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THE GREAT WAR AND ITS HISTORIOGRAPHY

DENNIS SHOWALTER

THE UNDERSTANDING OF the First World War is connected more than that of any other modern conflict with the war's historiography. Even before the armies marched, the respective combatants were compiling document collections justifying their innocence in the run-up to war and the initiation of hostilities. These "color books," named for their respective covers, were intended as much for domestic as for international consumption. They sought to solidify a public opinion widely—and justifiably—considered less enthusiastic for war than the cheering crowds of late July seemed to suggest. This was the Great War's first historiographical project. The pattern of self-justification continued, although the structure and content of the works increasingly aimed at obtaining support from neutrals, especially the United States.

The use of history as self-justification did not end with a series of peace treaties formally ascribing responsibility for the war to the Central Powers—Germany in particular. Apart from the widespread conviction of the German populace that the Second Reich had fought an essentially defensive war and had behaved during it no worse than its enemies, the newly established Weimar Republic lacked both the self-confidence to shoulder the moral responsibility and the financial capacity to deal with reparations for a conflict that had devastated Europe and shaken the world. Instead, the government fought back with the best weapon remaining at its command: Germany's academic community.

Strongly nationalistic and patriotic in orientation, matchless researchers and unrivaled polemicists—controversy has long been an art form among German intellectuals—the pundits and professors rallied behind a cause lost by the soldiers. Given a previously unheard of access to government documents and frequently supported by government money, a generation of revisionists challenged and denied Germany's sole responsibility for what they recognized as a catastro-

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phe, but attributed it to causes more complex than the behavior of a single country and its government.¹

Politicians elsewhere in Europe quickly recognized the risks of allowing Germany to take control of the discourse on the war's outbreak. Beginning in the 1920s, France, Britain, and the Austrian Republic published their own elaborate document collections, organized, edited, and annotated so as best to support their respective governments' prewar policies. The Soviet Union sought to confirm its revolutionary legitimacy by issuing material focused on Tsarist Russia's complicity in the war's outbreak. This material was supplemented for all the participants, and the neutrals as well, by the increasing availability of other primary materials, especially memoirs and the documents supporting them.

Two general factors affected much of the interwar research. The first reflected that most of the available source material had been organized by states. In consequence, most of the histories depicted states as the primary actors. The sheer amount of available data, moreover, was overwhelming by the contemporary standards of the historical profession. Processing and organizing it proved challenging to even the best minds of the craft; not for another half century would scholars be able to construct the ingenious approaches that characterize today's literature on the war's origins.

From the first postwar wave of research and analysis, a pecking order among the major participants emerged. Thus, in the United States, Harry Elmer Barnes inverted conventional wisdom by blaming France and Russia.² Harvard's Sidney Bradshaw Fay asserted that Austria-Hungary had a greater direct responsibility than any other power for the war's immediate outbreak.³ Halfway across the continent at the University of Chicago, Bernadotte Schmitt continued to assert Germany's primary, although not exclusive, responsibility.⁴ This last point characterized the first wave of scholarship on the Great War. Even those accepting the conclusions of Versailles tipped their hats to the work of their colleagues who reached different conclusions—conceding, however grudgingly, that the “truth” of the war's origins had yet to be determined.

1. Holger H. Herwig, “Clio Deceived: Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany After the Great War,” *International Relations* 12 (1987): 5–44.
2. Harry Elmer Barnes, *The Genesis of the World War: An Introduction to the Promises of War Guilt* (New York: Knopf, 1926).
3. Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).
4. Bernadotte Schmitt, *The Coming of the War 1914*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1930).

The second general element shaping research and presentation was the increasing permeation of the interwar intellectual community by Marxist concepts and constructions. That in turn encouraged a comprehensive criticism of a capitalist system increasingly considered responsible not merely for the Great War, but for the sorry state of Europe and the world since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.⁵ Connected to that was the emergence of a “debunking” approach to biography, perhaps beginning with Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*.⁶ The flawed personalities depicted in these works could hardly have been expected to understand the coming of the Great War, much less to have stopped it.

A younger generation of scholars reacted against their mentors by arguing that it had not been the policies of any particular government or statesman but the systemic factors such as imperialism, arms races, and alliance systems that led to the outbreak of the war. General-audience historians also adopted this fresh approach, which reinvigorated old readers and attracted new ones.

