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**The debate on the origins of World War One**

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**Beginning with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Dr Annika Mombauer explores the opposing debates about the origins of World War One. Is it possible for historians to arrive at a consensus?**

**The hundred-year debate**

How could the death of one man, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who was assassinated on 28 June 1914, lead to the deaths of millions in a war of unprecedented scale and ferocity? This is the question at the heart of the debate on the origins of the First World War. How did Europe get from the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife to the situation at the beginning of August when Germany and Austria-Hungary were at war with Serbia, Russia, France, Belgium, and Britain? Finding the answer to this question has exercised historians for 100 years, and arriving at a convincing consensus has proved impossible.

**The need to fight a defensive war**

Establishing the responsibility for the escalation of the July Crisis into a European war – and ultimately a world war – was paramount even before fighting had begun. The governments of Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary tried desperately to ensure that they did not appear to be the aggressor in July and August 1914. This was crucial because the vast armies of soldiers that would be needed to fight this war could not be summoned for a war of aggression. Socialists, of whom there were many millions by 1914, would not have supported a belligerent foreign policy, and could only be relied upon to fight in a defensive war. Populations would only rally and make sacrifices willingly if the cause was just – and that meant fighting a defensive war.

The French and Belgians, Russians, Serbs and British were convinced they were indeed involved in a defensive struggle for just aims. Austrians and Hungarians were fighting to revenge the death of Franz Ferdinand. Germans were assured by their Kaiser, Wilhelm II, and their Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, that Germany’s neighbours had ‘forced the sword’ into its hands.[[1]](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/the-debate-on-the-origins-of-world-war-one#footnote1) In 1914, Germans were certain that they had not started the war. But if not they (who had after all invaded Belgium and France in the first few weeks of fighting), then who had caused this war?

**From the victors’ war guilt ruling to a comfortable interwar consensus**

For the victors, this was an easy question to answer, and they agreed at the peace conference at Paris in 1919 that Germany and its allies had been responsible for causing the Great War. Based on this decision, which was embodied in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, vast reparations would be payable. This so-called ‘war guilt ruling’ set the tone for the long debate that followed on the causes of the war. From 1919 onwards, governments and historians engaged with this question as revisionists (who wanted to revise the verdict of Versailles) clashed with anti-revisionists who agreed with the victors’ assessment.  
  
Sponsored by post-war governments and with access to vast amounts of documents, revisionist historians (many, but not all, German) set about proving that the victors at Versailles had been wrong. Countless publications and documents were made available to prove Germany’s innocence and the responsibility of others. Arguments were advanced which highlighted Russia’s and France’s responsibility for the outbreak of the war, for example, or which stressed that Britain could have played a more active role in preventing the escalation of the July Crisis.  
  
In the interwar years, such views influenced a newly developing consensus that no longer foregrounded Germany’s war guilt, but instead identified a failure in the alliance system before 1914. The war had not been deliberately unleashed, but Europe had somehow ‘slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war’, as David Lloyd George famously put it.[[2]](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/the-debate-on-the-origins-of-world-war-one#footnote2) With such a conciliatory accident theory, Germany was off the hook, and instead of remaining a former troublesome enemy could become a potential future ally against the increasingly threatening-looking Soviet Union. And so a comfortable consensus emerged and lasted all through the Second World War and beyond, by which time the Great War (now known as the First World War) had been overshadowed by an even deadlier conflict.

**The Fischer school challenge to the revisionist consensus**

There was little reason to question this comfortable orthodoxy after 1945. The first major challenge to this interpretation was advanced in Germany in the 1960s, where the historian Fritz Fischer published a startling new thesis on the origins of the war which threatened to overthrow the existing consensus. Germany, he argued, bore the main share of responsibility for the outbreak of the war. Moreover, its leaders had deliberately unleashed the war in pursuit of aggressive foreign policy aims which were startlingly similar to those pursued by Hitler in 1939.[[3]](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/the-debate-on-the-origins-of-world-war-one#footnote3) Backed up by previously unknown primary evidence, this new interpretation exploded the comfortable post-war view of shared responsibility. It made Germany responsible for unleashing not only the Second World War (of this there was no doubt), but also the First – turning Germany’s recent history into one of aggression and conquest.

The German establishment, which included leading historians and politicians, reacted with outrage to Fischer’s claims. They attempted to discredit him and his followers. The so-called Fischer school was accused of ‘soiling its own nest’, and in the context of the Cold War of the early 1960s, it is not difficult to see that the question of the origins of the First World War was of serious contemporary political significance. Those willing to question Germany’s recent past and those wanting to hide any potential wrong-doings by Germany’s former leaders clashed in a public dispute of unprecedented ferocity.

