public -small state's leadership skill
Small State Has No Control	-geostrategic location -how wars are fought		-large state's leadership skill

### Working Definitions

#### Neutrality

Neutrality can mean simply not choosing a side in a conflict, but in this article, it refers to a deliberate policy to “not permit its territory to be used for war purposes.”<sup>29</sup> As shown in the literature review, however, the most successful neutrals in practice know when to compromise their own impartiality. There are different levels of transgression.

#### Small/Weak and Large/Powerful/Strong

Some scholars of civil conflict construe the adjectives “weak” and “strong” as useful descriptors of the clout that a government has within its own borders.<sup>30</sup> However, I use those terms in the sense of being “weak” or “strong” externally. In this article, they are predominantly synonymous with “small” and “large,” respectively. There is great dispute among small state scholars over the use of “small,”<sup>31</sup> but Karsh’s emphasis on smallness, which he says is simply limited power, limited means,<sup>32</sup> is best. It allows that a tiny state would act “smaller,” more characteristically “small,” than a state with slightly-below-average power, which would act “smaller” than an average-strength state, and so on.

#### Judgmental/Leadership Skill

More “skilled” leaders’ estimations of the short- and long-term costs and benefits of a given action for their nation will be nearer to the real-world costs and benefits than those of less “skilled” ones. However, the scholar, too, does not have complete information, so this attribute is not without subjectivity.

### Case Studies

The variables’ dependence on particulars creates a problem with a theoretical approach to studying this topic. One can only properly evaluate it when dealing with details. Therefore, this article will investigate it by examining actual events in two specific cases.

In 1870, a German coalition fought France, and in 1914, a united Germany fought France again but this time sent its armies through neutral Belgium. In both years, a treaty should have obligated both sides to honor Belgium’s neutrality, and any potential violator of the treaty would have had to consider seriously whether the geographical military advantage of cutting through Belgium would outweigh having to contend with the additional enemy of Belgium, more territory to occupy, and international condemnation, if not intervention, particularly by Britain. Indeed, at first sight, nothing much seems to have changed but the outcomes. Therein, however, lies the key to these kinds of spillovers. The fact that so many variables were held constant between these two cases means that the

29 Palo, p. 5.

30 Ann Hironaka, *Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 2.

31 Thorhallen, pp. 18-20.

32 Karsh, p. 4.

scholar has a better prospect to tease out which factors likely determined war or peace; the critical components are more isolated and easier to discern. Obviously, not all of the relevant factors remain identical, but one can minimize the effect of confounding variables by choosing cases in which their effect is less pronounced. Moreover, Belgium's status as a buffer state between the two major powers of France and Germany both times offers the worst-case scenario for a weak state. It twice faced the greatest test a small state can, succeeding once, failing the second time. This article's hypothesis would predict that an alteration in the quality of leadership of the belligerents would help explain the change in outcome for Belgium. By analyzing the decisions of the leadership of the belligerents in 1870 and 1914, the role of the quality of their leadership will be ascertained.

### **Case Study #1: Large State Leadership Concerning Belgium in 1870**

#### French Leadership

Historians disagree whether Emperor Napoleon III expressly stated an interest for Belgium,<sup>33</sup> but given that Belgium lay within the "natural borders of France" in the minds of the Frenchmen of the day<sup>34</sup> and Napoleon's disdain for neutrality evinced by his public desire to annex neutral Luxembourg,<sup>35</sup> Napoleon doubtless would have invaded Belgium if he deemed it convenient. Indeed, although attacking through Belgium would have been risky,<sup>36</sup> an invasion route through the neutral states neighboring France could have also been highly lucrative.<sup>37</sup>

