

**To what extent was clause 231 of the Treaty of Versailles
1919 unfair towards Germany?**

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Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

The focus of this investigation will be "*To what extent was clause 231 of the Treaty of Versailles 1919 unfair towards Germany?*". The investigation includes and focuses on the perspectives of historians in relation to the question. This research question was chosen because of the impact the Treaty of Versailles is said to have on Europe. Two sources which were distinctly relevant were "The Origins of the First and Second World Wars" by Frank McDonough and "Germany's Aims in the First World War" by Fritz Fischer.

Source 1: McDonough, F. (2014). In The origins of the first and Second world wars (pp. 24–51). Cambridge University Press.

The Origins of the First and Second World Wars was written by Frank McDonough, who is a Senior Lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University. The source is a history textbook, which is a secondary source, and was published in 1997. The date might be considered a limit due to the information available at the time it was created. However, since the war guilt debate was most active during the 20th century there might not have been a significant revelation since then, as this mostly occurred after the time of both wars. The purpose of the source is to illustrate the perspectives of a significant historical event, the outbreak of World War I. The source was relevant to the research since it provided an insight into the debate related to the Treaty of Versailles. It helped devise an understanding of the different perspectives of historians. This was of great value as this was what the investigation consisted of, the different perspectives of historians in regards to the question if Germany was solely responsible for the First World War. There is not an obvious bias to the source since it includes perspectives from two different sides, therefore it is an interpretation that is balanced between different viewpoints. Furthermore, another value of the source is that it provides historical distance.

Source 2: Fischer, F. (1967). In *Germany's aims in the First World War. with introductions by Hajo Holborn and James Joll (p. 53ff).*, Norton.

Another source which was important to my research is *Germany's Aims in the First World War* by Fritz Fischer. Fischer is a German historian who argued that Germany's decision-makers had aggressive war aims in 1914 which they pursued throughout the war, which is what this specific work argues. The release of *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, or *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, sparked further debate and controversy when it came to the outbreak of the First World War. The source is a primary-source and the English translation, which is my source, was published in 1967. Due to it being written some decades after the war it has the benefit of historical distance, meaning it contains hindsight and reflection upon the war. The purpose of the source was for Fischer to present and communicate his view on who was responsible for the First World War. Fischer's thesis was a key part of changing the direction and approach to debating the First World War. Furthermore, it was also the first work from a German historian which outright pointed the finger at Germany. Even though Fischer himself is German it is clear that the source does not demonstrate any bias based on nationality as he himself chose to abandon blind loyalty to his nationality. Of course, it is biased in the sense that it argues for the fact that Germany was responsible for the war, meaning it lacks the perspective of an opposing side. Overall the source was useful to me since it provided an historians view which supported the argument that Germany was responsible for the First World War.

Section B: Investigation

Background

The Treaty of Versailles was signed by the Allied and Germany at the end of the First World War during the Paris Peace Conference. In September 1918 German Generals, von Ludendorff and von Hindenburg, decided that the best course of action for Germany was for a new democratic government, not the army, to negotiate peace terms¹. The Germans agreed to armistice in November 1918 because they believed it would be similar to the Fourteen Points outlined by American President Woodrow Wilson². The result of this decision was it helped grow the powerful myth that Germany's army was not defeated in battle³.

The official report on the origins of the war was written by the victorious powers and presented during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. This report makes Germany accept responsibility for the war and is emphasized with Article 231 which held Germany and its allies 'guilty' for starting the war. The German viewpoint of the Treaty was that the terms felt imposed not negotiated and felt treated like a defeated country⁴. Most Germans had little idea of the size of German defeat and believed because Germany had requested an armistice, a more lenient settlement would follow⁵. The psychological impact was significant since most Germans considered the treaty harsh and blamed it for the problems of the Weimar republic⁶.

The outbreak of the First World War is one of the most controversial and continuously debated subjects in history. German historian Fritz Fischer believed that the war was planned

¹McDonough, F., p. 45

²Evans, D., & Jenkins, J., p. 20

³McDonough, F., p. 45

⁴Brendon, V., p. 123

⁵McDonough, F., p. 50

⁶McDonough, F., p. 51

and launched by Germany with the aim of dominating Europe. Fischer's statement only furthered the discussion and debate.

