

The Origins of World War I

"The lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."

----- Sir Edward Grey, remark on the outbreak of World War I.

Core Debate: Should primacy be given to international relations or domestic politics?

- **International Relations:**
 - Germany at fault - War a consequence of expansionistic Germany.
 - Germany exonerated - War a result of structural factors beyond Europeans' control.
- **Domestic Politics**
 - Germany at fault - Elites within Germany wage war for imperialistic aims and to ameliorate social unrest.
 - Germany exonerated - Events outside of Germany trigger war.

International Relations: Blaming the Germans

The Versailles Verdict as per Article 231

Key Scholars:

- Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols., trans. Isabella Massey (1952)
- D.C.B Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (1983)
- Zara S. Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (1977)
- A.J.P. Taylor makes this argument with his usual contradictory and condescending style in several works.

The gist of this argument does not differ substantially from what was written in the Versailles Peace Treaty:

"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."

----Article 231.

Luigi Albertini's account of the diplomacy during the July crisis has yet to be equaled. Albertini stresses the failure of diplomacy and miscommunication, but makes it clear that German aggressiveness was the key ingredient for war.

Lieven's account focuses on the troubled Tsarist regime and its relations with Germany. He believes war was inevitable due to a bellicose Berlin and a weak Russia. The principle problem for St. Petersburg was a weak executive trying to maintain imperial heritage despite Russians weakness in the face of an aggressive Germany. Lieven argues that Russia's actions were defensive and domestic pressure (prior humiliations, social tension, etc.) compelled the Tsar to mobilize in the face of Austrian belligerence and a potential quick defeat at the hands of Germany. He maintains Russia did not act foolishly, rather she saw things clearly and acted consistency. Austrian ambitions in the Balkans, the Tsar's limited foreign policy options, and Germany's inability to curb its militarism (and Vienna) are enough for Lieven to conclude the blame for war must "unequivocally rest with the German government"

Steiner argues the German drive for power threatened British interests. Relating Wilhelm II to Hitler, she says the Foreign Office view of the German menace was "entirely realistic". Steiner's story has British Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey as having no choice but to contain a voracious Germany. In sum, London responded defensively to an inevitable German aggression.

Taylor is best known for a "war by timetable" argument that puts events beyond the control of statesmen and makes the war a result of mobilization schedules, specifically railroad itineraries. However, he has made the argument that long before the railroads left their stations filled with troops, the primary reason mobilization schedules were needed in the first place was the breakdown of the balance of power due to a self-aggrandizing Germany. Otto von Bismarck maintained that it was not in Germany's interests for the bones of a Pomeranian grenadier to be buried anywhere in the Balkans. By 1914, the Pomeranian Grenadier was long since forgotten. Taylor argues this shift in Berlin's perspective - which caused its own "encirclement" - laid the root cause of WWI.

International Relations: A Historical Accident? Structural Factors Propel Europe into Abyss

Key Scholars:

- James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (1992)
- L.C.F. Turner, *Origins of the First World War* (1970)
- Paul Kennedy
- Joachim Remak, *The Origins of World War I* (1967)

Not the most original titles are they? In truth, the titles are a product of the scholarship as these authors and other advocates of the European tragedy argument blend historical factors together and depict 1914 as a powder keg that was going to blow sooner rather than later (thus, I will refer to this reasoning as the "powder keg" school). The points of emphasis may differ, but in the end militarism, a faulty alliance system, mobilization schedules, diplomatic blunders, etc. created a war juggernaut the statesmen were powerless to stop.

The military component is most often cited as the lynchpin that pushed events beyond the reigns of European diplomats. The principle culprit here would be Germany's Schlieffen Plan. Audacity personified, the entire German plan hinged on quickly defeating the French by funneling two million troops through tiny Belgium and seizing Paris in 6 weeks. The only way this (reckless?) gamble could be pulled off was if they captured the Belgian rail junctions intact **IMMEDIATELY at the onset of hostilities**. In truth, mobilization meant war throughout Europe; because of the Schlieffen Plan, this was literally the case in Berlin. Once the Russians mobilized, the Germans felt they had no choice but to attack because even a delay of a few hours was enough to ruin any chance of victory as the alternative was a two front war they knew they could not win. The haste of the German, Russian, and French mobilizations were due in large part to Germany's war plan. Turner and Kennedy are probably the best scholars that cogently describe the implications of the Schlieffen Plan.

