

# Chain-Ganging and the Outbreak of World War I: Causation or Coincidence?

Written by Ashleigh Croucher

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Chain-Ganging and the Outbreak of World War I: Causation or Coincidence?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/05/chain-ganging-and-the-outbreak-of-world-war-i-causation-or-coincidence/>

ASHLEIGH CROUCHER, OCT 5 2013

There are a range of theories attributed to explaining the outbreak of World War I, with 'chain-ganging' being the most prominent. Realist scholars, such as Waltz, Christensen and Snyder, have argued that in a multipolar world, the outbreak of war can be explained by chain-ganging. This essay will examine what chain-ganging is, survey the limitations of this argument, and analyse to what extent chain-ganging contributed to the outbreak of WWI. This essay will argue that, whilst chain-ganging is a facet of the outbreak of WWI, it is not the only explanation. Chain-ganging spread what was a localized issue internationally, extending the reach of war, however was not the primary cause of war in Europe. Combined with other factors including the rise and fall of powers in the international system, chain-ganging can explain aspects of the outbreak of the First World War, however not to the extent that Waltz, Christensen and Snyder have asserted.

Kenneth Waltz asserts that, due to the inherent instability within multipolar systems, there is a need for states to engage in efficient balancing behaviour. This however, is impeded by two 'pathological dynamics', which are often termed 'buck-passing' and 'chain-ganging'. 'Buck-passing' refers to where states rely on one another to bear the burden of 'checking' the rising power; in this 'under-balancing', the rising hegemon remains unchallenged, which, as Schweller (2006) argues, increases the chance of a later, more costly war, such as with Germany in the 1930s. Chain-ganging, by contrast, is a form of 'over-balancing', where states unconditionally support their allies. In this sense, a state's security is interwoven with the security of its alliance partners, caused by a relative equality in power between states in a multipolar system. Chain-ganging theory is underpinned by a neo-realist approach, which assumes, in an alliance, that there will be a hawk and a dove. This simplistic dichotomy argues that a hawk has a broader interest in war, whilst a dove has a broader interest in peace, with the distinguishing factor being their narrow interest in ensuring an ally does not defect or be defeated. Chain-ganging theory asserts that the dove's interest in its allies' survival can trump its broader interest in peace. Tierney (2011:286) explains the dynamics between the dove and hawk:

"the dove is unable to restrain the aggressive hawk by threatening to sit out a future conflict because the defection or defeat of the hawk would cripple its own security. The hawk recognizes this dynamic, concludes that its partner will fight in wartime, and acts in a reckless manner. The dove then reluctantly follows the hawk over the cliff's edge."

Like a chain gang bound together at the ankle, when one state marches to war, everyone in the alliance marches to war (Waltz 1979:165-170). However, Waltz's argument (that these pathologies do not occur in a unipolar or bipolar world, as great powers need not rely on their allies to ensure security) has one major flaw: if these two opposite pathologies of under- and over-balancing both result from multipolarity, when does buck-passing, rather than chain-ganging, occur? Christensen and Snyder (1990) argue that, the solution to this indeterminacy is that, while buck-passing is initiated by an actual or perceived advantage for the defender, chain-ganging occurs when an offensive is viewed as advantageous. When defence is (or is perceived to be) superior, states will act complacently in regards to rising powers, and, rather than balancing power themselves, they 'pass the buck' to other potential balancers. When the offence, however, is considered to be advantageous, countries tend to feel more unprotected, and as a result 'chain-gang' themselves in tight alliances, by committing "themselves unconditionally to reckless allies whose survival is seen to be indispensable." (Christensen and Snyder 1990:138) Furthermore, according to Glenn Snyder

# Chain-Ganging and the Outbreak of World War I: Causation or Coincidence?

Written by Ashleigh Croucher

(1997), tight alliances can cause a state to become 'entrapped', which leaves them susceptible to chain-ganging behaviour, in which there is a high degree of commitment in the form of either promises or interests. This is a point of contention amongst realist scholars; the causes of 'tight' alliances and subsequent chain-ganging behaviour are not static. Waltz asserts that chain-ganging is caused by the equality of power in a multipolar system; combined with the 'independent variable' of anarchy, states 'chain-gang' themselves to reckless allies in pursuit of stability and security; whereas Christensen and Snyder assert the role of perceived offensive advantage as the key causal factor. Glenn Snyder, by contrast, argues that chain-ganging is caused by a range of factors, namely, the anarchic nature of the international system, balanced alliances, and multipolarity. Where the loss of an ally is perceived as detrimental to a state's security, states provide unconditional commitments; thus causing this 'chain-ganging' behaviour (1997:343).

As stated above, realists such as Kenneth Waltz, Jack Snyder, Thomas Christensen and Glenn Snyder have asserted that in multipolar systems (which realists argue are the least stable), there is a fear within states that an ally will defect or be defeated, which in turn, draws other states in the alliance into wars against their direct national interest. As Christensen and Snyder summarise (1990:141), when "one member of the chain gang stumbles off the precipice, the other must follow."

For Snyder (1997:4), an alliance is a "formal association of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, in specified circumstances, against states outside their own membership". The various commitments of an alliance can include consultation between states, neutrality, and nonaggression, as well as the provision of either defensive or offensive support, military or otherwise (see Liska 1962; Kegley and Raymond 1990:52). Furthermore, there are 'tight' alliances, which highlights the concept of chain-ganging. These 'tight' alliances are characterised by the highly polarized nature of the groupings of states; there are numerous linkages *within* each coalition, however there are relatively few linkages *between* coalitions. Loose alliances, by contrast, exhibit shifting coalitions of states and strong linkages within *and* between coalitions. This distinction between different types of alliances is crucial. A loose alliance is more prevalent within a multipolar system, which, as realists argue, threatens stability in the international system, and is more susceptible to 'buck-passing'. On the other hand, tight alliances are more susceptible to chain-ganging.