During the 1930s, state-structured archival research and Marxist intellectual perspectives increasingly combined in a new perspective. The assertion of a collective responsibility usually proved so pervasive that the Great War came to be understood as a war that no one wanted, a failure of systems rather than a product of decisions. This approach fit well with a wider cultural and political effort in liberal Europe to heal the wounds of 1914–1918 in the face of the contemporary threats of totalitarianism and depression. It became part of the effort to sustain the Third Reich’s presence as a “Western” power, rather than seeing Germany turn rogue under Adolf Hitler. Its intellectual and political appeals possessed enough strength to sustain it for at least a decade after 1945, permitting the perception of Nazi Germany in turn as an aberration in German and Western European history—an aberration illustrated as much by its starting World War II as by its genocide of the Jews.⁷

In its developed form, the interpretation of the Great War as an unwilling conflict usually began with the mid-nineteenth-century wars of German unification. These conflicts, themselves limited, nevertheless established a new major power in the heart of Europe—a de facto threat to the neighboring countries.

5. Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), effectively provides a concise context for this development.
6. Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians: Cardinal Manning, Dr. Arnold, Florence Nightingale, General Gordon* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1918).
7. For a recent analysis of this issue, see Ian Kershaw, “Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39 (2004): 239–54.

Germany's directing hand, Otto von Bismarck, however, successfully averted conflict with Germany's neighbors partly by establishing the new Reich as an "honest broker" of Europe's disputes and partly by developing a complex network of alliances with the common purpose of maintaining the status quo against any challengers.⁸

Critics of that relatively benign interpretation argued that even before Bismarck's dismissal in 1890 by the young Emperor William II, challenges to his order were emerging. The Franco-Russian Alliance of 1894 reflected more than a simple concern over Germany's still growing economic and military power. At the same time, Germany's foreign policy grew more erratic and acquired a global dimension that Bismarck had generally eschewed. In particular, the construction of an ocean-going navy, albeit for reasons of domestic politics as well as international relations, sent a negative message to a Britain itself wearying under the burdens of a world empire challenged by France and Russia.⁹

Periodic efforts around the turn of the century to negotiate an Anglo-German alliance foundered on the simple ground that the two states had nothing to bring them together. In contrast, particularly after the experience of the South African War (1898-1902), Britain had strong grounds for settling its extra-European disputes with its direct rivals. Britain gave up its long-standing policy of "splendid isolation" in 1902 when a naval treaty with Japan permitted the Royal Navy to concentrate on Germany. In 1904, an Entente Cordiale with France signaled Britain's return to direct involvement in continental politics. Germany, increasingly perceiving itself encircled, responded with a series of clumsy initiatives, centered on Morocco, that not only brought Britain and France closer but led in 1907 to an Anglo-Russian agreement as well.

Germany's sense of isolation increased accordingly. The Reich had its own Triple Alliance, with Italy and Austria-Hungary, dating from 1882. But the Italian connection was fraying, while Austria, torn by ethnic conflicts, increasingly declined from a European to a regional power. Austria found itself challenged

8. Andreas Hillgruber, *Bismarcks Aussenpolitik* (Freiburg, Germany: Rombach, 1972); Bruce Waller, *Bismarck at the Crossroads: The Reorientation of German Foreign Policy After the Congress of Berlin, 1878-1880* (London: Athlone Press, 1974).
9. See George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875-1890* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979); Norman Rich, *Friedrich von Holstein: Politics and Diplomacy in the Era of Bismarck and Wilhelm II*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965); Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Great Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988). Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar: British Policy and Russia, 1894-1917* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), provides a trenchant criticism of the still dominant "weary titan" school whose impact is only now being felt.

militarily even by emerging southeast European states like Serbia and Rumania. The Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 marked the end of the Ottoman Empire as a European power and the rise of assertive middle-sized states willing to take high risks for regional gains. At the same time, a long-standing arms race escalated after the First Moroccan Crisis of 1905, tending to increase reliance on armed force rather than diplomacy as an instrument of first recourse in settling disputes.¹⁰

The kindling laid, it needed only a spark to ignite it. The details of the failure of negotiations in the month after the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 July 1914 may be differently presented. Authors writing in this framework, however, must depict a slide into war of a kind that even the most aggressive generals and governments neither foresaw nor wanted. Probably the most familiar presentation of this model is Barbara Tuchman's general-audience classic, *The Guns of August*.¹¹ It ranks as one of the few works of history that had a direct effect on current events; U.S. President John Kennedy cited it as offering him a lesson in how not to handle the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the same year that the books were printed.

