Liberty University

Wrongfully Accused

Germany and the Origins of World War I

A Thesis Submitted to

the Department of History

by

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Abstract

By examining the events that led to the outbreak of the First World War, one can determine whether any one nation was responsible for starting the war or failed to exercise its ability to prevent it. The origins of The First World War have seen no shortage of attention from historians in the hundred-plus years since its conclusion. Nevertheless, none have successfully presented a case that explains how what should have been a relatively minor diplomatic crisis transformed into the First World War. Instead, the traditional stance of blaming Germany for the war has been the de facto argument since the Treaty of Versailles included the "War Guilt" clause.

Several historians, especially in recent years, have presented credible alternative theories that claim the blame lies with the other powers such as Russia or Britain. However, modern historians collectively fail to supplant Germany as the bearer of responsibility because they narrow the scope of their research only to documents and sources that support their arguments while marginalizing or ignoring contrary sources. However, by breaking down each theory and analyzing them side-by-side, it becomes evident that combining the most substantial arguments from each approach makes a universally compatible narrative emerge.

Statement of Purpose

Few events in recent centuries have shaped the modern world as significantly as World War I. The events that devasted Europe between 1914 and 1918 are simultaneously the most researched and the least understood events of the modern era. Like a riddle wrapped in an enigma. Therein lies the fascination that the events of World War I offer. It represents an insurmountable challenge that begs to be taken on. The fact that more than a hundred years have passed and so much remains to be explored demonstrates how important it is to keep asking questions, even of the most recent and compelling of arguments.

I am never one to back away from a challenge, and performing research into World War I represented the ultimate challenge. Throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies, World War I stood out as an event in history where every answer opens up two more questions. It drew me in instantly and I have been enthralled ever since. I believed that the most important thing was not to assume that the answers provided are correct or complete, and that it is important to keep asking questions. I am proud to say that by asking the questions I started with, I have discovered more questions to answer and I plan to continue following the path I have started.

Dedication

I wish to express my appreciation to my thesis director, Dr. Martin Catino, and all of my professors who have provided me with guidance, encouragement, and the support that was instrumental to my success. Additionally, I would like to thank Liberty University for the opportunity to complete my studies while serving on active duty and being deployed to remote regions around the world.

Most importantly, I want to thank my loving and patient wife, Amanda, my incredible son, James, and the rest of my family. Thank you for giving me the strength and support to see this through to the finish line.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction and Historiography 1

Chapter 2. German War Guilt 22

Chapter 3. The Centennial 48

Chapter 4. Analysis 69

Conclusion 86

Bibliography 93

Illustrations

1. "War Declared By All!," 3
2. From the founding of Prussia to the end of the German Empire. 22
3. Map of Germany Divided According to the Treaty of Paris and the Acts of the Congress of Vienna 25
4. Prussia and the German States 28
5. Creation of the German Empire (1866-1871) 30
6. Mitteleuropa: Territorial Gains Proposed under the September Programme 43
7. The causes of the First World War set out like a bonfire. 49
8. The July Crisis of 1914. 70
9. Political Cartoon of the July Crisis 91

Chapter 1

Introduction and Historiography

On 28 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary, heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated by Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip during a state visit to Sarajevo. Over the next five weeks, now known as the July Crisis, diplomacy failed, Germany pledged their unwavering support to Austria-Hungary, and Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Russia mobilized its army on Germany and Austria's eastern border in response, forcing Germany's hand. On 1 August, Germany declared war on Russia, followed by France two days later. Honoring its treaty obligations, Britain declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary on 4 August. Russia formally declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary on 7 August. Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire joined the war three months later, dividing Europe between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) and the Entente Powers (France, Britain, and Russia) as it plunged into the First World War.

Everything stated above is technically correct regarding the start of the First World War. It summarizes what many will still find in academic textbooks and classroom lectures. However, it utterly fails to convey how incredibly complex the situation became in such a short period and resulted in a war that nearly wiped out an entire generation of Europeans. Many history books covering twentieth-century Europe shy away from going in-depth on World War I in favor of performing a deeper dive into World War II. This is understandable. By comparison, World War II is more straightforward. The belligerents and victims of aggression were easy to identify, their motivations were obvious and well documented, and there is no doubt who was responsible for starting the war. It is not as easy to answer these questions about World War I. How can blame

be assigned for being the instigator of the war when every belligerent nation can make a reasonable claim that they were only acting in self-defense?

With the unification of Italy in 1870 and Germany in 1871, other underrepresented groups within the multi-ethnic Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Empires experienced the same rise in nationalism. They began pushing for the formation of their sovereign states. One such group was the South Slavs, who were dispersed throughout the Balkan region of Eastern Europe, most of whom were under the control of Austria-Hungary. Several radical groups, such as the Black Hand and Young Bosnia, participated in political assassinations to achieve their aims. Both groups are believed to be connected to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife during their visit to Sarajevo in 1914, which precipitated the July Crisis.[1]

Austria-Hungary saw the opportunity to rid themselves of the troublesome South Slavs and sent Serbia an ultimatum with ten demands and a 48-hour deadline. Historians generally agree that Austria-Hungary intentionally made their demands so extreme that Serbia would never agree to all of them.[2] Knowing that Russia took a strong interest in Balkan affairs, before sending their ultimatum, Austria-Hungary received assurance from Germany of their full support in the infamous "Blank Check." Austria-Hungary then aggressively moved forward with its plans to attack Serbia. Austria-Hungary falsely assumed that Russia would choose to stay out of the conflict rather than support the nation that had just committed state-sponsored regicide. When Russia ordered a total mobilization of their military, Germany acted quickly by attacking France

[1] Richard Ned Lebow, "What Can International Relations Theory Learn from the Origins of World War I?," *International Relations* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 399–400, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117814556157.

[2] Michael S. Neiberg, Interview with Michael Neiberg, interview by the author, Personal Interview, November 19, 2021.

through Belgium. The violation of Belgium's sovereignty and treaty obligation to come to France's defense prompted Britain to declare war on Germany.[3]


WAR DECLARED BY ALL

AUSTRIA DECLARES WAR ON SERBIA DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY DECLARES WAR ON FRANCE DECLARES WAR ON TURKEY DECLARES WAR ON RUSSIA DECLARES WAR ON BULGARIA DECLARES WAR ON BRITAIN

OTTOMAN EMPIRE ALMOST DECLARES WAR ON ITSELF

NATIONS STRUGGLE TO REMEMBER ALLIES

Illustration 1. "War Declared By All!," *The Onion*, August 5, 1914.

The speed with which things developed and the lack of diplomatic intervention shocked the world. Over the previous two decades, several diplomatic crises lasted anywhere from six to thirteen months. In each crisis, the other powers successfully intervened and mediated a resolution that avoided war. One can see the shock over how rapidly things escalated by the satirical headline printed in the 5 August 1914 edition of The Onion. "WAR DECLARED BY ALL. Austria Declares War on Serbia Declares War on Germany Declares War on France Declares War on Turkey Declares War on Russia Declares War on Bulgaria Declares War on

[3] John Keiger, "Thinking the Causes of World War I," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 1 (2014): 52.

Britain. Ottoman Empire Almost Declares War on Itself."[4] The war lasted five years and took a devastating toll on an entire generation of Europeans.

After the war, Germany was forced to accept full responsibility for the war and make considerable concessions, including a loss of territory, a reduction in military forces, and significant reparation payments to the Allied powers. Article 231, the infamous "war guilt clause," declared, "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."[5] In the hundred years since the treaty's signing, historians have repeatedly analyzed the events that led to the start of the war to determine whether Germany deserved the blame forced upon it and, if not, which of the other belligerent nations did. However, with so many political and military leaders throughout Europe making rash decisions, no single country is responsible for plunging Europe into the First World War. Therefore, if historians insist on assigning blame, there is plenty to go around.

Though traditionally, Germany has taken the lion's share of the blame, mainly due to the "war guilt" clause in the Treaty of Versailles, it was not until the 1960s that honest discussion over Germany's guilt began. The debate started with the publication of German historian Fritz Fischer's book *Germany's Aims in the First World War*. Fischer linked Germany's imperial ambitions and belligerent tendencies with the July Crisis to support his argument that Germany

[4] "War Declared By All!," *The Onion*, August 5, 1914, https://www.theonion.com/august-5-1914-1819588242.

[5] "Treaty of Versailles," June 28, 1919, pt. Article 231, https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/lltreaties//lltreaties-ustbv002/lltreaties-ustbv002.pdf.

used the crisis as a pretense for its bid for world power.[6] Fischer's argument has remained the dominant explanation ever since. However, several books have emerged in the past decade that challenge Fischer's conclusions. Moreover, these new theories and arguments are bolstered by the increasing access to German government documents that became available in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

World War I was the seminal event that defined twentieth-century Europe. Though connections between World War I and World War II are easy to make, the impact of World War I goes much further. Not only did it shape the thinking of the decision-makers of World War II, but it created the circumstances that led to the Russian Revolution and placed Europe in a state of heightened military tensions that lasted for nearly three-quarters of a century. The only way to fully understand any aspect of Europe in the twentieth century is to understand World War I. Additionally, lessons learned from analyzing the events that led to World War I are relevant today as tensions continue to mount in several regions worldwide. Parallels are regularly drawn between the state of the European powers in the decade before the war and US-China relations today.[7] Few events in modern history have had such a broad and long-lasting impact as the First World War.

Historians have used several different approaches in their quest to answer how the war began. These approaches range from contextualizing the war as a Third Balkan War that got out of hand to an aggressive and militaristic Germany that was eager for the opportunity to assert

[6] Fritz Fischer, Hajo Holborn, and James Joll, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).

[7] John H. Maurer, "A Rising Power & the Coming of a Great War," *Orbis* 58, no. 4 (September 17, 2014): 500–501, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2014.08.004.

itself as a World Power.[8] They also are divided between the historians who believe that Europe at the dawn of the twentieth century was a powder keg waiting to go off and those who point to specific events that indicate the decline of political tensions and militarism in the first decade of the twentieth century. Each approach has yielded new revelations and insights to the start of the war yet fail to satisfy the community's desire to find the definitive answer.

As soon as war broke out in Europe, all the belligerent nations rushed to publish their "color book," an official collection of diplomatic correspondences to promote and justify the government's position on an event. For the British, this was the Blue Book;[9] Russians had the Orange Book;[10] Germany the White Book;[11] Austria-Hungary the Red Book;[12] and so on. In 1919, immediately after the war, these "color books" were combined with other essential documents and published by Francis Halsey as *The Literary Digest History of the World War*.[13] It would remain the most comprehensive single work on the First World War for nearly half a century.

From Halsey's and other early First World War scholars' work arose the most enduring yet controversial model for explaining the cause of the war: M.A.I.N. The acronym M.A.I.N. stands for Militarism, Alliances, Imperialism, and Nationalism. The dissolution of the Holy

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[8] Joachim Remak, "1914--The Third Balkan War: Origins Reconsidered," *The Journal of Modern History* 43, no. 3 (1971): 354–55.

[9] "The British Blue Book," in *The Times Documentary History of the War* (London [The Times Pub. Co.], 1917), 25–222, http://archive.org/details/timesdocumentary01londuoft.

[10] *The Russian Orange Book*, 1914, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Russian_Orange_Book.

[11] Germany Auswärtiges Amt, *The German White-Book: Authorized Translation. Documents Relating to the Outbreak of the War, with Supplements* (Liebheit & Thiesen, 1914).

[12] "Austro-Hungarian Red Book: Official English Edition, With an Introduction," *The American Journal of International Law* 9, no. 4 (1915): 309–413, https://doi.org/10.2307/2212216.

[13] Francis Whiting Halsey, The Literary Digest History of the World War, 1919.

Roman Empire and the formation of the German Empire in the previous century dramatically changed the balance of power throughout Europe. Scholars pointed to Germany's aggressive moves to assert itself as a significant power, expand its influence, and establish overseas colonies as essential factors that helped destabilize Europe. Combining those moves by Germany, along with the Imperial interest of the other powers, with the Triple Alliance and Triple Entente, the battle lines became visible years before the war. Finally, proponents of the M.A.I.N. model argued that the rise in German nationalism was the final component that made the war inevitable. Though the M.A.I.N. model has received near-constant criticism from all sides, it continues to be the simplest and most taught explanation for the start of the war. Fundamentally, the M.A.I.N. model asserts that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was just the convenient excuse needed.[14]

The M.A.I.N. model's heavy focus on Germany reinforced the German War Guilt approach. German War Guilt is rooted in the "War Guilt" clause in the Treaty of Versailles, which forced Germany to accept absolute responsibility for the war and pay heavy reparations to the Allied nations. After the Second World War, there was a renewed interest in examining the causes of both wars to prevent such significant forces of destruction from occurring again. However, when looking back through the lens of post-World War II Europe, historians were too willing to accept that Germany was the instigator of the devastating conflict. Historian Isabella Massey presented this argument as early as 1949 when she explained that though the Austria-Hungarian military leadership had long pressed for war against the South Slavs, it was only when Germany urged them to go to war in 1914 that Austria-Hungary became so bold. Had Germany

[14] *Causes of WWI - Michael Neiberg*, WWI Changed Us Webinar Series, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9xPQWKiQYE.

restrained them, as they had done in previous crises, Austria-Hungary would have accepted a diplomatic solution.[15]

The first significant endeavor to justify German War Guilt came from the German historian Fritz Fischer. Starting his research in the 1950s, Fischer examined all newly available documents related to the First World War in the German Imperial archives. In 1961, he published his findings in his book *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918*, which he subsequently published in English under the title *Germany's Aims in the First World War*.[16] In what became known as the Fischer Thesis, Fischer concluded that Germany used the July Crisis as an excuse to act on long-developed war plans against France and Russia and make Germany the dominant European world power.

Fischer is not alone in this conclusion. Fellow German historian Gerhard Ritter made a similar argument in his four-volume study *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk*, translated into English and republished in 1969 as *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in* Germany.[17] Also published in 1969, Fischer's second book, *War of Illusions*, reinforced his original argument and asserted that Germany's Imperial ambition drove its aggressive foreign policy.[18] So widely accepted was Fischer's Thesis that American historian Klaus Epstein wrote in his review of *Germany's Aims in the First World War* that Fischer had rendered all other work in

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[15] Isabella M. Massey, "The Diplomatic Origins of the First World War," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 25, no. 2 (1949): 185, https://doi.org/10.2307/3017380.

[16] Fritz Fischer, Hajo Holborn, and James Joll, Germany's Aims in the First World War (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).

[17] Klaus Hildebrand and David T. Zabecki, "The Sword and the Scepter: The Powers and the European System before 1914," in *The Schlieffen Plan*, ed. Hans Ehlert, Michael Epkenhans, and Gerhard P. Gross, International Perspectives on the German Strategy for World War I (University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 17–42, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qhkwc.5.

[18] Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914*, trans. Marian Jackson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

the field obsolete.[19] Throughout the 1970s, most historians hunted for ways to bolster Fischer's argument. This led to Imanuel Geiss's 1976 book *German Foreign Policy, 1871-1914.* Geiss follows Fischer's lead by arguing in favor of Germany's aggressive foreign policies but extends his research back to the formation of the German Empire in 1871. In doing so, Geiss claimed that German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's policies were responsible for creating Germany's situation at the dawn of the twentieth century.[20] To this day, Fischer's Thesis continues to dominate the debate among World War I historians.

Though the events immediately after World War II are most associated with the emergence of the Cold War, the Cold War shares an equally close relationship with the outcome of World War I. World War I radically altered the trajectory of Europe. Countless books and articles discuss how it created the conditions for World War II, gave birth to the Soviet Union, and placed Europe in a state of pseudo-war for the bulk of the twentieth century. Additionally, there is a direct correlation between heightened Cold War tensions and a surge in research into the origins of World War I.

As the Cold War tensions increased in the 1960s, so did the interest in solving the riddle of the origins of World War I. Despite Franz's widely accepted argument, there were still prominent dissenting opinions, such as those presented by the military and diplomatic historian Leonard Charles Frederick Turner. Turner cautioned his colleagues against focusing too much on Germany and ignoring external factors.[21] Turner is also the first to offer up Russia as an

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[19] Klaus Epstein, "Review: German War Aims in the First World War," *World Politics* 15, no. 1 (October 1962): 170.

[20] Imanuel Geiss, *German Foreign Policy, 1871-1914* (London; Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

[21] L. C. F. Turner, "The Russian Mobilization in 1914," *Journal of Contemporary History* 3, no. 1 (1968): 65.

alternative, arguing that the general mobilization of the Russian military prompted Germany's aggressive response. [22] This argument has recently reemerged in the research of historian Sean McMeekin.

In the 1980s, the Cold War would once again stoke the fires of intrigue as historians looked to the past to prevent disaster in the present. Increased rhetoric on both sides of the "Iron Curtain" prompted a complete re-evaluation of previously held beliefs, particularly on concepts such as the "Cult of the Offensive," the phenomenon of adopting offensive military strategies as official policy, and its impact on nuclear warfare in the modern era.[23] Steven Van Evera and Jack Snyder addressed the "Cult of the Offensive" in separate articles written in 1984. Evera pointed to the spread of this philosophy throughout Europe in the decades before the war as magnifying the crisis.[24] According to Evera, military leaders believed the attacker held a significant advantage during warfare. This influenced the decisions of the belligerents, resulting in their disproportionately aggressive military actions.[25] When understood within the context of when Evera was writing this article, one can see how it serves as an argument against first-strike scenarios between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Snyder is considerably more overt in drawing his parallel between 1914 and 1984. He harshly criticized the offensive military tactics employed by both sides during the war, blaming them for the extreme devastation that was left behind. He further emphasized that the more

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[22] Turner, 79–80.

[23] Jack Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," *International Security* 9, no. 1 (1984): 112, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538637.

[24] Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security* 9, no. 1 (1984): 58, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538636.

[25] Van Evera, 58–63.

aggressive the nation, Germany, the worse it suffered in the aftermath.[26] Snyder argued that by 1914, military strategy heavily favored the defender. Frustrated that the superpowers continued to develop offensive military strategies, Snyder then applied the same argument to the Cold War doctrine of mutually assured destruction. He insisted those strategies would only increase tensions and promote further instability.[27] Many other historians wrote similar articles during this period criticizing the first-strike mentality and asked questions such as whether political leaders could have acted to prevent the escalation.[28] Finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the decade prompted historians to look at the balance of power in pre-WWI Europe and suggest that a shift in that balance created the instability that resulted in the war.[29]

There are two prime motivators in the final round of research into the origins of World War I. First, the war's centennial anniversary brought renewed interest in the war itself as a general topic. Second, the past decade has seen a sharp rise in tensions between the United States and China, prompting concern that a new type of Cold War is brewing. Though political talking points label the competitive relationship between the two nations in terms of trade rather than militaristic, a recent article in the New York Times hints at there being more similarities than differences in the relationship between the United States and China now and the Cold War

[26] Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," 108–9.

