

Critically assess why historians disagreed on the causes of the First World War.

Everything the statesman creates is perishable, and in the long run, every decision is wrong. If it were otherwise, we would have no "history". (Golo Mann)

Since the First World War seems to be a turning point in world history, the causes of the war and the question of who is responsible have been discussed by many historians all over the world. By this means different points of view have been formulated and published. Radical opinions, like Fritz Fischer's in the 1960's, were seen as very controversial in contrast to Erich Brandenburg's contemporary point of view. Nevertheless, there is also a large area of agreement within the historian community. Historians agree that nationalism, the conflicts of economic imperialism and the accumulation of armaments as well as the rigid system of the alliances inclined Europe towards war. The murderer of Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo can be seen as the final straw for this sudden break down of a system that had preserved peace for over a century.

The two most controversial opinions about the origins of the Great War can be found in Germany's role at the beginning of the war and in the causes of the dysfunctions of the international political system and the mistakes and miscalculations of foreign policy actors. If historians critically look at Germany's actions in June and July 1914, they agree that Germany had a lasting effect on Austria's decisions. Germany left the final choice to the Monarchy but advised her to act at once and encouraged this by passing the "blank cheque". Wilhelm II "would regret it if we (Austria-Hungary) let this present chance, which was so favourable to us, go by without utilizing it,"¹ and "stated most emphatically that Berlin expected the Monarchy to act against Serbia..."² Germany believed that "we are ready (for war), and the sooner it comes, the better for us."³ In contrast to Germany's ambition,

¹ F. Fischer, Germany's Aims in the First World War pp. 50 – 92 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 59.

² F. Fischer, Germany's Aims in the First World War pp. 50–92 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 62.

³ F. Fischer, Germany's Aims in the First World War pp. 50–92 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 55.

Austria-Hungary wanted to keep the status quo to preserve their illusion of a Great united power.

Fritz Fischer declared in his book Germany's Aims in the First World War that Germany pressured Austria to formulate the ultimatum to Serbia of such severity that it would hardly be possible for any government to concede it. Although "the whole world understands that this ultimatum means war"⁴ Serbia yielded and agreed to almost all of the requirements. Nevertheless Austria had begun to mobilize in expectation of a negative answer and Germany took the view that, "a moment so favourable from military point of view might never occur again"⁵. It was for this reason that Germany did not follow Grey's urgent appeal to use its influence on Austria to accept Serbia's answer and consequently prevent European war.

In the same way all the great powers assumed that a localization of the conflict in Serbia would be difficult. The Riezler diary proved that Bethmann-Hollweg was truly aware that any action by Austria against Serbia might lead to a European war. Although Russia clearly declared that it would assist Serbia if attacked by Austria, Germany and Austria supposed that Russia was not militarily prepared and would decide against war. This as well as the assumption that Britain would keep neutral should be guaranteed with the "policy of localization"⁶. These two suppositions were probably the most serious miscalculations of the Entente's politicians. When the news about the general mobilization of Russia arrived, the Emperor proclaimed "state of imminent threat of war"⁷. After receiving an unsatisfied reply to their ultimatum, Germany answered with counter-mobilization and finally war broke out.

In Fischer's point of view the responsibilities of all great powers were not all the same. In his opinion, Germany forced Austria to revive and solve the Balkan conflict. To underline this view, Fischer quotes Josef Baernreither who states that "Germany seized her opportunity and made an Austrian grievance her signal for action"⁸. Germany also tried to make Russia responsible for the outbreak of the war because they had first mobilized. Furthermore in Fischer's radical point of view Germany was

⁴ Lichnowsky memoir in the German White Book Concerning the Responsibilities of the Authors of the War pp 15-21 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The outbreak of the First World War: Who Was Responsible? (Boston, 1963) p. 2.

⁵ Moltke in F. Fischer, Germany's Aims in the First World War pp. 50-92 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 65.

⁶ Bethmann Hollweg in F. Fischer, Germany's Aims in the First World War pp. 50-92 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 65.

⁷ F. Fischer, Germany's Aims in the First World War pp. 50-92 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 90.

⁸ F. Fischer, Germany's Aims in the First World War pp. 50-92 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 93.

pursuing an aggressive policy inspired by its economic interests. In his opinion Germany was pursuing this policy from about 1900 to the Second World War and he also accused Germany of having a September programme in order to achieve world power and that Germany had been long preparing for war.⁹

The more contemporary views after the end of the war until the outbreak of the 2nd World War were different. At that time the war guilt question amongst historians was being regarded as one thing leading to another and that the great powers decided and acted responsibly. Especially the German historian Erich Brandenburg emphasized that Germany could only be blamed for its “short-sightedness, lack of method, want of forethought” and that they only had “underestimated the dangers of that policy”¹⁰. The retrieval of Alsace-Lorraine by the French, the opening of the way to the straits and the control of the Balkans wished by Russia were more often declared as direct causes for World War One than the aggressive policy of Germany. For Erich Brandenburg, the Russian mobilization was the direct cause of the war. The Franco-German rivalry concerning Alsace-Lorraine and the Austria-Russia struggle for the leading position in the Balkans supported this acute political tension.¹¹

In addition national self-determination has played another important role in the debate. The murder of Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo was a chance for Austria-Hungary to revive the Balkan question and reappear as a great power with the help of its ally Germany. This murder offered Austria the opportunity to rouse public opinion in a war and to subdue the rising Nationalism at last. The declaration of war on Serbia was decisive; everything else followed from this. Whereas Fischer illustrated that Austrian policy was fundamentally peacefully oriented and that only through the great pressure by Berlin finally war broke out¹², many other historians argue that Austria was more to blame. “This was Austria’s war,”¹³ accentuated Joachim Remark and he clearly declared that the ultimatum was an “appalling

⁹ F. Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* pp. 50-92 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) pp. 55-97.

