

- War would provide a good distraction, and unifying effect, to overcome rising domestic problems in Germany
- War could improve the popularity of the Kaiser.

Once the Russians ordered mobilization, the Schlieffen Plan meant that Germany would have to draw in the French.

...it seems very unlikely that the Russians positively desired a major war. Mobilization for them meant preparation for a possible war. The Germans, however, interpreted mobilization as the virtual equivalent to a declaration of war, and Germany's Schlieffen Plan meant that the German army would have to attack and defeat France before moving eastwards to combat Russian forces.

From Robert Pearce and John Lowe, *Rivalry and Accord: International Relations, 1870–1914*, 2001

Thus Germany's responsibility for the beginning of war was:

- Urging Austria-Hungary on with the 'blank cheque'
- Declaring war on Russia on 1 August
- Violating Belgian neutrality
- Invading France
- Bringing Britain into the conflict.

Austria-Hungary

It is clear that Austria-Hungary was determined to respond to the Sarajevo incident, seeing it as an opportunity 'to eliminate Serbia as a political factor in the Balkans'.

The contribution of Austria-Hungary to the outbreak of war was that it:

- Exaggerated the potential threat of Serbia and was determined to make war
- Delayed responding to the assassination, which contributed to the development of the July Crisis
- Declared war on Serbia on 28 July, only five days after the delivery of the ultimatum (which in any case had a time limit of only 48 hours)
- Refused to halt its military actions even though negotiations with Russia were scheduled for 30 July.

Russia

The Russian Foreign Minister saw in the ultimatum to Serbia a 'European War'. Sergei Sazonov was determined to take a firm stand, as he believed that the Germans had seen weakness in Russia's previous responses to Balkan crises. Although the Tsar was in favour of partial mobilization, his generals ordered general mobilization on 30 July.

The contribution of Russia to the beginning of the war was that it:

- Did not try to restrain Serb nationalism, even though it was likely to lead to instability in the Balkans
- Supported Serbia, which deepened the conflict and possibly caused Serbia to reject the ultimatum
- Mobilized, thus triggering a general European war.

France

France's government was hesitant about getting involved in a war, and, after the ignominious defeat of 1871, it did not want to provoke a general war. France's ally Russia mobilized without consulting the French, and then the Germans declared war on France on 3 August. France had not decided to go to war; it was swept into it.

The responsibility of France was that it gave Russia assurances of support before the July Crisis.

Britain

Britain was divided over whether to fight Germany or not. The Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, wanted to, and there has been criticism of his and Britain's ambiguous position in the July Crisis. Some historians argue that Britain should have made it clear to Germany that it would stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with the French, and this might have deterred the Germans from pursuing the Schlieffen Plan. Yet Grey himself did not have a mandate to make his position clear, due to the mixed opinions of parliament.

The violation of the neutrality of Belgium led to some popular demands for war with Germany, and gave the British government grounds, based on the treaty of 1839, to declare war. The responsibility of Britain for the start of the war was that it should have made its position clearer during the July Crisis.

John Lowe also makes the following point:

...the most serious charge against Britain, however, is that her naval talks with Russia in 1914 convinced the German chancellor that the ring of encirclement around her was now complete. Grey's false denial of these secret talks also destroyed his credibility as a mediator in German eyes in the July crisis.

From Robert Pearce and John Lowe, *Rivalry and Accord: International Relations 1870–1914*, 2001

Historiography: the causes of the Great War

STUDENT STUDY SECTION



THE TRIUMPH OF "CULTURE."

Cartoon analysis

What is the message of this cartoon, which was published on 26 August 1914, following Germany's invasion of Belgium?

◀ 'The Triumph of Culture', a cartoon from *Punch*.

Central Powers

The Central Powers were the countries that fought against the entente powers, namely Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. They were called the Central Powers due to their geographical position in Central Europe.



Responsibility for causing World War I was placed on the Central Powers by the Versailles settlement in 1919. In the war guilt clause of the Treaty of Versailles with Germany (Article 231), Germany had to accept responsibility as one of the aggressors. (This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.) While the Treaty of Versailles was being drawn up by the victorious powers, the German Foreign Office was already preparing documents from their archives attempting to prove that *all* belligerent states were to blame. To this end, between 1922 and 1927 the Germans produced 40 volumes of documents backing up this claim.

Other governments felt the need to respond by producing their own volumes of archives. Britain published 11 volumes between 1926 and 1938, France its own version of events in 1936, Austria produced 8 volumes in 1930 and the Soviet Union brought out justificatory publications in 1931 and 1934. Germany's argument gained international sympathy in the 1920s and 1930s. There was a growing sentiment that the war had been caused by the failure of international relations rather than the specific actions of one country. Lloyd George, writing in his memoirs in the 1930s, explained that 'the nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war.'

