

The historians and the origins of the First World War

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War guilt: the changing debate

The outbreak of the First World War is one of the most controversial and repeatedly debated subjects in history. The historical debate has been intensely affected by the prevailing political climate and by the urge to find out who was primarily responsible. This quest for a guilty party began almost as soon as the first shots were fired. The official report on the origins of the First World War, written by the victorious powers, and presented to the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, offered two conclusions:

- 1 The war was premeditated by Germany and its allies and resulted from 'acts deliberately committed in order to make it unavoidable'.
- 2 Germany and Austria-Hungary deliberately worked to defeat 'all the many conciliatory proposals made by the Entente powers to avoid war'.

The view of Germany as the story-book villain is enshrined in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, which held Germany and its allies 'guilty' for starting the First World War. During the inter-war years, the German government sought to reverse this verdict and released 15,889 official documents in 54 volumes during the 1920s to accomplish this end. The weight of this evidence led many to alter their original views. David Lloyd George, the British prime minister, in his war memoirs, suggested that 'all the nations of Europe slithered over the edge of the boiling cauldron of war in 1914'. In 1927, Erich Brandenburg, a German historian, argued that Germany did not plan for war in 1914. He blamed Russia for wanting control of the Balkans, and France for wanting revenge for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine. In 1930, Sidney Fay, an American historian, published a balanced and deeply influential study, which argued that no European power wanted war in 1914 and that all, to greater or lesser degrees, must share the blame. Fay attached some liability to each power involved in the July Crisis. Germany did not plot the war and was a casualty of its alliance with Austria-Hungary. Austria-Hungary was most responsible, but felt that it was acting in self-defence against the expansion of Serb nationalism. Serbia may not have wanted war, but believed that it would be forced to fight. Russia was partly responsible, for encouraging Serbia and mobilising its troops. France can be blamed in a roundabout way for its determination to support Russia. Britain did make efforts for peace, but did hardly anything to restrain Russia or France. Thus, Fay concluded that the verdict of sole German guilt was defective.

Collective responsibility

The idea of collective responsibility for the outbreak of war soon became the orthodox interpretation. During the 1930s, the question of German guilt became a very sensitive issue in foreign relations, and was cordially dropped. In 1938, for example, G. P. Gooch, a leading British historian, reflected the prevailing orthodoxy by stating: 'The belief that any nation or statesman was the arch criminal in 1914 is no longer held by serious students of history.' The debate had moved away from apportioning guilt towards an assessment of long-term causes. The inter-war period was the golden age of the study of international relations. Many specialists in this comparatively new subject held that the causes of war could be clearly isolated and future wars thereby prevented. Every type of long-term cause, including the alliance system and old-style diplomacy, imperial rivalry, the growth of militarism, nationalism, the arms race, and the development of inflexible war plans, was advanced.

After 1945, the focal point of the debate over war origins shifted to the Second World War. In 1951, however, a conference of French and German historians, organised by Gerhard Ritter, a leading German historian, met to reflect on the current state of the debate on the origins of the First World War and concluded: 'The documents do not permit attributing a premeditated desire for a European war on the part of any government or people in 1914. Distrust was at a peak, ruling circles were dominated by the idea that war was inevitable. Each one accused the other of aggressive intentions; each accepted the risk of war and saw its hope of security in the alliance system and the development of armaments.'

During the 1960s, two American political scientists introduced a computer to the debate. A total of 5,000 key views, culled from all the verbatim documents of unquestioned authenticity of the key decision-makers in Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Britain and France during the July Crisis of 1914, were fed into a computer, which came to these conclusions:

- 1 All the major powers felt that their rivals were antagonistic, and saw themselves as being friendly.
- 2 The major leaders became obsessed with short-term decisions during the July Crisis.
- 3 All the major powers felt that they were the injured party in the crisis.

The computer research confirmed that no one power was solely responsible for the outbreak of war.

Germany and the origins of war: Fritz Fischer and his critics

In 1961, Fritz Fischer, a German historian, dropped a bombshell onto the debate by publishing a book 900 pages long, entitled, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* ('Grab for world power'). This was eventually published in English, with the more sober title: *Germany's aims in the First World War* (1967). The book apportioned chief responsibility to Germany for preparing and launching the First World War. It was to provoke a fierce conflict between German historians. Fischer was an unusual revolutionary: born in 1908, he served in the German army during the Second World War, and was appointed professor of history at Hamburg University in 1948.

