Historiography: the causes of the Great War

Responsibility for causing World War I was placed on the Central Powers by the Versailles settlement in 1919. In the war guilt clause of the Treaty of Versailles with Germany (Article 231), Germany had to accept responsibility as one of the aggressors. While the Treaty of Versailles was being drawn up by the victorious powers, the German Foreign Office was already preparing documents from their archives attempting to prove that all belligerent states were to blame. To this end, between 1922 and 1927 the Germans produced 40 volumes of documents backing up this claim.

Other governments felt the need to respond by producing their own volumes of archives. Britain published 11 volumes between 1926 and 1938, France its own version of events in 1936, Austria produced 8 volumes in 1930 and the Soviet Union brought out justificatory publications in 1931 and 1934. Germany's argument gained international sympathy in the 1920s and 1930s. There was a growing sentiment that the war had been caused by the failure of international relations rather than the specific actions of one country. Lloyd George, writing in his memoirs in the 1930s, explained that 'the nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war.'

S.B. Fay and H.E. Barnes were two American historians who, to some extent, supported the revisionist arguments put forward by Germany regarding the causes of World War I. Barnes argued in his 1927 book, The Genesis of the War, that Serbia, France and Russia were directly responsible for causing the war, that Austro-Hungarian responsibility was far less, and that least responsible were Germany and Britain. He supported this view by arguing that the Franco-Russian alliance became offensive from 1912, and their joint plans intended to manipulate any crisis in the Balkans to provoke a European war. Both countries decided that Serbia would be central to their war plans and early in 1914 officers in the Serbian General Staff plotted the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. The Russian and French motives for starting a European war were to attain their key objectives: the seizure of the Dardanelles Straits and the return of Alsace-Lorraine, which could only be realized through war.

An Italian historian, Luigi Albertini, wrote a thorough and coherent response to the revisionist argument in the 1940s. Albertini's argument focused on the responsibility of Austria-Hungary and Germany in the immediate term: Austria for the ultimatum to Serbia, and Germany for its 'naivety' in demanding a localized war. Overall, Germany was in his view fundamentally to blame, as it was clear that Britain could not have remained neutral in a war raging on the continent.

Fritz Fischer

In 1961, historian Fritz Fischer published Germany's Aims in the First World War; this was later translated into English. Fischer's argument focused responsibility back on Germany. He discovered a document called the 'September Programme' written by the German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg. This memorandum, which was dated 9 September 1914 (after war had started), set out Germany's aims for domination of Europe. Fischer claimed that the document proved that the ruling elite had always had expansionist aims and that a war would allow them to fulfill these. War would also consolidate their power at home and deal with the threat of socialism. Fischer went on to argue in another book that the War Council of 1912 proved that Germany planned to launch a continental war in 1914. At this War Council, von Moltke had commented that 'in my opinion war is inevitable and the sooner the better.'

Fischer's argument is persuasive, as he links longer-term policies from 1897 to short-term and immediate actions taken in the July Crisis. In short, he is able to explain why war began.

Given the tense world situation in 1914 - a condition for which Germany's world policy, which had already led to three dangerous crises [those of 1905, 1908 and 1911], was in no small measure responsible - any limited or local war in Europe directly involving one great power must inevitably carry with it the imminent danger of a general war. As Germany willed and coveted the Austro-Serbian war and, in her confidence in her military superiority, deliberately faced
the risk of a conflict with Russia and France, her leaders must bear a substantial share of the historical responsibility for the outbreak of a general war in 1914.

Fischer's arguments have been criticized in the following ways:

• Fischer argues 'backwards' from the German 'September war aims'. There is limited evidence to prove Germany had specific expansionist aims prior to September 1914. • The December War Council is also limited evidence; its importance is debatable as the imperial Chancellor was not present. • Fischer holds the domestic crisis in Germany as central to why war was triggered in 1914. However, Bethmann-Holweg dismissed war as a solution to the rise of socialism. • It could be argued that German policy lacked coherency in the decade before 1914.

• Fischer focuses too much on Germany; this leads to an emphasis on German actions and he neglects the role played by other powers.

After Fischer

Since Fischer's theses on German guilt, historians have continued to debate the degree of German responsibility. Conservative German historians such as Gerhard Ritter rejected Fischer's view in the 1960s, although Immanuel Geiss defended Fischer by publishing a book of German documents undermining the arguments of the revisionists of the 1920s. However, the majority of historians around the world now agree that Germany played a pivotal role in the events that led to war through their policy of Weltpolitik and their role in the July Crisis, though this was not necessarily as part of any set 'plan' as Fischer had argued.

'It has been widely asserted that German policy held the key to the situation in the summer of 1914 and that it was the German desire to profit diplomatically and militarily from the crisis which widened the crisis from an Eastern European one to a continental and world war' (Ruth Henig, The Origins of the First World War, 1993).

Other historians have stressed different issues in explaining the outbreak of war, however.

