

For over a century, the causes of the First World War have been debated by politicians and scholars. Over the years that this debate has gone on, there have been many suggestions and opinions put forward. In this paper I will begin by discussing the historiographical debate surrounding the cause of the First World War. I will also be presenting my own interpretation of the events which led to the outbreak of the First World War. I will be arguing that no single cause led to the outbreak of war in 1914. Rather, a combination of several of these causes created a perfect storm and these circumstances, along with the actions of political leaders, diplomats and generals brought Europe to war.

Perhaps the most obvious cause of the First World War was the July Crisis of 1914. By 1914, the expanding Kingdom of Serbia was a thorn in Austria-Hungary's side. The Habsburg monarchy feared that other ethnicities, which they referred to as "subject nationalities", within their empire would either prefer to be a part of Serbia or want their independence, and revolt. Serbia had been growing in power and nationalist groups within Serbian society had very clear designs on land currently held by Austria-Hungary.<sup>1</sup> The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo would provide Austria-Hungary with the opportunity it needed to take action against Serbia and solve this underlying internal problem.<sup>2</sup>

In the days following the assassination, Austria-Hungary contemplated its options for a response. After securing a promise of German support, the infamous "blank cheque", the

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<sup>1</sup> James Joll, and Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Routledge, 3rd edition, 2007), 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 13.

Austro-Hungarian government agreed on an aggressive approach.<sup>3</sup> To this end, Austria-Hungary sent an ultimatum to Serbia on July 23<sup>rd</sup> and demanded a reply within 48 hours.<sup>4</sup> Should Serbia refuse the demands presented in the ultimatum, Austria-Hungary would have its cause for war. In their discussion of the July Crisis, Joll and Martel indicate that Serbia considered accepting the demands.<sup>5</sup> However, the Serbian reply to the ultimatum, “while extremely conciliatory in tone”, was not an outright acceptance of all terms dictated in the ultimatum.<sup>6</sup> This gave Austria-Hungary its cause for war. Any attempt to mediate a peace failed and thus, war broke out between Austria-Hungary and Serbia on 28 July.

The July Crisis is certainly the most immediate cause for war breaking out between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. However, this does not take into account the underlying conditions which made war possible or perhaps even probable. Austria-Hungary was concerned about how its subject nationalities might react to an increasingly powerful Serbia. Some within the Austro-Hungarian government, such as Baron Conrad von Hötzendorf, Chief of the Austro-Hungarian General Staff, welcomed the opportunity for Austria-Hungary to settle its accounts with Serbia and remove a potential problem.<sup>7</sup> The July Crisis also does not account for the war spreading into the rest of Europe. Indeed, the foundation for the escalation of the war from a local Balkan conflict to a war that would affect all European powers was laid well before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand or the delivery and refusal of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum.

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<sup>3</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 51.

Another cause for the First World War is the Imperial rivalries between the powerful European countries. In particular, Germany was eager to expand her colonial holdings, to acquire her “place in the sun” and be considered a true global power.<sup>8</sup> In the eyes of many influential Germans from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, expanding Germany’s colonial empire was an important step in achieving their goal of becoming a *Weltmacht*, or “World Power”.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, since the late nineteenth century, there was growing popular support for colonial overseas expansion in Germany.<sup>10</sup> By the twentieth century, land available for colonization was becoming more and more scarce. Germany, who had begun its colonial expansion later than Britain and France, felt that she was getting “less than her fair share of its prizes”.<sup>11</sup> Germany was seeking to acquire a colonial empire which she felt was representative of her status as a world power, and equal to the other world powers.<sup>12</sup>

As a part of her effort to be recognized as a world power, Germany began an extensive naval build up under Admiral Tirpitz. The reason behind this naval armament was the importance attributed to the fleet, specifically the battlefleet. In fact, the creation of a strong fleet was seen by many Germans as “an essential symbol of German power.”<sup>13</sup> Having a strong navy was considered an essential part of building and maintaining a colonial empire.<sup>14</sup> The British considered this naval build up to be a challenge and a threat to their current naval

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<sup>8</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 230.

<sup>9</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 219.

<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang J. Mommsen, “Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in Wilhelmine Germany, 1897-1914,” *Central European History* 24, no. 4 (1991): 384.

<sup>11</sup> Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 230.

<sup>14</sup> Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, 8.

dominance.<sup>15</sup> As I will discuss, this new threat will affect British foreign policy her diplomatic alignment in Europe.