The Fischer thesis

Fischer's approach was very conventional, concentrating on the archives of the German leadership and focusing on the aims and policies of four key German figures: the Kaiser; Bethmann Hollweg, the chancellor; Gottlieb von Jagow, the foreign secretary; and Helmuth von Moltke, the chief of the army's general staff. Fischer believed that the truth about German guilt or innocence could only be determined by the official documents. He gained access to unpublished documents in East Germany. The major aim of the book was to show, in laborious detail, the vast, expansionist aims of Germany during the war. Only one chapter in the book deals with the origins of the war. Even so, the Fischer thesis is associated with the idea of German responsibility for the outbreak of war. On this issue, Fischer makes the following claims:

- 1 Germany was prepared to launch the First World War in order to become a great power.
- 2 Germany encouraged Austria-Hungary to start a war with Serbia, and continued to do so, even when it seemed clear that such a war could not be localised.
- 3 Once the war began, Germany developed a clear set of aims, already discussed before the war, to gain large territorial gains in central and eastern Europe, very similar to Hitler's later craving for *Lebensraum* ('living space') in eastern Europe.

The tremendous response to the book led Fischer to write a follow-up volume in 1969 entitled *Krieg der Illusionen* (published in English under the title *War of illusions*). This concentrated on German foreign policy from 1911 to 1914, and argued that the Kaiser's government cold-bloodedly planned the outbreak of the First World War from 1912 onwards.

The two most unorthodox aspects of Fischer's thesis were the prominence given to domestic factors in shaping Germany's foreign policy (*Primat der Innenpolitik*), as opposed to the established German view that external factors shaped foreign policy (*Primat der Aussenpolitik*), and the new evidence that he assembled concerning the actions of Bethmann Hollweg, the German chancellor. The importance of domestic issues on the shaping of German foreign policy can be traced back to the influence of Eckart Kehr, a young radical German historian of the Weimar period, who argued that domestic factors were the chief moving force behind German foreign-policy adventures. In a similar way, Fischer suggested that German foreign policy was viewed by the Kaiser and his government as a key means of diverting attention from domestic discontentment.

However, Fischer's most remarkable claims are reserved for Theobald Bethmann Hollweg. He was traditionally viewed as a cultured, responsible, well-meaning liberal statesman, who was surrounded by military hotheads during the July Crisis. In Fischer's view, Bethmann Hollweg was no puppet of the militarists, but the prime mover of German policy during the July Crisis of 1914, and a key figure in the development of Germany's expansionist aims once war began. Bethmann Hollweg was deeply gloomy about the Balkan situation, realised that Austria-Hungary required Germany's full support, and believed that Germany had to break free from its diplomatic 'encirclement'. To this end, the German chancellor attempted to improve Anglo-German relations, and hoped that the British government might remain neutral in any future war. The 'blank cheque' given to Austria-Hungary during the July Crisis, and Bethmann Hollweg's last-minute pleas for British neutrality, were therefore essential parts of a pre-existing German

policy. Thus, Fischer believes that the First World War was no preventative war, born of fear and desperation; it was planned and launched by Germany with the aggressive aim of dominating Europe. If Fischer is correct, then Germany bears full responsibility for starting the First World War, and, as a result, Hitler cannot be seen as a ghost in the German machine - he was no crazed madman, but an ordinary German statesman whose aims and policies were not very different from those of Bethmann Hollweg, the German chancellor who went to war in 1914. Fischer sees a clear continuity in Germany foreign policy from the Kaiserreich (the empire) to Nazi Germany.

Criticism of Fischer

Not surprisingly, the Fischer thesis triggered off one of the most intense debates on German history. The orthodox view, which had been so thoughtfully constructed, of all the major European powers 'slithering over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war', was challenged. The majority of German historians managed to ignore the massive, three-volume work of Luigi Albertini, published in the 1950s, which had already suggested that Germany was the nation most responsible for the outbreak of the First World War, and other works by non-German historians which argued much the same. But it was the Fischer thesis which caused the greatest reaction, because it was being advanced by a secure and highly respected doyen of traditional diplomatic history.

The views of Fischer were greeted with a harshness rarely seen, even among German historians. Fischer was accused of 'reading history backwards' for depicting imperial Germany as a breeding ground and source of influence for the later, expansionist aims of Hitler's Germany. Fischer's approach was also seen as contradictory. He focused on evidence from German 'high politics', but suggested that policy was affected by social and economic factors - which he ignored. The book was also accused of being 'Germanocentric', in so far as it neglected the policies of other powers and failed to place German policy within the context of broader European and international developments.

