The Origins of the First World War: The Historical Debate
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Starting from the war guilt clause of the Treaty of Versailles, Dr Ruth Henig leads the reader through the serpentine history of the outbreak of war debate, past the American historian Fay and his 'reckless Germany' interpretation, Lenin's 'imperialism' and economic rivalries, through Albertini's post-Second World War review, to the acceptance of the Fischer-based analysis. This widely accepted current view gives greater weight than previously to the problems within the German elite among the reasons for war.

One of the most popular topics in modern European history, both amongst Advanced Level students, and those continuing with history at college or university, is the origins of the First World War. However, two serious problems face students as they struggle to come to grips with the central issues. The first is the sheer complexity of a topic which covers both broad themes such as the prevailing philosophies of the time, the growth of nationalism and the impact of economic imperialism and arms races, and specific rivalries such as those between the Balkan states, the conflicts between Austria-Hungary and Russia in eastern Europe, and the Triple Entente versus the Triple Alliance. The second problem relates to the interpretation of all this material. Furious debates about what caused a great war to break out in 1914 have been raging since 1919. Charges and counter-charges have been made. Without some understanding of this long and complex historical debate, students cannot hope to come to a clear view of the issues involved or of the books which cover the topic. This last point becomes very important in light of the assertion made by Herwig in a book published in 1992 that 'most of the works on the July crisis written before 1961 are now out of date'.

The aim of this article is therefore to bring students fully up to date by means of an assessment of the historical debate on the origins of the First World War as it unfolded in the inter-war years which looks in particular at the course it has followed since the early 1960s and at the stage it has currently reached.

War Guilt: Impetus to Debate

It was article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, signed by the Allies and Germany in 1919, which ensured that, from the outset, the debate on the origins of the First World War would be a highly political one. The clause, inserted to establish Germany's liability for war reparations, read:

The Allied and Associated Governments affirm, and Germany accepts, the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the

loss and damage to which Allied and Associated governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed on them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.

Hardly surprisingly, this interpretation of events in 1914 caused a storm of protest in Germany, and the German delegates, representing the new republican regime which had emerged since the abdication of the Kaiser in November 1918, signed the Treaty only under duress. The German interpretation of the situation which had faced the country before 1914 was that Germany was encircled by an aggressive alignment of Russia, France and Britain, and had no alternative but to try to break out of it. This was widely believed, not just in 1914 or in 1918, but as late as the 1930s. A popular German textbook of the 1920s, used in secondary schools, explained the situation as follows:

In the so-called peace treaty, the unheard of demand for reparations and the unexampled exploitation of Germany was founded on the lie regarding Germany's war guilt. Did Germany desire the war, did she prepare it maliciously and begin it wantonly? Today every informed person inside and outside Germany knows that Germany is absolutely innocent with regard to the outbreak of war. Russia, France and England wanted war and unleashed it.

Weimar Germany never accepted the findings of article 231, and leaders of successive governments believed that if they could show that the detested 'war guilt clause' was a lie, then the ethical basis for the payment of reparations would disappear, and the way would be open for wholesale revision of the entire treaty. A special branch of the German foreign office was set up, the War Guilt Section, which organised, financed and directed two main units - a Working Committee of German Associations for
Combatting Lies Concerning War Responsibility, which circulated literature to trade unions, clubs and employers' associations, and a Centre for the Study of the Causes of War. This recruited scholars, journalists and teachers to demonstrate the inaccuracy of article 231, and by extension, the whole treaty. Forty volumes of material were published between 1922 and 1927, based mainly on German Foreign Office archives, and excluding material from General Staff records, Navy Office files or from the Ministry of War. Some documents have since been found to have been falsified, and crucial episodes were ignored - such as the Potsdam meetings between the Austrian envoy, the Kaiser and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg on 5-6 July 1914, at which the German 'blank cheque' was issued to the Austrians.

The German Interpretation

German interpretations of events in 1914 centred on the aggression of the Serbian government, which allegedly had close connections with the Black Hand assassins. Austria had to meet this challenge, and Germany had no option but to support her ally. Britain should have helped Germany to localise the conflict, but in any event this would have been virtually impossible because of full Russian mobilisation in support of Serbia, and Russia's aggressive designs in the Balkan and Black Sea region. The German conclusion was that no single nation was responsible for the events of 1914, and certainly not Germany. Some German historians acknowledged that there might have been miscalculations on the part of German leaders, such as the Kaiser's belief that, because a royal heir to the throne had been murdered, Tsar Nicholas II would not support Serbia and condone such an act, or a mistaken belief that Britain might stay neutral in the face of an unfolding European war, but these errors of judgement did not in any way lead to an unwarranted German aggression.