Certainly, even well into the war, the British feared that "the French wolf" would strike "the Belgian lamb."<sup>38</sup> On July 31, 1870, British Foreign Secretary Lord Granville wrote to King Leopold II of Belgium that a renewal of the 1839 treaty guaranteeing Belgian neutrality had been sent to France and Prussia,<sup>39</sup> part of a British policy telling the belligerents outright that it would support the opposing side if one side disregarded the 1839 treaty.<sup>40</sup> This aligned with Britain's general aim dating to the 16th century to keep the Low Countries free from the other major powers.<sup>41</sup> However, the date suggests that Britain only issued its official position two weeks after the beginning of the war, which a risk-acceptant France could have rendered too late by an immediate invasion. Britain aside though, Belgium's army amounted to 100,000 (unconcentrated) soldiers on article (of which 83,350 would be successfully mobilized),<sup>42</sup> not insignificant considering Napoleon had 100,000 at the decisive Battle of Sedan.<sup>43</sup>

However, despite the incentives for Napoleon to not invade Belgium unless willing to assume massive risk, these appear not to be the most important reasons he did not invade Belgium. Unlike his uncle, this Napoleon was well known for a lack of military prowess.<sup>44</sup> He did not have an alternate strategy. He did not really choose *any* strategy.<sup>45</sup> He saw that he was at war with Prussia, so he moved toward the border with Prussia. In short, Napoleon could not plan to invade Belgium because he did not have a plan.

33 Alan Strauss-Schom, *The Shadow Emperor: A Biography of Napoleon III* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), p. 365; Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 21.

34 Peter Sahlins, "Natural Frontiers Revisited: France's Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century," *American Historical Review* 95:5 (1990): p. 1,423.

35 Strauss-Schom, p. 364.

36 Barthélemy-Edmond Palat, *La Stratégie de Moltke en 1870* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1907), p. 30.

37 Wawro, p. 66.

38 "House of Commons Debate August 10, 1870," Vol. 203 cc1776-1792.

39 Robert Demoulin, "Documents inédits sur la crise internationale de 1870," *Bulletin de la Commission royale d'Histoire* 122:1 (1957): pp. 160-161.

40 "House of Commons Debate August 10, 1870."

41 Robert Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 893.

42 Christophe Bêchet, "Les Perceurs de Sedan," *Journal of Belgian History* 46:2 (2016): pp. 73, 86.

43 Wawro, p. 228.

44 Strauss-Schom, p. 247.

45 Wawro, p. 72.

### *Prussian-German Leadership*

Although in theory only a simple minister serving at the pleasure of the Prussian king, “[Otto von] Bismarck commanded those around him by the sheer power of his personality,”<sup>46</sup> which allowed the master diplomat to dominate his king and Europe for more than a quarter century.<sup>47</sup> Since, as Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow write, “where you stand is where you sit,”<sup>48</sup> meaning that one’s office often corresponds with what one deems most meaningful, Bismarck tended to regard diplomatic considerations such as likely British reactions highly. Consequently, when the army’s Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke was planning his invasion of France, Moltke noted that “the neutrality of Belgium, Holland, and Switzerland limits the theater of war to the space between Luxembourg and Basel.”<sup>49</sup> He had accepted certain parameters out of political necessity and planned accordingly. This was not that large a leap, though. Moltke’s ultimate goal, the encirclement of the French, was possible with the deployment of his armies along only a fraction of the length of the border between the German states and France.<sup>50</sup> Another incentive to leave Belgium alone was that, as a bonus to the Germans (as well as the French) for respecting its neutrality, Belgium provided them with the standard perks, such as caring for both sides’ wounded.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the leadership of both sides had decided not to trespass on neutral territory. Nevertheless, neutral territory was violated. The worst case occurred after the Battle of Sedan, when at least 5,000 defeated French soldiers fled across the nearby Belgian border largely unhindered by Belgian soldiers and customs officials, returning to France to fight another day.<sup>52</sup> Despite previous and subsequent threats,<sup>53</sup> the incident ended before Bismarck could have acted, so he accepted the sunk cost and did not invade.

From that point on in the war, the Germans held the preponderance of might in the field, so Belgium was temporarily no longer a buffer state. It successfully remained out of the war for the duration.