Ironically, just as the image of an unwanted—or at least unexpected—war had its most significant impact, it was being challenged by a fundamental reexamination of a question long thought settled. In 1959, Fritz Fischer of Hamburg University published an article, followed in 1961 by a monograph, stating that Germany's leaders had deliberately pursued an aggressive foreign policy in 1914, knowing that it was likely to lead to general war. The Second Reich, moreover, waged that war from the beginning in pursuit of a comprehensive set of annexationist aims designed to give Germany continental hegemony and world power.¹²

The impact of these arguments and the long-term controversy they engendered inside and outside of the federal republic has obscured another significant point. The Fischer thesis, by challenging the accepted explanation of the origins of the Great War, opened the door to addressing the “historical accident” interpretation of National Socialism. That, in turn, implied a continuity between the German Empire and the Third Reich and made it possible to approach a different question, one that was increasingly prevalent among West German students in the 1950s.

10. The best summary of this currently standard interpretation is Hew Strachan's *The First World War, vol. I, to Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8–64 and references.

11. Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

12. Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht; Die Kriegszielpolitik des Kaiserlichen Deutschlands 1914* (Duesseldorf, Germany: Droste, 1961).

However, only a few of them dared to run career-threatening risks by asking their instructors and mentors how Auschwitz had happened, or whether the *Wehrmacht's* shield was as clean as its veterans asserted.¹³ The particular and general challenges posed by Fischer's scholarship generated a fundamental reconsideration of virtually every aspect of modern German history. Yet the "Fischer Thesis" had a surprisingly limited impact on the subject it ostensibly had addressed directly: the origins of the Great War. An increasing number of the "responsibility ranking" works were already putting Germans at the head of their lists when assessing responsibility, immediate and indirect, for the war's outbreak. The last and greatest work of this school, Luigi Albertini's three-volume *The Origins of the War of 1914*, first published in Italian during World War II and translated into English during the 1950s, described Germany as making most of the key decisions.¹⁴ British historian A. J. P. Taylor, in a series of works of general as well as academic influence, presented Germany as the crucial disturber of modern European order.¹⁵

In West Germany, processes of natural attrition, retirement, and death removed most of Fischer's original opponents during the 1970s. Increasingly and predictably, both his supporters and his critics concentrated on smaller details. Three principal approaches emerged by the 1980s. Fischerite purists continued to insist that Germany went to war in 1914 from hegemonial ambitions. A "domestic crisis" school whose influential protagonists included Hans Ulrich Wehler, Wolfgang Mommsen, and Volker Berghahn emphasized internal stresses and contradictions as preparing Germany's path to war. Smaller in numbers and less familiar outside the German historical community, a neoconservative school including Gregor Schoellgen, Egmont Zechlin, and Andreas Hillgruber saw German policy in 1914 as essentially defensive, based on a series of calculated risks to preserve freedom of action in tightening military and diplomatic parameters which were shaped in turn by Germany's position at the geographic center of Europe.¹⁶

13. Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht. History, Myth, Reality*, trans. D. L. Schneider (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), discusses the making and dismantling of one of the principal postwar myths.
14. Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, trans. and ed. Isabella Massey, 3 vols. (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1952–1957).
15. The clearest statement is Taylor's *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of German History Since 1815* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1968).
16. The literature and its categorization are admirably presented in Annika Mombauer's *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (London and New York: Longman, 2002) and in Mark Hewitson's *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004).