[27] Snyder, 111–12.

[28] Samuel R. Williamson, "The Origins of World War I," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1988): 795–818, https://doi.org/10.2307/204825; Scott D. Sagan, "1914 Revisited: Allies, Offense, and Instability," *International Security* 11, no. 2 (1986): 151–75, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538961; John W. Langdon, "Emerging from Fischer's Shadow: Recent Examinations of the Crisis of July 1914," *The History Teacher* 20, no. 1 (1986): 63–86, https://doi.org/10.2307/493177.

[29] Peter Gellman, "The Elusive Explanation: Balance of Power 'Theory' and the Origins of World War I," *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 2 (1989): 163–64.

relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union.[30] Not surprisingly, historians are once again looking at the origins of World War I for new insight into averting a significant conflict. Despite being incredibly complicated, it is evident that the academic community still looks to World War I for lessons in foreign policy and diplomacy.

Dr. Michel Neiberg, a Professor of History at the Army War College and one of the foremost experts on twentieth-century military history, is often heard saying that the only thing World War I historians can agree on is, "Get your flu shot!"[31] This playful allegory of the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918 is commonly associated with World War I. However, the fact that historians cannot agree on much else about World War I is evident by the sheer number of alternative theories that have emerged in recent decades that challenge the status quo.

In the half-century after Fischer's book was published, few historians have mounted a significant challenge to his conclusions. By the 1980s, the discussion shifted away from German war guilt, already widely accepted throughout the academic community. Instead, it focused on the inevitability of war in the early twentieth century. This new narrative was a central theme in a long list of books, such as the 1981 *Germany in the Age of Total War* and continuing through the 1990s with David G. Herrmann's *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (1995) and *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War* (1991).[32] A new explanation

[30] Paul Mozur and Steven Lee Myers, "Caught in 'Ideological Spiral,' U.S. and China Drift Toward Cold War," *New York Times*, July 14, 2020, https://www.cnas.org/press/in-the-news/caught-in-ideological-spiral-u-s-and-china-drift-toward-cold-war.

[31] Michael S. Neiberg, "Lessons from 1918: Get a Flu Shot, Wash Your Hands," accessed December 7, 2021, https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/special-series/covid-19/spanish-flu/.

[32] Volker R. Berghahn, *Germany in the Age of Total War* (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1981); David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691015958/the-arming-of-europe-and-the-making-of-the-first-world-war; Steven E. Miller, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Stephen Van Evera, eds., *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War*, Revised edition (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1991).

emerged with each book that detailed the conditions that set the stage for a significant conflict. Though the basis of their arguments differed, they all led to the same conclusion that the war was inevitable. However, it would be another decade and the centennial anniversary of the war for historians to finally break cleanly with the old narratives and justifications to present new and distinct theories.

One of the first and most significant outliers among alternative war guilt theories is Niall Ferguson's book *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (2008).[33] Ferguson is a Scottish historian whose specialty is the British Empire. In a significant twist, Ferguson makes the case that it is, in fact, Britain's fault that the First World War occurred, or more accurately, that it is Britain's fault that a regional conflict exploded onto the entire continent and ultimately embroiled the world in war. This theory dismisses all the arguments that the war was inevitable, that Germany manipulated the situation to justify going to war, and that there was no way to prevent what should have been a diplomatic solution from spiraling out of control. In its place, Ferguson offers that regardless of what was transpiring between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, Austria-Hungary and Germany, and Germany and Russia, it was correspondences between Germany and Britain that hinged the decision to declare war. This concept is only mildly supported by previous research and depends more on counterfactuals to make the case. Even Fischer acknowledged that among all the belligerent nations, only Britain gave Germany a reason for pause. However, Fischer and his proponents argue that although Germany wished to avoid war with Britain, it was willing to risk such a war to achieve its goals of a larger and more powerful Germany.

[33] Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I*, Revised ed. edition. (Basic Books, 2008).

Instead, Ferguson emphasized the exchanges between Germany and Britain in the crucial final days leading up to the war, where Germany intended to get a declaration of neutrality from Britain. According to Ferguson, had Britain agreed to Germany's request to remain neutral, Germany would have easily defeated the other belligerent nations and ushered in a new continental economic and trade system controlled by Germany. This outcome, Ferguson argued, would save millions of lives and alter the historical trajectory of Europe, preventing World War II, the Holocaust, and bringing about the formation of the European Communities decades earlier. The Achilles' heel of Ferguson's argument is its reliance on counterfactuals. While it is certainly possible that a quick and decisive victory by Germany would have done everything Ferguson suggests, it benefits from the knowledge derived from hindsight, which the decision-makers of 1914 could not have.

In 2014, as the centennial anniversary of the war approached, more and more historians threw their hats into the ring and offered a fresh interpretation of events of the war. Sean McMeekin presented one such interpretation in his 2011 book *The Russian Origins of the First World War*.[34] McMeekin is an American historian specializing in early twentieth-century Europe and extensively researched the Balkan Wars, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia. Unlike Ferguson, McMeekin does not make a wild assertion that events hung on a single diplomatic exchange. Instead, he takes the unique approach of treating its origins as the Third Balkan War. In less than two years before the July Crisis, the Balkans were the site of two short wars, and, according to McMeekin, the reaction to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand should not have been much different. McMeekin argued that in the end, nobody cared about the assassination,

[34] Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, Reprint edition. (Harvard University Press, 2011).

certainly not the Archduke's uncle, the emperor of Austria. He detailed how little concern there was regarding the death of the Archduke and his wife.

The Archduke and his family were already partially ostracized from court because his wife was not of sufficient royal blood. McMeekin elaborated by pointing out that the Archduke and his wife were in a car and not a horse-drawn carriage because they were not of adequate royal status; their bodies were shipped back to Vienna on the back of a milk train; and at the funeral, the children entered last and were not permitted to touch the bodies. Finally, McMeekin asserts that it is the July Crisis, not the June Crisis, because the "crisis" had nothing to do with the assassination. Once McMeekin removed the Archduke as a sufficient cause, he explained why the Third Balkan War became the First World War. McMeekin does not attempt to hide that Austria-Hungary continuously acted in bad faith in their dealings with Serbia and Germany. Still, he blamed Russia's decision to mobilize along Germany's border as the primary reason things escalated so quickly. Austria-Hungary bet on Russia not coming out in favor of a country that just committed a state-sponsored regicide. However, once Russia mobilized, Germany had no choice but to act, removing any possibility of containing the war in the Balkans.

Another fresh take on the First World War, which caused waves in the academic community, was *Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (2012).[35] Christopher Clark is an Australian historian living in Germany who specializes in Anglo-German relations. Clark's interpretation of the First World War is unique as he does not set out to answer the fundamental question of who is responsible for starting the First World War. As such, his book is a near textbook-perfect representation of decisions made in the belligerent nations' capitols.

[35] Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, Kindle edition (Harper, 2013).

Contrary to what the title suggests, Clark does not argue that European leaders blindly marched into the war, unaware of the consequences of their decisions. On the contrary, Clark presents a well-documented case in which the critical decision-makers knew precisely what they were doing, what they were risking, and how terribly wrong things could, and ultimately did, go. For Clark, there are no sides, no villains in the story, and no person or country to blame. In Clark's view, the issue is not one of individual agency but of a system in which all the leaders operated and interacted, and the war resulted from a complete failure of that system.

The final alternative theory comes from Dr. Michael Neiberg. Neiberg uses his training as a social historian to take a unique approach in *Dance of the Furies* (2011).[36] Instead of focusing heavily on what the key diplomats and military leaders were doing in July, he focused on what the average person was thinking at the time. In doing so, Neiberg completely dismantled M.A.I.N. and undermined the idea that Germany was dead set on war. Several examples he gave throughout his book show that nowhere in any of the major powers was there a real push from the public to go to war. To counter the argument that militarism was on the rise, Neiberg pointed to the Zabern Affair and its aftermath as an example of the decline of militarism in Germany.

Furthermore, rather than seeing the alliances as pushing the powers towards war, Neiberg argued that they were instrumental in preventing war. The alliances were purely defensive. Nobody was obligated to come to another's aid if they were the aggressor in a conflict. To support his assertion, Neiberg gave examples of several "crises" in the two previous decades where the alliances worked together to avoid an escalation. According to Neiberg's argument, imperialism was moving away from competition and towards international cooperation, thereby

[36] Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I*, Illustrated edition. (Harvard University Press, 2011).

removing it as a motive for war. Finally, though he acknowledged nationalism was on the rise, Neiberg argued against it being sufficient motivation to go to war. To support this assertion, he quoted David Starr Jordan, the then president of Stanford. After traveling through Alsace-Lorraine in 1913, Jordan observed, "no considerable body of rational men in either France or Germany desires war or would look upon it otherwise than as a dire calamity."[37] Instead, Neiberg offered the idea that nobody wanted the war they ended up with. In his view, many bad decisions and assumptions came together in just the right way to create the perfect storm that was World War I.

Each of these historians presents well-researched and supported arguments. Therefore, they have managed to hold up to the constant scrutiny from their peers. However, the fact that historians keep returning to the origins of World War I demonstrates that there still lacks a definitive answer. It is presumptuous to believe this research assignment will yield that answer. Still, in each of the arguments mentioned above, there are glaring failures to consider arguments put forward by their contemporaries. Since these theories are mutually exclusive, it is fascinating what happens when one does a deeper dive into their supporting documents and examines them side by side.

Researching the origins of World War I is not new territory for a historian. As evident in its historiography, World War I is one of the most heavily researched topics of the twentieth century. This means that there are very few gaps in the research on this topic. The problem with the historiography is not the gaps in the research. It is the lack of cohesion among World War I historians. Rarely have two or more historians examined the sources and come to the same

[37] Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I*, Illustrated edition. (Harvard University Press, 2011), 58.

conclusion. More than a century after the war had ended, no historian has written the definitive history of the origins of World War I. This is both the research topic's appeal and the difficulty it represents.

Instead of scouring for the lone document that will somehow radically alter the perception of the events of July 1914, this project will examine the current five prominent theories: Germany was to blame, Russia was to blame, Britain was to blame, everybody was to blame, and nobody was to blame. At the same time, it will address the question of the inevitability of war. These theories are well researched by their respective proponents and are supported by quality primary and secondary sources. However, many of the views are in direct conflict with one or more of the others.[38] Therefore, if one of these theories were determined to represent the definitive answer to the origins of World War I, it would also follow that one or more of the remaining theories are incorrect. Since there are so many competing theories, and none can be easily dismissed, the question becomes how to reconcile these competing views.

This research project will differ considerably from the historians mentioned above regarding methodology and scope. This project will argue that no single nation, including Germany, is solely responsible for causing the war or escalating it from a localized Balkan conflict to a World War that involved all the European powers and eventually even the United States. The aim is not to disprove any previously submitted theories of the origins of the war but to show how they fail to rise to the level necessary to establish solitary responsibility. This project will evaluate five conflicting theories explaining how the war started. Broadly, they are:

1. The aggressive German foreign policy and war aims.

[38] Jonathan Steinberg, "Old Knowledge and New Research: A Summary of the Conference on the Fischer Controversy 50 Years On," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (2013): 247–49.

2. The Russian-Serbian conspiracy.
3. The British responsibility counterfactual.
4. The German Gambit.
5. The Blameless Game.

To better understand how these theories evolved into their modern forms, this project will move past the published works of the historians and re-examine their supporting documents. Chapter 2 will trace the evolution of Prussian militarism and the rise of the German Empire following the Franco-Prussian war. Additionally, Chapter 2 will evaluate the roles that militarism, alliances, imperialism, and nationalism played in developing Germany's aggressive foreign policies. Throughout its existence, Prussia, and later Germany, ambitiously sought to assert itself as a significant European power. Under the guidance of Otto von Bismarck, Germany carefully maneuvered the world of politics and diplomacy to achieve these goals without destabilizing the balance of power. In the post-Bismarck years, Germany became increasingly aggressive, which pushed France and Russia to strengthen their military commitments. Finally, the Chapter will introduce the Fischer Thesis, which not only argues that Germany is responsible for the war but that Germany had planned the war in advance. The Fischer Thesis has been the dominant theory in the academic community since the 1960s.

Chapter 3 will introduce the four competing theories that offer counterarguments to the Fischer Thesis. These theories attempt to absolve Germany of the traditional war guilt forced upon them. Instead, they make the case that had certain events by the respective nations not occurred, or if certain telegrams had or had not included specific statements, it would have altered Germany's actions and prevented the war. The chapter aims to show how none of these theories sufficiently demonstrate that any nation alone was capable of starting or stopping the

war. Was Britain's entrance into the war responsible for the devastating results and, subsequently, many of the disasters that fell upon Europe throughout the twentieth century? Did Russia and Serbia conspire to start a war that would pull in the other European powers? Was Germany playing both sides during the July Crisis? One must examine these essential questions alongside the supporting evidence of all four competing theories.

The final chapter of this project summarizes the thesis and presents a synthesized argument that will withstand the same scrutiny other arguments have experienced. Ultimately, this project will show that each nation played a critical role in bringing about the war, yet not one country alone could have prevented it. Hence, no one country alone should bear the "war guilt" imposed on Germany by the Allies in the Treaty of Versailles.

The number of available comprehensive archival collections on the First World War is overwhelming, with many digitized in recent years. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been a prime motivator in making resources available digitally, a trend that will hopefully continue as the world slowly returns to a normal or its "new normal" state. In addition, hard copy archives are available through numerous organizations in the United States and Europe, with their digital counterparts only minutes away for an experienced computer user. The challenge for the researcher is not the lack of access to quality archival sources but the daunting task of working through the voluminous mountain of archival sources to locate documents that apply to their topic. In the case of the origins of World War I, research material is readily available from collections accessible through University Libraries and national archives in the United States and most of the major countries in Europe.

The Library of Congress possesses a broad range of primary documents and archival sources that offers easy access for researchers. In addition, the National World War I Museum

and Memorial in Kansas City is an incredible resource for researchers looking to access research material. A visit to the museum quickly impresses the scope and complexity involved in researching any topic related to World War I. Finally, the Foreign Relations of the United States (F.R.U.S.) is equally valuable. The F.R.U.S. is a collection of official documentary records, maintained by the Office of the Historian in Washington D.C, of every major U.S. foreign policy decision and significant diplomatic activity dating back to the Civil War. In addition, it includes diplomatic telegrams from American ambassadors stationed in the major European nations. During the July Crisis, these telegrams created an unusually candid narrative about the decisions being made by the various countries. Along these same lines, digital copies of each belligerent nation's "color books" are available from online archives.[39]

Finally, The International Society for First World War Studies is essential for any researcher, regardless of which aspect of the war they are researching. One example of the resources available on the Society's website is its online bibliography. The bibliography comprises over 10,000 secondary sources organized into 91 categories ranging from "International Relations during the war" to "Science, Technology, and Medicine." In addition, the bibliography lists 89 sources specifically related to the origins of the war, with several hundred more that explore the related histories of each nation involved or impacted by the war.

[39] "Austro-Hungarian Red Book"; Amt, *The German White-Book*; *The Russian Orange Book*; "The British Blue Book"; Ministere Des Affaires Etrangeres, *The French Yellow Book: Diplomatic Documents* (Hutchinson & Co., 1939).

Chapter 2

German War Guilt

Germany did not evolve into a great European power in the same manner as the other European nations. In fact, Germany was still in its infancy at the dawn of the twentieth century, making World War I little more than the equivalent of a toddler throwing a temper tantrum. Still, despite lacking political cohesion until the latter half of the nineteenth century, Germany has a rich history. This is especially true of the Kingdom of Prussia, which would become the dominant German state within the German Confederation and ultimately establish the German Empire under its rule. As a result, Prussian militarism became infused in German culture when Germany worked to establish itself first as a European power and then later as an Imperial power. As Germany's power and influence continued to grow, so did the forces aligned against them, causing Germany to look to its Prussian roots and prepare for the impending war.

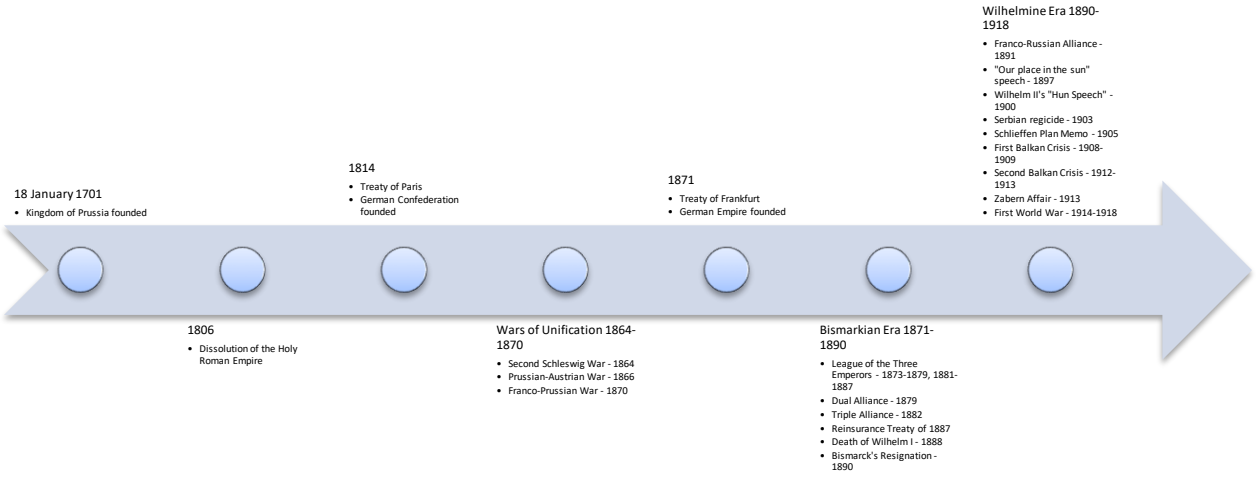

Illustration 2. From the founding of Prussia to the end of the German Empire.

Prussian militarism has a distinguished history that predates the Kingdom of Prussia itself. Not formally founded until 18 January 1701, Prussia first established its reputation for military prowess on 18 June 1675 (Julian calendar date) when Frederick William led the

Brandenburg-Prussian army to victory over the invading Swedish forces in the Battle of Fehr Bellin. Before their defeat, the Swedes were considered invincible on the battlefield. Though the battle was only a minor encounter, it significantly impacted the Prussian psyche.[40]

It was not by chance that the Brandenburg-Prussian army gained such military proficiency. Since the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), Frederick William had taken steps to construct a professional military made up of Prussian citizens. This marked the beginning of professional standing armies in Europe at a time when mercenaries still constituted the bulk of most armies.[41] As a result, Frederick William became known as The Great Elector, and his military doctrine and organization became the foundation of the future Prussian army.