In time, however, many of Fischer’s ideas became accepted as a new consensus was achieved. Most historians remained unconvinced that war had been decided upon in Germany as early as 1912 (this was one of Fischer’s controversial claims) and then deliberately provoked in 1914. Many did concede, however, that Germany seemed to have made use of the July Crisis to unleash a war. But its government was not the only one to do so. In the wake of the Fischer controversy, historians also focused more closely on the role of Austria-Hungary in the events that led to war, and concluded that in Vienna, at least as much as in Berlin, the crisis precipitated by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was seen as a golden opportunity to try and defeat a ring of enemies that seemed to threaten the Central Powers.

**New questions but no new consensus**

In recent years this post-Fischer consensus has in turn been revised. Historians have returned to the arguments of the interwar years, focusing for example on Russia’s and France’s role in the outbreak of war,[[4]](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/the-debate-on-the-origins-of-world-war-one#footnote4) or asking if Britain’s government really did all it could to try and avert war in 1914. Germany’s and Austria-Hungary’s roles are deemphasised, and it is stressed that there were decision-makers in all the major capital cities who considered a general European war in August 1914 to be a risk worth taking. After 100 years of debate, every conceivable interpretation seems to have been advanced. In some of the most recent publications, even seeking to attribute responsibility, as had so confidently been done at Versailles, is now eschewed.[[5]](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/the-debate-on-the-origins-of-world-war-one#footnote5) Is it really the historian’s role to blame the actors of the past, or merely to understand how the war could have occurred?  
  
Such doubts did not trouble those who sought to attribute war guilt in 1919 and during much of this long debate, but this question will need to be asked as the controversy continues past the centenary. The current consensus on why it broke out is ‘that there is no consensus’.[[6]](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/the-debate-on-the-origins-of-world-war-one#footnote6)After 100 years of arguing about the war’s causes, this long debate is set to continue.

**Footnotes**

[1] Cited in Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War. Controversies and Consensus* (London: Pearson 2002), p.21.

[2] David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol.1 (London, Nicolson and Watson 1933), p.32.

[3] Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Düsseldorf, Droste 1961) and *Krieg der Illusionen*(Düsseldorf, Droste 1967), Engl. transl.: *Germany and the Origins of the First World War*(London, Chatto & Windus 1967 ) and *War of Illusions* (London: Chatto & Windus 1975).

[4] Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), idem, *July 1914. Countdown to War* (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013); Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Außenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914* (Munich, Oldenbourg 2007).

[5] Chris Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe went to war in 1914* (London, Allan Lane 2012).

[6] [David Blackbourn, Review of Margaret Macmillan’s *The War that ended Peace*, The Guardian, 24 October 2013. Accessed 5 November 2013](https://uk.sitestat.com/bl/shelvesandspaces/s?www.theguardian.com.books.2013.oct.24.war-ended-peace-margaret-macmillan-review&ns_type=clickout&ns_url=http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/24/war-ended-peace-margaret-macmillan-review).

The Debate on the Origins of World War One

1. Why do you think it was so important for all nations involved to believe that they were fighting a defensive war?
2. Why do you think that initially, Germany received most of the blame for the war?
3. What do you think the author means when they call historians, “revisionists” and “anti-revisionists”?
4. What is the “accident theory”? According to the author, why did the “accident theory” eventually replace the idea that Germany was guilty?
5. Why were Fischer’s ideas so controversial? What did his critics mean by saying that the Fischer school of thought was “soiling its own nest”?
6. According to the author, what is the current consensus on why the war broke out? What does this mean?

Causes of World War 1

Explosion

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| Tsar Nicholas II Tsar Nicholas II | http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/images/trans.gif |
| http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/images/trans.gif | |

No one event or person caused the Great War. There were many factors that contributed to mobilization of the belligerents. With a rapidly expanding European economy, people demanded social and governmental changes: British suffragettes fought to win British women the right to vote; socialists called for reforms, uniting laborers to demand that the wealth and power of a nation be used to benefit the majority. While in Russian, Tsar Nicholas II held fast to an autocratic old-world view.  
   
On June 28, 1914, Serbian fanatic, Gavrilo Princip, assassinated Archduke Franz-Ferdinand of Austria, causing Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany to support Austria in punishing the Serbs, setting the stage for Russia - backing Serbia - and her allies France and Britain to go to war.

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In the weeks after the assassination, none of the critical leaders had the power or will to slow down the decisions, actions, reactions and attitude shifts of key government and military leaders. By August, millions of Europeans -- especially the military and diplomatic leaders of Austria-Hungary, Germany and Russia -- saw war as the way to save their honor, as well as to solve the internal and international problems that needed to be resolved.

