Peace and conflict researchers in the behaviouralist tradition deliberately
stripped conflict of its context in order to analyse its generic features. By
doing so they came up with rich dynamic models of conflict processes.
But real conflicts are shaped by setting as well as by process. We have to
consider not only the process-level dynamics, but also the contextual
factors which exacerbate conflicts or mitigate them. We need to put the
context back into conflict theory, while retaining a theoretical approach
to the relationship between conflict dynamics and the conflict’s environ-
ment. In this chapter I consider how the context shapes the conflict and
vice versa. The aim is to understand how contextual factors condition
the prospects for emergent conflicts and influence whether they escalate
into violence, are peacefully resolved, or lead to other outcomes.

How contexts shape conflicts
All conflicts take place at a certain time in a certain place, and the tem-
poral and spatial context shapes them in specific ways. Considering the
temporal context first, any conflict situation can be related to trends at
various time-scales: very long-term processes (such as a long-term change
in a social or international system), intermediate processes (such as the
formulation of a particular policy by a decision-maker) and short-term
processes (such as decisions). In the case of wars, it is common to distin-
guish underlying or background causes, proximate and trigger causes of
war. The First World War, for example, had as underlying causes the
strength of nationalism in Europe, the competition for power between
large, industrialized, militarized nation-states and the fears and frustrations
that arose from them. The proximate causes were the policies pursued
by the major states in the context of this competition: the German attempt
to gain diplomatic and political influence commensurate with its economic power, the forward Austro-Hungarian policy in the Balkans, the German willingness to support it. The trigger cause was the assassination at Sarajevo. The context for conflict in Europe became more war-prone as the preventive diplomacy of the Concert system broke down, to be replaced first by Bismarck’s relatively stable alliance system and later by the more polarized alliances of the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance. These changes in the European order set the context for conflict, although the intricate moves that led up to the crisis in 1914 created the particular conflict that took place. In contrast, during the earlier Concert period, Europe was relatively free of inter-state conflict. Fear of renewed revolution, a common interest on the part of the major powers in preserving the status quo, and scope for expansion overseas led the major powers to co-operate in settling conflicts and avoiding major wars.

As well as being shaped by the times, conflicts take their character from their spatial and social settings. A conflict system is typically embedded in a surrounding social environment that shapes the conflict in significant ways. First, there may be direct causal influences from the context to the conflict – most obviously, when outsiders stir up a conflict or supply the protagonists with arms. Or factors outside the conflict system may causally affect the conflict, as when a change in the means of production throws class interests into conflict. Second, the context constitutes the conflict system, shaping the actors, influencing their goals, and patterning their relationships. The wider setting influences what the conflictants want, what kind of outcomes they are willing to consider, and what the meaning of the issues at stake are to them. And it sets precedents, creates reputations, and alters pecking orders, influencing that status of the protagonists in the wider society.

Many conflicts are themselves nested within other conflict formations (Dugan 1996). For example, a dispute over wages between a tea plantation owner and a tea picker in Sri Lanka is embedded in a larger conflict formation between landowners and landless peasants, which itself is embedded in the political and economic structures of the global commodity markets, where prices of tea are set in relation to other goods and services. Parties are frequently engaged in more than one conflict, and their choice of actions is not a response to one conflict alone but to their total situation. This was clearly the case in 1914 when a local conflict in Serbia was nested within a wider conflict between the central powers in the Balkans, itself nested within the general competition for power between the European states.

Context is not only reproduced in conflict, but in a sense, is encapsulated in it. Elements of the context may be accessible and open for transformation