S.B. Fay and H.E. Barnes were two American historians who, to some extent, supported the **revisionist** arguments put forward by Germany regarding the causes of World War I. Barnes argued in his 1927 book, *The Genesis of the War*, that Serbia, France and Russia were directly responsible for causing the war, that Austro-Hungarian responsibility was far less, and that least responsible were Germany and Britain. He supported this view by arguing that the Franco-Russian alliance became offensive from 1912, and their joint plans intended to manipulate any crisis in the Balkans to provoke a European war. Both countries decided that Serbia would be central to their war plans and early in 1914 officers in the Serbian General Staff plotted the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. The Russian and French motives for starting a European war were to attain their key objectives: the seizure of the Dardanelles Straits and the return of Alsace-Lorraine, which could only be realized through war.

An Italian historian, Luigi Albertini, wrote a thorough and coherent response to the revisionist argument in the 1940s. Albertini's argument focused on the responsibility of Austria-Hungary and Germany in the immediate term: Austria for the ultimatum to Serbia, and Germany for its 'naivety' in demanding a localized war. Overall, Germany was in his view fundamentally to blame, as it was clear that Britain could not have remained neutral in a war raging on the continent.

Fritz Fischer

In 1961, historian Fritz Fischer published *Germany's Aims in the First World War*; this was later translated into English. Fischer's argument focused responsibility back on Germany. He discovered a document called the 'September Programme' written by the German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg. This memorandum, which was dated 9 September 1914 (after war had started), set out Germany's aims for domination of Europe (see Chapter 3 for more discussion of this aspiration). Fischer claimed that the document proved that the ruling elite had always had expansionist aims and that a war would allow them to fulfil these. War would also consolidate their power at home and deal with the threat of socialism. Fischer went on to argue in another book that the War Council of 1912 proved that Germany planned to launch a continental war in 1914. At this War Council, von Moltke had commented that 'in my opinion war is inevitable and the sooner the better.'

Fischer's argument is persuasive, as he links longer-term policies from 1897 to short-term and immediate actions taken in the July Crisis. In short, he is able to explain why war began.

Given the tenseness of the world situation in 1914 – a condition for which Germany's world policy, which had already led to three dangerous crises [those of 1905, 1908 and 1911], was in no small measure responsible – any limited or local war in Europe directly involving one great power must inevitably carry with it the imminent danger of a general war. As Germany willed and coveted the Austro-Serbian war and, in her confidence in her military superiority, deliberately faced the risk of a conflict with Russia and France, her leaders must bear a substantial share of the historical responsibility for the outbreak of a general war in 1914.

From Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 1967

Fischer's arguments have been criticized in the following ways:

- Fischer argues 'backwards' from the German 'September war aims'. There is limited evidence to prove Germany had specific expansionist aims prior to September 1914.
- The December War Council is also limited evidence; its importance is debatable as the imperial Chancellor was not present.
- Fischer holds the domestic crisis in Germany as central to why war was triggered in 1914. However, Bethmann-Hollweg dismissed war as a solution to the rise of socialism.
- It could be argued that German policy lacked coherency in the decade before 1914.
- Fischer focuses too much on Germany; this priority leads to an emphasis on German actions and he neglects the role played by other powers.

After Fischer

Since Fischer's theses on German guilt, historians have continued to debate the degree of German responsibility. Conservative German historians such as Gerhard Ritter rejected Fischer's view in the 1960s, although Immanuel Geiss defended Fischer by publishing a book of German documents undermining the arguments of the revisionists of the 1920s. However, the majority of historians around the world now agree that Germany played a pivotal role in the events that led to war through their policy of *Weltpolitik* and their role in the July Crisis, though this was not necessarily as part of any set 'plan' as Fischer had argued. 'It has been widely asserted that German policy held the key to the situation in the summer of 1914 and that it was the German desire to profit diplomatically and militarily from the crisis which widened the crisis from an Eastern European one to a continental and world war' (Ruth Henig, *The Origins of the First World War*, 1993).

Other historians have stressed different issues in explaining the outbreak of war, however.

John Keegan

Military historian John Keegan focuses on the events of the July Crisis. He suggests that although there were long-term and short-term tensions in Europe, war was in fact not inevitable. In fact, war was unlikely due to the interdependence and cooperation necessary for the European economy, plus royal, intellectual and religious links between the nations.

The key to Keegan's theory is the lack of communication during the July Crisis. He highlights the fact that the Kaiser had 50 people advising him – mostly independent and jealous of one another: 'The Kaiser ... in the crisis of 1914 ... found that he did not understand the machinery he was supposed to control, panicked and let a piece of paper determine events.' Keegan suggests that had Austria-Hungary acted immediately, the war might have been limited to a local affair. It was Austria-Hungary's reluctance to act alone, and its alliance with Germany, that led to the escalation.

No country used the communications available at the time, such as radio. Information was arriving fitfully, and was always 'incomplete'. The crisis that followed the expiration of the ultimatum to Serbia was not one that the European powers had expected and the key problem was that each nation failed to communicate its aims during the crisis:

- Austria-Hungary had wanted to punish Serbia, but lacked the courage to act alone. They did not want a general European war.
- Germany had wanted a diplomatic success that would leave its Austro-Hungarian ally stronger in European eyes. It did not want a general European war.
- Russia did not want a general European war, but had not calculated that support for Serbia would edge the danger of war closer.
- France had not mobilized, but was increasingly worried that Germany would mobilize against it.
- Britain only awoke to the real danger of the crisis on Saturday 25 July, and still hoped on Thursday 30 July that Russia would tolerate the punishment of Serbia. It would not, however, leave France in danger.