Why were the Germans so stupid to pin their hopes on such insanity? Simple, they weren't. In fact, the German plan looks pretty damn good compared their contemporaries: the French marching into Alsace-Lorraine as if at Waterloo and mercilessly mowed down by machine gun fire, the Austrian debacle in the Carpathians, and the Russian annihilation at Tannenberg by the Germans. It is all too easy to condone or condemn military thinkers after the fact. Their legacy lies less in their genius or imbecility than the unpredictable battles that are decided more by luck, contingency, and the incompetence of others rather than their own doing. For instance, the French are ridiculed for hiding behind the Maginot Line in 1939 while the Germans are moronic for not adopting Moltke the Elder's advice and this very same fortress strategy in 1914. Huh?! Paying less attention to armchair generals writing with the privilege of hindsight and precise archival evidence in favor of what the generals perceived would happen in 1914 (which incidentally is much closer to reality than is attributed...every serious thinker knew it would be a bloodbath) offers much more valuable insight into the crisis that faced the statesmen in July 1914. Michael Howard and Steve Van Evera (both found in *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War*) accurately conclude because the offensive was believed to a decisive advantage, if there was a window for a diplomatic solution, it was frighteningly small. Understanding the "Cult of the Offensive" is crucial for comprehending how quickly July 1914 destabilized; generals truly believed their empires would crumble if attacked and politicians were

tempted by the notion that fortune favors the foolish. Finally, James Joll convincingly argues that the pervasiveness of the "cult of the offensive" and the glorification of military matters was implicit in a society replete with military values. It was the "unspoken assumptions" that disputes would be determined on the battlefield rather than the conference table. Paul Kennedy has argued that the Schlieffen Plan, conceived in an era where war was still seen as a legitimate instrument to resolve international disputes and the offensive was perceived to have a decisive advantage, rather than Fischer's "War Council" made Berlin the diplomatic center of the world in 1914.

Another destabilizing element in 1914 was an ambiguous interlocking alliance system. James Joll is probably the best at explaining how this system - in disarray by 1914 because of the inexact nature of the Anglo-French Entente Cordiale and the lack of support for Austria and Russia in the Balkans by their recent partners - limited freedom of action. The two most significant constraints were (1) military expectations (e.g. the Schlieffen Plan counted on the Austrians attacking Russia) and (2) the pressure to prop up weaker partners or risk future devoid of friends. Germany had particular worries here, as their only reliable friend was a decaying Austria-Hungary. George Kennan argues that the "fateful" Franco-Russian alliance all but made WWI inevitable. Kennan says the main problem with this alliance was it was solely a military convenience between a Republican France and Tsarist Russia that were not only political antipodes, but had entirely different expansionist motives. This alliance guaranteed any Balkan quarrel would erupt into a world war, which was precisely what happened.

There are other numerous structural defects within the European system that scholars have asserted caused WWI more so than any specific German ambition. By and large, the "Powder Keg" crowd, either implicitly or straight up, contend a war of some sort was inevitable since only a spark was needed to unleash Armageddon. Joll's *The Origins of the First World War* is the best survey that examines such factors as imperialism, domestic concerns, and the failure of diplomats. Two ingredients within the Powder Keg that probably do not get enough historical ink are the role of Austria [after all they started the damn thing] and the aggressive attitudes of the Entente's politico-military elite. Remark's work is the best at addressing the former point. Because of Vienna's desire to crush Serbia, he categorically blames Austria-Hungary and to a lesser extent Serbia (for failing to contain terrorism) and Russia (for failing to consider the ramifications of full mobilization). With regards to the pugnacious Franco-Russian camp, Turner, in response to the so called "Berlin war party", gives a good account of French Revanchism and the corruption, chauvinism, and incompetence that characterized the Russia of Nicholas II.