The outbreak of WWI provides a useful test of chain-ganging theory, as it has "come to define, or at least to exemplify, a concept of theoretical outcome", in this case, chain-ganging (Gerring 2001:219). However, to examine just the events in 1914 would cause analytical limitations, and as a result, one must consider other events and alliance patterns prior to 1914. Of particular relevance when examining the extent to which chain-ganging contributed to the outbreak of war, are the alliance politics that were seen in the alliances between Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire (the Central Powers, formed in 1879), and between France and Russia (the Entente, formed in 1893). These two coalitions represented what Waltz would define 'tight' alliances, characterised by polarized groupings of states where alliance linkages lay primarily within the partnership. Realists have argued that WWI is the ultimate case of chain-ganging: it was the product of a spiral effect caused by chain-ganging. Prior to the outbreak of war, there was a fear that an ally would either be defeated or defect, and cause a state to make unconditional commitments. This resulted in the participation in a war that was against their broader interests. As Waltz (1979:167) summarises,

"if Austria-Hungary marched, Germany had to follow: the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire would have left Germany alone in the middle of Europe. If France marched, Russia had to follow; a German victory over France would be a defeat for Russia. And so it was all around the vicious circle."

Christensen and Snyder (1990:139-156) make a similar argument to Waltz regarding the perceived 'military edge' for the attacker. They argue that states were committed to "unconditional alliances and immediate offensives in the event of war, with little regard to the circumstances." The result was that, "the perceptions of offensive military advantages gave rise to alliance chain-ganging before 1914." As Christensen (1997:67) argued in his later work: "in 1914, when Austria mobilized for war, so did Germany. When Russia mobilized for war, so did France", echoing Waltz's claims of 'marching to war'.

Glenn Snyder offers a similar interpretation, focusing on the Great Powers. For them:

# Chain-Ganging and the Outbreak of World War I: Causation or Coincidence?

Written by Ashleigh Croucher

“the risk of alienating their allies overbalanced the possible success in restraining them. Losing allies was the worst case; war was only second worst; the fear of abandonment trumped the risk of entrapment.”

The result was that “chain-ganging was the rule in the pre-1914 period” (1997:328, 344). Crawford (2003:82) also accepts the chain-ganging explanation of WWI, arguing that France and Germany “were unable to control their allies ... although both threatened to do so, neither felt they could abandon their allies without writing their own death warrant in the long run.” The *Times* in April 1914 summarized the tight alliances in Europe:

“to secure the support of the other members of their own group and to induce them to share the responsibility and risks of...conflict, any Power or Powers which may meditate recourse to arms must first satisfy those other members that the quarrel is necessary and just. They are no longer unfettered judges in their own cause, answerable to none but themselves” (quoted in Joll 1984:37).

However, if bargaining within the coalitions were characterized by restraint, not chain-ganging, then the realist argument that chain-ganging was directly causational to the outbreak of war comes under scrutiny. The war began due to the coordinated aggression by Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empires, not chain-ganging. Within the literature (see Fischer 1967; Lieber 2007; Snyder and Lieber 2008), there has been a shift towards a favouring of the explanation that Austria-Hungary and Germany caused the conflict, intentionally unleashing war. As Hamilton and Herwig (2003:47) conclude, “in July 1914 Austria-Hungary’s leaders were the first to opt for war, and they did so with plan and foresight.”

There were a range of factors contributing to the outbreak of WWI: the rise and fall of great powers, nationalism and aggression from various actors, and whilst chain-ganging was an aspect of the outbreak of war, it was not a key factor. It contributed to the geographical spread of war, however, it did not cause the violence in the first place. Furthermore, the literature surrounding chain-ganging has several key limitations, namely the lack of prediction as to *when* chain-ganging, as opposed to buck-passing, will occur.

## Bibliography

Christensen, Thomas J., and Jack Snyder. (1990) ‘Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,’ *International Organization* 44 (2): 137–168.

Crawford, Timothy W. (2003) *Pivotal Deterrence: Third Party Statecraft and the Pursuit of Peace*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Fischer, Fritz. (1967) *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Gerring, John. (2001) *Social Science Methodology: A Critical Framework*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Hamilton, Richard F., and Holger H. Herwig, eds. (2003) *Decisions for War, 1914–1917*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Joll, James. (1984) *The Origins of the First World War*. London: Longman.

Kegley, Charles W., and Gregory Raymond. (1990) *When Trust Breaks Down: Alliance Norms and World Politics*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

Lieber, Keir A. (2007) ‘The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory,’ *International Security* 32 (2): 155–191.

Liska, George. (1962) *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press.

# Chain-Ganging and the Outbreak of World War I: Causation or Coincidence?

Written by Ashleigh Croucher

Schweller, Randall L. (2006) *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Snyder, Glenn. (1997) *Alliance Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Snyder, Jack, and Keir A. Lieber. (2008) 'Correspondence: Defensive Realism and the "New" History of World War I,' *International Security* 33 (1): 174–194.

Tierney, Dominic. (2011) 'Does Chain-Ganging Cause the Outbreak of War?' *International Studies Quarterly* 55, 285-304.

Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

—  
*Written by: Ashleigh Croucher*  
*Written at: University of Queensland*  
*Written for: Dr Andrew Phillips*  
*Date written: September 2011*