Germany's ambition to become a world power never had clearly defined goals or targets.<sup>16</sup> This means that, Germany had no clear territorial demands. In fact, a large part of her quest for world power status revolved around building a navy powerful enough that Britain "would not risk a war with Germany and would have to give way to German demands, but what these demands would be was never very clear."<sup>17</sup> Such vague claims caused fear in Britain, who had to a vast empire to protect.<sup>18</sup> When combined with Germany's extensive naval build up, which proved a threat to the Royal Navy's control of the seas, the ill-defined nature of Germany's imperial ambitions were obviously cause for concern.

The Imperial rivalry between Britain and France was longstanding and "appeared to be one of the most stable, and predictable, elements of international politics in the late nineteenth century."<sup>19</sup> However, by the late nineteenth century, Britain was "an imperial power on the defensive whose resources were not necessarily sufficient to protect its vast possessions."<sup>20</sup> When Britain and France reached the Entente Cordiale in 1904 that settled many outstanding colonial disputes between them, Britain found itself increasingly drawn into the de-facto anti-German coalition alongside France and Russia. France and Russia were already allies and Britain's new understanding with France helped them reach an understanding with Russia over their borders in Asia, specifically around India.<sup>21</sup> Britain's move to secure its imperial

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<sup>15</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 229.

<sup>16</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 230.

<sup>17</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 230.

<sup>18</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 229.

<sup>19</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 220.

<sup>20</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 224.

<sup>21</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 224.

possessions left Germany increasingly isolated.<sup>22</sup> Other colonial rivalries were shelved in an effort to deal with this new threat.<sup>23</sup>

That being the case, there was still the possibility for Germany and Britain to negotiate in colonial affairs up until the outbreak of the war.<sup>24</sup> Though Imperialism and colonial matters may or may not have been the cause that brought the countries of Europe to war in 1914, it can safely and confidently be asserted that it was a major factor contributing to the alignment of these countries when war did break out.

The German Historian Fritz Fischer contributed a very famous and very hotly debated thesis about the origin of the First World War. Fischer also blames Imperialism as the cause for the First World War. However, unlike Joll and Martel, Fischer places blame primarily on Germany. Fischer expressed his views on the origin of the First World War in his book *Germany's Aims in the First World War*. His view of Germany's role in the outbreak of the First World War can be more or less summarized by the title of the original German edition of the book which translates to "Grab for World Power". As I have outlined earlier in this paper, Germany was seeking recognition as a world power. In this book, Fischer blames Germany's quest for recognition as a world power for the outbreak of the war. According to Fischer, the July Crisis was just a convenient excuse Germany used to precipitate a war.<sup>25</sup> Germany chose this time to act because it felt that it had the advantage over her enemies and that, should the war be delayed, that advantage would be greatly reduced or disappear.<sup>26</sup> Russia had recently lost a

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<sup>22</sup> Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 245.

<sup>24</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 229.

<sup>25</sup> Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 50.

war to Japan and was in the process of rebuilding her army and navy. Germany estimated that, within a few years, Russia would have completed her rearmament and would be in a position to pose a much more serious threat to Germany.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, it was very important to Germany that, should a war break out with Russia, it should be sooner rather than later.

There can be no doubt that Germany had Imperial ambitions at the beginning of the twentieth century. The German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg published the September Program in 1914 outlining the demands Germany would seek to impose on her defeated enemies. The importance afforded to *Mitteleuropa* and *Mittelafrika* show that Germany certainly did have imperialist and expansionist aspirations in the event they could enforce a victorious peace. However, these aspirations alone are not conclusive in proving that Germany started the First World War.

Fischer argues that, in order to precipitate a war, Germany encouraged Austria-Hungary to take aggressive action against Serbia in retaliation for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. At the behest of Kaiser Wilhelm II, German diplomats advised Austria-Hungary to take whatever action she deemed necessary and ensured that Germany would support Austria-Hungary even if it came to a European war.<sup>28</sup> Fischer notes that Austria-Hungary's military plans for a potential war with Serbia relied on German support, presumably to counter the threat of Russian intervention.<sup>29</sup> In this way, German participation is a crucial factor in Austria-Hungary's decision making and therefore, in the outbreak of the war. However, that does not mean that Germany's promise to support its ally is the deciding factor that caused the outbreak of