Over the next several decades, Frederick William the Great Elector and his son, King Frederick William I of Prussia, continued to make dramatic reforms to develop a viable standing army that steadily increased prestige throughout Europe. King Frederick William I believed that a mighty army was the most crucial factor in achieving political stability. This was the starting point of Prussian militarism as King Frederick Willliam I concentrated all the resources of Prussian society on creating a strong military organization.[42] His efforts bore results as Prussia became an emerging power in Europe.

However, it was Frederick William's grandson, King Frederick the Great, who first demonstrated the power and efficiency of Prussia's army in the Silesian Wars (1740-1763). The cumulation of a century of military reforms of Frederick William the Great Elector, who

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[40] Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 46–47.

[41] H. W. Koch, *A History of Prussia*, 1st edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 59.

[42] Dr. Robert Ergang, *The Potsdam Führer: Frederick William I, Father of Prussian Militarism* (San Francisco, UNITED STATES: Borodino Books, 2017), 11, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=4837884.

established Prussia's first standing army, and King Frederick William I, who transformed the army into an elite military force, established the Prussian military as the third largest and one of the most feared in Europe. When describing Prussia during Frederick's reign, Prussian minister Friedrich von Schrötter declared, "Prussia was not a country with an army, but an army with a country."[43]

[43] Mary Fulbrook and Professor of German History Mary Fulbrook, *Piety and Politics: Religion and the Rise of Absolutism in England, Wurttemberg and Prussia* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 52.

Illustration 3.Mathew Carey and M. Lavoisne, *Map of Germany Divided According to the Treaty of Paris and the Acts of the Congress of Vienna*, Atlas Map, 6,200,000, David Rumsey Historical Map Collection (Philadelphia: M. Carey and Son, 1820).

After the Napoleonic Wars caused the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, the Treaty of Paris (1814) and the Congress of Vienna established the German Confederation, with Austria as the dominant power. However, the Confederation failed to unify the thirty-nine German states, mainly because it depended heavily on the cooperation between Prussia and

Austria. Prussia and Austria were the two largest and most powerful German states and frequently opposed one another. [44] As a result, many Germans attempted to replace the Confederation with a more cohesive nation-state, beginning with the Revolutions of 1848.

Europe experienced a series of political upheavals beginning in 1848. Middle-class revolutions fueled by ideals of liberalism, nationalism, socialism, and monachism swept across the continent, and the German Confederation was no exception.[45] Though the revolutions in the German Confederation were violently put down, they presented Prussia with the opportunity to dissolve the German Confederation and unite the German states into a single nation under one ruler. However, with Austria opposing Prussia, a debate developed over how best to achieve the unification of the German people, known as "The German Question." The two proposed solutions were establishing Großdeutschland (Greater Germany) to include Austria and Kliendeutschland (Lesser Germany) to exclude Austria. Eventually, with Russia supporting Austria's position, Prussia's proposal was defeated, and the German Confederation resumed in 1850.[46]

The second attempt to replace the German Confederation with a unified German state occurred in the 1860s with the German Wars of Unification. King Wilhelm I of Prussia enacted military reforms in 1862, capitalizing on the advancements achieved by a rapidly industrializing Prussia, and modernized Prussia's professional standing army. The reforms included doubling

[44] Peter Haldén, "Republican Continuities in the Vienna Order and the German Confederation (1815–66)," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 287, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066111421037.

[45] Theodore S. Hamerow, "History and the German Revolution of 1848," *The American Historical Review* 60, no. 1 (1954): 27–28, https://doi.org/10.2307/1842744.

[46] Matthew Levinger and Matthew Bernard Levinger, *Enlightened Nationalism: The Transformation of Prussian Political Culture, 1806-1848* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 223–26.

the standing military, increasing annual recruitment, and extending terms of active service from two to three years. Additionally, the reforms reorganized the army to increase efficiency and take advantage of advanced modern weaponry such as the Dreyse needle gun.[47] This modernization widened the gap between the already powerful Prussian army and the rest of Europe.[48]

Prussia then instigated a series of wars to bring the German Confederation under control, starting with the Second Schleswig War against Denmark in 1864. During this war, the German Confederation united against a common enemy to reclaim the German-speaking duchies of Schleswig and Holstein. Led by both Prussia and Austria, the German forces were victorious. However, in the war's aftermath, they could not agree on reincorporating the duchies into the Confederation.[49]

The disagreement between Prussia and Austria gave Prussia the pretext they were looking for to declare war on Austria. The Frankfurt Diet of the German Confederation agreed to support Austria and mobilize the Confederation forces against Prussia. As a result, the Confederation split between the states who supported Prussia and those that supported Austria. Under the leadership of General Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, the Prussian army defeated Austria and its allies in only seven weeks. Moltke employed the German railroad systems to deploy Prussian forces rapidly and, with the help of the breech-loading needle gun, demonstrated Prussia's superior military prowess.[50]

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[47] D. G. Williamson, *Bismarck and Germany: 1862-1890*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 13, 38, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315833644.

[48] J. Carpenter, "The Needle-Gun," *Once a Week* 2, no. 34 (August 25, 1866): 205–10.

[49] Roger Shaw, "Seven Weeks War: 1866," *The Military Engineer* 43, no. 294 (1951): 273.

[50] Williamson, *Bismarck and Germany*, 38.

After the defeat of Austria, Prussia dissolved the German Confederation. It formed the Northern German Confederation consisting of most German states, with the notable exception of Austria, and established the King of Prussia as the Confederation's hereditary President. The German states in the south, who remained independent, agreed to place their armies under the supreme command of the President of the Confederation.[51]

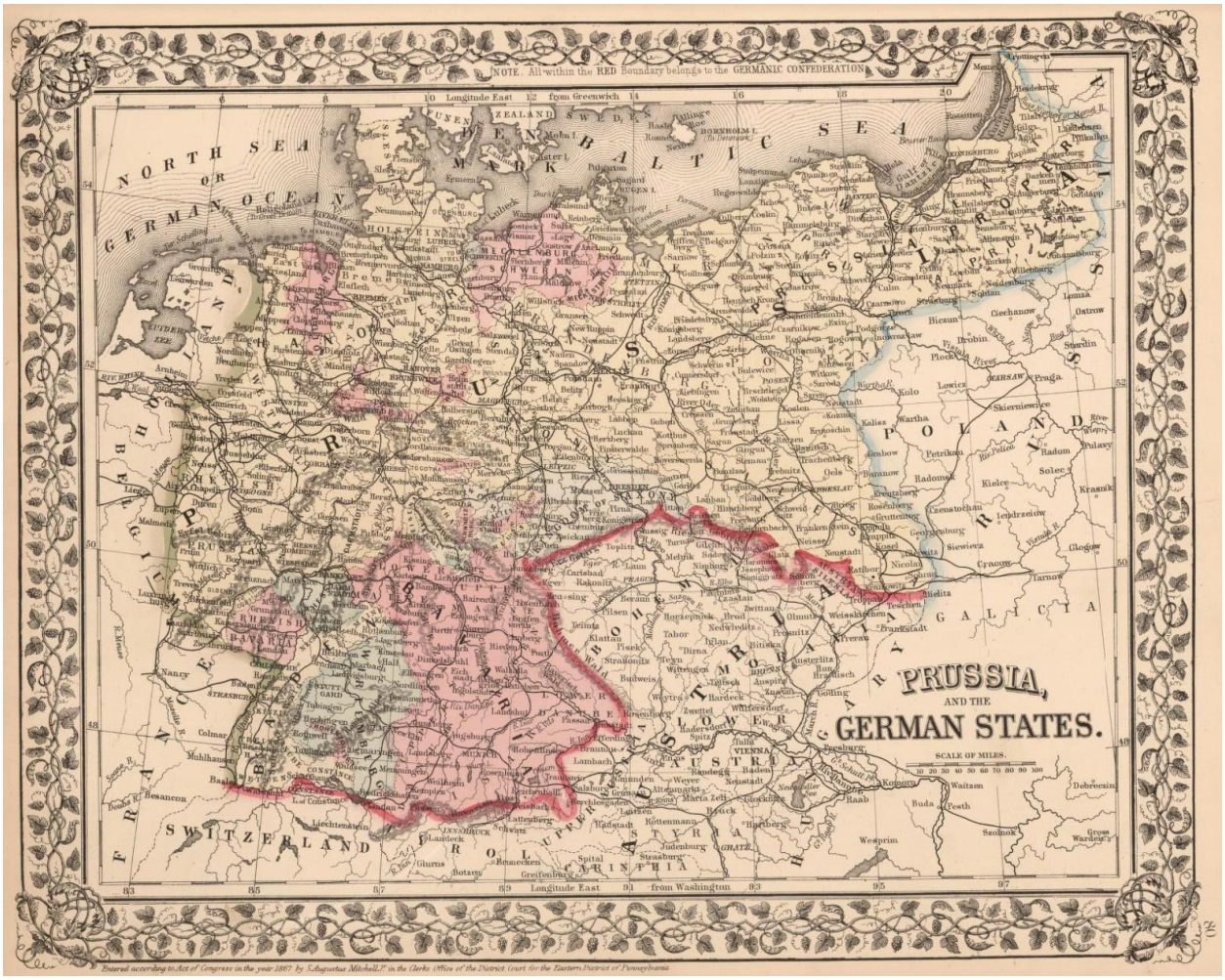

Illustration 4.Samuel Augustus Jr. Mitchell, *Prussia and the German States*, Atlas Map, 4,300,000, David Rumsey Historical Map Collection (Philadelphia: S.A. Mitchell Jr., 1868).

[51] Shaw, "Seven Weeks War," 273–74.

Germany was closer than ever to achieving political unification, but there remained resentments within Confederation over their defeat in the war and Prussia's imposed rule. Additionally, particularism in southern states became Bismarck's final hurdle, with the Patriot Party in Bavaria, the People's Party in Württemberg, and various other religious and political factions opposing the idea of consolidating Germany into a single political entity.[52] One more war remained before German unification was complete: the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871). Prussia once again instigated a war, this time with France. By supporting the Hohenzollern candidacy for the Spanish throne in opposition to the French preferred candidate, Prussia could manipulate events in its favor and have France declare war on Prussia.[53]

The news of the French declaration spread rapidly throughout the Northern German Confederation and the German people patriotically united behind Prussia. The fighting lasted a mere six months, with Prussia again achieving military domination over its enemy. Once again, Prussia's military deployment outpaced its adversary and achieved a series of swift military victories. The battle of Sedan, fought on 1 September 1870, was such a crushing defeat of French forces that over 104,000 soldiers, including Napoleon III, were taken prisoner. Still, the fighting continued until an armistice was declared on 28 January 1871 following the fall of Paris. The war officially ended on 10 May 1871 with the signing of the Treaty of Frankfurt.[54]

By the war's conclusion, the southern states had relinquished their objections to the unification of Germany. The new German Empire was declared not in Berlin but at the Palace of

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[52] Williamson, *Bismarck and Germany*, 52.

[53] Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 549.

[54] Williamson, *Bismarck and Germany*, 56–57; Otto von Bismarck, "Annexion Alsace-Lorraine - Traité de Francfort - 1871," Euro Docs, May 10, 1871, https://eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Germany:_Agreements_and_Treaties.

Versailles in the Hall of Mirrors. King Wilhelm I, was declared the first German Emperor on 18 January 1871, 170 years after his ancestor, Frederick I, was crowned the first King of Prussia.[55] In a final blow to the French, the newly formed German Empire annexed the French territory Alsace-Lorraine to serve as a buffer against any future attacks by the French.[56]

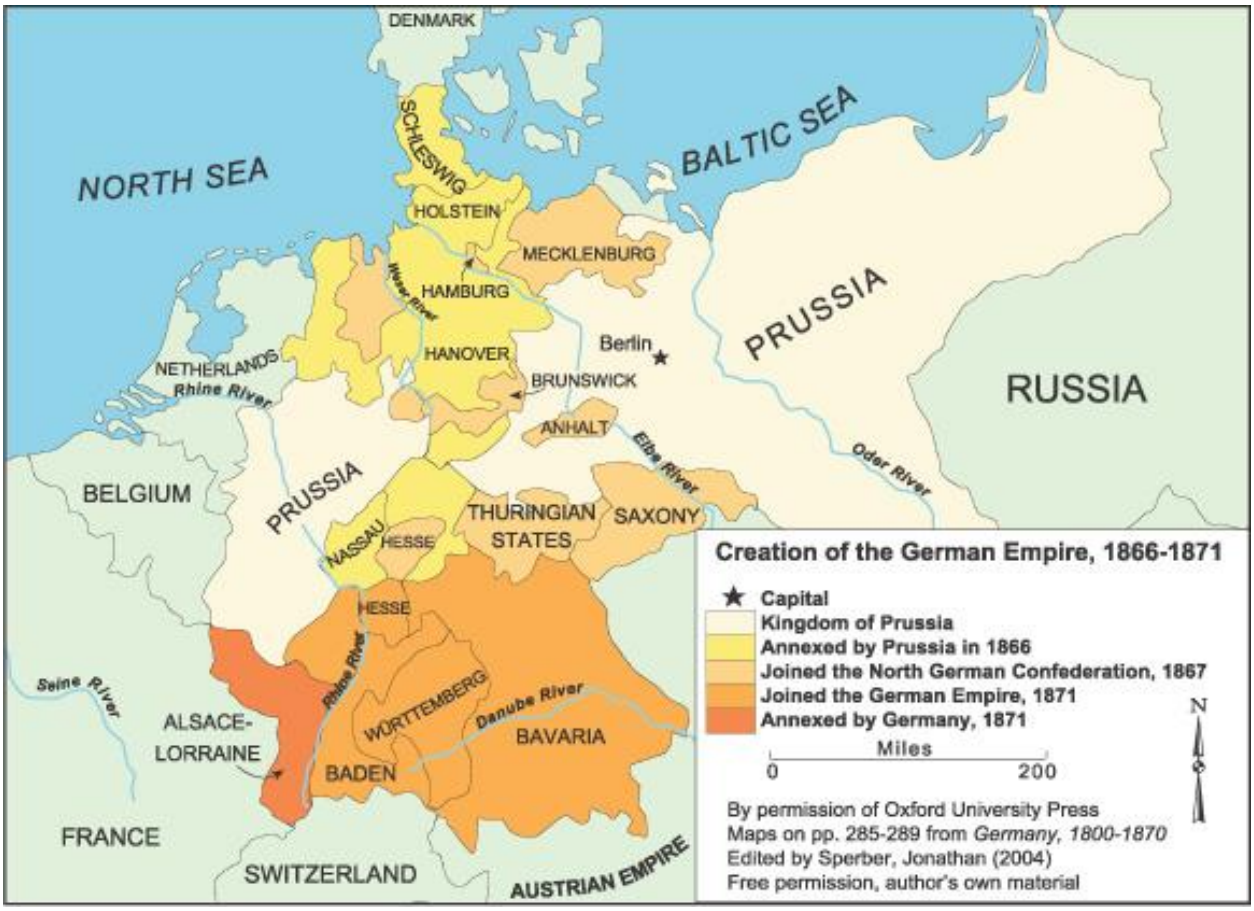

Illustration 5.Jonathan Sperber, *Creation of the German Empire (1866-1871)*, Germany, 1800-1870 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

The Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was the primary orchestrator behind the formation of the German Empire. Following the Revolutions of 1848, the German Confederation adopted a new constitution that established a bicameral legislature allowing an elected House of

[55] Edgar Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany 1850-1918*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2002), sec. The Creation of the German Empire.

[56] von Bismarck, "Annexion Alsace-Lorraine - Traité de Francfort - 1871."

Representatives. The representative body's one significant power was control over the state budget, which they could use to exert pressure over the monarchy. In 1862, they attempted to block the king's military reforms by overwhelmingly rejecting the proposed budget. On the advice of the Minister of War, Albrecht von Roon, Wilhelm I appointed Otto von Bismarck the Minister-President and Foreign Minister. Bismarck's political skills became immediately apparent as he pushed through the military reforms despite the continued opposition of the House of Representatives.[57]

From the very beginning, Otto von Bismarck set his eyes on the unification of the German states under Prussian domination. Just days after his appointment as President Minister, he gave his most famous speech, "Blood and Iron," to the House's Budget Committee, where he stressed that Germany could only find an answer to the German Question through Prussian military domination:

> Germany is not looking to Prussia's liberalism, but to its power; Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden may indulge liberalism, and yet no one will assign them Prussia's role; Prussia has to coalesce and concentrate its power for the opportune moment, which has already been missed several times; Prussia's borders according to the Vienna Treaties [of 1814-15] are not favorable for a healthy, vital state; it is not by speeches and majority resolutions that the great questions of the time are decided – that was the big mistake of 1848 and 1849 – but by iron and blood.[58]

Bismarck followed up his speech with carefully crafted action. After successfully pushing through the military reforms, Bismarck set his sights on achieving the unification of the German people. Bismarck's skillful maneuvering saw Prussia and Austria unite against Denmark in the Second Schleswig War in 1864, just as Bismarck readily took advantage of the Prussian-Austrian

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[57] Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 522.

[58] Otto von Bismarck, "Excerpt from Bismarck's 'Blood and Iron' Speech (1862)," trans. Jeremiah Riemer, German History in Documents and Images, September 30, 1862, https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=250&language=english.

rivalry in the war's aftermath to instigate the Seven Weeks War in 1866.[59] Nevertheless, it was not until the conflict over the Hohenzollern candidacy that Bismarck finally achieved his goal. Bismarck seized on the opportunity presented by Wilhelm I's polite refusal of the French's request to denounce the candidacy in perpetuity. Bismarck took the king's telegram, famously known as the Ems telegram. By carefully editing the language of the response, it made it appear as though the king had insulted the French in his refusal of their request. He then released the edited version and leaked a French translation to the press. The outrage sparked in France gave Bismarck the war he needed to unite the German people under Prussian domination and establish a German Empire.[60]

Bismarck's achievements did not end with the formation of the German Empire. Now the first Imperial Chancellor of the German Empire, he quickly achieved total domination over his political rivals and opposition groups. Bismarck ignored the opinions of parliament, dealt ruthlessly with his foes, and ensured that all information came to the Kaiser through him. Outside of Germany, Bismarck's carefully thought-out diplomacy maintained the delicate balance among the European powers. Inside Germany, he was the Iron Chancellor. [61] Despite being a staunch conservative, Bismarck employed Realpolitik, a political philosophy that placed results over ideals. This divorce from idealism freed him to do whatever was necessary to achieve his goals.[62]

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[59] Shaw, "Seven Weeks War," 273–74.

