



German war guilt re-examined

Graham Goodlad

The victorious allies blamed Germany for starting the First World War. Were they right?

Key concept

Causation

Before you read this

Check your notes on the Treaty of Versailles: on what grounds did the Allies draw up the War Guilt clause? This article covers the build-up to the July crisis, but go over the events of 1914 to make sure you are clear on the precise details of Germany's role in the short term as well.

The argument that Germany was primarily responsible for the First World War dates back to the Treaty of Versailles, which was imposed by the victorious powers in 1919. Article 231 of the treaty identified 'the aggression of Germany and her allies' as the main cause of the war. This view became less fashionable in the inter-war years as the diplomatic records of many of the countries involved in the war were published, creating the impression that responsibility had been shared. The catastrophe was widely attributed to

- Many historians have been influenced by the arguments of Fritz Fischer, that Germany actively planned a war of conquest prior to 1914.
- Germany was a highly militarised country, headed by the ambitious and unstable Kaiser Wilhelm II.
- Germany's provocative foreign policy and naval arms build-up caused neighbouring states to adopt a more defensive posture.
- German military planning was based on the Schlieffen Plan, which involved preparations for action against both France and Russia.
- Germany gave strong support to Austria-Hungary against Serbia in the crisis caused by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914.
- There is reason to believe that Germany preferred to fight in 1914, before its main rival, Russia, was able to complete its rearmament.
- Nonetheless the role of Austria-Hungary and Russia in the 1914 crisis should be given close attention.

mistakes made by the great powers, to the dominance of military elites over civilian governments in more than one country, or to the tightly-knit alliances between them. The war came to be seen as the outcome of accident rather than design. The former British prime minister, Lloyd George, popularised this interpretation with his claim that 'the nations in 1914 slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war'.

In the 1960s, attention was once again focused on the role of Germany. A controversial German historian, Fritz Fischer, argued that the regime of Kaiser Wilhelm II had extensive territorial ambitions and that it planned a war of aggression in pursuit of these aims. Fischer drew attention to the so-called 'war council', held in December 1912. At this meeting between the kaiser and key military and naval leaders, the notion of a 'preventive war' against Russia was discussed. Fischer also argued that civilian leaders, such as von Bethmann-Hollweg, **chancellor** from 1909 to 1917, were just as guilty as important military figures. The German leadership saw an expansionist foreign policy as a response to domestic difficulties arising from the growth of democracy, which was challenging the dominance of the traditional aristocratic elite. These representatives of the old order were particularly worried by the rise of the **Social Democratic Party**, which formed the largest element in the *Reichstag* (German parliament) by 1912. The quest for

world power would be an effective way of defusing the threat posed by these new and unwelcome forces.

Many conservative German historians rejected Fischer's assumption that there was a similarity between the external policies of the kaiser's regime and those of Nazi Germany. Others accepted Fischer's view that there was a deliberate will to war on the part of imperial Germany, although there was dispute over the extent to which it had planned for such an event in advance.

A desire for world power

There seems no doubt that, under Kaiser Wilhelm II, German foreign policy from the 1890s became increasingly assertive. Although the kaiser did not enjoy unrestricted power, his erratic character and personal priorities had an important influence on the evolution of policy towards other states. The political system gave him considerable influence, both as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and as the person to whom the chancellor and other ministers were responsible. Imperial Germany was a highly **militaristic** society, in which the army was not subject to normal civilian political control, its leaders enjoying direct access to the kaiser.

Under Wilhelm, Germany followed a policy known as *Weltpolitik* (world policy), in an effort to enhance its power both on the continent of Europe and as part of a quest for overseas colonies. Although this does not mean that Germany actually sought war prior to 1914, its effect was to increase other powers' suspicions of its motives and to cause them to draw more closely together for defensive purposes. Particularly important in this respect was the 1905–06 Morocco crisis, when the kaiser directly challenged French colonial interests in north Africa in the hope of weakening their recently concluded *Entente Cordiale* (agreement) with Britain. Instead, his aggressive diplomacy brought about a tightening of Anglo-French links.

