

The Historiography of the causes of the First World War

The Aftermath

Article 231 Versailles - 'Germany accepts the responsibility...for causing all the loss and damage...as a consequence of the... aggression of Germany and her allies

Weimar Germany textbook - '...Germany is absolutely innocent with regard to the outbreak of war. Russia, and France and England wanted war and unleashed it.'

Between 1922 and 1927 **forty** volumes of official material was published by the German government.

The Interwar Years

G. Lowes Dickinson (Cambridge historian) – *The International Anarchy* (1926) War caused by 'alliance system' and secret diplomacy. A Wilsonian viewpoint.

Sidney Fay (American Historian) – *Origins of the World War* (1928) Blamed Russian mobilisation and Austria-Hungarian diplomacy

Lenin – *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) Socialists following Lenin identified close links between capitalism, imperialism and the causes of war. The arms race cited as a typical example.

Luigi Albertini (Italian journalist) – *The Origins of the War of 1914* (1942-3) Three volumes on the precise facts of the six week crisis.

The Fischer Controversy

Fritz Fischer (German Historian) – *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (1961)

- (i) Germany planned for and hoped that war would break out as a consequence of its backing of Austria against Serbia
- (ii) Annexationist aims predated the war and were very similar to that of the Nazis
- (iii) Reasons for expansionism largely found in her social, economic and political *domestic* situation in 1914.

Since Fischer

Not surprisingly, the Fischer thesis triggered off one of the most intense debates on German history. Gerhard Ritter, a German historian considered Fischer's work an act of national disloyalty. In Ritter's view, Germany stumbled into war by supporting Austria-Hungary and by allowing the military planners to roll the dice. German policy was mistaken, but it was essentially defensive.

Since 1970s drew to a close, the bold attempt by Fischer to assert Germany's primary responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War had been accepted by both sides in the debate. The debate is now extremely sophisticated and revolves around whether Germany intended an offensive war of territorial expansion or a defensive war designed to re-order European diplomatic relations. There are many supporters of Fischer, most notably Immanuel Geiss who suggests that the dominant long-term cause of the First World War was the German desire for *Weltpolitik*. ...However, a number of historians still reject the idea of Germany cold-bloodedly planning a war for vast territorial gains. The type of war that Germany wanted has become a central issue for historians. The chief critics of Fischer believe that German leaders desired a very limited, 'defensive war' in 1914.