The most unrelenting early critic of Fritz Fischer was Gerhard Ritter, a German historian, who considered Fischer's work an act of national disloyalty. Ritter claimed that it was unfair to blame Germany exclusively for the outbreak of war. The primary aspects of Ritter's counter-thesis on German policy were:

- 1 There is no evidence of a unified German plan for war or world domination.
- 2 Germany acted defensively throughout the July Crisis to preserve its position in the existing status quo.
- 3 The main German aim was to support Austria-Hungary, Germany's only firm ally.
- 4 The German government realised too late that the conflict could not be localised.
- 5 The German government put too much reliance on military planners, who devised war plans which were bound to lead to an escalation of the crisis.
- 6 Bethmann Hollweg tried honourably and desperately to disentangle his country from being drawn into war at the end of the crisis, and became a victim of the military planners.

In Ritter's view, Germany stumbled into war by supporting Austria-Hungary and by allowing the military planners to roll the dice. German policy was mistaken, but it was essentially defensive. The most consistent aspects of German policy before 1914 were not cold-blooded planning and expansionist aims, but bluff and brinkmanship. The risks were calculated, but a bloodless diplomatic victory was always the main aim. In July 1914, the German government saw an ideal opportunity to drive a wedge between the powers of the Entente Cordiale, thereby presenting Austria-Hungary with increased power and status. Thus, Ritter claims that the German government wanted to risk the threat of a European war in order to gain a diplomatic victory, but hoped that it would not actually be required to fight one. German actions in July 1914 were really a gamble which went horrendously wrong. Where Fischer saw premeditation and intent, Ritter saw blindness and miscalculation; where Fischer saw aims, Ritter saw tactics.

The changing debate

The debate between Fischer and his critics continued throughout the 1960s without any side giving way. However, as the 1970s drew to a close, the bold attempt by Fischer to assert Germany's primary responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War had, to greater or lesser degrees, been accepted by both sides in the debate. Because of Fritz Fischer, no one will look at the origins of the First World War in the same light again. The debate is now extremely sophisticated, especially concerning the calculations and policies of the German leadership, and revolves around whether Germany intended an offensive war of territorial expansion or a defensive war designed to re-order European diplomatic relations. There are many

supporters of Fischer, most notably Immanuel Geiss, Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka. Geiss suggests that the dominant long-term cause of the First World War was the German desire for Weltpolitik. ...However, a number of historians still reject the idea of Germany cold-bloodedly planning a war for vast territorial gains. The type of war that Germany wanted has become a central issue for historians. The chief critics of Fischer believe that German leaders desired a very limited, 'defensive war' in 1914. This interpretation was first developed by two German historians -Egmont Zechlin and Karl Erdmann - and is supported by numerous followers. The essential argument of this counter-thesis is to suggest that Bethmann Hollweg took a 'calculated risk' in July 1914 in order to gain a diplomatic victory, or, failing this, to fight a 'defensive preventative war' with extremely limited objectives. According to this view, German policy in 1914 decided on a preventative war, born of desperation, and with no master plan for vast expansion, designed to ensure the survival of Germany as a major power in Europe. Zechlin makes the following points in support of the idea of a 'preventative war':

- 1 German support for a preventative war grew after the Balkan wars had produced vast gains for Serbia.
- 2 Bethmann Hollweg lacked the patience to settle matters by negotiation, believed that the Entente powers were paralysing Germany, and realised that Russia was growing stronger in the Balkans, and Austria-Hungary weaker.
- 3 When he gave Austria-Hungary the 'blank cheque', Bethmann Hollweg realised that the crisis might escalate into a European war.

...Thus, the anti-Fischer school is willing to accept that Germany should take the major responsibility for the war, but rejects:

- 1 the view of German policy being determined by domestic difficulties;
- 2 the view that Germany was planning an aggressive war of expansion. In place of this, it suggests that German leaders were gambling on a localised European war, with a swift German victory to break free from Germany's diplomatic 'encirclement'.

The nature of the international system: alliances and diplomacy

No explanation of why the European powers acted as they did in July 1914 can avoid some consideration of the nature and composition of the alliance system. Bernadotte Schmitt argued that the issue at stake during the July Crisis was a Struggle to decide the balance of power in Europe for an indefinite time ahead between the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente. Thus, in Schmitt's view, 'the alliances which had originally served the cause of peace, when put to the final test, almost mechanically operated to convert a local quarrel into a general war'. This view once commanded widespread support. Indeed, few historians would disagree that the alliance system was important in encouraging the build-up of European tension. However, A. J. P. Taylor was probably right to claim that the pre-1914 alliances were so precarious and fragile that they cannot be seen as the major cause of the war. This indicates that a fundamental problem which contributed to the outbreak of war was the lack of a fully effective balance of power in Europe - not its existence. Even a formal alliance in 1914 did not guarantee support for war. Italy, which had a binding alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, remained neutral. Britain, with no binding alliance - the Entente Cordiale of 1904 was a bond of friendship and settled colonial differences - decided to go to war.