Bankrupt Diplomacy and Miscalculation

Germany's massive output of documents and publications in the 1920s provoked other governments into publishing their prewar diplomatic records to show that they too had nothing to hide. The British Government published 11 volumes between 1926 and 1938, the Austrian Government 8 in 1950, and France started on a complicated project divided into three series. Some Russian documents were published in Berlin between 1931 and 1934; no Serbian documents, however, were published by the Yugoslav government until 1980.3 Because most of the primary sources produced were diplomatic documents, and because the destructive impact of four years of war had discredited the 'old' diplomacy, increasing emphasis was laid by historians on prewar 'secret diplomacy', on the increasingly rigid alliance systems, and on what appeared to be the total bankruptcy of the entire European diplomatic system. This view of a general European breakdown was shared by two very different world leaders after 1918, the United States President, Woodrow Wilson, and leader of the new Bolshevik regime, Lenin.

Woodrow Wilson believed very firmly that secret diplomacy and the selfish greed of the prewar European great powers had brought them into collision in 1914. Only a transformation of the way in which the international system operated would prevent wars in future, and hence he saw his great mission as the establishment of a League of Nations. Many League enthusiasts in Britain in the inter-war period shared Wilson's distrust of secret diplomacy and his view of a general European diplomatic breakdown in 1914. So did two American academics, Harry Barnes and Sidney Fay. In 1925, Barnes, a Professor of Historical Sociology, wrote a book called The Genesis of World War, largely to express his anger at war in general and at the authors of the Great War in particular, who he deemed to be the Serbian and Russian governments. Three years later, Fay, a colleague of his at Smith University, produced a two-volume Origins of the World War. He exonerated the Serbian government, and believed that Germany should not have promised her Austrian ally a free hand against Serbia, but he blamed this on the Kaiser's short-sighted diplomacy, not on a general German attitude of aggression. Fay's conclusion was that it was Russian mobilisation which precipitated the final catastrophe leading to German mobilisation, but that it was the reckless policy of Austria-Hungary which was more responsible than any other power for the immediate origin of the war. As for Germany, she never planned for war in 1914 and did not want it.

Fay's assessment was extremely influential both in the United States and in Britain for the next 30 years, though it was immediately challenged by Renouvin in France and by Schmitt in the United States. Both these historians placed their emphasis on the dangerous gamble which Germany took in 1914 by giving full support to Austria and counting on the willingness of Russia to accept diplomatic defeat. Schmitt argued that the two Central Powers were out to alter the balance of power in the Balkans, and that this was bound to provoke Russia into a military response. Therefore German policy was belligerent and dangerously aggressive.

Lenin's Analysis

The perspective of Lenin was somewhat different; he saw the policies of all the great powers before 1914 as being inherently aggressive, as a direct result of their development as advanced capitalist states. Lenin viewed the First World War as an imperialist struggle amongst the great capitalist powers for the reallocation of the world, its resources and its markets. In a pamphlet written in 1916, entitled Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism, he argued that the war in 1914 was caused by economic rivalries generated by cliques of highly-organised financial monopolies and cartels putting pressure on
their respective governments. There was enough plausibility in this approach to cause a lasting impact, particularly amongst those of a left-wing or radical persuasion. Armaments manufacturers, whether French or German, had clearly exerted a powerful influence before 1914; there had been strong Anglo-German commercial and naval rivalry; there had been imperial scrambles for territory and concessions in Africa, in the Near East and in China.

There were some rather weak links in Lenin’s sweeping analysis. Was Serbia so industrialised? Was monopoly capitalism exercising such a considerable influence on the Russian court and on the Habsburgs? Why did not that most advanced of capitalist states in 1914, the United States, become embroiled in the imperialist rivalries which triggered off the war? One can show that Lenin’s theories do not fit the facts of 1914 very closely, but none the less his interpretation exercised a powerful influence, and was taken on board as the orthodox Marxist ‘explanation’ of the outbreak of war in 1914 by east European governments after 1945. As late as 1968, East German historians were arguing that the First World War constituted ‘a quarrel among the imperialists for a new division of the world’. Monopoly capitalists and Junker agrarians, assisted by the military, unleashed the war which was inevitable owing to the ‘conflicts inherent to the capitalist social order’.

**Shared Responsibility**

The essential point which was common to both the American and Soviet interpretations of 1914 was that no one single nation or alliance was responsible for war. If guilt was appropriate, it should be shared. If the break-down of the entire European diplomatic system or the development of an advanced stage of capitalism was at fault, then this was beyond the control of a single nation. By the late 1930s, the view which prevailed most strongly about the origins of the war was the one put forward by the former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George in his *War Memoirs*, that ‘the nations in 1914 slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war’. A committee of distinguished French and German historians, meeting in 1952, agreed that ‘the documents do not permit attributing to any government or nation a premeditated desire for European war in 1914’.