[60] Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 548–49; Shaw, "Seven Weeks War," 273–74.

[61] Hajo Holborn, "Bismarck's Realpolitik," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21, no. 1 (1960): 89, https://doi.org/10.2307/2708000.

[62] Holborn, 85–88.

One example of his employing Realpolitik domestically was how he neutralized the Social Democratic Party. Since the German constitution protected their existence, Bismarck instituted anti-socialist laws preventing them from organizing and prohibited them from publishing any political propaganda. However, Bismarck realizes that while most people may not adhere to the entire socialist doctrine, there are extremely popular tenets. To address this, Bismarck established the first social welfare state in Europe by enacting several laws, including the Sickness Insurance Law of 1883, the Accident Insurance Law of 1884, and the Old Age and Disability Insurance Law of 1889.[63]

Domestic politics is not the only area where Bismarck asserted his influence. As the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bismarck focused intensely on foreign politics. Throughout their long history, the German states had always been weak and politically fragmented, with the surrounding nations driving the diplomatic landscape of Europe. However, with the emergence of a powerful and unified German Empire, the balance of power had dramatically shifted.[64]

Bismarck was a masterful statesman who recognized Germany's precarious position in central Europe. He realized that he could not control the rising forces in Europe, such as nationalism, but he could harness them and bend them to his will. "Politics," according to Bismarck," is the art of the possible."[65] So, to counter Germany's disadvantageous geographical situation, Bismarck built a delicate house of cards of alliances designed to keep Europe at peace

[63] Marcel van Meerhaeghe, "Bismarck and the Social Question," ed. Jürgen Backhaus, *Journal of Economic Studies* 33, no. 4 (January 1, 2006): 284–86, https://doi.org/10.1108/01443580610688448.

[64] Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 552–53.

[65] Otto von Bismarck, Die Politik ist die Lehre vom Moglichen, interview by Friedrich Meyer von Waldeck, Gesammelten Werke, vol. 7, August 11, 1867, 222.

and avoid a war on all sides. With France still wounded from their recent defeat, Bismarck looked to his neighbors to the south and east to form alliances.

In 1873, Bismarck formed the League of the Three Emperors, consisting of the Kaisers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Tsar of Russia. Together, the three emperors would control Eastern European politics and work to isolate France in the west.[66] Initially, the alliance was beneficial to all parties. However, as the Ottoman Empire continued to crumble, territorial disputes in the Balkans placed Austria-Hungary at odds with Russia, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the League in 1879. The League was revived in 1881, but the ongoing unrest in the Balkans continued to plague the League until its permanent dissolution in 1887.[67]

In the face of continued Russian aggression in the Balkans, Bismarck negotiated the Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary in 1879. The alliance linked the two nations in a defensive pact. If either signatory was attacked, the other was required to come to their aid under the treaty. This pact remained in effect until World War I, where it was activated to assure Germany's support should Russia declare war on Austria-Hungary.[68] Italy joined the alliance in 1882, making it the Triple Alliance. Unfortunately, Italy failed to meet its obligation under the alliance during World War I and instead came into the war on the Entente side against Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Bismarck was greatly concerned about the constant social and political upheaval in the Balkans. Moreover, the endless territorial disputes between Austria-Hungary and Russia in the Balkans amplified the potential for war in the region. Therefore, when the League of the Three

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[66] Brian Healy and Arthur Stein, "The Balance of Power in International History: Theory and Reality," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 17, no. 1 (March 1, 1973): 37, https://doi.org/10.1177/002200277301700103.

[67] Myra Catherine Runkel, *The Reconstitution of the League of the Three Emperors in 1881* (University of Wisconsin--Madison, 1925), 45–58.

[68] Healy and Stein, "The Balance of Power in International History," 42.

Emperors dissolved in 1887, Bismarck sought new measures to avoid a war with Russia. The Reinsurance Treaty of 1887 was designed to do just that.[69] In exchange for Russia agreeing to a pledge of benevolent neutrality should either become engaged in a war with a third Great Power. However, it excluded Germany attacking France and Russia attacking Austria-Hungary.

Furthermore, Germany agreed to join Russia in opposing any change to the status quo in the Balkans. Like with every other carefully crafted treaty and alliance, Bismarck's underlying motive was to maintain peace and keep the status quo in Europe.[70] Despite all his efforts, Bismarck was constantly wary of a coming war in the Balkans. In 1888, he gravely predicted, "One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans."[71]

All this careful maneuvering ended on 20 March 1890, when Kaiser Wilhelm II asked Otto von Bismarck to resign as Chancellor. Following the death of Wilhelm I, on 9 March 1888, his son Friedrich III only ruled for 99 days before he too passed away, making his son Wilhelm II the new German Emperor. Unlike his grandfather, Wilhelm II sought to actively participate in the daily operations of the Empire, much to Bismarck's dismay. Bismarck had enjoyed unchecked authority for over two decades, which even the Kaiser yielded to regularly. Wilhelm I often joked, "it's hard to be Kaiser under Bismarck."[72] However, with Wilhelm II, the two vehemently disagreed on domestic and foreign policies. It was not long before it became

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[69] Otto von Bismarck, "Secret Reinsurance Treaty with Russia (June 18, 1887)," German History in Documents and Images, June 18, 1887, https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1862.

[70] W. N. Medlicott, "The Mediterranean Agreements of 1887," *The Slavonic Review* 5, no. 13 (1926): 75–76.

[71] Othon Anastasakis, David Madden, and Elizabeth Roberts, eds., *Balkan Legacies of the Great War*, 1st ed. 2015 edition (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), v.

[72] Jacob Heilbrunn, "A House That Bismarck Built," ed. Jonathan Steinberg, *The National Interest*, no. 116 (2011): 89.

apparent that Bismarck could no longer perform his function as Chancellor. He submitted his resignation, and the Kaiser appointed Leo von Caprivi to succeed him as Chancellor of the German Empire.[73]

Not only did the Bismarckian policies cease after his resignation, but several strategically placed treaties and alliances were allowed to falter, most notably the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia. With the end of the Reinsurance Treaty, Russia began to look to France as an ally in Europe. As a result, Russia and France signed their Franco-Russian Alliance on 29 August 1891. The alliance included military commitments to come to the other's defense should another power attack them.[74] This shift in the Russian alliance from Germany to France brought Germany one step closer to the two-front war that Bismarck had masterfully avoided in his two decades as Chancellor. Unfortunately, the Kaiser failed to see the truth that Bismarck had long foreseen: if Germany were to survive, it must never fight a two-front war.[75]

Of course, Bismarck's European status quo was precisely what Wilhelm II worked to undermine. Rather than placing Germany in the middle as an honest broker in Europe, Wilhelm II ambitiously worked to transform Germany into a world power. The first half of the 1890s saw Germany's foreign policy shift from Bismarck's Realpolitik to Wilhelmine's Weltpolitik. Moreover, Wilhelm II believed that Germany must act aggressively to obtain as many foreign colonies as possible as a latecomer to the Imperial game.[76]

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[73] V. I. Bovykin and D. W. Spring, "The Franco-Russian Alliance," *History* 64, no. 210 (1979): 24.

[74] Bovykin and Spring, 26–27.

[75] Feuchtwanger, *Imperial Germany 1850-1918*, 76.

[76] Steven Press, "Buying Sovereignty: German 'Weltpolitik' and Private Enterprise, 1884–1914," *Central European History* 55, no. 1 (March 2022): 29–30, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938921001746.

"We do not want to put anyone into the shade, but we demand a place for ourselves in the sun."[77] So Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, the German Empire's third Chancellor since Bismarck, declared in the closing of his speech to the Reichstag on 6 December 1897. These summed up Germany's ambitions to become an Imperial power, specifically establishing colonies in East Asia. Meanwhile, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, Secretary of State of the German Imperial Navy, sought to achieve these goals by increasing the size of the German navy.

Tirpitz believed Germany needed a powerful navy to become an imperial power to rival Britain. Tirpitz managed to rally significant public and parliamentary support to build a new fleet of battleships with the Kaiser's support.[78] Germany's rapid investment in building up its navy alarmed Britain.[79] Not to be outdone, Britain too invested heavily in its navy, and so began a naval arms race. Winston Churchill, who served as the First Lord of the Admiralty from 1911 to 1915, realized the impact of the naval arms race on both nations. In a public speech in Glasgow on 9 February 1912, Churchill recognized that "The British Navy is to us a necessity and, from some points of view, the German Navy is to them more in the nature of a luxury."[80] He then suggested a pause in the naval build-up, but the Kaiser rejected the idea. In the end, German warship development was outpaced by Britain two to one, and the Kaiser gained nothing except Britain's ire. Historian Norman Stone observed of the arms race, "The last thing that Germany

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[77] James Holmes, "Mahan, a 'Place in the Sun,' and Germany's Quest for Sea Power," *Comparative Strategy* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 2004): 27, https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930490274490.

[78] Holmes, 28.

[79] Eyre Crowe, "Perceptions of German Foreign Policy in England (January 1, 1907)," German History in Documents and Images, January 1, 1907, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=784.

[80] A. D. Harvey, *Collision of Empires: Britain in Three World Wars, 1793-1945* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1993), 248.

needed was a problem with Great Britain, and the greatest mistake of the twentieth century was made when Germany built a navy designed to attack her."[81]

Another brazen example of Kaiser Wilhelm II stoking Germany's Imperial aggression was his Hun Speech of 1900. The Kaiser addressed German troops in the speech as they prepared to depart for China to help suppress the Boxer Rebellion. Included in Wilhelm II's fiery rhetoric was the following passage:

> Should you encounter the enemy, he will be defeated! No quarter will be given! Prisoners will not be taken! Whoever falls into your hands is forfeited. Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German.[82]

It demonstrates Wilhelm II's views of German Imperialism. However, the Foreign Office found the passage so incendiary that they removed the above passage when they released the "official" version.

At the end of Bismarck's tenure in office, Germany was a growing industrial power and a significant player in European politics; the major powers had endured a long period of relative stability; carefully crafted treaties and alliances secured Germany's borders. However, over the decade following his resignation, all of this collapsed. While Germany remained an industrial power, abandoning Bismarckian Realpolitik and its increasingly aggressive foreign policy isolated Germany on the continent, with France and Russia becoming increasingly closer. Only

[81] Norman Stone, *World War One: A Short History* (Basic Books, 2009), 11.

[82] Friedrich Wilhelm Viktor Albert, "Wilhelm II: 'Hun Speech' (1900)," German History in Documents and Images, July 27, 1900, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=755.

Austria-Hungary remained an ally, but the slow collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the east captured their attention.[83]

With Germany becoming increasingly surrounded by hostile nations, Field Marshall Alfred von Schlieffen sent a memorandum to the Ministry of War updating Germany's deployment plans in the event of a war with France and requesting an increase to the standing army. The contents of this 1905 memo have famously become known as the Schlieffen Plan.[84] Within the memo's contents, Schlieffen outlines the decline of Russia's military readiness following their recent defeat in the Russo-Japanese war and the possibility of leaving only a small contingent in the east to defend against Russia. At the same time, the main German forces invade France. The eastern front would then be secured by German allies Austria and Hungary before Russia could fully mobilize.[85] The Schlieffen plan will later come under scrutiny as proponents of German war guilt use it to support the argument that Germany planned World War I. However, it is essential to remember that this deployment plan was only one in a series of plans revised and updated regularly over several decades preceding World War I, including after the 1905 memo.

Kaiser Wilhelm II officially held two titles: Kaiser of the German Empire and King of Prussia. As detailed above, Prussia has a long and distinguished history of militarism within its society. This history did not end with the formation of the German Empire, as it may have

[83] Amanda Briney, "The Rise and Fall of the Ottoman Empire," *ThoughtCo*, July 13, 2019, para. 8, https://www.thoughtco.com/the-ottoman-empire-1435003.

[84] Alfred von Schlieffen, "The Schlieffen Plan (1905)," German History in Documents and Images, December 1905, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=796; Annika Mombauer, "Of War Plans and War Guilt: The Debate Surrounding the Schlieffen Plan," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 5 (October 1, 2005): 861, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390500394009.

[85] Mombauer, "Of War Plans and War Guilt," 864, 866.

appeared during Bismarck's tenure as Chancellor. Instead, it was simply harnessed to serve a different purpose. However, once Bismarck was removed, so was the harness, and Prussian militarism returned as a significant force within Prussian-German society. Germany's saber-rattling at the dawn of the twentieth century reminded the European powers how formidable the Prussian-German military was, which led to the formation of alliances and entente arrangements designed to counter Germany in the event of a war. On the surface, these arrangements acted as a deterrent to a significant war among the powers. However, in the event of such a war, they also guaranteed its escalation.[86]

These were the forces at play within Germany on 28 June 1914 that politicians and historians have long used to blame Germany for the outbreak of World War I. Nevertheless, indisputable in their simplicity, they still fail to tell the whole story. Finally, in the 1950s, a West German historian named Fritz Fischer was granted complete access to all the available Imperial German archives that pertained to World War I. After careful examination, he published his findings in 1961 in a book titled *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegzielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918* (published in English in 1868 under the title *Germany's Aims in the First World War).*[87] The book formed the basis for the Fischer Thesis, which continues to survive and spark heated debate among World War I historians.

According to the Fischer Thesis, Germany had long planned a European War. Fischer concluded that if Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination had not provided the pretext, Germany intended to instigate a war. The idea of Germany intentionally provoking a war is not

[86] Samuel R. Williamson, "German Perceptions of the Triple Entente after 1911: Their Mounting Apprehensions Reconsidered," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 2 (2011): 205–6.

[87] Fritz Fischer, Hajo Holborn, and James Joll, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

without precedence in Prussian history. As discussed above, Prussia had a long history of inciting wars when it suited its interests. In addition, Wilhelm II was beginning to understand how precarious Germany's position was and became convinced war was inevitable. Moreover, if that were the case, it would be better sooner rather than later.[88]

One of the cornerstones of Fischer's argument is the notes from a string of meetings of the German War Council between December 1912 and May 1914, where preparations were underway to fight a two-front war. The plans included such details as making Russia appear as the aggressor, hoping to keep Britain neutral, and performing a blitz attack on France through Belgium while Austria-Hungary held off Russian forces in the east. Then, after a quick defeat of France, turning the full power of their military on Russia.[89] According to diary entries made by the Kaiser's naval aide, Admiral von Muller, the Kaiser was alarmed by a recent report that Britain was committed to supporting France in war regardless of which country was the aggressor. To Fischer and his followers, this demonstrated that Germany planned and prepared for a European war long before the July Crisis.[90]

A mountain of documents that include proposals for restructuring the European powers following a German victory in a continental war further bolstered Fischer's Thesis. As early as 1890, Bismarck's' successor, Caprivi, had begun developing plans for a central European economic system that linked all of Europe and was under the control of Germany.[91] These plans took on a new form after the start of the war following the declaration of war. Fischer discovered

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[88] T. G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 135–36.

[89] Fischer, Holborn, and Joll, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 1968, 29–38.

[90] Imanuel Geiss, *July 1914: Selected Documents: Outbreak of the First World War*, First American Edition (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 362.

[91] Fischer, Holborn, and Joll, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 1968, 9.

numerous documents dating back to September 1914 that he believed demonstrated Germany's intentions should they prevail, beginning with the September Programme.

The September Programme was a group of proposals. Foremost among them was a memorandum written by Kurt Riezler, the Chancellor's personal assistant, and initialed by the Chancellor himself.[92] According to Hollweg's notes, the purpose of the September Programme was for "security for the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time."[93] To achieve this goal, "France must be so weakened as to make her revival as a great power impossible for all time. Russia must be thrust back as far as possible from Germany's eastern frontier and her domination over the non-Russian vassal peoples broken."[94]

Hollweg not only formulated this idea of German security but went so far as to define how Germany should deal with each of the nations involved. This included turning Belgium, Holland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, and the United Baltic Duchy into vassal states and annexing several other territories and countries along its eastern border with Russia. Additionally, Germany would realize its Imperial goals after it seized all colonies controlled by France and Belgium.[95] Germany's desire for territorial gains only increased as the war dragged on.[96] These territorial gains represented Germany's plans to establish a Mitteleuropa and Mittelafrika.

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[92] Kurt Riezler, "The September Memorandum (September 9, 1914)," German History in Documents and Images, September 9, 1914, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=980.

[93] Fischer, Holborn, and Joll, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 1968, 103.

[94] Fischer, Holborn, and Joll, 103.

[95] Fischer, Holborn, and Joll, 104–5.

[96] Fischer, Holborn, and Joll, 348–51.

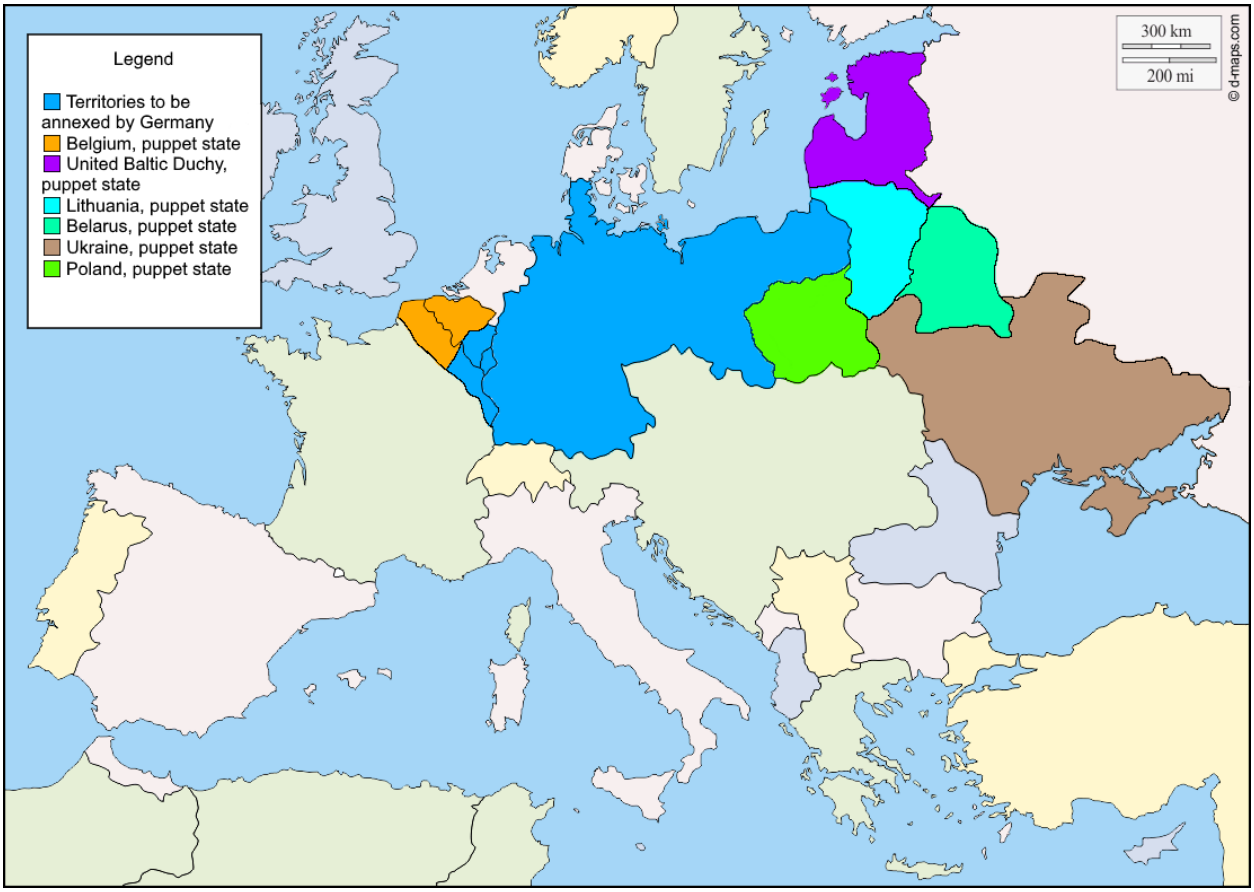

Illustration 6.*Mitteleuropa: Territorial Gains Proposed under the September Programme* (Wikipedia Commons, July 29, 2020).