### **Case Study #2: Large State Leadership Concerning Belgium in 1914**

#### *French Leadership*

According to Plan XVII, the French were to attack Germany along the common border,<sup>54</sup> though this time not through lack of reflection about attacking Belgium, something Chief of Staff Joseph Joffre deemed would have been of “the greatest interest” “if only military considerations count.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, one deduces, the Belgian armed forces were not sufficient to deter France from attacking. Indeed, the size of the army that Belgium could field had only grown to 117,000 by 1914.<sup>56</sup> However, “Hard experience with two Bonapartist empires had made republican France wary of placing too much authority over strategy in the hands of the military,”<sup>57</sup> so although communication between civilian and military leadership was often lacking,<sup>58</sup> Joffre adapted when President Raymond Poincaré forbade him from planning a first strike on Belgium because of political risks with Britain.<sup>59</sup> Poincaré judged correctly. Within the British cabinet in 1914, “most were willing to consider it [intervention on the side of France]

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46 Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 3.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

48 Jack Levy and William Thompson, *Causes of War* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2010), p. 164.

49 Palat, p. 45.

50 Wawro, pp. 80-81.

51 Bêchet, p. 73.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

53 Wawro, p. 211; Bêchet, p. 90.

54 Samuel Williamson, “Joffre Reshapes French Strategy 1911-1913,” in Paul Kennedy ed., *The War Plans of the Great Powers 1880-1914* (Winchester, MA: George Allen & Union Publishers, 1979), pp. 147-148.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

56 John Simkin, “Armies 1914,” Spartacus Educational, updated January 2020.

57 G.J. Meyer, *A World Undone: The Story of the Great War* (New York: Random House, 2006), p. 109.

58 Williamson, p. 136.

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

only if Belgian neutrality were threatened [by Germany.]”<sup>60</sup>

Still, France’s calculus could have changed. Intelligence revealed the Germans would invade Belgium in a war<sup>61</sup> and hinted they may do so on a massive scale.<sup>62</sup> Yet, Joffre had ruled out using his reserves on the frontlines, so he could not fathom that the Germans might, which would allow them enough soldiers to both defend their border and initiate a large-scale invasion of Belgium.<sup>63</sup> Joffre’s predecessor, Victor Michel, had foreseen German plans and even contemplated a French offensive into northern Belgium as a preemptive riposte, but he was ousted.<sup>64</sup> Since Joffre’s assessment, not Michel’s, was followed, France did not invade Belgium.

#### *German Leadership*

After “Bismarck’s strong hand and towering intellect” left the scene in Germany, the system of government he had established no longer worked properly.<sup>65</sup> With a new, incompetent Kaiser,<sup>66</sup> and without the republican emphasis on civilian leadership of France or the iron will of Bismarck, Bismarck’s successors failed to handle Moltke’s successors. The politicians knew well before the war of the prospective invasion of neutral Belgium as enshrined in the Schlieffen Plan,<sup>67</sup> but they did not demand revisions as Poincaré had with Joffre. By 1914, British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey observed that “there are forces other than [Chancellor Theobald von] Bethmann-Hollweg in the seat of authority in Germany.”<sup>68</sup>

In the army, whereas Moltke the Elder had incorporated political factors into his calculations and constructed plans to match Bismarck’s policies,<sup>69</sup> Alfred von Schlieffen saw in the Battle of Cannae, says John Keegan, “the pure essence of generalship, untainted by politics, logistics, technology, or the psychology of combat.”<sup>70</sup> He deliberately did not consider variables he should have, and he thought that he was better for it. In reaction to Germany’s new footing that France’s new border fortifications and rapprochement with Russia heralded in, Moltke had abandoned hope of a quick victory in a future war,<sup>71</sup> but Schlieffen adjudged a two-front war an unacceptable outcome and began to accept enormous risks to eliminate it.