The Primacy of Domestic Politics

The Berlin "War Party" and the Fischer Thesis

Key Scholars:

- Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (1961/1967)
- Fritz Fischer, *From Kaiserreich to Third Reich* (1979/1986)
- V.R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (1993)
- Wolfgang Mommsen, "Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914" (1973)
- Imanuel Geiss, *German Foreign Policy, 1871-1914* (1976)

Without question, the Fischer controversy is central to any debate surrounding the origins of WWI. Fritz Fischer broke ranks from the traditional Rankean historical approach employed by German historians arguing for more than a casual link between domestic fears of the German power elite and the expansionist aims of the Kaiserreich. Fischer contends the elites wanted war since 1912 (the year of sweeping Social Democratic gains in the *Reichstag*) and manipulated the Austrians into using the *Causa Belli* (lawful cause of war) created by the assassination of Archduke into starting WWI. Fischer felt that some newly opened archives, specifically Bethmann Hollweg's famed "September Programme" which called for annexations and economic mastery over central Europe, demanded a different interpretation for the war. In sum, Germany had a **plan** and the German power elites machinations in 1914 brought about their war to stave off democracy and attain continental hegemony.

Besides being the springboard for any discussion regarding WWI, Fischer's work has had numerous implications:

- **He helped open the floodgates of social history and later *Alltagsgeschichte* (everyday history). This was more of a byproduct of inspiration rather than his methodology since his work is mainly a one-way dialogue between the masses and the elite.**
- **He and his work were heavily ridiculed by conservative German historians in the backlash he created by shedding a different light on the question on German war guilt barely a decade after the Nazi-era.**
- **Perhaps most unsettling, by identifying numerous continuities between Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany and Adolf Hitler's - the most significant being an agrarian-big business alliance who used domestic repression and external aggression to defend their power and privilege against liberalism and socialism - Fischer argues for something rotten in German history, whose roots go well back before 1914. For Fischer, Germany's war aims in 1914 and 1939 were eerily similar.**

Fischer has been criticized for putting Germany outside of historical context. Germany appears aggressive only because Fischer isolates her from an age where expansion was prevalent and all nations had "war councils". Fischer's has also been accused of confusing the timing of German war aims. Hollweg's programme came *after* war had already broken out and Germany appeared on the verge of winning. Additionally, all belligerents had grandiose goals. Finally, the Powder Keg advocates claim that structural forces drove the engine of history, not the German elite. For instance, it could be argued the Schlieffen Plan's rigid timetable relegated Bethmann Hollweg to a diplomatic instrument. In sum, Fischer ascribes far too much historical agency to a small cadre of Germans who are not too dissimilar to their European counterparts.

Nevertheless, Fischer's domestic focus has inspired a generation of historians to reevaluate old historical canons. Some, such as Fischer's pupil Imanuel Geiss, use Fischer's model and simply add a few nuances here and there. In his case, Geiss argues that a peculiar form of Social Darwinism permeated Germany and provided the basis for Berlin's *Weltpolitik* which the German elites used to unify the masses.

Other scholars who accept Fischer's domestic emphasis and view of German culpability for WWI:

- **V.R. Berghahn:** Berghahn stresses the rapid industrialization that was out of step with political and social structures; the consequences of which saw an aristocratic elite (the *Junkers*) in total power and paranoid of any change. Refusing to reform, the elites viewed the armaments industry and militarism as panaceas to ameliorate social tension. The Tirpitz Plan, a huge naval building programme designed to frighten the British into acquiescence of Germany's *Weltpolitik*, should be seen as the zenith of these schemes. After these measures failed and lead to more domestic unrest, Germany turned to war as a last ditched attempt to maintain status quo and preempt revolution.
- **Wolfgang Mommsen:** Mommsen argues that a functional-structural approach is the best way to understand foreign policy. In short, this model emphasizes the malfunctions of constitutional and governmental institutions at odds with the modernizing forces of rapid industrialization and mass culture. By 1914, the anachronistic German, Russian, and Austrian governments were woefully inadequate to deal with the rapid social change and steady advance of mass politics. These gulfs between the social and political realms lead increasingly to conflict and hostility to the ruling elites. In the end, the only recourse for the elites was to use nationalism and ultimately war as a tool to quell the working class.