**The Second World War: New Perspectives**

However, the circumstances of the outbreak of the Second World War were beginning to cause something of a re-think. Was Hitler a freak, a historical accident? Or was there some underlying continuity of aggressive German ambition, an aim to expand into eastern Europe and to dominate Russia, which was relevant to 1914 too? Those interested in the causes of the First World War began to look again at German policy before 1914, and the first to do this exhaustively was Luigi Albertini, an Italian journ-

alist. He went through all the available documents, interviewed all the surviving participants and wrote a three-volume work, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, between 1942 and 1943, though this was not published in English until the 1950s. Albertini’s view was that the German support for Austria in early July 1914 constituted a very risky gamble, and that German mobilisation was equivalent to war, because of the Schlieffen plan. Though he acknowledged the fact that Russian policy escalated the crisis, that the Serbs had no intention of compromising with Austria, and that Grey could have warned the Germans earlier of likely British intervention, he concluded that ‘final, definite responsibility for the outbreak of the war lies with the German plan of mobilisation’.

**Militarism and the Desire for Peace**

This view was shared by A.J.P. Taylor in his 1954 publication, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1868-1914*. He asserted that ‘the sole cause for the outbreak of war in 1914 was the Schlieffen plan’, because, while Austrian and Russian mobilisations were diplomatic moves, Germany’s meant war. Within western Germany, Gerhard Ritter had already embarked on an extremely thorough and critical examination of the problem of militarism in Germany, which resulted ultimately in a four-volume publication, published in English in the early 1970s as *The Sword and the Sceptre*. While he found much to criticise in the growing power and ascendancy of the military elites in Wilhelmine Germany, he none the less still believed, in 1960, that German political and military leaders had been overwhelmed by the crisis of 1914, and that ‘we have no right to doubt the genuineness of their basic desire for peace. No one in a position of authority wanted to bring about a world war; in this sense the “war-guilt question” no longer exists.’ However, contrary to Ritter’s belief, within a year the ‘war-guilt’ question was brought to centre stage once more with the publication of a voluminous work by a Hamburg Professor of History, Fritz Fischer entitled *Griff Nach der Weltruhm*, published in England in 1966 under the rather different title, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*.

**Fischer’s Argument**

Fischer’s book caused an immediate sensation, and provoked a great outcry in West Germany, particularly amongst fellow historians. For it presented three very provocative theses. The first one asserted that the German government in July 1914 accepted, and indeed hoped that a major European war would result from its backing of Austria against Serbia. The second one suggested that the annexationist war aims of the Imperial government not only predated the outbreak of war, but also showed a remarkable similarity with the plans made by the Nazis for conquest after 1933. And the third one argued that the sources of German expansionism were to be
found less in Germany’s international position than in her social, economic and political domestic situation on the eve of war.

In coming to such conclusions, Fischer had had the benefit of being allowed access to the Imperial archives in Potsdam, since 1945 located in East Germany. This in itself annoyed the West German historical establishment, but it was the way in which he utilised his documentary findings to frame a charge of general German responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914 which really enraged his critics. He did not share Ritter’s belief that civilian leaders, such as the Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, had been misled or dominated by the military. Indeed, he argued that the sources revealed no substantial difference in approach or in objectives between the civilian and military decision-makers.

For the next few years, Fischer’s work was the subject of great controversy, and he himself was subjected to bitter personal attack. The West German government cancelled funding for a lecture tour Fischer had arranged to undertake in the United States. But the staunchness with which Fischer defended his views, and the documentary material which became available during the 1960s, much of it collected by Fischer’s former pupil, Imanuel Geiss, forced Fischer’s critics to look again at the policies pursued by German leaders in 1914. They began to admit, grudgingly, that German strategy in 1914 had been a high-risk one, but argued that it had been justified by the growing Russian military build-up and construction of railways in her western provinces. Pessimism about the future and in particular about the inexorable growth of Russian power permeated both civilian and military leaders in Germany in 1914, it was argued, and made them willing to run the risk of war in 1914, not to achieve aggressive objectives, but to secure Germany’s position as a great power.