Schlieffen reckoned on one front at a time if he defeated France in six weeks, swinging his army east in time to meet the slow-moving Russians.<sup>72</sup> With the east wide open to the Russians though, no delay was permissible. To accommodate his timetable and the space required by the 1914 army “six times larger” than 1870,<sup>73</sup> he would invade Belgium and bypass the French fortifications.<sup>74</sup> As for possible British intervention, Schlieffen’s successor, Moltke the Younger, proclaimed “the more English the better” because then they would be swept away with the supposedly inevitable defeat of the French.<sup>75</sup>

Moltke the Younger could have renounced the Schlieffen Plan, which Schlieffen himself acknowledged was risky.<sup>76</sup>

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60 Massie, p. 897.

61 Williamson, p. 134.

62 Ibid., pp. 144-145.

63 Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August: The Outbreak of World War I* (New York: Presidio Press, 2004 (originally published in 1962)), p. 43.

64 John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 38.

65 Meyer, p. 110.

66 Keegan, p. 47.

67 L.C.F. Turner, “The Significance of the Schlieffen Plan,” in *The War Plans of the Great Powers 1880-1914*, p. 207.

68 Massie, p. 894.

69 Turner, p. 200.

70 Keegan, pp. 31-32.

71 Turner, p. 200.

72 Tuchman, p. 23.

73 Ibid., p. 24.

74 Turner, p. 201.

75 Massie, p. 896.

76 Meyer, p. 111.

Moltke the Younger even believed secretly that any war would be long,<sup>77</sup> yet still he accepted this plan dependent on a short war. Furthermore, until 1913, Germany had other plans, but Moltke actually scrapped them!<sup>78</sup> Now, the violation of Belgian neutrality was a certainty, the only plan.

### *Synthesis*

As shown in the two case studies above, between 1870 and 1914, four variables' changes were significant to the change in outcome of war or peace for Belgium. Belgium's geostrategic location worsened because of France's new fortifications and alliance with Russia; how wars were fought worsened for Belgium because of the space needed for the new scale of armies; Belgium's relative military capability worsened because the size of German armies against France increased six times while Belgium's did by less than one and a half. Thus, no matter the leaders in 1914 Germany, Belgium would have been a more tempting target than in 1870.

Nevertheless, the results of the study also seem to validate this article's hypothesis. In 1870, under Napoleon, impulsively, France forwent serious plans; in 1870, under Bismarck and Moltke the Elder, the Germans considered their war already winnable enough on French soil; in 1914, under politicians like Poincaré, France hoped for British support; in 1914, the weakness of German politicians like Bethmann-Hollweg and narrow minds of generals like Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger dragged neutral Belgium into World War I. In each situation, the most measured decision for the large states appears to have been to not interfere with Belgium, so Belgium's government did about as well as it could. In one case, though, to Belgium's great misfortune, the relevant people of a powerful neighbor misjudged.

### **Conclusion**

Small neutral states are sometimes thrust into wars they do not want to fight, and sometimes they manage to avoid the wars. Scholars have made steps toward discovering the reasons for the variance in war and peace, but have not achieved a satisfactory explanation. This article endeavors to tie together the strands into a cohesive description of the forces at work.

After specifying eight distinct such forces through an examination of the literature, the article goes on to describe the cases and definitions used. The existence of a ninth force is posited. Then, the cases are investigated.

As shown in the two case studies above, leadership ability in the large states, the ninth force, matters. It takes its place next to the other eight. Many moving parts working simultaneously in conjunction and against one another settle the question of war or peace for a small neutral state. The statuses of and interactions among the factors of geostrategic location, how wars are fought in the given time period and region, policy toward alliances, prestige, economic ties, military capability, the public, and the situational assessment skills of both the small and large states all come together to determine whether or not a small neutral state is dragged into a war between warring major powers.

New questions now arise. How much does the judgmental skill of large-state leaders with regard to potential actions toward small states compare with that of those same people toward whom they presumably usually focus, other large states? How can judgmental skill be better measured in the first place? Which factors will tend to play the largest roles for peace or war? Much remains to be investigated about the fates of small neutral states during wider wars.

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77 Ibid., p. 107.

78 Ibid., p. 113.