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<sup>27</sup> Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 53.

the war. Indeed, Russia had backed down from previous Balkan conflicts when Germany promised to support Austria-Hungary and it was reasonable to expect they might do so again.<sup>30</sup>

Fischer's work was very provocative and led to a debate, aptly known as the Fischer Controversy, that has still not reached consensus over 50 years after it began.<sup>31</sup> As one might expect, there was fierce opposition to Fischer's thesis in his native Germany. Most of this opposition came from prominent German historians. In particular, Gerhard Ritter was a strong and very notable opponent of Fischer's claims.<sup>32</sup> Ritter accused Fischer of "damaging the German national consciousness."<sup>33</sup> At the time of the publication of Fischer's work, the widespread belief, especially amongst the established German historians, was that Germany had fought a defensive war in 1914.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Fischer's thesis highlights the continuity of war aims from Imperial Germany through the Third Reich. This is problematic and in direct opposition to the thesis favored by prominent historians and West German politicians of the time, that the Nazi regime was an aberration of German history and not a continuation.<sup>35</sup> Ritter and some other historians felt that Fischer's claim was dangerous for West Germany, especially in a time when Germany was still a divided country during the Cold War and West Germany was trying to fit in with its Western allies.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, some journalists looked much more favorably upon Fischer's interpretation of the policies of Imperial Germany and the outbreak of the First World War.

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<sup>30</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Annika Mombauer, "The Fischer Controversy 50 years on," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (April 2013): 239.

<sup>32</sup> Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (April 2013): 254.

<sup>33</sup> von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," 254.

<sup>34</sup> von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," 253.

<sup>35</sup> von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," 254.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew Stibbe, "Reactions from the Other Germany: The Fischer Controversy in the German Democratic Republic," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (April 2013): 318.

Fischer's book was more than a study of Germany's policy leading up to and during the First World War. Journalists considered Fischer's work to be a challenge of the entire interpretation of Germany's twentieth century history.<sup>37</sup> Due to the political significance of the Fischer thesis, it was covered by newspapers, radio and television channels.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Fischer's critics, established conservative historians, and his supporters, journalists and some historians, each tried to sway the population to their side in what became a very public debate.<sup>39</sup>

Likewise, reactions from historians in Soviet-controlled East Germany were mostly positive. One of the contemporary movements within East German historiography was the critique of German Imperialism and those who defended it.<sup>40</sup> Fischer's critic Ritter was named explicitly as one of the West German historians responsible for the revival of German Imperialism.<sup>41</sup>

The reaction to the Fischer controversy was very muted in Russia. When the Fischer controversy first raged, the Soviet historians were not very involved. This is because of the repression of historiographical debate.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, historians in the Soviet Union were unwilling to challenge Lenin's views on the First World War and preferred to focus on the October Revolution or the Second World War.<sup>43</sup> Lenin, and the Bolsheviks, had asserted that the First World War was an Imperialist war and they blamed desire for expansion, which stemmed from greed, as the cause of the outbreak.<sup>44</sup> The unwillingness of historians to challenge this

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<sup>37</sup> von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," 257.

<sup>38</sup> von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," 257.

<sup>39</sup> von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," 257.

<sup>40</sup> Stibbe, "Reactions from the Other Germany," 320.

<sup>41</sup> Stibbe, "Reactions from the Other Germany," 320.

<sup>42</sup> Joshua Sanborn, "Russian Historiography on the Origins of the First World War since the Fischer Controversy," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (April 2013): 351.

<sup>43</sup> Sanborn, "Russian Historiography on the Origins of the First World War since the Fischer Controversy," 351.

<sup>44</sup> Sanborn, "Russian Historiography on the Origins of the First World War since the Fischer Controversy," 352.



position “ensured that the party line would remain strongly entrenched, regardless of what sorts of debates German historians were having.”<sup>45</sup> When Soviet historians did discuss the outbreak of the First World War, they favored the argument that Imperialism, specifically German Imperialism, had caused the war.<sup>46</sup> This meant that Fischer’s thesis was looked upon favorably and there was little controversy around his ideas.<sup>47</sup>