The crucial alliances were the German alliance with Austria-Hungary and the Franco-Russian alliance. Germany was determined to support its alliance partner throughout the crisis, but was clearly following its own aims. The French did clearly offer support for its alliance partner, but did not play a crucial role in the decision for war. Thus, alliances were important, but as James Joll has argued, no European power really accepted that the alliance system consisted of two firm and balanced power blocs, and no major European power subscribed to the idea that the alliance system was a complete deterrent against war. Each power made wrong calculations about the likely behaviour of its alliance opponents. The pre-1914 alliance system was therefore a very fragile system but it did not make war inevitable. It seems that the alliance system raised expectations about likely allies in a future war. and influenced the military plans of each power. However, each nation seemed to base its decision for war on an assessment of national interests, which were linked to alliances, but were not, in all cases, determined by them.

War by timetable? Militarism, armaments and war plans

It has often been claimed that a mood of militarism pervaded Europe before 1914. Hence, militarism,

armaments and the war plans of the major powers have all been put forward as key factors in the outbreak of war. Europe has been viewed as 'an armed camp' from 1870 to 1914. Michael Howard argues that each announcement of increased armaments' expenditure by a European power before 1914 was viewed as a threat by its perceived rival, and thus created an atmosphere of mutual fear and suspicion which played a major part in creating the mood for war in 1914. The view that the First World War was brought about by the escalation of an arms race is superficially attractive. Yet the idea that a build-up of arms naturally leads to war remains dubious. In fact, the proportion of the gross domestic product (GDP) spent by the major European powers on arms expenditure was quite small. In 1914, Germany spent 3.5 per cent of GDP on defence; this was less than Britain (4.9 per cent), France (3.9 per cent) and Russia (4.6 per cent). The belief that high expenditure on arms leads to a desire for war remains unproved. For example, Austria-Hungary (1.9 per cent) spent less than all the major powers on arms in 1914, but was determined to go to war. In a recent summary of the debate, Niall Ferguson has claimed that the role of the arms race in encouraging the First World War has been greatly exaggerated. The country with the largest growth in military expenditure before 1914 was Britain - the power which least wanted war. Most European nations spent far more on education and social services than on armaments...

Strategic fears were closely linked to military aims and plans. A. J. P. Taylor argued that the outbreak of the First World War was caused 'almost entirely by rival plans for mobilisation by the European powers'. This view has many supporters. All the European powers had developed detailed war plans in the expectation of war. The military planners believed in a swift mobilisation of forces and lightning offensives. Yet the relationship between military plans and the actual decision for war is notoriously complicated. In Britain, Sir Edward Grey took hardly any notice of army and naval chiefs when considering British participation in the First World War. The French government did not really support the idea of an offensive strategy, and was not greatly influenced by the military planners anyway. In Russia, the chiefs of staff told the Tsar that the army was ready for war, and the Russian emperor and his ministers made the decision to mobilise forces. Military planning was more influential in Austria-Hungary and Germany. The Austro-Hungarian chiefs of staff persuaded the Habsburg government that a lightning assault against Serbia was required. The German generals strongly advised the Kaiser and his government to implement the Schlieffen Plan. This involved a war on two fronts and a speedy offensive.

Nationalism

...Very few historians would object to the view that the struggle to supplant the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans was a very important factor in the outbreak of war. The key players in this struggle were southern European nationalist groups, Russia (which hoped to profit from the Ottoman decline) and Austria-Hungary (which feared Slav nationalism and Russian ambitions). In July 1914 the military leaders of Austria-Hungary were so determined to deal with Serbia that they lost their heads, persisted with a disastrous ultimatum, and ignored all pleas for mediation. The level of fear and emotion that Slav nationalism caused in Austria-Hungary should not be underestimated.

In Joachim Remak's view, the Habsburg-Serb quarrel was not a minor issue, but the major issue which brought about war. The rest of Europe was dragged into what Remak terms 'the third Balkan War'. He argues that Austria-Hungary and Serbia both knew that they were on a collision course in 1914, and that they did not care if their battle for supremacy in the Balkans activated all the major European alliances. According to this view, primary responsibility for beginning the war is shared between Austria-Hungary, which wanted to restore its prestige, and Serbia, which stood in a good position to benefit from European rivalry in the region. The growth of Serbia clearly threatened the future of the Habsburg Empire. The delivery of the Austrian ultimatum and the decision to attack Serbia were also crucial points on the road to war. The view that Austria-Hungary was solely responsible has also been strongly argued by many historians.