Historian Fritz Fischer evoked a big reaction in connection to the debate after publishing *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1961), or *Germany's aims in the First World War* (1967). His work directed the main responsibility for World War I to Germany and focused on expansionist aims of the country during the war. It claims not only that Germany was prepared to launch the war in order to become a great power, but also that Germany encouraged Austria-Hungary to start a war with Serbia⁷, through the encouragement 'the sooner the better'⁸. Furthermore, the German ambassador of Austria, Tschitsky, was holding almost daily discussion on possible action against Serbia⁹. As the war set in motion, Fischer argues that Germany developed a clear set of aims which had been discussed before the war¹⁰, including gaining territory in central and eastern Europe. Fischer's foremost concern was the archives of the German leadership and on the aims of four key German leaders: the Kaiser, chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, foreign secretary Gottlieb von Jagow, and the chief of the army's general staff Helmuth von Moltke¹¹.

One of the most unique aspects of Fischer's thesis was the new evidence concerning the actions of Bethmann Hollweg. He was viewed as a responsible well-meaning liberal statesman surrounded by the military during the July Crisis¹². However, Fischer argued he was a main mover of German policy and a key figure of Germany's expansionist aims¹³.

⁷ McDonough, F., p. 26

⁸Fischer, F., p. 53

⁹Fischer, F., p. 57

¹⁰McDonough, F., p. 26

¹¹McDonough, F., p. 26

¹²McDonough, F., p. 27

¹³McDonough, F., p. 27

Fischer explains that the diaries of Bethmann Holloweg's secretary, Kurt Riezler, reveals how ready Holloweg was for war during the July crisis¹⁴.

Fischer's thesis triggered a large debate on German history. Fischer not only questioned the taboo built up over the decades by political regimes in Germany, but also broke the monopoly of knowledge held by conservative or slightly conservative-liberal historians¹⁵. Furthermore, his work gave rise to reactions because German responsibility for the war was now being pursued by a dependable and well-respected member of conventional diplomatic history¹⁶.

As when any new work is published among historians there were some who supported the thesis Fitcher had put forward. This included Immanuel Geiss, another German historian. Geiss believed that the long-term cause of World War I was German desire for Weltpolitik¹⁷. He described Weltpolitik as aggressive policy, which invited hostile reactions and an environment where peace could not be sustained¹⁸. Geiss insists that July 1914 was a logical climax of the German challenge to the situation in European relations¹⁹. Another historian with views which aligned with Fritz Fischer's was John Röhl. Röhl had acquired new evidence which reinforced the view that Germany was planning war and believed it developed after the Agadir Crisis of 1911, and caught pace during the period of the Balkan Wars²⁰. Röhl claims the German government was pursuing a pre-existing plan during the July Crisis, to either split the Triple Entente²¹ or to provoke a European war²².

¹⁴Fischer, F., p. 91

¹⁵Tierney, B., Kagan, D., & Williams, L. P., p. 53

¹⁶McDonough, F., p. 27

¹⁷McDonough, F., p. 29

¹⁸McDonough, F., p. 29

¹⁹McDonough, F., p. 29

²⁰McDonough, F., p. 29

²¹association between Great Britain, France, and Russia, the nucleus of the Allied Powers in World War I. Definition from Encyclopædia Britannica, inc

²²McDonough, F., p. 29

German historian Gerhard Ritter did not support Fischer's beliefs. The early critic of Fischer considered his work an act of national disloyalty. Ritter argues that Germany found itself in war through supporting Austria-Hungary and by allowing military planners to take a chance²³. He suggests that the German Government wanted to risk the threat of European war in order to gain a diplomatic victory but hoped it would not end in an actual fight²⁴. He proposed that the acts of July 1914 were a gamble gone very wrong.

The main critics of Fischer believe that German leaders desired a very limited, 'defensive war'. This view was developed by German historians Egmont Zechlin and Karl Erdmann. Their main argument, which is similar to Ritter's, urges that Bethmann Hollweg took a 'calculated risk' in July 1914 in order to gain diplomatic victory²⁵. Zechlin and Erdmann believe that the war was born of desperation and with no master plan for vast expansion, created to ensure survival of Germany as a major European power²⁶.