None of the European powers had communicated their objectives clearly in the July Crisis. Therefore, for Keegan it was the events of 31 July that were the turning point. The news of Russia's general mobilization and the German ultimatum to Russia and France made the issue one of peace or war. The Great Powers could step back from the brink, but a withdrawal would not be compatible with the status of each as a Great Power. The Serbs, a cause of the crisis in the first place, had been forgotten.

James Joll

Joll attempts to link impersonal forces – factors beyond the specific control or influence of an individual leader, regime or government – to personal or man-made forces. He suggests an atmosphere of intense tension was created by impersonal forces in the long and short terms, and personal decisions made in the July Crisis led to war. Joll explains the outbreak of war in terms of the decisions taken by the political leaders in 1914, but argues that these decisions were shaped by the impersonal factors, which meant that the leaders had only limited options open to them in the final days of the crisis.

Personal Forces	vs	Impersonal Forces
expansionist aims		capitalism
war plans		international anarchy
calculated decisions		alliances

Marxist historians have focused on the role of capitalism and imperialism as the key causes of World War I, but a limitation with focusing on impersonal factors is that they do not seem to explain why the war broke out when it did. Joll's argument links the impersonal factors to the personal decision-making taking place during the July Crisis, and thus, apparently, overcomes this problem.

Niall Ferguson

In *The Pity of War* (2006), Niall Ferguson suggests that Germany was moving away from a militaristic outlook prior to World War I, and highlights the increasing influence of the Social Democrat Party there. The German Social Democrat Party was founded as a socialist party, with a radical agenda for Germany. By 1912 they had gained the most votes in the Reichstag and their influence increasingly alarmed the Kaiser's regime. Ferguson sees Britain as heavily implicated in the causes of war, particularly Sir Edward Grey. Britain misinterpreted German ambitions and decided to act to impede German expansionism. Ferguson does not see war as inevitable in 1914, despite the forces of militarism, imperialism and secret diplomacy.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Review activity

Draw up a grid summarizing the views of the key historians that you have read about in this chapter. Also include the views of the historians in the Student Study Section below.

Document analysis

Study the sources below. As you read, decide what factor each historian is stressing as the key cause for war.

Document A

The First World War was not inevitable. Although it is essential to understand the underlying factors that formed the background to the July Crisis, it is equally essential to see how the immediate circumstances of the crisis fit into this background in a particular, and perhaps unique, way. Europe was not a powder keg waiting to explode; one crisis did not lead necessarily to another in an escalating series of confrontations that made war more and more difficult to avoid. Europe had successfully weathered a number of storms in the recent past; the alliances were not rigidly fixed; the war plans were always being revised and need not necessarily come into play. It is difficult to imagine a crisis in the Far East, in North Africa or in the Mediterranean that would have unleashed the series of events that arose from the assassination in Sarajevo. The First World War was, in the final analysis, fought for the future of the near east; whoever won this struggle would, it was believed, be in a position to dominate all of Europe. Germany and her ally made the bid for control; Russia and her allies resolved to stop them.

From Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 1987

Document B

[For Germany]... war seemed to offer... a solution to both domestic and foreign antagonisms. And if that war could be made appealing to all sections of the population – as a war against Tsarist Russia most certainly would be, even to ardent socialists – then so much the better. There can be no doubt that German leaders were prepared for war in 1914 and exploited the crisis of June–July 1914 to bring it about... Just as the Germans sought to increase their power, so Britain and France sought to contain it, by military means if necessary. In this sense it could be argued that both powers fought to try to restore the balance of power to Europe.

Countries went to war because they believed that they could achieve more through war than by diplomatic negotiation and that if they stood aside their status as great powers would be gravely affected...

From Ruth Henig, *The Origins of the First World War*, 1993

Document C

It used to be held that the system of alliances was in itself sufficient explanation for the outbreak of war, that the very existence of two camps made war inevitable sooner or later. But this approach has, for two reasons, an over-simple appreciation of the individual alliances. In the first place, the primary purpose of the alliances was defensive... Second, the way that war actually broke out bore little relation to treaty obligations...

There were, however, two ways in which the alliances did affect international relations and contribute to the growth of tension in Europe in the decade before 1914. First, they provided the links across which crises could spread from peripheral areas like North Africa and the Balkans to the major powers themselves. Normally, the dangers were seen and the connections cut; hence the Moroccan crises of 1906 and 1911 were allowed to fizzle out. But, as the sequence of events after Sarajevo showed only too clearly, the means existed whereby a local conflict could be transformed into a continental war. Second, the alliances had a direct bearing on the arms race and the development of military schedules.

From Stephen J. Lee, *Aspects of European History 1789–1980*, 1988

Question

- 1 Read Documents A, B and C. Briefly summarize the points made in each source. Compare and contrast these arguments with those of the historians discussed on pp.32–34.