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Review of Alexander Lanoszka and Michael Hunzeker's 'Rage of Honor: Entente Indignation and the Lost Chance for Peace in the First World War'

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Scholars have long studied the causes of World War One. More recently, they have focused on events and processes which occurred after the outbreak of hostilities, including military intervention, war fighting strategies, and especially the war’s duration. In particular, research has explored why the Central Powers and the Entente were unable to reach a peace agreement before autumn 1918 given the obvious stalemate on the Western Front after the failure of the Schlieffen Plan in 1914. Alexander Lanoszka and Michel Hunzeker provide the latest entry into this line of enquiry, arguing that British concerns about national honor made a negotiated peace impossible and extended the war until Germany’s ultimate collapse in November 1918.

In making this argument, Lanoszka and Hunzeker push back against existing rationalist explanations of the war’s duration which have focused on the inability of the belligerent powers to credibly commit to a peace agreement. Specifically, Dan Reiter argues that no settlement could have been reached which both secured Germany against future attacks and which was acceptable to the Entente.¹ In short, the Entente could not credibly commit to peace in the future when power had shifted in the Entente’s favor, so Germany sought to achieve an overwhelming victory. Alex Weisiger, while not focusing on World War One in particular, argues that commitment problems are the best explanation of long, severe wars.² The duration of such wars results from states seeking significant shifts in the balance of power to prevent future vulnerability or because they believe a given regime is dispositionally incapable of credibly committing to peace. Finally, H.E. Goemans argues that no settlement could be struck which would both be acceptable to the Entente and produce sufficient gains to satisfy German public opinion, thereby allowing the German regime to stay in power.³

Contrary to these arguments, Lanoszka and Hunzeker argue that considerations of honor prevented the British from even considering German peace overtures in December 1916. Instead, London sought a fight to the finish in order to punish the Germans. Arguments that World War One was fought for reasons of honor are not new. For instance, Avner Offer argues that considerations of honor are crucial for understanding Germany’s willingness to fight in 1914.⁴

¹ Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

² Alex Weisiger, *Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

³ H. E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁴ Avner Offer “Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honor?” *Politics & Society* 23:2 (June 1995).

Lanoszka's and Hunzeker's explanation differs in that it focuses on the continuation of the fighting rather than its outbreak and that it examines British behavior rather than the behavior one of the more militarized continental powers.

The authors build on the notion that individuals will fight and even risk their existence in order to avenge slights to their honor. Furthermore, they argue that honor (or dishonor) can scale up and be associated not only with individuals but also with institutions and states. This means that states, and in particular the leaders of those states, are willing to wage costly wars and even risk the existence of their regimes in order to preserve or recoup their state's honor. The authors also suggest that insults to martial honor require either an acknowledgment of wrongdoing by the party that has slighted one's honor or the punishment of that party if no apology is forthcoming. In other words, in the context of war, honor takes on a constant sum quality and states can uphold their honor only by bringing dishonor upon the other party.

Last, Lanoszka and Hunzeker argue that preventive wars—wars fought because one side believes it is better to fight now before expected changes shift power in favor of its foes—and wars involving territorial occupation are particularly apt to provoke considerations of honor. World War One was certainly a preventive war—Germany feared growing Russian power and decided to fight in 1914 in no small part because of such concerns—and of course the war involved a great deal of territorial occupation. This makes Lanoszka's and Hunzeker's decision to focus on Britain intriguing as the British were not the focus of German preventive motives and no British territory was occupied. Rather they argue that the German occupation of Belgium, whose independence was guaranteed by the British, engaged British conceptions of honor.

The authors provide a variety of evidence that honor was the principal reason Britain continued to fight until the German surrender in 1918. First, Britain did not reduce its war aims in response to negative battlefield information over the course of the war. Such behavior runs counter to most private information explanations of war,⁵ though it would be consistent with explanations based on either honor or commitment problems. Second, Lanoszka and Hunzeker rely heavily on the British government's response to Germany's peace offer in December 1916. They emphasize that Britain never seriously considered the offer. In particular, the British found the offer's tone to be haughty and were upset that the Germans did not assume responsibility for starting the war. Such an emotional response is certainly consistent with the honor hypothesis, especially as the authors argue that the British could have interpreted Berlin's bluster as an attempt to hide the Germans' weakness and satisfy their domestic constituencies. Likewise, the authors argue that

⁵ Most rationalists assume that disagreements stemming from private information cannot endure in intensely fought wars because battles and offers for settlement should quickly reveal information, meaning that private information cannot explain long wars like World War One. For a contrary view see Zachary C. Shirkey, "Uncertainty and War Duration," *International Studies Review* (forthcoming). It argues that private information can explain long wars because new private information is created over the course of wars and because battles do not reveal information about states' abilities to bear costs. The article includes a case study on why states fought in 1918 making it directly relevant to the debate about the causes of World War One's duration.

the offer's extreme vagueness was a result of the Germans' desire to avoid creating divisions within their own alliance rather than an indication that the offer was not serious.