All of these theories depict the failure of top down responses to historical forces from below.

The Primacy of Domestic Politics

A Focus Away From Germany: A New Revisionism?

Key Scholars:

- Arno Mayer, "Domestic Causes of the First World War" (1967)
- Samuel R. Williamson *Austria-Hungary and the Coming of the First World War* (1990)
- Niall Ferguson *The Pity of War* (1999)

As was the case after soon after Versailles, historians attacked Fischer's new orthodoxy that placed the guilt squarely on Germany. Shortly after Fischer's thesis exploded onto the historical scene, Arno Mayer also argued against the tradition diplomatic balance of power story and stressed domestic forces leading to WWI. Mayer believed that post 18th century "revolutionary" periods were inappropriate to use the old diplomatic methodology as politicians were now held accountable by the public. Mayer diverges from Fischer when he advocates that all of Europe - not just Germany - was beset by domestic disturbances and in a pre-Revolutionary state as forces on both the extreme left and right where gaining power. All conservative European statesmen consciously used popular nationalism and edged closer to war to preserve their social systems from the rise of both socialist and protofascist groups. In this sense, Mayer sees World War I as a massive counter-revolution (so great because all of Europe viewed victory as the panacea for conservatism) designed to arrest the course of history. Mayer identified the Austrians as especially desperate for war, but spreads the blame through all major powers. Mayer's argument is probably overly ambitious and too generalized, but his point that diplomacy cannot be separated from its creators and the socio-political context which it originates is a sound observation that diplomatic historians often neglect.

Mayer was also on something identifying Austria as especially bellicose. Samuel R. Williamson picks up where Mayer left off and argues (correctly) that the Austrian role has been neglected; a curious oversight since the decision to wage war was Vienna's. This decision for war was a consequence of the erosion of caution in Hapsburg diplomacy. Convinced Serbian nationalism and Russian Balkan ambitions were disintegrating a monarchy comprised of 11 different nationalities, Austria-Hungary risked a world war hoping the Archduke's assassination would serve as a *Causa Belli* for a local war Vs. Serbia and German support would intimidate the Russians into backing down. Much of Williamson's book is devoted to domestic structures, particularly the interplay between external and domestic factors which shaped the Monarchy's decision making. In the end, this unique and convoluted political structure proved unable to deal with modern nationalism. Williamson's Austria is not the decrepit sinking power that is often portrayed - its multi-national subjects even proved loyal to the regime at the outbreak of war - but its leaders believed punishing the insolent Serbs was necessary for preserving their increasingly archaic multi-national system.

Niall Ferguson is difficult to categorize because rather than developing a coherent thesis, he is intent on refuting historical orthodoxies and antagonizing some of his contemporaries. I have placed him here because it is Ferguson's contention that there was an *anti*-militant sentiment within Germany (as evinced by lower armaments spending than the Entente members and rise of the SPD) and he places the onus for Armageddon solely on Great Britain - "nothing less than the *greatest* error in modern history". Ferguson's villain is Sir Edward Grey, who steered a British policy towards an anti-German slant that contradicted traditional interests. Germany's decision for war was a gamble based on weakness and its aims were fully compatible with London's interests. Rather than standing aside, Grey and a few connivers grossly misread German ambitions and plunged Britain into war in large part to save their own political skin. Ferguson's revisionism refutes the notion that militarism, imperialism, secret diplomacy, or the arms race - the main ingredients for the so called "powder keg" of Europe, made war inevitable. This, in addition to his derision of the Fischer thesis, is another compelling reason to fit Ferguson here. Ferguson goes as far to say the British intervention was not defensive, had the Germans not violated Belgian neutrality the British would have done so themselves. A number of scholars casually dismiss Ferguson's revisionism because it seems too far-fetched or methodological reasons (the Ludendorff Counterfactual draws particular ire), but having read the entire book it is the humble opinion of this observer there are too many trenchant points to simply discard *The Pity of War* and bury one's head in the sand as some historians so. So much for intellectual objectivity.

<http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~zeppelin/originsww1.htm>