As the documents seemingly showing Germany's guilt continued to pile up, it became harder and harder for historians to resist the argument that Germany did, in fact, plan the war. Fischer's unequaled access to the German Imperial archives provided a completely new look at the thoughts and actions of the leaders in Germany before and during the war. Fischer's Thesis quickly became widely accepted for going against his German colleagues who long maintained Germany's innocence in starting the war.[97] In fact, by the end of the 1960s, the Fischer thesis had

[97] Annika Mombauer, "Introduction: The Fischer Controversy 50 Years On," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (2013): 231–32.

become the dominant theory on the origins of World War I. An honor that it continues to hold more than sixty years later.[98]

If Fischer's Thesis is correct, it fits directly within Wilhelmine's Weltpolitik policies. If Germany wanted to become the dominant world power, one could argue that a practical way to achieve this goal is to launch a preemptive attack on its rivals. France, Russia, and even Britain had become alarmed at Germany's increasingly aggressive foreign policies and saber-rattling. It was the reason France and Russia continued to renew the Franco-Russian Treaty; Britain, France, and Russia formed the Triple Entente; and the increase in tensions among the powers that Germany then perceived as a building of aggression against them.

One small catch in the Fischer Thesis is that Germany did not launch the preemptive war against France and Russia. They did not have to formulate an elaborate scheme to make Russia appear the aggressor and provide a pretext to declare war on France. Instead, a young Bosnian Serb, Gavrilo Princip, did that for them when he assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914. Austria-Hungary became infuriated with righteous indignation. Their loyal ally, Germany, assured Austria-Hungary of their support as they sought restitution from Serbia. Russia intervened on Serbia's behalf, supporting state-sponsored regicide in the process. The die was cast.

A final key piece of damning evidence against Germany is the infamous "Blank Cheque" issued by Kaiser Wilhelm II to Emperor Franz Joseph on 6 July 1914.[99] In his response to Austria's request for German support, Wilhelm II unconditionally committed Germany to

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[98] Mombauer, 238–40.

[99] Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, "Telegram from the Imperial Chancellor, von Bethmann-Hollweg, to the German Ambassador at Vienna" (July 6, 1914), The World War I Document Archive, Brigham Young University Library, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_'Blank_Check'.

support Austria's decision regarding Serbia, including a declaration of war. With the assurance of Germany's support, Austria-Hungary felt emboldened to extract a heavy price from Serbia. Historians of the Fischer school see the Blank Cheque as Germany leaning on the scales of war to shape the circumstances in their favor. Germany wanted a war; it had long prepared for war, and now one was looming on the horizon, allowing them to frame their actions as defensive.

On 23 July 1914, Austria-Hungary delivered an ultimatum to Serbia with ten demands and a 25 July deadline to respond.[100] Historians have long debated the intentions behind Austria-Hungary's ultimatum but generally agree that Austria-Hungary intentionally designed the terms to ensure that Serbia would reject the ultimatum. The Serbian response was agreeable to most of the terms of the ultimatum.[101] However, they refused any demand that sought to infringe upon their sovereignty.[102] When the Kaiser read the Serbian response, he was pleased and believed a peaceful resolution was possible. However, neither he nor Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg reacted fast enough to prevent Austria-Hungary's attack on Serbia at the expiration of the deadline.[103]

In the final days leading up to the start of the war, a series of ten telegrams between Nicholas Romanov, the Russian Tsar, and Kaiser Wilhelm II discussed the pending war and what they could do to avoid it. The Willy-Nicky telegrams initially served as a potential back-channel

[100] Leopold von Berchtold, "The Austro-Hungarian Ultimatum to Serbia" (July 23, 1914), The World War I Document Archive, Brigham Young University Library, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Austro-Hungarian_Ultimatum_to_Serbia_(English_translation).

[101] Nikola Pašić, "The Serbian Response to the Astro-Hungarian Ultimatum" (July 25, 1914), The World War I Document Archive, Brigham Young University Library, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Serbian_Response_to_the_Austro-Hungarian_Ultimatum_(English_Translation).

[102] Williamson, "The Origins of World War I," 811.

[103] Williamson, 813–14.

communication between the leaders to avert a disastrous war. However, as they continued, the tone changed, indicating that neither leader had enough control over the situation to stop what was about to happen. In one final, unanswered telegram, Nicholas begged Wilhelm II to submit the Austro-Serbian problem to the Hague Conference for arbitration. Unfortunately, the issue never made it to the Hague Conference, and the telegrams failed to avert the outbreak of the war. The subtext of the telegrams would indicate that there was only so much either leader could do to reign in their military leaders, and after a certain point, the decision was beyond their control. [104]

Though throughout the discussion of the decisions being made, only a few key decision-makers are repeatedly and prominently referenced, it is a mistake to believe that they are the only ones pulling the strings. In addition to the two Kaisers and the Russian Tsar, each belligerent nation had a war council, senior ministers, and military advisors, down to the military commanders, who shaped each nation's response. Between the Fischer Thesis, which places the Kaiser at the center of a German secret plot to start a preventive war against France and Russia, and other German war guilt proponents who support the theory that Germany pushed Austria towards war, it is no wonder that Germany has borne the weight of World War I for more than a century.

The evidentiary support of the idea that Germany was preparing for a war they believed was inevitable is hard to refute. Undeniably, Germany was ready for war. Considering their Prussian cultural heritage, this is hardly a surprise. The Prussian culture infused into the German Empire was rooted in militarism from before the Prussian state even existed. Prussia had always carefully chosen its military conflicts, manipulating its adversaries into declarations of war to provide it with the pretext they needed to unleash its armies and achieve its goals. Based on

[104] Friedrich Wilhelm Viktor Albert and Nikolai Alexandrovich Romanov, "The Willy-Nicky Telegrams" (July 29, 1914), The World War I Document Archive, Brigham Young University Library, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Willy-Nicky_Telegrams.

Fischer's Thesis, this is precisely what they did here. Of course, they may not have caused the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Still, Germany manipulated Austria and Russia into a war it wanted and unleashed its armies on Europe in the days following.[105]

Definitive answers to the questions surrounding the outbreak of World War I continue to elude historians more than a hundred years after the war ended. Understanding these issues is critical to comprehending the development of Europe throughout the twentieth century, which included a communist revolution in Russia, a second world war, and a cold war that dominated the world for half a century. Additionally, it has real-world implications today as tensions rise between nations, replacing democracies with absolutist regimes, invasion of sovereign nations, and threats of nuclear war.

The next chapter will discuss the more prominent challengers to the Fischer Thesis. Just as when one knows something is wrong with what they see but cannot quite place their finger on it, historians know something is flawed in the Fischer school of thought. The fact that after more than six decades since Fischer published his first book on the subject, historians are still looking for an alternative explanation shows that Fischer's Thesis fails to provide the definitive answer to the questions that still exist around the start of World War I.

[105] Fischer, Holborn, and Joll, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 1968, 57–61.

Chapter 3

The Centennial Revival

More than sixty years after Fritz Fischer first published his research into Germany's activities in the years before and during the First World War, his conclusions still loom large in the academic community.[106] Fischer's conclusions are so influential that any historian who wanted to present a new thesis on the origins of the First World War must have first addressed them. They must then show how their research had uncovered sources that were not available or otherwise considered by Fischer and how this research led them to draw a different conclusion. As the centennial anniversary of the start of the First World War approached, several historians decided to throw their hats into the ring. Amidst the renewed interest in the origins of the First World War, there rose to prominence four distinct theses that challenged the Fischer Thesis and shifted responsibility away from Germany. This chapter will examine the following anti-Fischer theses: the Russian-Serbian conspiracy, the British counterfactual, the Gambit war, and the Blameless narrative.

[106] Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, Reprint edition (Harvard University Press, 2011), 1.

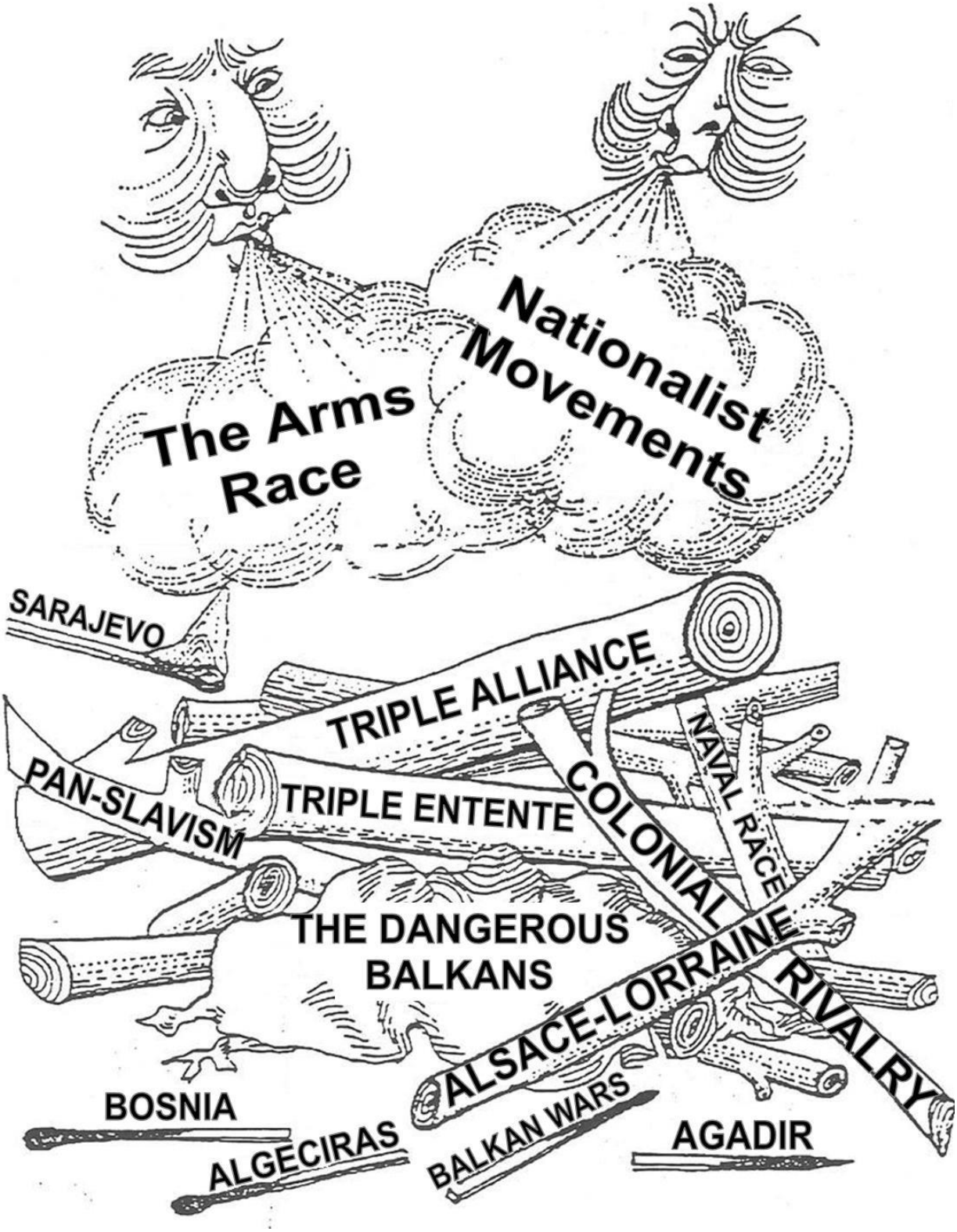

Illustration 7.The causes of the First World War set out like a bonfire. (Wikimedia Commons, September 21, 2007).

A leading proponent of the Russian-Serbian conspiracy thesis is historian Dr. Sean McMeekin. McMeekin is the Francis Flournoy Professor of European History and Culture at Bard College and specializes in Russian and Eurasian studies.[107] In the two books he has published on the origins of the First World war, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*[108] and *July 1914: Countdown to War*,[109] McMeekin lays out the thesis that the First World War was entirely avoidable and that it is Russia, not Germany, who deserves to bear the bulk of the responsibility.

While McMeekin agrees with Fischer's assertion that war was inevitable, he insists the war would not have amounted to anything more than a Third Balkan War, with no reason to draw any European powers into the conflict.[110] Given the constant turmoil in the Balkans over the previous four decades, McMeekin claims that another war breaking out in that region would not have come as a surprise to anybody in Europe. To support this claim, McMeekin looks back to the First Balkan Crisis of 1908-1909. During this crisis, Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina, which, ironically, Archduke Franz Ferdinand opposed as it was an unnecessary provocation of the South Slavs and an insult to Russian pride. Tensions rose sharply between Russia and Austria-Hungary over the annexation, and Russia only backed down after the threat of war with Germany.[111] This planted the seeds for Russian resentment McMeekin revisits when discussing the July Crisis.

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[107] "Sean McMeekin," Bard College, 2020, https://www.bard.edu/faculty/details/?id=3613.

[108] McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*.

[109] Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War*, Kindle Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

[110] McMeekin, 389.

[111] McMeekin, 3–4.

Next, McMeekin examined the First and Second Balkan Wars (1912-1913). The First Balkan War saw the Balkan League (Serbia, Greece, Montenegro, and Bulgaria) wage a successful war against the Ottoman Empire. In contrast, the Second saw Bulgaria declare war on its former allies over the division of the spoils. In both instances, Serbia gained territory and emerged in a stronger position than before. Though Russia had orchestrated the organization of the Balkan League through its minister to Belgrade, Nikolai Hartwig, Russia did not need to mobilize its army to support the Balkan League directly.[112]

The main point of focusing on the crises in the Balkans between 1909-1913 was to highlight people's displacement, which caused a surge in refugees. By the spring of 1914, the refugee crisis had become so great that, according to McMeekin, war was about to break out between Greece and the Ottoman Empire. This is effectively the Third Balkan War McMeekin's thesis proposed was inevitable and would have pulled in the other European powers. To support this conclusion, McMeekin referred to the First Balkan War, where the Ottoman Empire had closed off the Dardanelles Straits, effectively cutting off Russia's only warm water access. This gave Russia an invested interest in preventing a war between Greece and the Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile, since the other European power had not found it necessary to interfere with the previous three crises, there was no reason to suspect they would start in 1914.[113]

At this point in McMeekin's thesis, two crises remained isolated in the Balkans and a potential for a third in which Russia would likely have intervened to prevent or moved to secure control of the Straits but would still not have involved the remaining powers. So had fate not intervened on 28 June 1914, the First World War would never have happened. Still, McMeekin

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[112] McMeekin, 26.

[113] McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, 32.

does not limit his thesis to what may have been. Instead, he turns to the five weeks following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and outlines the remainder of his thesis: that Russia is responsible for the First World War.

McMeekin's argument begins with the obvious based on what we know and, in some cases, what we do not know. What is known is that Russia is the only one of the great powers who did not fly the flag at half-mast, including in the tsarist legation in Belgrade during the official funeral mass. Additionally, the lack of condolences conveyed by Russian diplomats throughout the Balkans did not go unnoticed. Furthermore, Serbia's head of military intelligence later implicated Russia's military attaché in Belgrade, General Victor Artamonov, as having green-lit the assassination. Ironically, Artamonov was not in Sarajevo on 28 June despite the Austrian military maneuvers that were about to begin.[114] Meanwhile, what is unknown are the details surrounding coordination between France and Russia since four weeks of correspondence in July 1914 have vanished along with most of the Russian records during this period.[115] So even if Russia was not involved in the assassination, they were not sorry that it happened.

McMeekin then highlights the inconsistencies between what intentions Russia communicated and what was happening. Despite most historians focusing on Russia's general mobilization order, which only happened after Austria declared war on Serbia on 28 July, McMeekin points out that Russia began partial mobilization against Austria-Hungary *and* Germany on 24 July. When Germany naturally expressed alarm at Russia's military massing along its eastern border, Russia sent misleading communications claiming they had given no order to mobilize. Meanwhile, on 26 July, Russia continued to increase its military

[114] McMeekin, 47–48.

[115] McMeekin, *July 1914*, 55.

preparedness.[116] Finally, Russia issued total mobilization orders on 29 July, three days before the declaration of war from Germany.[117]

To his credit, while McMeekin used the internal communications in the foreign and war ministries to show Russia's aggressive actions in July 1914, he worked to absolve the Tsar to what extent he could. Even as he gave the order for total mobilization, Tsar Nicholas II reached out to his cousin Kaiser Wilhelm II to avoid an all-out war. The so-called Willy-Nicky Telegrams demonstrate Nicholas's reluctance even as the war machine gained momentum. Upon receiving an encouraging response from his cousin, McMeekin quotes the Tsar, "everything possible must be done to save the peace. I will not become responsible for a monstrous slaughter."[118] Even as he uses the Tsar's indecisiveness n making the final decision to order total mobilization, McMeekin cleverly uses the same statement to highlight that he fully comprehended the consequences of his decision meant war.[119]

Amidst his compelling argument favoring Russian responsibility, McMeekin also pokes holes in the Fischer Thesis. From Hoyos's mission to Berlin to obtain the so-called "Blank Check," McMeekin highlights the Kaiser's initial reluctance to commit. Only after Hoyos persisted throughout the day did the Kaiser finally authorize a declaration of support.[120] Next, he highlights Austria's duplicity in drafting the ultimatum and what they chose to share with the German Ambassador. In fact, when the German Ambassador asked to see the ultimatum,

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[116] McMeekin, 220–21.

