

The Historians and the Origins of the First World War

Written report presented at the Versailles Peace Conference:

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."*

This view is also expressed in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles:

"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 the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies. "

The German Government promoted a revisionist campaign during the inter-war years to reverse this verdict. They released 15,889 official documents in 54 volumes during the 1920's and historians like H. Rothfels and Erich Brandenburg assisted the Government.

H. Rothfels stressed "collective responsibility"

Erich Brandenburg argued that Germany did not plan for war in 1914. He blamed Russia for wanting control over the Balkans, and France for wanting revenge for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine.

Sidney Fay (American Historian) wrote 1930 that no European power wanted war in 1914 and that all, to greater or lesser degrees, must share the blame (collective responsibility). In this Germany did not plot the war and was a casualty of its alliance with Austria-Hungary.

The idea of "Collective responsibility" became the first strong view - the "Orthodox interpretation". Instead of finding the "guilty part" the historians concentrated the "long-term causes"; the alliance system and old-style diplomacy, imperial rivalry, the growth of militarism, nationalism, the arms race, and the development of inflexible war plans.

In 1951 one of the leading German historians, Gerhard Ritter, 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 on accused the other of aggressive intentions; each accepted the risk of war and saw its hope of security in the alliance system and the developments of armaments."

During the 1960's two American political scientists used a computer to get a verdict about the responsibility. They fed the computer with 5000 key views 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. The computer made the following 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 came to the same conclusion as most historians - *no power was solely responsible for the outbreak of war!*

In 1961 another German historian, Fritz Fischer - professor of history at Hamburg University, published a book on the topic. It was 900 pages long and entitled *"tariff nach der Weltmacht"* (Grab for world power). In 1967 it was published in English with the title "Germany's aims in the First World War". The book apportioned chief responsibility to Germany for preparing and launching the First World War! Fischer had gone through the archives of four key German figures; the Kaiser, BethmannHollweg (the Chancellor), Gottlieb von Jagow (the foreign secretary) and Helmuth von Moltke (the chief of the army's general staff). He especially concentrated on the aims and policies of these four men. The major part of the book shows the vast expansionist aims of Germany during the war. Even though the Fischer "thesis" is connected to the German responsibility of the war its only one chapter in the book that deals with the origins of the war. In this chapter Fischer 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 localized.*
- 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 in Eastern Europe.*

Fritz Fischer wrote a follow-up volume in 1969 entitled "*Krieg der Illusionen*" (War of illusions). This book concentrated on the German foreign policy between 1911 and 1914. It argued that the Kaiser's government cold-bloodedly planned the outbreak of the First World War from 1912 onwards. Two important aspects in the Fischer thesis were:

- 1. The importance of the domestic factors in shaping Germany's foreign policy (the view before was that the external factors were more important..)*
- 2. The new evidence of Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg's actions. Fischer saw Bethmann-Hollweg as the prime mover of German policy during the July Crisis of 1914 and a key figure in Germany's expansionist aims once war began! This was different than the cultured, responsible, well-meaning liberal statesman, who was surrounded by military hotheads during the July Crisis. According to Fischer Bethmann-Hollweg was no puppet of the German militarists...*

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.