Postwar scholars sympathetic to the Second Reich and its problems usually proved willing to concede a far larger share of German responsibility for the war than their intellectual predecessors. In so doing, they opened the way for a renewed consideration of motives and behaviors in Europe's other capitals. In *The Pity of War* (1998), Niall Ferguson went so far as to argue that British policy before 1914 accepted the virtual certainty of a war with Germany that the subsequent course of history has shown as neither inevitable nor necessary.¹⁷ While this thesis has generated more criticisms than acceptance, its critics, particularly Stig Foerster, have highlighted problems of British policy and judgment, especially its systematic understatement of Germany's aggressive intentions before and during the July Crisis.¹⁸

The major recent development in analyzing the Great War's origins, however, has been the growing understanding that the rest of Europe did more than react to German initiatives. They overhauled their military systems and increased their military capacities. Edward Hermann and David Stevenson have demonstrated that the near-exponential expansion of armed forces after 1905 was accompanied by an obsessive symmetry in their structuring. Each state anxiously watched all the others for signs of some innovation worth copying.¹⁹ Not merely the great powers, but such middle-sized states as Belgium, Serbia, Greece, and Rumania possessed a level of influence in 1914 far greater than that they could exercise later in the twentieth century. Historians nevertheless saw few signs of a "will to peace" anywhere as Europe approached 1914. Each government, each high command, was all too conscious of its own perceived shortcomings. With no state believing itself able to withstand a first strike, conciliation was correspondingly discounted not only in Berlin, but also in Vienna and St. Petersburg, Belgrade—even Paris, London, and Brussels.²⁰

While it stretches the evidence to assert the existence of a new consensus on the origins of the Great War at the beginning of the twenty-first century, points of

17. Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1998).

18. Stig Foerster, "Im Reich des Absurden: Die Ursachen des Ersten Weltkrieges," in *Wie Kriege Entstehen. Zum historischen Hintergrund vom Staatenkonflikten*, ed. B. Wegener (Paderborn, Germany: Schöningh Verlag, 2000), 211–52.

19. Edward Hermann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

20. See the anthology *The Origins of World War I*, Richard Hamilton and Holger Herwig, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

confluence seem to have emerged. The concept of “war by accident” has few remaining adherents. While Fritz Fischer’s thesis has been heavily modified, Germany is generally assigned the principal burden of responsibility for the outbreak of the war itself. That does not mean that Germany acted in isolation. Other countries, including even such lesser powers as Serbia, are also considered as having been involved in the process. The nature and extent of the secondary responsibilities continue to vary widely depending on individual scholars’ perspectives and sources. They have not, however, ignited academic disputes on the level of the interwar years or the 1960s, remaining instead at the level of footnote fights and review exchanges.

Arguably, the most significant aspect of this measured approach to the war’s origins is its freeing of space for new intellectual initiatives, particularly a growing concern for the Great War’s transformative aspects: the interrelated effects of violence on soldiers and civilians alike. A war initially defined in all the participating states in patriotic terms as a war of national defense became a crusade. Patriotism escalated into perception of the conflict as being between civilization and barbarism. Crude hatreds, reflexive dehumanization of the enemy, and acceptance of brutalities unheard of in the West for centuries accompanied that dichotomy. The final consequence was the development of full-blown eschatological expectations: the war would prepare the way for God’s dominion on earth. All this opened the way both to individual and collective disillusion and to higher levels of violence in order to achieve by force the desired messianic ends. Those legacies of the Great War remain, and settling the conflict’s origins frees us to evaluate its conduct and its ramifications.

That is the purpose of this special edition of *The Historian*. It is unusual in several ways. The journal has a long history of encouraging the work of junior scholars, and the four article contributors to this issue fit that category well enough to define it. (The less said about the seniority of the editor, the better and kinder!) As the official journal of Phi Alpha Theta, however, *The Historian*’s contributors have been overwhelmingly from the United States. Of the four who shape this issue, one originates in the United States, one in France, one in Germany, and one in the United Kingdom. Three of the four work in countries other than their homelands. Interestingly, all four contributors wrote in English from the beginning. That last is no small point—the question of “official” language could determine who did and did not attend major conferences.

This edition of *The Historian* is, in short, an example of that kind of internationalization that Europe on the surface appeared to have achieved in the twentieth century’s early years—only to be so devastatingly disillusioned that it has

taken the best part of a century to transform illusion to reality. For this small manifestation, I thank my colleagues who contributed their scholarship. I thank David R. Carr, whose editorial skills and remarkable patience brought it to publication. And for the opportunity I thank above all a good friend and a remarkable scholar, Jack Tunstall.