[117] McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, 70.

[118] McMeekin, *July 1914*, 273.

[119] McMeekin, 398.

[120] McMeekin, 97–98.

Leopold von Berchtold, the Austrian Foreign Minister, lied, claiming it was not ready.[121] Finally, McMeekin caps off his argument with the Kaiser's reaction to the Serbian response. Among the comments the Kaiser scribbled on the Serbian reply, McMeekin quotes, "A brilliant achievement in a time limit of only forty-eight hours… more than one could have expected… a great moral success for Vienna… all reason for war is gone… I should never have ordered mobilization."[122]

Far from the warmonger that the Fischer school often portrayed the Kaiser, the comments appear to express relief and joy at the possibility that Germany may avoid war. This expression of satisfaction stands in stark contrast to the Kaiser's reaction to the news that Austria had declared war. He summoned Bethmann to the palace and ordered him to pressure Vienna to negotiate with Russia exclaiming, "You have got me into a fine mess."[123]

Like McMeekin, economic historian Dr. Niall Ferguson is also a proponent of an inevitable war in Europe.[124] Ferguson is the Milbank Family Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Standford University, and has published extensively on Economic History and British Imperial History.[125] However, unlike McMeekin, Niall Ferguson does not attempt to reframe the narrative of the July Crisis, nor does he take on Fischer in his argument. In fact, for his argument, Ferguson seems content to stipulate that the Fischer thesis is accurate. Instead, Ferguson argues that it was Britain's fault the war became a global conflict.[126]

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[121] McMeekin, 142.

[122] McMeekin, 241.

[123] McMeekin, 252.

[124] Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I*, Kindle edition (Basic Books, 1998), sec. 3297.

[125] "Niall Ferguson," Hoover Institution, accessed March 12, 2022, https://www.hoover.org/profiles/niall-ferguson.

[126] Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, sec. 1781.

Ferguson's argument is a radical departure from the mainstream narratives of the First World War. The most significant component that sets Ferguson apart is his use of counterfactuals as the framework to develop his argument. During a video debate between Ferguson and Dr. Charles Maier, the first Leverett Saltonstall Professor of History at Harvard University until his retirement in 2019, Maier highlighted the benefits of using counterfactuals when performing historical research. According to Maier, when used correctly, counterfactuals are a terrific way to analyze history because each implies a series of scenarios that might have been that did not happen. The challenge for a good historian is to determine which counterfactuals are relevant. [127]

To emphasize his point, a German victory in the First World War could have adverted the rise of Nazism and prevented the Second World War, the Holocaust, and even the Cold War. However, it may also have meant the United States did not use the atomic bomb against Japan, making nuclear fallout a less effective deterrent in later conflicts such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. However, Maier cautions that reliance on counterfactuals can lead to erroneous conclusions as the historian has the added benefit of hindsight. While a German victory had the potential to avert future atrocities, nobody could have predicted that in 1914. Therefore, it is essential to remember that decisions must be evaluated against the information available when they were made.[128]

Though Ferguson's argument at times descends into shocking statistics that transform human lives into mere numbers, at its core, he presents a compelling case for Britain's responsibility. Making the point early on that he believes that the world would have been better

[127] "The Pity of War: Explaining World War I" (C-SPAN, April 21, 1999), https://www.c-span.org/video/?122689-1/the-pity-war-explaining-world-war-i.

[128] "The Pity of War: Explaining World War I."

off had Britain remained neutral, Ferguson goes step by step, critically analyzing each decision made by Britain. Finally, Ferguson speculates what might have happened had Britain decided differently.[129]

One of Ferguson's first major points is Britain's ill-preparedness to fight a continental war. Unlike the other powers who maintained large standing armies (Germany sent forty divisions to the western front; France sent thirty-nine), Britain could only send a six-division expeditionary force.[130] According to Ferguson, this decision to send a small, poorly trained force to intervene in such a large-scale conflagration amounted to "criminal folly."[131] In addition, Ferguson argues that Britain mismanaged the war regarding economic and human resources. As a result, Britain squandered much of the resources they could not afford to lose.

According to Ferguson, Britain first failed to adequately fund the early stages of the war, forcing them to overcompensate in the last two years. Second, Britain did not adequately allocate its skilled labor force, sending most volunteers to the western front. Secondly, Britain's poor financial management resulted in it paying too much for labor and shells.[132] Ferguson argues that had Britain been better at allocating home front and war front resources, Britain may have been successful at winning the war without requiring the United States' intervention.[133] Instead, Britain's intervention is only strong enough to stall a German victory but not strong enough to change the trajectory of the war.[134]

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[129] Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, sec. 1781.

[130] Ferguson, secs. 2187–2188.

[131] Ferguson, sec. 2457.

[132] Ferguson, sec. 806.

[133] Ferguson, sec. 6493; "The Pity of War: Explaining World War I."

[134] Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, sec. 2191.

After showing why it was an unwise decision for Britain to intervene in the continental war, Ferguson breaks down the decision-making process of Sir Edward Grey and the House of Commons. Grey had been receiving alarming reports on Germany for years, many of which represented Germany as having megalomaniac ambitions. Grey was concerned with reports that Germany's aim was "to dimmish the power of any rivals, to enhancer her own [power] by extending her dominion, to hinder the co-operation of other states, and ultimately to break up and supplant the British Empire."[135] Other reports echoed similar claims that Germany wanted to exert its dominance over Europe and challenge Britain for maritime supremacy.

Similar arguments were made at the Committee of Imperial Defense's War Council as early as 1911. Should Germany defeat France and Russia, "Holland and Belgium might be annexed to Germany, and a huge indemnity would be placed on France who would also lose some of her colonies. In short, the result of such a war would be that Germany would attain to that dominant position which has already been stated to be inimical to the interests of this country."[136] Given the preponderance of information pointing to a German threat, Ferguson is not entirely shocked that Grey concluded that Germany had a Napoleonic design that severely threatened Britain and the balance of power on the continent.[137]

In his final criticism of Britain's decision to intervene in the continental war, Ferguson points out that Britain was not facing any threat and had little if anything to gain. Germany had already abandoned any intention of competing with Britain's navy after silently admitting defeat

[135] Ferguson, sec. 2375.

[136] Ferguson, sec. 2388.

[137] Ferguson, sec. 2380.

in the naval arms race in 1911. Additionally, Germany's goal of dismantling the Russian Empire in Eastern Europe posed no threat to Britain's interests.[138]

Ferguson then focuses on imagining what Europe may have looked like had Britain not intervened. Here, Ferguson appears to embrace Fischer's Thesis as he adopts most of the German war aims arguments and assumes Germany implemented them precisely as the contemporary documents describe upon its victory. Accordingly, Ferguson's imaging of Europe has Germany establishing the Mitteleuropa according to the September Programme described in Chapter 2. Ferguson then describes how Germany would have created a Central European Customs Union that would have functioned similarly to today's European Union.[139]

Furguson and Maier disagreed on the nature of the Central European Customs Union in a 1999 debate at Harvard University. According to Maier, the Central European Customs Union that Germany would have established is unlikely to be a benevolent marketplace. Instead of the European powers participating equally, it is more likely that the marketplace imposed by Germany would have been militaristic and hierarchal for quite some time.[140] Ferguson skillfully counters this notion by referencing the September Programme's stated goals and other comments and observations made by German statesmen before the war. For example, Bernhard von Bülow, former Imperial Chancellor and Bethmann's immediate predecessor, repeatedly expressed that it would push Germany to the left if it went to war. Moreover, the need to cooperate with the Social Democrats throughout the war would ultimately weaken the right's position.[141]

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[138] Ferguson, sec. 1258.

[139] Ferguson, sec. 1258.

[140] "The Pity of War: Explaining World War I."

[141] Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, sec. 4241; "The Pity of War: Explaining World War I."

Ferguson further dismisses the idea that a German victory would have resulted in a proto-Third Reich. The German Empire in 1914 was, according to Ferguson, a highly modern, sophisticated, democratizing system in Europe. Furthermore, it contained the biggest socialist and anti-militaristic party, the rule of law, and complete civil and political rights for Jews. Ferguson then sharply compares Germany with Britain's chosen ally, tsarist Russia, the least liberal and democratic of the European powers and a known persecutor of Jewish populations within its borders.[142]

Ferguson expands on his counterfactual argument that it would have been better for Britain and the rest of Europe had Britain not intervened by claiming the entire world would also have benefited. When challenged on this point during the debate that averting the second war in Europe would not have necessarily prevented a conflict in the Pacific with Japan, Ferguson counters with the idea that the British Empire would have been stronger and, therefore, more capable of fending off Japanese aggression. To illustrate his point, Ferguson points out that the First World War had left Britain in debt to the sum of 125-150% of its gross domestic product (GDP). This debt financially crippled Britain's ability to maintain its global empire, making it vulnerable to Japan.[143]

Ferguson presents a fascinating look at what might have been. Playing out his counterfactual sees Germany establish a Central European Customs Union. Even if it were initially militaristic, it would have only been so temporary as leftist forces in Germany slowly took over. Eastern Europe is liberated from tsarist Russian rule to everybody's benefit, especially the Jewish population. Britain would not have suffered a generational setback of skilled labor

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[142] Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, secs. 1247–1263; "The Pity of War: Explaining World War I."

[143] "The Pity of War: Explaining World War I."

and incurred massive debt. A continuation of the Wilhelmine dynasty meant no Weimar Republic, no rise of Nazism or Adolf Hitler, and, most importantly, no Second World War. Following Ferguson's argument, the same was true in the Pacific, given that decades of underfunding and neglect would not erode Britain's Imperial strength. It is easy to understand how one may conclude that this is potentially a better world.

Dr. Michael S. Neiberg, Chair of War Studies at the US Army War College, is another prominent First World War scholar who takes another unique approach to explaining the road to war in 1914.[144] As a social historian, Neiberg does not concern himself with what the few people at the top of the political spectrum were doing in private to start or stop a war as much as he does the citizens of the belligerent nations and significant events that occurred in the public sphere. Though not directly called out in his book, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I,*[145] any astute reader will recognize that Neiberg is silently raging against the placing of the First World War into the framework of the M.A.I.N. (Militarism, Alliances, Imperialism, and Nationalism) Causes.

The M.A.I.N. Causes are one of the most common methods to teach the First World War. Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to come away from Neiberg's book without at least some questions about why this framework is still used and why more historians are not doing something to change this. One by one, Neiberg presents irrefutable evidence that none of these four items were of significant concern for the average person on the street, and absolutely none of them were cause for war. Just taking Militarism and Nationalism as justifications for the war

[144] Michael S. Neiberg, "Michael Neiberg," Michael Neiberg, accessed November 5, 2021, https://michaelneiberg.weebly.com/.

[145] Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I* (Cumberland, United States: Harvard University Press, 2011), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=3301262.

themselves implies popular consent, if not a popular push towards war. However, as Neiberg points out in the introduction, focusing too heavily on these sources can cloud one's understanding of how the war began.[146]

Traditional narratives use significant events at the dawn of the twentieth century, such as the Dreyfus Affair in 1906, to mark the start of the rise in militarism in Europe, which would peak in 1914. However, according to Neiberg, the Dreyfus Affair was the peak of militarism in Europe, after which militarism steadily declined.[147] To support this assertion, Neiberg not only points to the Dreyfus Affair weakening the militarist factions in France, but also the political parties who supported an extension of conscription from two to three years lost fifty parliamentary seats in the 1914 French elections.[148]

Britain also showed a distinct decline in militarism by the spring of 1914. In March 1914, the Curragh Incident made clear that the army would no longer blindly follow orders when more than fifty officers announced they would not act against the Ulster Volunteers. Additionally, as many as another hundred threatened to resign if the Curragh officers were punished.[149] Even Germany, arguably the most militaristic nation in Europe, showed signs that militarism was declining. The Zabern Affair in 1913 marked a drastic decrease in the army's power in Germany. The outcry over the scandal was so great that it resulted in the first vote of censure by the Reichstag. In response, the Kaiser removed the garrison, and its officers dispersed to remote parts of Germany. It even resulted in many deputies refusing to stand when the Kaiser came to

[146] Neiberg, 9–14.

[147] Neiberg, 75.

[148] Neiberg, 80.

[149] Neiberg, 38.

the Reichstag. These were all unprecedented in the history of the German empire.[150] Just months before the start of the war, militarism was arguably at its lowest point in four decades.

According to Neiberg, alliances are also an insufficient explanation for war. In Europe, the alliances at play had already been in place for several decades without resulting in a war. Additionally, the alliances are almost entirely defensive. For example, as discussed earlier, the Franco-Russian Alliance stipulated that the two powers were only obligated to come to the other's aid if they were the victim of an attack from another major power. In other words, if one of them were an aggressor, the other was not obligated to provide military support. Alliances had assisted diplomacy in avoiding several wars throughout the previous century.[151]

Neiberg also argued that the successful diplomatic resolution of conflicts undermines imperialism as a major cause of the war. Neiberg uses the Moroccan Crises of 1905 and 1911 as prime examples of how imperialist conflicts were not cause for war. The crises occurred between France and Germany, with the first lasting slightly longer than a year, from March 1905 to April 1906, and the second a mere four months, from July to November 1911. In both incidents, the crises were resolved diplomatically through arbitration in the Hague, with a disinterested third party serving as the arbiter.[152] Given the historic hostility between the two nations, if one were merely waiting for a pretense of war, both crises provided it.

Nationalism is the one force that Neiberg treats differently than the other three. Neiberg does not argue that nationalism is not on the rise throughout Europe, nor does he try to claim it is not an essential identification for many Europeans. However, he argues that the continent had a

[150] Neiberg, 75–76.

[151] Neiberg, 46.

[152] Neiberg, 55.

shared culture that transcended borders and negated nationalism as a primary cause for war.[153] Even the question of Alsace-Lorraine, the two provinces Germany took from France after the Franco-Prussian war,

Surveys performed as early as the 1890s by the Mercure de France solidly support this bold claim. The surveys showed that public opinion on the issue of Alsace-Lorraine had already relegated it to history. The younger generation surveyed expressed that the issue had little relevance, while the older generation expressed that regaining the lost territories would not erase the humiliation they suffered. Even David Star Jordan, the first president of Stanford University and president of the World Peace Foundation, who spent time touring the region in 1913, observed that the issue of revenge against Germany had subsided over time. According to Jordan, "there is scarcely any part of Europe where the war spirit is lower or the war make less in evidence" than in Alsace-Lorraine.[154]

Neiberg then turns his attention to what he asserts are the real primary movers behind the First World War. He starts in the most logical place for any historian, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The Archduke was not just any aristocrat. He was the nephew of the Austria-Hungary emperor and the heir-apparent to the Hapsburg throne. Due to his uncle's age and declining health, Ferdinand would soon become the next emperor. However, as Neiberg points out, nobody outside Vienna was concerned about his death. Instead, headlines and quotes emerged from influential individuals throughout Europe, such as the page six article in the *Irish Times* that read, "another tale of blood in the annals of the ill-fated House of Hapsburg." That article appeared on 29 June, one day after the assassination. Following issues would see the story

[153] Neiberg, 11.

[154] Neiberg, 71–72.

move to the back page for a few days, and then there was no mention of the assassination.[155] Years later, the Viennese intellectual Stefan Zweig observed that "only a few weeks more and the name and figure of Franz Ferdinand would have disappeared for all time out of history."[156]

Neiberg points to the significant crises Europe had faced over the previous two decades to understand why Europe was unphased by the assassination. Each of the crises (Fashoda in 1898; the first and second Morocco Crises in 1905 and 1911; and the Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913) held a greater significance than the assassination of the Archduke.[157] Nevertheless, in each case, diplomacy prevailed, and war was averted.

So, what made the July Crisis so different? As late as 27 July, the Manchester *Guardian* published articles saying, "Diplomacy would have all the time needed to localize this latest Balkan war where it belongs, in the Balkans." Throughout western Europe, people remained optimistic until the last moment that the European leadership would find a peaceful solution to the crisis.[158] The difference between the earlier crises and the July Crisis, according to Neiberg, is how fast things unfolded. The crisis began on 23 July with the delivery of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia and concluded on 30 July with Russia's total mobilization and declarations of war. Moreover, the July Crisis lasted only seven days, whereas earlier crises stretched over several months to more than a year.[159]

Neiberg explains what made the July Crisis different from the previous crises Europe had experienced. First, Austria-Hungary was a victim in the crisis and not the aggressor for the first

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[155] Neiberg, 23.

[156] Neiberg, 16.

[157] Neiberg, 55.

[158] Neiberg, 112.

[159] Neiberg, 146.

time. Second, the assassination of the Austria-Hungary Archduke gave them room to maneuver. Third, Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, the Chief of the General Staff of the Austro-Hungarian military, had advocated for years for a preventive war against Serbia. Additionally, Russia, who had always stood in the way of a war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, would not support a nation guilty of state-sponsored regicide. Finally, Austria-Hungary can cloud their assault on Serbia as justifiable retribution.[160]

In addition to Austria-Hungary, the other powers weighed their involvement in the crisis. In Britain and France, the consensus is that the conflict in the Balkans between Austria-Hungary and Serbia did not impact them. Even in Germany, Austria-Hungary's principal ally, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, the Chief of the Great German General Staff, had already determined that 1914 was a better year to go to war than 1917.[161] Finally, in Russia, it was decided that it was an excellent time to get involved, not to help the Serbians but to take advantage of the crisis and seize control of the Dardanelles.[162]

Finally, Neiberg skirts Fischer's Thesis by arguing that Germany was playing both angles in a strategic gambit. Germany believed that if they backed Austria-Hungary in their punitive war against Serbia and Russia remained neutral, the Ottoman Empire may join them, and Britain and France would likely not intervene. So, Germany issued an ultimatum to Russia to cease mobilization within 12 hours or face a declaration of war. Germany also believed that Russia would back down as it had in 1909. This would allow Austria to punish Serbia and, by extension, Germany could extend its influence into the Balkans. However, if the Russians mobilized,

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[160] Neiberg, 83–84.

[161] Neiberg, 84.

[162] Neiberg, 103.