However, the pioneering work of John Leslie, a British historian whose knowledge of the documents on Austria-Hungary was matchless, has cast great doubt on the importance of the Austro-Serb quarrel. Leslie makes three crucial points:

- 1 Austria-Hungary used the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand as an excuse to settle accounts with Serbia, and asked Germany to prevent Russian intervention.
- 2 Germany saw the war with Serbia as secondary to the struggle with Russia.
- 3 In the July Crisis, the Kaiser virtually commanded Austria-Hungary to set aside its anger against Serbia and to deploy the major portion of its troops against Russia.

Thus, Leslie believes that Austria-Hungary can be held responsible for planning a local Austro-Serb conflict, which was linked to its fears about Balkan nationalism, but Germany, which was not interested in this quarrel, quite deliberately used it as an opportunity to launch the European war which Austria-Hungary had never desired. A recent investigation into the policy of Serbia shows no plan for a third Balkan war. On the contrary, it seems that Serbia was exhausted by the previous Balkan struggles, and desired a period of stability and a peaceful settlement of the July Crisis. John Lowe perhaps puts the significance of the Austro-Serb quarrel into its proper context by stating: 'The crisis in the Balkans was the occasion, rather than the cause of the First World War.'

An imperialist war? Marxist and economic explanations

The role of imperialism and economic factors in the origins of the First World War has not greatly attracted historians in recent years. It was once argued by Marxist writers and historians that imperial rivalry and the influence of monopoly capital were major underlying reasons for the war. The first serious attempt to explain the role of imperialism was put forward by V. I. Lenin, the leader of the Russian Bolshevik Party, in *Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism*, written in exile during 1916. This interpretation saw the war as being the direct consequence of imperial rivalry, which led capitalist businessmen to seek new markets and encouraged governments to support economic interests. Lenin believed that German monopoly capital was behind German foreign policy. The primary aim was to gain territory denied to Germany during the era of the 'new imperialism'. Lenin saw war as inherent in the nature of capitalism. In this way, the First World War can be seen as the culmination of a search for territory and markets, led by capitalists whose aims were supported by governments. In this view, millions of people were being sacrificed to ensure the future domination of one group of monopoly capitalists over another. However, it should be said that the scramble for territory in Africa and Asia never led to war between the major European powers, and very rarely threatened to do so.

Marxist-Leninist theory also insisted that the foreign policies of the major European powers were a function of capitalist businessmen. Many Marxist historians saw monopoly capital as the hidden hand behind the First World War. A typical example of this sort of interpretation was advanced by Konne Zilliacus shortly after the Second World War, who argued that no European nation went to war in 1914 because of treaty obligations, moral issues or the rights of small nations, but to defend imperialist interests, which consisted of 'the private interests of finance and monopoly capital'. Yet it seems clear that major western European industries, especially steel, iron and coal, were becoming interdependent before 1914, and that among capitalist businessmen involved in such industries there was a desire for peace.

The Marxist-Leninist explanation has never achieved general acceptance among the majority of traditional historians. It remains difficult to find convincing evidence for the influence of capitalist businessmen on the foreign policy of the major European powers before 1914. Indeed, the aims of government and business are often deeply divided. In August 1914, for example, a delegation of leading financiers from the City of London begged Sir Edward Grey not to go to war, but he ignored them. Similarly, not all German monopoly capitalists supported war in 1914. For example, Albert Ballin and Max Warburg, two seemingly 'ideal type' German capitalists, opposed the war. On the other hand, many arms manufacturers and steel companies did make enormous profits from war, but they also made profits in peacetime. Bankers and arms manufacturers did have influence over foreign policy, but did not always advocate war. A great many Marxist explanations regarding the role of economics on war are all too often based on speculation, guesswork and a very partial reading (or often total neglect) of original sources.

However, the rejection of purely Marxist-Leninist interpretations of the origin of the war should not lead to a rejection of the importance of economic considerations per se. A strong industrial economy did prove vital to a successful foreign policy in the twentieth century. The role of economics was obviously a deeply important 'unspoken assumption' of the policy-makers. But the link between politics and economic factors has generally been ignored by diplomatic historians, who have relied on the 'official records' of government as the basic source used for analysis. Official sources tend to discuss a particular policy that is to be adopted, not the ways in which business groups or economic factors have influenced the chosen course of action. According to Joll, 'official records' are often based on conventions which exclude the importance of business influence. Even so, it must be conceded that there is no evidence that there was any business interest in planning a war in 1914. It is therefore difficult to claim that the pressure for war in 1914 came from capitalist interests.