In 1930, American historian Sidney Fay published a study which argued that no European power wanted war in 1914 and must therefore share the blame²⁷. Fay held each power involved in the July Crisis aquatuable for the events outcome, and concluded that the idea of sole German guilt was flawed²⁸. Fay believes that conclusions can not be drawn from what motivated the leaders before the war, but instead judgements can be made based on what they did in the new situation which arose²⁹. Fay states how the Treaty of Versailles was fabricated by the victors under the influence of the blindness, ignorance, hatred and propagandist misconceptions to which the war had risen³⁰.

²³ McDonough, F., p. 28

²⁴ McDonough, F., p. 28

²⁵ McDonough, F., p. 29

²⁶ McDonough, F., p. 29

²⁷ McDonough, F., p. 24

²⁸ McDonough, F., p. 24

²⁹ Tierney, B., Kagan, D., & Williams, L. P., p. 42

³⁰ Sidney B. Fay, pp. 547-548

Historians that do not agree with Fritz Fischer are still willing to accept that Germany should take major responsibility for the war but reject his view that Germany was planning an aggressive expansion war³¹. They instead believe that German leaders were gambling on a localised European war with a swift Germany victory to be able to break free from diplomatic ‘encirclement’³². The new Weimar democracy was weakened by the treaty which created an opportunity for propaganda³³, and contributed to internal political difficulties. The treaty got in the way of inter-European cooperation and intensified the underlying issues³⁴. The consequences of the Treaty of Versailles are important to mention since even though historians might not agree on who should hold responsibility, it is still clear that the treaty did pave the way for the conflict of later decades.

In conclusion, clause 231, the ‘war guilt’ clause, of the Treaty of Versailles officially blames Germany for the First World War. The time after the war marked a period when historians started debating if this really was the case. The release of Fritz Fischer's work, which argues that Germany should take responsibility for the war, marked a new stir in debate. Some historians agree with Fischer and some do not. Even though there clearly exist two different schools of thought when it comes to the outbreak of the war, it is hard to deny the fact that all countries were in some way affected by the First World War and its legacy hung like a shadow over international relations in the years to come.

³¹McDonough, F., p. 29

³²McDonough, F., p. 29

³³Layton, G., p. 33

³⁴United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Section C: Reflection

The investigation regarding placing the responsibility and blame of the First World War on Germany and the debate which came along with the controversial Treaty of Versailles, has made me aware of the challenges historians face and their methods. Due to the many perspectives and beliefs when it came to the outbreak of the First World War, historians had to constantly back up their statements with evidence. As new evidence comes to light, such as when the Weimar Republic released new documents in order to try and prove its innocence, historians might realize that their view might be in need of an alteration. The withholding of knowledge and documents by some historians caused an imbalance. This was a challenge Fritz Fischer faced and overcame as he broke the monopoly of knowledge held by conservative or slightly conservative-liberal historians³⁵.

As I was researching the method I used to start with was looking for opinions and views of historians. The views of historians was a key part of my investigation, meaning it was important to find different ones which both agreed and disagreed with the fact that Germany should be held responsible for the war. Whenever I came across a historian's name I would take a note of it and their view. In the end I narrowed it down to the historians used. I found that this method gave me a better understanding of the different perspectives. A challenge I came across as I was conducting my investigation was what information to include in the background to demonstrate the historical context. There can be a lot said about the end of the First World War and the Peace Conference in Paris, the hard part was deciding what was relevant to include in my investigation.

Even though one is a student of history and the other a professional historian, in some way the methods and problems might cross paths. Neither I nor a historian can write about a

³⁵Tierney, B., Kagan, D., & Williams, L. P., p. 23

topic without backing it up with evidence. However, while historians might be using their own first hand research as evidence, I might use their research as my evidence. Although the same process of figuring out what's relevant and valuable is gone through. Furthermore, historians have to be ready for the response they will get when they release their work, as Fischer did when he released *Griff nach der Weltmacht*.

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