Germany could claim self-defense against Russia, setting up the scenario discussed in the 1912 War Council meeting highlighted by Fischer.[163]

Another historian that has made advancements in analyzing the causes of the First World War is Dr. Christopher Clark. Clark is a well-respected historian specializing in nineteenth-century Europe and Anglo-German relations. He was recently awarded the Charlemagne Prize in May 2022, and in 2015, in recognition of his contributions to the field of study, Queen Elizabeth knighted him.[164] His book, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, is an exhaustive review of the many contributing factors, power plays, and secret agendas which existed throughout the belligerent nations, some going back more than a hundred years before the events of 28 June 1914. As evident by its 741 pages, Clark takes his time laying the groundwork for his thesis, waiting until the final third of his book to discuss the July Crisis.[165]

The detailed background information provided by Clark serves multiple purposes. First and foremost, Clark projects the idea that the war is more complex than many of the prominent historical narratives allow. Second, by taking the time to track the evolution of the Serbian monarchy, Clark demonstrates how the emergence of regicidal groups and secret societies such as the Black Hand Society evolved naturally over a century-long period. This contrasts with the commonly accepted history of the Black Hand, which typically conflates its origins with the conspirators of the Serbian regicide of 1903.[166] While this is likely when the organization was

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[163] Neiberg, 137.

[164] Brenda Haas, "Historian Christopher Clark to Receive European Media Award," *Deutsche Welle*, May 19, 2022, Online edition, https://www.dw.com/en/historian-christopher-clark-to-receive-european-media-award/a-61832172.

[165] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*.

[166] Ivor Roberts, "The Black Hand and the Sarajevo Conspiracy," in *Balkan Legacies of the Great War: The Past Is Never Dead*, ed. Othon Anastasakis, David Madden, and Elizabeth Roberts, St Antony's Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 25, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-56414-6_3.

formally established, Clark establishes that by the turn of the century, the modus operandi of the Black Hand Society was practically a national pastime in Serbia.[167] Finally, in the middle third of his book, Clark familiarizes the reader with the significant decision-makers within each nation. The table was already set by the time Clark reached the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Clark's narrative of the war is shaped by his determined approach of not asking *why* the war happened but instead focusing on *how* the war happened. In the introduction to his book, Clark asserts that when one asks the question of why something happened, the answer is inevitably consumed with assigning blame.[168] This is especially true in the case of the First World War, the history of which is intrinsically framed by Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles. Clark's goal is to challenge the conclusion that the war was inevitable and return responsibility to the decision-makers and the decision-making process that marched the nations towards war with eyes wide open.

The Sleepwalkers is inarguably an incredible achievement in terms of the breadth of research and meticulous examination of the events unfolding in each belligerent nation. In his conclusion, Clark pulls together his argument against the assignment of blame and aims at the Fischer thesis and those who followed in Fischer's footsteps of blaming Germany.[169] The strength of Clark's narrative is the detailed information it includes, with the step-by-step accounts of each nation in the years, months, days, and hours leading up to the final decisions. However, while he declares that Fischer's thesis is wrong to assign blame to Germany, Clark

[167] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 5–7.

[168] Clark, sec. 364.

[169] Clark, 559.

also maintains that none of the powers are to blame. Instead, Clark shields those he identifies as responsible for making the decisions from accountability for the outcome of their actions. He argues that each made the best decision possible with the information available to them at the time.

Each of these theories challenges the Fischer Thesis, either directly as in the case of Sean McMeekin and Christopher Clark or indirectly as with Niall Ferguson and Michael Neiberg. Each argument has strong primary source documents to support the claims made, and the research methodology used is sound, just as it is with Fischer. Still, the theories offered are all opposed. Outside Ferguson's argument, which relies on counterfactuals to propose what could have been, no two approaches discussed in this chapter or the previous one can be entirely correct simultaneously. However, none of them are wrong either. In the concluding chapter, each argument will be broken down by its source documents and compared side by side to evaluate how each historian came to their conclusion by choosing which documents to reference or not to reference and how much weight to give to conflicting primary sources.

Chapter 4

Analysis

Nearly twenty-five hundred years have passed since Thucydides established the practice of what is now known as the historical method[170]. Nevertheless, even in this modern era, historians struggle to master the basic tenets handed down by Thucydides. Thucydides' most notable work is *History of the Peloponnesian War,* recounting the fifth-century BC war between Sparta and Athens.[171] Thucydides was consumed with understanding human nature and using that to explain behavior during times of crisis, such as the Peloponnesian War (431-404 C). Just like Thucydides two and a half centuries ago, historians today are trying to understand the same elements of human nature and how to properly use that to explain the decisions made during the July Crisis in 1914.

Historians shoulder a great deal of responsibility when evaluating the evidence because how they weigh conflicting pieces of evidence or what they choose to include and exclude can dramatically impact the outcome of their research. Additionally, historians must contend with cognitive biases and fallacies. Cognitive biases can influence how a historian approaches certain subjects and their interpretations. For example, an implicit bias may unconsciously cause the historian to interpret motivations based on preconceived beliefs.[172] Fallacies are another trap that historians must avoid. According to the "Historian's Fallacy" chapter in *Bad Arguments: 100 of*

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[170] Charles Norris Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1929), 179.

[171] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Kindle edition (Open Road Media, 2020).

[172] Monica Thakrar, "Council Post: Unconscious Bias And Three Ways To Overcome It," Forbes, accessed June 1, 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/11/19/unconscious-bias-and-three-ways-to-overcome-it/.

the Most Important Fallacies in Western Philosophy, the historian's fallacy is when a historian's hindsight bias skews their interpretation of a historical event. While similar, this is separate from another cognitive bias called presentism. Presentism is when a historian projects ideas and beliefs into the past.[173]

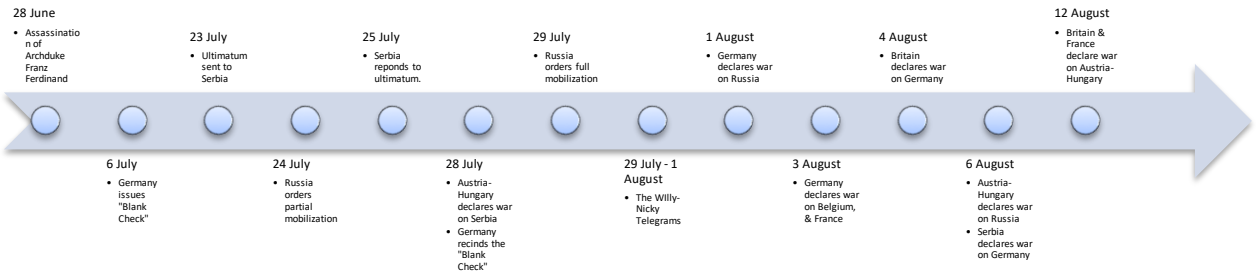

Illustration 8.The July Crisis of 1914.

When examining the theories put forth by the five historians discussed earlier (Fischer, Ferguson, McMeekin, Neiberg, and Clark), it becomes evident that they have much in common. There is little disagreement over the order and impact of significant events that occurred after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand leading up to the declaration of war by the belligerent nations. None of the historians had greater or lesser access to archival documents than the other, and the respective historian's research strongly supports each argument. So why do each of these historians come up with a different conclusion?

When Fischer was granted access to the Imperial archives in the 1950s, he was given unprecedented access to newly discovered government documents that had never before been analyzed in connection with the origins of the war.[174] It was this access to archival records that, when published, earned Fischer the recognition of rendering all previous interpretations of the

[173] Heather Rivera, "Historian's Fallacy," in *Bad Arguments* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2018), 163–64, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119165811.ch30.

[174] Mombauer, "Introduction," 234.

war obsolete.[175] This reputation has bolstered Fischer's findings and enabled them to be nearly bulletproof for over half a century. Even today, any historian desiring to put forward an alternative interpretation must inevitably deal with the Fischer Thesis.

The lynchpin of the Fischer Thesis is the strength and irrefutability of the sources on which it was based. No subsequent historian has attempted to argue against the idea that the Imperial German culture largely inherited its militaristic nature from its Prussian roots, nor have they debated what was discussed during the War Council Meeting in December 1912. Likewise, there is no disagreement over the existence of the September Programme (and similar) proposals. As a matter of fact, there is no direct disagreement between the four contrary historians and Fischer on the accuracy of the events as revealed in Fischer's findings. It is only in the interpretation of the intent and impact of those events that there is disagreement.

Ferguson is the most lenient of the contrary historians. Ultimately, his theory skirts around confronting the Fischer thesis by focusing almost solely on the decision-making process of the British elites. In Ferguson's counterfactual argument, he accepts Fischer's assertion of what Europe would look like had Germany won the war and enacted the September Programme. Likewise, Neiberg's arguments avoid conflict with the Fischer Thesis by basing it around the sentiments of the masses as opposed to the select few decision-makers in power. Even when forced to address decisions that led to war, Neiberg narrows his assessment to France, arguably the least belligerent nation at the time.[176] However, Neiberg does deliver a severe blow to Fischer's reliance upon militarism as a dominating force pushing Germany towards war. This

[175] Klaus Epstein, "Review: German War Aims in the First World War," *World Politics* 15, no. 1 (October 1962): 170.

[176] Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies*, 136–39.

succeeds in cutting one of Fischer's legs out from under him but does not do enough damage to topple his thesis entirely.

It is up to McMeekin and Clark to carry the burden of directly confronting Fischer. McMeekin's argument all but absolves any German responsibility for the war. McMeekin seemingly ignores the evidence Fischer relies heavily upon and, instead, chips away from the argument's foundation. Instead, McMeekin chips away from Fischer's thesis's foundation by caveating nearly every major point in Fischer's argument. McMeekin recharacterizes the December 1912 War Council meeting as merely a crisis meeting regarding the Balkan Wars. Though he does acknowledge Moltke's belief that it was better if Germany fought a European war sooner rather than later, he was the lone voice in the room with Tirpitz and Bethmann against the idea. The Kaiser dead set against war unless a Russian invasion forced Germany's hand.[177] This recharacterization of the meeting lessens its impact that Germany began pushing for a war afterward.

McMeekin further undermines the Kaiser's role in pushing for war by highlighting both his and Bethmann's belief that Austria's actions against Serbia would remain a local affair. In fact, an entire chapter of *July 1914* deals first with the Kaiser's relief at the Serbian response to Austria-Hungary's ultimatum, followed by utter dismay at the "fine mess" he accused Bethmann of getting him into once it becomes clear it is too late to stop Austria-Hungary's declaration of war.[178] Additionally, McMeekin points to Bethmann's rescinding of the "blank check." However, even though Bethmann waited too long to rescind the "blank check" to prevent Austria-

[177] McMeekin, *July 1914*, 83.

[178] Sean McMeekin, "You Have Got Me into a Fine Mess," in *July 1914: Countdown to War*, Kindle Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 241–58.

Hungary's declaration of war, it still contradicts Fischer's claim that Germany was secretly coveting war.[179]

Clark takes a more diplomatic approach in challenging Fischer. Clark's book *Sleepwalkers* provides an incredibly detailed and comprehensive narrative, which highlights what was happening in the capital of each of the belligerent nations. Taking this approach, Clark discusses the "War Council" meeting and the "blank check" but presents the multiple arguments made by previous historians. This may be an excellent method to allow readers to reach their conclusions, but it tells nothing of Clark's opinions.[180] Clark waits until his conclusion before addressing the Fischer Thesis. He then does so not by challenging Fischer's arguments or conclusions but by asking whether there is even a need to assign responsibility. The only criticism of Fischer that comes out of Clark is Fischer's sole reliance on the German Imperial archives to form the basis for his thesis.[181]

There is no question that the Fischer Thesis was a remarkable advancement in the understanding of decisions and intentions of German leadership before and throughout the war. However, as Clark pointed out, Fischer's research is too limited in scope to fully address what was happening among all the belligerent nations. Though the real kink in Fischer's armor is not the scope of his research, it is his methodology. Fischer describes the beginnings of his research in an article he published in *Historische Zeitschrift (Historical Magazine)* titled Deutsche

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[179] McMeekin, *July 1914*, 282.

[180] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 329, 415.

[181] Clark, 560–61.

Kriegsziele Revolutionierung Und Separatfrieden Im Osten 1914-1918 (German War Aims Revolutionization and Separate Peace in the East 1914-1918).[182]

According to Fischer, the journey began after finding the September Programme documents, which then inspired him to continue to look deeper into the archives. In his book *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, Fischer traces Germany's actions from the "War Council" in December 1912 through the September Programme documents written after the war had begun. Fischer continued to highlight similar proposals from groups that showed Germany's expansionist goals and then started the concluding section of his book by dedicating an entire chapter to how the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is the first example of Germany's War Aims coming to fruition.[183]

His arguments seemingly fall apart when evaluating Fischer within the context of the research presented by the contrary historians. Neiberg removes Prussian militarism, and both McMeekin and Clark present evidence that Germany was not pushing for war and that Germany, in McMeekin's case, unsuccessfully tried to restrain Austria-Hungary from going too far. Given what is known about Fischer's research methodology from his articles and books, Fischer appears to have fallen victim to a cognitive bias known as anchoring. Fischer anchored his argument on the idea that the September Programme was Germany's goal and then looked for evidence that bolstered this conclusion. Combining this with the fact that Fischer limited his research to only German sources, it is possible to conclude that the Fischer Thesis also suffers from confirmation bias, in which Fischer only sought sources that would prove his thesis.

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[182] Fritz Fischer, "Deutsche Kriegsziele Revolutionierung Und Separatfrieden Im Osten 1914-1918," *Historische Zeitschrift* 188, no. 1 (December 1, 1959): 249–310, https://doi.org/10.1524/hzhz.1959.188.jg.249.

[183] Fritz Fischer, Hajo Holborn, and James Joll, "The Peace of Brest-Litovsk: The First Realization of German War Aims," in *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 475–509.

Sean McMeekin's theory is a bold departure from the Fischer Thesis and the historians that follow his model. McMeekin does argue that there was one nation whose actions stood out above the others in ensuring the start of the war. However, McMeekin argues that it was Russia, not Germany. As discussed above, McMeekin dismisses the December 1912 meeting as the start of Germany's secret war plans, and he goes to great lengths to absolve the German Kaiser and Chancellor from the guilt laid upon them for issuing the "blank check." Instead, McMeekin delivers a compelling argument that the war should have been a minor local conflict contained within the Balkans.[184]

McMeekin draws primarily on Russian archives, which have only been available to the public for the past two decades, to form the basis of his argument that the First World War was more Russia's than Germany's.[185] His introduction sets the stage for his argument as McMeekin highlights Russia's Great Army Programme of 1913, which modernized Russia's mobilization plans to allow for rapid deployment of forces, and the idea that the two Balkan Wars (1911-1913) were merely a precursor to the First World War.[186] From the beginning, it is clear that McMeekin is coming at the situation from two different angles. On the one hand, a strictly localized conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia had no reason to involve any major powers. However, on the other hand, the "Russian steamroller" will inevitably change the course of the war.[187] After all, what else could Germany do once Russia massed troops on its eastern border?

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[184] McMeekin, *July 1914*, 389.

[185] McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, 5.

[186] McMeekin, 1, 4.

[187] McMeekin, 6.

McMeekin has very little to say about the Fischer Thesis because he disagrees and finds Fischer's "revelations" unsatisfying.[188] Instead, he prefers more balanced sources such as Luigi Albertini's *The Origins of the War of 1914* and L. C. F. Turner's *Origins of the First World War*. With that, McMeekin has little more to say regarding the Fischer Thesis except to criticize the continued obsession with the September Programme, which McMeekin regards as nothing more than a pipe dream emerging from Germany's initial victories that had no bearing on the war's origins.[189]

McMeekin's thesis on the origins of the First World War is laid out in his two books *July 1914: Countdown to War* and *The Russian Origins of the First World War*. The former gives a day-by-day narrative of significant interactions of Germany and Austria-Hungary with each other and the other belligerents. The latter concentrates heavily on Russia's internal and external machinations during the July Crisis.

According to McMeekin, a war in the Balkans was inevitable, but a continental war was not. This is not a significant revelation, given that most of contemporary Europe understood the chaotic instability of the Balkans. Even Bismarck had commented on the potential for war in the Balkans decades earlier. However, despite his assertion that Russia's involvement caused the war to spill out of the Balkans, they play only a minor role in McMeekin's *July 1914* book. Instead, McMeekin goes to great lengths to show how Austria-Hungary acted without and even against Germany's advice.[190]

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[188] McMeekin, *July 1914*, 431.

[189] McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, 77.

[190] McMeekin, *July 1914*, 144, 431.

Unlike in his *July 1914* book, Russia takes center stage in McMeekin's *The Russian Origins of the First World War*. The narrative is reminiscent of Fischer in that it is heavily one-sided. Like Fischer's *Germany's Aims in the First World War* book, McMeekin did an exceptional job researching primary sources in the Russian archives. Also, like Fischer, the narrative presented gave very little attention to the roles of the other belligerent nations. Although arguably, Russia committed several overt actions that pushed the war machines down the road, without the full context of the rest of the belligerents' activities, McMeekin's arguments fall short of causing a significant shift in First World War scholarship. On the contrary, McMeekin risks his argument becoming tainted by confirmation bias without a more balanced approach, further weakening its standing in the academic community.

McMeekin's argument fairs well compared to the other contrary historians discussed above. When compared to McMeekin instead of Fischer, there is little impact on Ferguson's argument. Ferguson's counterfactual relies upon the events of the July Crisis playing out exactly as they did up to Britain's entry into the war. Since Britain was the last of the belligerent nations to declare war, the circumstances had little impact. One can even argue that Ferguson's counterfactual is more compatible with McMeekin's argument than with Fischer's. Contrary to Fischer, McMeekin disregards the September Programme as evidence of Germany's premeditation. If the September Programme were a pre-war concept in Germany, it would undermine several of Ferguson's assumptions.[191]

Likewise, McMeekin's argument can easily coexist with the arguments proposed by Neiberg and Clark. Neiberg based his argument on research into how the general population in Europe felt toward war in the two decades prior to the July Crisis. Additionally, he dismantles

[191] Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, sec. 4190.

the M.A.I.N. model for the causes of the war piece by piece, which in turn undermines Fischer.[192] Finally, since Christopher Clark does not put forward a robust controversial argument in his narrative, there is very little reason for conflict between Clark's and McMeekin's positions on the topic. Ultimately, the less militaristic and aggressive Germany appears, the more it bolsters McMeekin's conclusions that Russia was the primary mover behind the war.

One might expect similar criticism leveled at Niall Ferguson and his argument that Britain is responsible for the war as was leveled against Fischer above. True, Ferguson spends most of his time focused solely on Britain and what he considers their failures in the war. However, unlike Fischer, Ferguson does not neglect the motivations and aims of the other belligerent nations. His counterfactual relies heavily on how he believes the events would have unfolded if Britain had not entered the war. Furthermore, since the bulk of Ferguson's argument exists within a counterfactual narrative, he essentially avoids most of the traditional fallacies.