Likewise, in Britain, the Fischer controversy did not receive much attention. This is because when Fischer’s work was published, diplomatic history had fallen out of fashion in Britain.<sup>48</sup> As was the case in Russia, the consensus among historians was essentially in agreement with Fischer. Therefore, Fischer’s work was not as shocking as it was to Germans and did not cause such an uproar as it did in West Germany.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the British historian Taylor had a thesis very similar to Fischer’s in which he blamed Germany for encouraging Austria-Hungary to go to war with Serbia, knowing the risk of a generalized European war.<sup>50</sup>

As I have discussed, I believe that each of these arguments regarding who or what caused the First World War are reasonable and well founded. However, I feel that they fail to adequately take into consideration the actions of all parties and the circumstances in their entirety. In other words, they highlight incomplete causes for the outbreak of the First World War. I believe that no single cause discussed can adequately explain the outbreak of the First

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<sup>45</sup> Sanborn, “Russian Historiography on the Origins of the First World War since the Fischer Controversy,” 351.

<sup>46</sup> Sanborn, “Russian Historiography on the Origins of the First World War since the Fischer Controversy,” 352.

<sup>47</sup> Sanborn, “Russian Historiography on the Origins of the First World War since the Fischer Controversy,” 353.

<sup>48</sup> T.G. Otte, “‘Outcast from History’: The Fischer Controversy and British Historiography,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (April 2013): 382.

<sup>49</sup> Otte, “‘Outcast from History,’” 382-383.

<sup>50</sup> Otte, “‘Outcast from History,’” 383.

World War. Rather, it was a combination of these causes which created a perfect storm and brought Europe to war in 1914.

For this reason, I believe that the cause for the First World War stems from the actions of Austria-Hungary, Serbia, Russia and Germany. The refusal of Austria-Hungary's ultimatum by Serbia led to the escalation of their conflict. Whether Serbia refused out of fear that an investigation might reveal the complicity of certain elements of the Serbian government in the plot to assassinate Franz Ferdinand or because the Serbs had received an offer of support from Russia, this refusal would set in motion the preparations for war in Europe.<sup>51</sup>

Meanwhile, the refusal to negotiate a settlement on the part of the Austro-Hungarian government meant that a war with Serbia could not be avoided once the Serbians had refused the demands presented in the ultimatum. This shows the Austro-Hungarian leaders to be reckless.

Next, were it not for Russian interference, it would have been possible for the war to remain a localized one between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. Whether Russia played any part in the refusal of the ultimatum or not, they most certainly contributed to the propagation of the war by supporting Serbia. Indeed, on 28 July, the tsar authorized a partial mobilization of Russian forces.<sup>52</sup> The tsar and the Russian government knew very well that any mobilization of forces would be considered "the most decisive act of war."<sup>53</sup> In fact, Russia was the first power to do so, meaning that its actions are a very important part of the propagation of hostilities in Europe.<sup>54</sup> Russia's support of Serbia, a wayward, even rogue, state, was reckless and inappropriate. I find

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<sup>51</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 19.

<sup>52</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Jean Stengers, "1914: The Safety of Ciphers and the Outbreak of the First World War," In *Intelligence and International Relations, 1900-1945*, ed. Christopher Andrew and Jeremy Noakes (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1987), 30.

myself agreeing with one British diplomat who claimed that the notion that Russia and her tsar were the protectors of all Slav states was foolish.<sup>55</sup>

The Russian mobilization triggered the “blank cheque” Germany gave to its ally Austria-Hungary. More importantly, it meant that Germany had no choice but to begin mobilizing its own forces because of the above-mentioned implication of the Russian mobilization.

Germany’s promise to support Austria-Hungary, regardless of the risk of European war was most definitely reckless. As Fischer and others have argued, it is possible that this was Germany’s way of precipitating a European conflict. However, I find it more likely that this was Germany simply supporting its waning ally. It would have been perfectly reasonable to assume that a German promise of support would have dissuaded Russian interference in a matter that did not concern them in the slightest. There was a precedent for this, when in 1908 Russia had conceded the annexation of Bosnia by Austria-Hungary because of German support.<sup>56</sup>

Once Germany entered the war, Russia called upon her ally France. In this way, the alliance system contributed to the propagation of the war.

It is unlikely that any explanation of the causes of the First World War will be unanimously satisfactory. Historians have been debating these causes for a long time and are likely to continue to do so. Every new theory, and every new archival document painted a better picture of the events which led Europe to war in 1914. Hopefully, this can give us a better understanding, if not of the ‘why?’ Europe went to war, then at least of the ‘how?’.

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<sup>55</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 14.

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