John Keegan

Military historian John Keegan focuses on the events of the July Crisis. He suggests that although there were long-term and short-term tensions in Europe) war was in fact not inevitable. In fact, war was unlikely due to the interdependence and cooperation necessary for the European economy, plus royal intellectual and religious links between the nations. The key to Keegan's theory is the lack of communication during the July Crisis. He highlights the fact that the Kaiser had 50 people advising him - mostly independent and jealous of one another: 'The Kaiser ... in the crisis of 1914 ... found that he did not understand the machinery he was supposed to control, panicked and let a piece of paper determine events.' Keegan suggests that had Austria-Hungary acted immediately) the war might have been limited to a local affair. It was Austria-Hungary's reluctance to act alone, and its alliance with Germany, that led to the escalation. No country used the communications available at the time, such as radio. Information was arriving fitfully, and was always 'incomplete'. The crisis that followed the expiration of the ultimatum to Serbia was not one that the European powers had expected and the key problem was that each nation failed to communicate its aims during the crisis:

• Austria-Hungary had wanted to punish Serbia, but lacked the courage to act alone. They did not want a general European war.

• Germany had wanted a diplomatic success that would leave its Austro-Hungarian ally stronger in European eyes. It did not want a general European war.
• Russia did not want a general European war, but had not calculated that support for Serbia would edge the danger of war closer.

• France had not mobilized, but was increasingly worried that Germany would mobilize against it.

On 25 July Britain only awoke to the real danger of the crisis and still hoped on 30 July that Russia would tolerate the punishment of Serbia. It would not, however, leave France in danger.

None of the European powers had communicated their objectives dearly in the July Crisis. Therefore, for Keegan it was the events of 31 July that were the turning point. The news of Russia's general mobilization and the German ultimatum to Russia and France made the issue one of peace or war. The Great Powers could step back from the brink, but a withdrawal would not be compatible with the status of each as a Great Power. The Serbs, a cause of the crisis in the first place, had been forgotten.

**Niall Ferguson**

In The Pity of War (2006), Niall Ferguson suggests that Germany was moving away from a militaristic outlook prior to World War 1, and highlights the increasing influence of Social Democrat Party there. The German Social Democrat Party was founded as a socialist party, with a radical agenda for Germany. By 1912 they had gained the most votes in the Reichstag and their influence increasingly alarmed the Kaiser's regime. Ferguson sees Britain as heavily implicated in the causes of war, particularly Sir Edward Grey who left it unclear as to whether Britain would intervene were Germany to attack. Britain misinterpreted German ambitions and decided to act to impede German expansionism. Ferguson does not see war as inevitable in 1914, despite the forces of militarism, imperialism and secret diplomacy.

**Document Analysis: Study the sources below. As you read, decide what factor each historian is stressing as the key cause for war.**

**Document A**

The First World War was not inevitable. Although it is essential to understand the underlying factors that formed the background to the July Crisis, it is equally essential to see how the immediate the crisis fit into this background in a particular, and perhaps unique, way. Europe was not a powder keg waiting to explode; one crisis did not lead necessarily to another in an escalating series of confrontations that made war more and more difficult to avoid. Europe had successfully weathered a number of storms in the recent past; the alliances were not rigidly fixed; the war plans were always being revised and need not necessarily come into play. It is difficult to imagine a crisis in the Far East, in North Africa or in the Mediterranean that would have unleashed the series of events that arose from the assassination in Sarajevo. The First World War was, in the final analysis, fought for the future of the near east; whoever won this struggle would, it was believed, be in a position to dominate all of Europe. Germany and her ally made the bid for control; Russia and her allies resolved to stop them.

From Gordon Martel, The Origins of the First World War, 1987
Document B

{For Germany}... war seemed to offer... a solution to both domestic and foreign antagonisms. And if that war could be made appealing to all sections of the population as a war against Tsarist Russia most certainly would be, even to ardent socialists~ then so much the better. There can be no doubt that German leaders were prepared for war in 1914 and exploited the crisis of June-July 1914 to bring it about. .. Just as the Germans sought to increase their power, so Britain and France sought to contain it, by military means if necessary. In this sense it could be argued that both powers fought to try to restore the balance of power to Europe.

Countries went to war because they believed that they could achieve more through war than by diplomatic negotiation and that if they stood aside their status as great powers would be gravely affected.

From Ruth Henig, The Origins of the First World War, 1993

Document C

It used to be held that the system of alliances was in itself sufficient explanation for the outbreak of war, that the very existence of two camps made war inevitable sooner or later. But this approach has, for two reasons, an over-simple appreciation of the individual alliances. In the first place, the primary purpose of the alliances was defensive... Second, the way that war actually broke out bore little relation to treaty obligations... There were, however, two ways in which the alliances did affect international relations and contribute to the growth of tension in Europe in the decade before 1914. First, they provided the links across which crises could spread from peripheral areas like North Africa and the Balkans to the major powers themselves. Normally, the dangers were seen and the connections cut; hence the Moroccan crises were allowed to fizzle out. But, as the sequence of events after Sarajevo showed only too clearly, the means existed where by a local conflict could be transformed into a continental war. Second, the alliances had a direct bearing in the arms race and the development of military schedules.