Ferguson first condemns the British government for implementing policies that made Britain ill-prepared to enter a continental war with any hope of success. Then he lays out the details of his counterfactual, essentially what could have been. Ferguson's argument about Britain's lack of military readiness is entirely valid. Unlike their continental counterparts, Britain did not maintain a standing army. Nor had they embraced conscription as the belligerent nations did then. Seeing how their entrance into the war resulted in such a devastating loss of human and logistical resources, there is hardly a counterargument that one can make. Ferguson even dispels the idea that Britain was entering the war for altruistic reasons in support of Belgium, as has been claimed. Instead, Ferguson quotes Edward House, an American diplomat stationed in Britain, as saying that Britain came into the war "primarily . . . because Germany insisted upon having a

[192] Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies*, 9–14.

dominant army and a dominant navy, something Great Britain could not tolerate in safety to herself."[193]

Ferguson does not make a serious effort to challenge Fischer's thesis. Instead, he spends most of his time on the subject, helping to explain it to modern readers. Ferguson's only departure from Fischer and his followers is regarding the September Programme. According to the Fischer Thesis, the September Programme was part of Germany's long-term aims that predated the outbreak of the war and was a contributing factor to Germany's aggression during the July Crisis. However, Ferguson points out that there has never been any evidence to suggest that the September Programme was a pre-war aim.[194] This is a necessary distinction that Ferguson must make since he based his whole counterfactual on the idea that Britain and the rest of Europe would have been better off had it not entered the war.

If one accepts Ferguson's argument that Britain stays out of the war, the outcome becomes much different. Germany would have achieved a swift victory in the west and eventually would have won the war. In the process, Austria-Hungary would have become part of Germany, and substantive territory along all their borders would have become annexed to serve as a buffer against aggressors. Finally, Germany would impose a common European marketplace reminiscent of the European Union today.

The problem with Ferguson's argument is that it makes numerous assumptions that the evidence cannot support. The first assumption is that if Germany won, they would have been benevolent in establishing the European marketplace. However, history demonstrates that when a major power fights and wins a war, the worst of human instincts comes out. Therefore, it is

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[193] Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, sec. 3811.

[194] Ferguson, sec. 4185.

doubtful that Germany would have been so gracious in victory, especially considering the brutality of its Belgium occupation.

Still, there are some things that Ferguson proposes that are highly probable. First, there would have been a continuation of the Empire. This means that the Weimar Republic would never have been established, the empire would likely have become more liberal over time, and there would be no rise of Fascism, no Nazism, no Auschwitz, No Holocaust, and no reason for World War II.[195] Nobody can argue that avoiding any of these terrible events is a bad thing. However, they amount to little more than wishful thinking.

Unfortunately, Ferguson is succumbing too much to the cognitive bias of hindsight when developing his counterfactual. Counterfactuals are only speculative, and their worth extends only to the limit that they can add to our knowledge and understanding of a subject. However, since nobody could have foreseen the disastrous outcome of the First World War and how events would unfold over the remainder of the twentieth century, it is unreasonable to judge the rightness of Britain's actions. This is not to discount Ferguson's entire argument. Ferguson spends a great deal of time addressing what Britain could reasonably know at the time while criticizing their poor assessment of Germany's intentions and the balance of power on the continent.[196]

A better counterfactual would have been grounded within the conceptual framework of the time. If Ferguson had limited himself to only what information Britain had available when considering whether to enter the war, his argument would have been stronger. However, his counterfactual would likely have been different as well. The fact that Ferguson hangs his

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[195] Ferguson, secs. 1233–1260.

[196] Ferguson, secs. 1293–1305, 3953.

argument so much on the idea that Britain was ill-prepared for war is not as convincing of an argument once hindsight is removed. Britain had not maintained a large army for a considerable time, preferring instead to rely on a small elite force that, in times of war, was augmented by mercenaries (much like the continental Europe before the rise of Prussian military dominance). This is the same model Britain successfully used both during the Napoleonic Wars and World War II, so Ferguson's argument that Britain needed a standing army to win a war on the continent is less convincing than it might have been.[197]

Ferguson's counterfactual does make one successful argument: Britain could have and should have, handled things differently. A common thread among most theories involving the origins of the First World War is the idea that Germany desperately wanted to ensure Britain's neutrality. Had Sir Edward Grey's messaging to Germany been more direct and forceful, it may have been enough for Bethmann to move a little quicker to reign in Austria-Hungary before it was too late. Instead, Grey signaled to Germany that though they intended to honor their commitments to Belgium and France, there was not much support for going to war.[198]

Despite its flaws and fallacies, Ferguson's counterfactual provides a benefit in that it allows for an analysis of Germany's post-war plans in a way that none of the other contrary historians achieve. Additionally, cloaking it within a counterfactual, just like with the Fischer Thesis, enables Ferguson's argument to co-exist alongside McMeekin, Neiberg, Clark, and the countless other historians analyzing the origins of the First World War.

In another decisive break from tradition, Michael Neiberg delivers the social historian's perspective. Neiberg's thesis starkly contrasts the typical inevitable and probable war models as

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[197] Ferguson, sec. 2950.

[198] Ferguson, sec. 4345.

he argues against the four pillars that have supported nearly every narrative for over a century: Militarism, Alliances, Imperialism, and Nationalism. Neiberg does not assert that the decision-makers in Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia believed they were fighting a genuinely defensive war. Instead, Neiberg focuses on the general population's beliefs about the war and why they were fighting.[199] Neiberg can build his argument around these beliefs and shine a light on areas often ignored within the framework of the First World War.

Neiberg shies away from any attempts to explain away the typical smoking gun topics on which most war guilt historians hang their arguments. Neiberg did not discuss the December 1912 "war council" meeting or the September Programme. This is entirely reasonable once one understands the purpose of Neiberg's research. The "war council" meeting is generally only used by the followers of the Fischer Thesis to show how Germany planned the war. Since Neiberg is arguing that militarism was already in decline, especially in Germany, there is little reason for him to analyze the meaning of this meeting. Likewise, if one is not arguing in favor of German premeditation, the September Programme does not play a factor.

The one smoking gun that Neiberg cannot avoid is the "blank check." However, Neiberg masterfully navigates this by pointing out that the Kaiser merely agrees to "stand by Austria-Hungary, as is required by the obligations of his alliance and of his ancient friendship." Nothing in the memorandum suggests that the Kaiser was eager for war or encouraging military action. Instead, it merely confirms that Germany will not break the Dual Alliance treaty, which has already been in place for a quarter of a century.[200]

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[199] Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies*, 139.

[200] Neiberg, 84.

Since Neiberg is not arguing for or against war guilt for any of the belligerent nations, he can avoid directly confronting the Fischer Thesis. The only mention of Fischer comes in the notes where he gives credit to Fischer for igniting "an academic and popular firestorm."[201] Whether Neiberg agrees or disagrees with Fischer, it is apparent that he believes that any discussion within the academic community that furthers our understanding of a topic is a good thing.

Still, Neiberg's argument does effectively eliminate Germany as a militaristic nation. It is difficult to imagine the same person who withdrew the garrison from Zabern and punished all the officers for their aggressive conduct is also a warmonger determined to conquer and subjugate most of Europe. The same is true with the Reichstag, who refused to stand for the Kaiser after the Zabern Affair.[202] Still, Neiberg's reliance on data collected about the general population does not eliminate the possibility of bad actors. This allows Neiberg's argument to withstand outside criticism while coexisting with many other contrary historians, including McMeekin, Ferguson, and Clark. Moreover, though Neiberg undermines most of Fischer's argument that Germany planned the war, his argument does not disallow the possibility that bad actors in Russia could take advantage of the situation presented by the conflict between Serbia and Austria-Hungary.

Christopher Clark's narrative of the First World War is the most difficult of his contemporaries to break down. This is not because Clark fails to include enough details in his narrative. It is also not due to a lack of documents supporting any of Clark's claims. On the contrary, Clark's book *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* is arguably the most comprehensive narrative of the war referenced in this document. However, while Clark succeeds

[201] Neiberg, 376.

[202] Neiberg, 74–75.

in conveying an incredible amount of information about the war, he fails to provide a succinct analysis. This is likely a result of Clark's approach where instead of answering "why" Europe went to war, he chose to answer "how" Europe went to war.[203] Unfortunately, this results in a narrative where the war is everyone's fault, and, therefore, it is nobody's fault. Since all the decision-makers acted together within a system, it removed individual agency and absolved them from any responsibility.

Whenever Clark's narrative addresses a controversial topic, he carefully includes information from multiple sides of the controversy. Concerning the significant elements of the Fischer Thesis (the war council, the blank check, the September Programme), Clark dutifully presents the arguments for and against Fischer while remaining neutral in his conclusion. For the December 1912 "war council," he presents the argument that this meeting was the starting point of Germany's pre-meditated move toward war and the counter-argument that it was merely a reaction to the international crisis. Clark then continues with his narrative without offering any further argument other than that there was not any clear evidence to show Germany overtly began any preparations.

Clark is equally non-committal over the outcome of the Hoyos Mission, where the Kaiser issues the infamous "blank check." Again, he presents the argument that Germany used the situation to start a preventive war, which Clark confirms was a consideration among the senior military leadership, as well as the counter-argument that the Kaiser believed Russia would stay out of the conflict. Nevertheless, again, Clark leaves the situation ambiguous with quotes from both sides of the argument but no clear assertion of which side won in the end.[204]

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[203] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, sec. 334.

[204] Clark, 414–15.

Nowhere in Clark's narrative is the September Programme addressed. Just as with Neiberg, this omission suggests Clark considers the German war aim a product of the war rather than a contributing factor or an example of pre-meditation. This also aligns with McMeekin's assertion above when he highlights the lack of evidence that indicates the September Programme was an idea before Germany declared war. However, its omission is not the same as making a case against its inclusion in other arguments in favor of German war guilt. Therefore, it would be foolish to take this as an indication that Clark is silently refuting Fischer. On the contrary, for the same reasons, Clark's narrative can coexist alongside contemporaries such as McMeekin, Ferguson, and Neiberg. His narrative is also able to coexist alongside Fischer.

While Clark's approach is frustratingly non-committal, it may also represent the direction the First World War scholarship should move. Finally, it may be time to set aside the need to assign blame after more than a century. Instead, Clark's narrative demonstrates a path forward where it is possible to analyze the conditions that led to war separate from the individual decisions that led to war.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the amount of information available on the First World War is so vast that one can use a selection of sources to support just about any theory on the origins of the war. However, throughout the above analysis of five independent theories on the origins of the war, only one thing is obvious. None represent the definitive answer to the question of which of the belligerent nations is responsible, or even most responsible, for the war. Ironically, throughout this analysis, the only theory that fails to hold up to scrutiny is the Fischer Thesis.

Fischer began his research with the discovery of the September Programme. Using this as an indicator that Germany had premeditated plans for war, he worked backward from this reference point to show that Germany used the July Crisis to instigate a war while claiming self-defense. Then, he continued back to December 1912 and claimed the "war council" meeting was the starting point of Germany's planning for war. If one only uses documents that support this narrative, then it sounds entirely reasonable, and Germany deserves every bit of the blame in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles.[205]

However, if one considers the information presented by McMeekin, Neiberg, and Clark, the "war council" meeting was only in response to the crisis in the Balkans. True, there were statements in support of using the crisis as a pretext for a preventive war. However, there was no indication that the Kaiser was in favor and no evidence of any action taken after the meeting to prepare Germany for war. Likewise, when Germany declares support for Austria-Hungary with the "blank check," there is nothing in the memorandum that suggests military action or a desire

[205] "Research Guides," pt. Article 231.

for war. Again, there is no evidence that Germany began preparations following the Hoyos mission.

Additionally, none of the contrary historians, including Ferguson, identify the idea of the September Programme as having existed prior to the war and therefore was not a factor. Finally, Neiberg makes a solid case that militarism declined long before the "war council" meeting. Taken all together, Fischer is not left with much of an argument other than claiming there were hardliners in Germany, and one can levy that same claim against all the other belligerent nations as well.

None of this means Germany was utterly innocent. On the contrary, Germany took clear steps that increased the likelihood of war. As Thucydides concluded over twenty-four hundred years ago, "The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war inevitable."[206] This quote forms the basis of the Thucydides Trap described by Graham Allison in his 2017 book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*[207] Allison, co-founder and former dean of the modern John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and former Assistant Secretary of Defense, successfully applied this concept to twelve major wars between two or more powers over the past five hundred years, including the First World War.[208]

According to Allison, war is highly probable when a rising power challenges a ruling power. In the case of the First World War, Germany was the rising power challenging Britain,

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[206] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 26.

[207] Graham Allison, *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Reprint edition (Mariner Books, 2017).

[208] "Thucydides Trap: Case File," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, sec. 12, accessed June 13, 2022, https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/case-file.

which France and Russia supported.[209] In the case file, Allison identifies several key areas where the Thucydidean dynamic existed between Germany and the Triple Entente powers. First, Germany's rapid industrialization in the second half of the nineteenth century enabled them to increase their share of global manufacturing, mostly at Britain's expense. Next, in the 1890s, to become a "World Power," Germany began to build a navy to rival Britain, the dominant naval power. Finally, Russia's growing strength, the announcement of the Great Army Programme in 1913, and the heavy investment of French capital into Russian infrastructure further encouraged Germany's political and military leadership to push for an ever-increasing aggressive posture.[210] This explains the condition of Europe in 1914, but not why diplomacy failed to resolve the crisis in July 1914.

To understand the diplomatic failure during the July Crisis, it is essential to remember the incredibly complex system of treaties, alliances, and carefully established checks and balances of power. As discussed earlier, the one person who was skillful enough to manage this system was Otto von Bismarck. Without Bismarck's keen political and diplomatic foresight, the system he so carefully crafted during his three decades as Imperial Chancellor had begun to unravel. Therefore, with the Thucydidean dynamic in full swing in 1914, despite none of the belligerent nations desiring war, they were willing to fight one to prevent their perceived enemies from achieving a victory.

A greater narrative begins to take shape when taking a step back and looking at all the theories side-by-side. In *Sleepwalkers*, Clark takes the time to give a history of the Kingdom of

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[209] Richard N. Rosecrance et al., *The Next Great War?: The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U. S. - China Conflict* (Cambridge, UNITED STATES: MIT Press, 2014), 73, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=3339908.

[210] "Thucydides Trap: Case File," sec. 12.

Serbia. Clark's intention here is to normalize Serbia's acceptance and reliance on regicide as an official policy. However, in the process, Clark reveals that Serbia had long envisioned a united south slav kingdom, much like Germany's September Programme. However, unlike the September Programme, Serbia's Unification Programme, Greater Serbia, was a pre-war aim dating back as early as 1836 with the publication of Serbian anthropologist Vuk Karadžić's national tract *Srbi svi i svuda* (Serbs all and everywhere).[211] Therefore, unlike Fischer's argument that falls apart once the September Programme is removed as a pre-war aim, there is a stronger argument for Serbia starting the war against Austria-Hungary.

From the Serbian viewpoint, Austria-Hungary was an existential threat to their nationalist agenda. McMeekin fails to make this point in his *Russian Origins*. McMeekin does highlight pan-Slavic propaganda impacting Russian foreign policy but does not connect this to Serbia and its agenda.[212] Given that his argument ties the First and Second Balkan Wars to the July Crisis, McMeekin argues should have only resulted in the Third Balkan War. Using Serbia's unification aims only bolsters that argument.

Still, McMeekin does the best job of reconceptualizing the Kaiser's role in the July Crisis compared to the Fischer school. McMeekin shows that there were no preparations for war coming out of the December 1912 meeting nor following his cabinet meeting during the July Crisis. Additionally, in *Countdown to War*, McMeekin highlights the Kaiser's relief at the Serbian response to the ultimatum because it means there was no reason for war.[213] Neiberg's assertion that militarism had long declined in Germany supports this argument. Like McMeekin,

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[211] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 22.

[212] McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, 21.

[213] McMeekin, *July 1914*, 83, 105, 225.

Neiberg demonstrates the Kaiser's attitude towards militarism by highlighting the Kaiser's response to the Zabern affair.[214]

Neiberg does overlook some contrary elements when arguing against alliances and nationalism as significant causes of the war. Neiberg argues that alliances are purely defensive and are not a good reason for war. He credits these alliances for maintaining the balances in Europe, which allowed for diplomacy to prevail in previous crises.[215] However, though alliances may use defensive language, the First World War is an example of how easily manipulated the concept of defense was. Additionally, while the alliances act as deterrents, they ensure that once a war does begin, they guarantee its escalation. By crediting the alliances this way, Neiberg discounts Bismarck's role in maintaining the balance of power through his carefully crafted foreign policies. The longer Europe was absent of Bismarckian statecraft, the less it could maintain the balances he established.

With nationalism, Neiberg uses examples in France, Germany, and Britain to demonstrate how this was not a significant force pushing those nations to war. In these cases, Neiberg's arguments are difficult to refute. However, he does not address how nationalism may have impacted Serbia. In the previous century, just as Serbia was developing the Greater Serbia aim, Italy and Germany overcame centuries of division to unify into single political states. Understandably, Serbia desired to create a comparable pan-Slavic kingdom. The growth of nationalism in Serbia is apparent in *Sleepwalkers* and alluded to in *Russian Origins*. Additionally, it is a significant part of the motive behind the assassination that sets off the crisis.

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[214] Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies*, 75–76.

[215] Neiberg, 46.

Therefore, had Neiberg factored the Balkan region into his analysis, he would likely have come to a very different conclusion.

Illustration 9.Political Cartoon of the July Crisis. (Wikimedia Commons, April 12, 2011).

Serbia was not willing to back down from Austria-Hungary's ultimatum. Russia was unwilling to stand by and allow Austria-Hungary to steamroll over Serbia. Germany was unwilling to stand by and allow Russia to attack Austria. Furthermore, Britain was unwilling to allow Germany to invade France and violate Belgium's neutrality. These statements are apparent across the different theories analyzed. However, no matter which approach one takes, nobody appears to want to lay blame on Austria-Hungary's doorstep. McMeekin comes the closest in *Countdown to War* when he highlights how strong the forces in Austria-Hungary were pushing for war and how dishonestly it dealt with Germany to prevent any objections to the ultimatum and their war plans.

Ultimately, despite incredible cases made by each of the historians, none of them make a strong enough case to lay blame on a single nation. Additionally, the two countries which arguably are taking the most actions that start the war, Serbia and Austria, are mostly absent in the debate over responsibility. These arguments tell us that none of the belligerent nations can escape responsibility. So if blame must be assigned, there is plenty of it to go around.

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