Europe in 1914

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| http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/images/trans.gif | German industry German industry |
| http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/images/trans.gif | |

At the start of the Great War in 1914, Germany was a relatively young power, only coming into existence following a series of wars in 1871. Germany's Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, had shepherd the country into the 20th century with the adage that Germany must always be in a majority of three in any dispute among the five great European powers. His aim was to maintain peaceful ties with Russian.  
   
When Kaiser Wilhelm II came to power, he quickly retired Bismarck, and upset the Chancellor's delicate balance of power by refusing to renew Germany's friendship with Russia. Germany soon found itself in a minority of two. Its only European ally was the weakest of the European powers, Austria-Hungary.  
 

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| German battleship squadron German battleship squadron | http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/images/trans.gif |
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The tripwire that set off the century's first global conflict was Austria's declaration of war against Serbia on July 28, 1914, a month after Archduke Franz Ferdinand (the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne) was assassinated in Sarajevo by a Serbian fanatic. A war between Austria and Serbia meant a war between Austria and Russia -- Serbia's traditional ally. That meant war between Russia and Germany. And that meant war between Germany and France. And that meant war between Germany and Great Britain. In a flash, the whole continent was at war

"In 1900 you could say that space, time, and visual dimensions had been transformed in a way that a century before no one could have dreamt of.

"The idea of a telegraph or a telephone, indeed, the idea of cities that are lit by electricity all the time, the concept of transportation and communication available to the masses, this had not even been dreamt of a hundred years before.

"In many parts of Europe, they were a dream fifty years earlier, so that if space is collapsed and time is collapsed, then virtually anything is possible. Just think of Jules Verne's Around the World in Eighty Days, by the time of the first World War, by the time of 1900, around the world in, maybe, perhaps, eighty hours was a possibility. The beginnings of air travel made it possible. The beginnings of the extraordinary dimensions of travel under the water through submarines, these are technical changes of an enormous potential, not necessarily for military means alone, but for the extraordinarily vibrant and expansive European economy that dominated the world.

"One of the extraordinary effects of the move of large populations from the countryside to the city is the expansion of rights of literacy, the expansion of the popular press, all of which lead to a vision that the life of your father or grandfather was a matter of necessity.

"Your life, and more importantly, your children's life, was a matter of choice.

"The expansion of education, the expansion of entertainment, the emergence of the film industry, newsreels, all this brought to masses of people visions of worlds they had never thought were theirs to have access to.

"It is in many respects the moment when a vision of immense and unlimited possibilities became available to anybody, and of course, what that meant is not necessarily hope. It could also mean intense frustration because with the vision that possibilities are there comes the question,

"Why not me?

"Why not my class? Why not farmers? Why not factory employees? Why not women?' All of these questions of frustration come directly out of the enormous pace of change, at the same time.

"Every country in Europe knew the industrial power of military power. Military power grew out of the barrel of a blast furnace. Everybody knew it, and so, in order to provide for the steel and the machinery necessary to stand up to the powers of the day, let's say the royal Navy in Britain, industrial expansion was essential.

"Germany was run by a landed aristocracy who knew very well that they needed heavy industry in order to challenge the other great naval power in the world, Britain.

"It had to be the case that these individuals who are not part of the industrial elite, use the industrial power of their nation, in order to stand up politically, against or along side every other major power.

"Now that meant to grow economically meant to be a military power, and not to grow economically was dangerous because it meant you couldn't generate the equipment necessary to fight either a small war or a big one. This is why the defeat of Russia in the war against Japan of 1905, was so worrying. This is why, forty years earlier, the defeat of France against Germany indicated something about the difference between a power that is economically more advanced and a power that is economically less advanced.

"The consequence of backwardness is military weakness and defeat, and this is one of the fundamental problems of Europe before the war.

"It looked as if the major economic power, Germany, did not have the equivalent political power on the European stage or the World stage, and there is no way to adjust that inequality.

"Britain had been the greatest economic power in the world, had the greatest navy in the world. It dominated the middle of the 19th Century. By 1900 Germany was the greatest power on the continent and certainly rivaled Britain as an industrial power with every indication that it would overtake Britain as an industrial power.

"But where comes the political equivalent of economic and industrial power? It may come within Europe. It may come within Empires, but it had to come from somewhere. The instability of European life is that Germany grew too rapidly for the political structures which were old, and nobody knew how to change them, short of war."

The War as a Detective Story

"The First World War is a detective story with no resolution for a very simple reason.

"It's what converts a controlled explosion into a monumental explosion that is the real question. Why Austria-Hungary wanted to punish Serbia for the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand is a question that we can answer.

"On the Sixth of July, there was a German-Austrian understanding about how Germany would support Austrian attempts to annihilate Serbia. We know that. That's not the detective story. The story is how did you get from there to the First World War, and who wanted that small explosion to become a big one? And the answer is almost impossible to define.