¹⁰ E. Brandenburg, *From Bismarck to the World War* pp. 518-523, cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The outbreak of the First World War: Who Was Responsible? (Boston, 1963) p. 8.

¹¹ E. Brandenburg, *From Bismarck to the World War* pp. 518-523, cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The outbreak of the First World War: Who Was Responsible? (Boston, 1963) p. 10.

¹² G. Ritter, ‘Eine neue Kriegsschuldthese?’ in *Historische Zeitschrift* 194 (1962), pp 657 – 668 cited in D.E. Lee (ed.) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 99.

¹³ J. Remark, ‘1914 – The third Balkan war: Origins Reconsidered’ in *Journal of Modern History* 43 (1971), p. 353-366 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 144.

document – tardy, incompetent, deceptive and designed to be rejected”¹⁴. But what alternative did the Habsburg Monarchy have? Austria-Hungary needed a Balkan war in order to survive; otherwise the drive for self-determination in the Balkans would finally destroy the Habsburg Empire.

For many years historians have endeavoured to resolve these questions and many different points of view found their protectionists. So despite many intensive debates consistency could not be found, but why? On the one hand historians have not had access to all primary sources. Although Germany published a huge collection of documents soon after the war, historians had to prove if the documents were authentic and complete or if “guilty” Germany tried to influence the common opinion. Furthermore France, Italy and Russia held back with their records and so a global view was difficult in the early stages of research. On the other hand the nationality and the personality of the historians as well as the use of individual research and analysis methods influenced these various opinions. If historians analyse documents under different attitudes and expectations variable point of views are the obvious result.

Earlier historians, like Erich Brandenburg, laid their focus on studying the international system as a whole whereas the trend in the 1960’s focused on particular national situations and their domestic problems. Fritz Fischer, for instance, reopened the discussion concerning the origins of the Great War in 1961 with Der Griff nach der Weltmacht and drew a close with Krieg der Illusionen in 1969. During this time period many Historians tried to find new answers as to whether Germany’s policy had to be understood as aggressive or defensive.

In contrary to Fischer’s manner American scientists considered war plans, intelligence and armaments. The latest trends went so far as to look into topics such as nationalism, economic integration and cultural determinations of power politics.¹⁵ Other Historians wanted to strike out into new directions and rated the causes differently. Arno J. Mayer called more attention to the domestic causes and advised historians to take into consideration the internal disturbances that had influenced the decisions of the involved governments¹⁶. In the Article ‘The Third Balkan War’ by

¹⁴ J. Remark, ‘1914 – The third Balkan war: Origins Reconsidered’ in Journal of Modern History 43 (1971), p. 353-366 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 143.

¹⁵ D. Stevenson, The Outbreak of the First World War: 1914 in Perspective, (London, 1997) p.41.

¹⁶ A.J. Mayer, ‘Domestic Causes of the First World War’, from The Responsibility of Power: Historical Essays in Honor of Hajo Holborn by Leonard Krieger and Fritz Stern pp. 286-293 cited in D.E. Lee

Joachim Remak the question of Austria's war guilt instead of Germany's was emphasized once more¹⁷. Gerhard Ritter takes a similar view when he declares that Austria was requesting support in Berlin and he furthermore blamed Austria for its "disastrous diplomacy – and strategy – as lame as it was frivolous and insincere in the decisive weeks"¹⁸. The historian John Keegan judged that Fischer's work, "though causing outrage in Germany at the time of their publication remain essential texts" and he wrote that "Germany had wanted a diplomatic success that would leave its Austrian ally stronger in European eyes, it had not wanted war"¹⁹. On the contrary Niall Ferguson emphasized in his Pity of War that for him the origins are clear. He states, "in the face of mounting military capacity on the part of their potential adversaries, the rulers of Germany decided to act first"²⁰. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson criticized in the *Contemporary History Journal* both The Pity of War by Ferguson and The First World War by Keegan.²¹

Following this line of arguments historians have not found consistency yet. The orthodox view, which shows collective responsibility, gets outdated by Fischer's view, which blames Germany as the aggressor. The historian Ritter instead blames the ally system. In addition also many other views exist, which analyse Germany's aggressive or defensive policy. Fortunately historians differ over various important historical events. Although this means that various solutions are possible and a true one does not really exist. This implies at least that the whole process remains flexible and is open for new and revolutionary discoveries. So let the discussions move on...

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(ed.) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) pp. 127–134.

¹⁷ J. Remark, '1914 – The third Balkan war: Origins Reconsidered' in *Journal of Modern History* 43 (1971), p. 353-366 cited in D.E. Lee (ed) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) pp. 142–147.

¹⁸ G. Ritter, 'Eine neue Kriegsschuldthese?' in *Historische Zeitschrift* 194 (1962), pp 657–668 cited in D.E. Lee (ed.) The Outbreak of the First World War: Causes and Responsibilities (Lexington, 1975) p. 99.

¹⁹ R. Prior and T. Wilson, 'The First World War', Journal of Contemporary History 35/2 (2000), pp. 321-322.

²⁰ R. Prior and T. Wilson, 'The First World War', Journal of Contemporary History 35/2 (2000), p. 323.

²¹ R. Prior and T. Wilson, 'The First World War', Journal of Contemporary History 35/2 (2000), pp. 319 – 328.

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