**Fischer and the Will to War**

This view was strongly challenged by Fischer in his second major book which came out in 1969, and appeared in English in 1975 as *War of Illusions*. The focus of this book was on German policy between 1911 and 1914, and Fischer drew on detailed documentary evidence to substantiate his charge that there was a strong ‘will to war’ amongst German leaders before 1914. In particular, he drew attention to the personal diary of Admiral Muller, which had been published in 1965, and which referred to a meeting between the Kaiser and his chief military and naval advisers on 8 December, 1912. The Kaiser had been informed by his new Ambassador to London that, in the event of a German attack on France, Britain would come to France’s aid. This provoked a general discussion and review of the European situation, which led the Chief of the General Staff, von Moltke, to comment, ‘In my opinion war is inevitable, and the sooner the better’. This view appeared to be generally agreed,
as was the desirability of a war against Russia being ‘better prepared’ in the press. Fischer laid great emphasis on this ‘war council’ meeting, and argued that it revealed a clear intention on the part of Germany’s leaders to wage European war at the earliest favourable opportunity.

**The Part Played by Domestic Politics**

Fischer’s researches also laid great emphasis on the social and political structure of Wilhelmine Germany, and on the power wielded by a set of autocratic, militaristic Junkers, who were violently anti-democratic and anti-modern. They felt their domestic position to be under threat from the forces of social democracy, and their world aspirations to be increasingly blocked by the ‘encirclement’ policies of France, Russia and Britain, and by their own lack of investment capital. Fischer’s claim that it was domestic social and political factors which were instrumental in shaping Germany’s increasingly aggressive foreign policy after 1911 was taken up by a younger generation of German historians in the 1970s. In particular, Wehler developed further the concept of the ‘primacy of domestic politics’, and Herwig portrayed the German ruling élite as ‘ridden with anxiety, guilt, fear, and paranoia, yet at the same time dominated by a remarkable egoism’. He argued that ‘German statesmen and soldiers by the second decade of the twentieth century could see escape from their predicament only in a “mad bolt”’. The publication of the diaries of Kurt Riezler, Bethmann-Hollweg’s closest adviser, in 1972, only served to substantiate this view of the German leadership being willing to pursue a dangerous, high-risk strategy in 1914, though there remained disagreement over whether this was to further long-nurtured aggressive designs or because of defensive motives.

**The New Orthodoxy and New Questions**

By the mid 1980s, Fischer’s interpretation of German policy was becoming accepted as the new orthodoxy. Writing in *Europe Transformed* in 1983, Norman Stone, Regius Professor of History at Oxford, commented, ‘not many historians nowadays dissent from the proposition that the German government egged on by its generals deliberately provoked the war of 1914’. James Joll, in *The Origins of the First World War*, published in 1984, argued that by December 1912, German rulers had accepted war as inevitable but were concerned to wage it at the most opportune time. One of the most recent reviews of writing on the origins of the First World War, published in 1992, suggests that three-quarters of Fischer’s assertions are now accepted as valid. However, disagreements remain, largely over the importance of the ‘war council’ meeting of December 1912 and of the extent to which it supports the view that Germany was planning for war since that time, and over the nature of Germany’s aims in 1914. Were Germany’s leaders really trying to ‘grab at world power’ in July 1914, or were their aspirations based on continental Europe? And were their policies the product of confident, determined, expansionist ambitions, or did they result from feelings of increasing insecurity and growing pessimism about the future?

Much work has also been carried out over the past few years into the prewar planning and domestic situations of the other major European states. Meticulous research has suggested that neither Russia nor France wanted war in 1914; Britain also wished to avoid a military conflict, but did not know how best to achieve this, and there is still disagreement about whether a firmer assurance from Grey early on in the crisis, that Britain would stand by her entente partners and intervene on their side in a general European conflict, might have caused a rethink of German policy. The latest study of Habsburg foreign policy suggests that by 1914, Austria was determined to wage war against Serbia, and that July of that year saw a ‘fateful meshing of aggressive German Weltpolitik with an even more aggressive, irresponsible Habsburg Balkanpolitik’.

So, in 1994, the verdict of the Treaty of Versailles, which aroused so much controversy between the two world wars, is now endorsed by the great majority of historians. Writing in *The Coming of the First World War*, published in 1991, Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann observed that ‘in the present state of research, the evidence that Germany and Austria started the war and dragged the rest of the powers into it is even stronger than in the early 1960s when Fischer published his analysis of German war aims policies’. We await the publication of new source material or of future books and articles seeking to challenge what has now become the standard interpretation of the origins of the First World War.

**Notes**


Dr Ruth Henig has lectured in History at Lancaster University since 1968. She is the author of several publications including three Lancaster pamphlets on twentieth-century European history. Her most recent, _The Origins of the First World War_, is about to be reprinted with an expanded historiographical assessment of writings on the origins of the war.