Yet, there also were rational reasons for rejecting the offer out of hand. Like the Germans, the British had to be concerned about domestic audiences and creating divisions within their alliance. Additionally, the current front lines favored the Central Powers—Bucharest had just fallen—and it was believed that the Germans could not be trusted. To favorably respond to such a vague offer would have been risky and could potentially have exposed British weaknesses. If we accept that the Germans' haughty tone could be explained rationally as a way to hide weakness, why cannot London's brusque refusal be seen in the same light?

More importantly, there are significant reasons to doubt the seriousness of the German offer. The Germans had just replaced Gottlieb von Jagow as foreign minister with the more belligerent Arthur Zimmermann, an unusual move prior to a serious peace endeavor. The offer was devoid of specifics not only because of disagreements between Berlin and Vienna, but also because Generals Paul von Hindenberg and Erich Ludendorff had opposed Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg's proposed terms. The generals had also insisted that the peace offer in no way interfere with ongoing military operations or the preparations for the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. In other words, the German government was divided about what, if anything, to offer. Thus, it is not surprising that historians have often concluded that the German peace offer was primarily a ploy to soften the reaction of neutral states to the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare.⁶ Lanoszka and Hunzeker seem to accept at face value Ludendorff's post-war claim that the offer was genuine and that the war continued only because of British intransigence. In other words, while the British refusal to consider the German peace initiative is consistent with the honor thesis, it is also consistent with rationalist explanations as there were sound reasons to not respond to the offer.

What would be convincing and would help sort out honor-based motives from those of commitment problems is evidence of British leaders directly referencing concerns of honor. Lanoszka and Hunzeker provide this in the person of General William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. He made clear and direct references to honor in internal British debates as a reason to continue fighting, and argued that anyone who disagreed would be behaving dishonorably. Yet, it is not clear that his views about honor were representative of those of the British cabinet in general. True, British civilian leaders defended themselves against Robertson's charges of dishonorable behavior, but this does not mean that their motives for wanting to continue the war were in and of themselves about honor. One can want to fight for rational reasons and still rankle at insults.

In sum, it is certainly possible that Lanoszka and Hunzeker are correct that considerations of honor drove the British to fight to the finish after the Western Front became stalemated. Yet they do not conclusively prove their case. While much of the evidence is consistent with the honor

⁶ W. B. Fests, "British War Aims and German Peace Feelers during the First World War (December 1916–November 1918)", *The Historical Journal* 15:2 (June 1972), 298. It can also be seen as a last-ditch effort by Bethmann Hollweg to avoid the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare.

hypothesis, it is also largely consistent with rationalist explanations, especially those rooted in commitment problems.

Frankly, both explanations could be at work. There is no reason to believe all members of the British government reasoned in the same way. It is perfectly consistent to hold that some were concerned with honor while others were motivated by commitment problems. Further, individuals may have multiple motives for their decisions. An individual could favor continued fighting both out of concerns that the other side could not credibly commit and out of a desire to uphold national honor. While such mixed motives are not strictly rational, it is certainly possible for individuals to be simultaneously motivated by both psychologically based and non-psychologically based beliefs. Thus, Lanoszka's and Hunzeker's article is sure to provoke further discussion on states' motives for war in general and World War One in particular, but it does not provide sufficient evidence to end the debate about why states continued to fight in 1917 and 1918.

Zachary C. Shirkey (Ph.D. Columbia 2006) is Associate Professor of Political Science at Hunter College, CUNY. He has written two books on the timing and causes of military intervention, *Is This a Private Fight or Can Anybody Join? The Spread of Interstate War* (Ashgate, 2009) and *Joining the Fray: Military Intervention in Civil Wars* (Ashgate 2012). His current project with Ivan Savic, *State Responses to Threat in the Face of Uncertainty* (Routledge, under contract), focuses on states' alignment decisions when they are faced with potential external threats.