"There are those who say that the German military and navy wanted it for years. This was their grasp for world power. This is the moment of truth, when they finally get what they should have gotten because of their economic industrial power. That means it's all malice aforethought, and the whole story is cooked up in Berlin.

"There are other people who say they wanted a small-scale war, and got a big scale war instead, and lost it.

"But there's a third view that it is, as it were, a collective failure. As you said, the collective failure is that individuals who are diplomats, and with the intention of stopping these conflicts from getting out of hand simply didn't take it seriously enough, on both sides of the line.

"I would have thought that the best way to understand this question of who was responsible for the outbreak of the First World War is to eliminate those of lesser responsibility. Nobody in London, nobody in Paris, nobody in St. Petersburg wanted the small war to turn into a big war. That conversion of the Balkan War into the Great War was not conjured up anywhere other than in Berlin and in Vienna.

"If there is a smoking gun, it's in one or the other of those capitals. But the jury's still out. The trial has yet to be concluded."

"It was not at all surprising that anybody who lived in Germany would find this the most dynamic, the most robust, and the most terrifying nation in the world.

"Most of German society as it was in the early 19th Century had vanished by 1900. The pace of urbanization was huge. Berlin was a provincial backwater in 1860. By 1910 it was one of the great metropolitan centers of the world, and it came through migration. Germany was an enormous magnet for people who wanted a good life in Eastern Europe – from Poland, from Russia, who were escaping from other regimes. They went to Berlin, went to Hamburg, went to the southwest of Germany to the great cities of the wine land, and grew this extraordinary labor force, working class, bourgeoisie, business class, that created more wealth per capita than any other country in Europe.

"The pace of change in Germany was probably greater than any other country in Europe.

"No country was moving as rapidly as Germany, and at the same time, no country had social divisions as deep as in Germany. Because all of these individuals coming to congregate in these huge meat-packing tenements – that's what they called them – were living under conditions which were evidently unjustified. And they were living perhaps a mile away from the Kaiser's palace, couple of miles away from Potsdamm, where the high command lived in these elegant palaces that you can still see today.

"This created an extraordinarily explosive mixture where the most powerful nation in the world, Germany, had the most powerful revolutionary movement in the world – the German Social Democratic Party. And it's a function of the pace of change, and the pace of urbanization, that you both had this amazing growth of military power and growth of working class power – and they were both evident together.

"The Kaiser would have demonstrations for his birthday. The Social Democratic Party would have demonstrations for the first of May – and they were about the same size."

Total War - Everyone a Target

"In some ways, you might be able to argue that the First World War started on the 22nd of April 1915.

"Up to that point, what had occurred was a series of well-known 19th Century encounters that had gone wrong. But on the 22nd of April, not far from the city of Ypres, the Germans did something new. They opened cylinders of poison gas to try to break through the defensive strength of the allies on the other side. French and Canadian troops were hit by this gas, or chlorine gas, and were terrified. These are men without really any protection against this because it never happened before. These weren't shells, these were cylinders that had been lined up, and when the German troops thought that the wind was blowing the right way, the cloud opened – it looked very much like a green cloud – and the people who didn't escape from it would have their lungs burned out and die an awful death.

"Now, that moment is very important in understanding how the war that so many people joined up to fight turned into something much worse.

"It's important for a whole series of reasons. One, is that gas warfare is another level of brutality, another level of violence that until that point, had not been available to either side. And once it became available to one side, it was used by both.

"But it also required a huge industrial backup to produce. By 1918, one in every four shells on the Western Front was a gas shell. That meant huge factories producing weapons of war of a kind, which lowered the obstacles to brutality, because if you couldn't get out of a trench, if you couldn't flee, if you couldn't surrender, then there is a different nature to battle and confrontation. That is extermination, not combat, because a soldier cannot surrender.

"If he has no protection against the gas, he will simply suffocate and die miserably.

"The nature of that kind of war opens up the whole issue of whether this conflict began in a 19th Century fashion with a degree of understanding about what the limits of violence were, and, slowly but surely – 1915 is a critical moment – those limits were pushed and pushed and pushed until they didn't exist anymore. So that by the end of 1915, you could say that everyone in each combatant country was at risk. No one was safe. Everyone was a target.

"The first of those steps was the bombardment of civilian populations through zeppelins. This is something that brought home to the civilian population that they, too, were on the firing line. A kindergarten in the east of London was not what the zeppelins aimed at, but given the state of the art at the time, it's not surprising that they killed children.

"It is in 1915, that this kind of war was born, and the best way to understand it and its horrifying character, is to call it total war."