Timeline

- 1882** Triple Alliance between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy.
- 1894** Franco-Russian alliance.
- 1898** Start of German naval expansion programme.
- 1904** France and Britain conclude the *Entente Cordiale*, a resolution of their differences on colonial issues.
- 1905** Morocco crisis: Kaiser Wilhelm II intervenes in Morocco in a bid to drive Britain and France apart.
- 1907** Britain and Russia reach agreement.
- 1908** Austria-Hungary annexes Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- 1912–13** Balkan Wars.

chancellor: head of the German government, equivalent to a prime minister.

Social Democratic Party: pro-working class socialist party, favouring a transfer of wealth from rich to poor, and seen as a threat by the old land-owning class in Germany.

militaristic: supporting the values of the army and the spread of their influence within civil society.

assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand: heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, murdered on 28 June 1914 by a member of a Serbian terrorist group, the Black Hand, during a visit to Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia. The assassination was used by Austria as a pretext for a quarrel with Serbia.

Austrian ultimatum: Austria responded to the assassination by presenting a series of humiliating demands to Serbia. Serbia accepted all of these demands except one, that Austrian officials be given access to Serbia in order to investigate the murder.

1912–13 Balkan Wars: in the first war a group of Balkan states, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and Montenegro, defeated the Turkish empire. The second war was caused by disagreements between Serbia and Bulgaria. As a result, Serbia emerged as the strongest state in south-east Europe.

This in turn added to Germany's sense of insecurity, prompting the belief in government circles that it was being 'encircled' by a potentially hostile alignment of neighbouring powers.

Another feature of German policy, the attempt to build a battle fleet to rival the Royal Navy, had equally damaging diplomatic consequences. The kaiser and the secretary of state for the Imperial Navy, Admiral Tirpitz, aimed to construct a sufficiently large navy so that Britain, the world's leading maritime power, would be deterred from challenging Germany at sea and would accept its rise to world power status. The German plan overlooked the possibility that Britain, alarmed by the potential threat to its security, would in turn accelerate its own naval building programme. Britain also concluded agreements with France (1904) and Russia (1907) that enabled it to concentrate its naval forces in the North Sea. The naval building competition had effectively ended by 1912, when Germany decided to focus instead on its army, but it had the effect of worsening Anglo-German relations.

On the continent, by the second decade of the twentieth century, German policy was based on the assumption that it would conceivably have to face a simultaneous conflict with France and Russia. Political leaders accepted the Schlieffen Plan, a military plan drawn up by the former chief of general staff. It meant that if war broke out with Russia, German forces would also invade France, crossing neutral Belgium in order to achieve their objective. The possibility that this might draw Britain into a continental war in support of Belgium was not considered an important factor. In effect, political considerations were being subordinated to military and organisational priorities.

Germany and the July crisis

None of this meant, however, that Germany was bound to play the role that it did in the July 1914 crisis, which preceded the outbreak of the First World War. Germany's decision to support Austria-

The 1914 crisis

28 June	Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.
5 July	Germany gives Austria assurance of support in action against Serbia.
23 July	Austrian ultimatum to Serbia.
25 July	Serbia accepts all but one item in the Austrian ultimatum.
28 July	Austria declares war on Serbia.
30 July	Russia begins general mobilisation.
1 August	Germany declares war on Russia.
3 August	Germany declares war on France and invades Belgium.
4 August	Britain declares war on Germany.

Questions

- How important is it to blame one power for the outbreak of war in 1914?
- In the context of the period, is there a difference between planning for world power and planning for war?
- How important is the role of the kaiser in reaching a judgement about Germany's role in causing the war?
- How accurate is it to claim that, without Germany, the July crisis would not have led to a European war? Could the same thing be said of Russia?
- Has this article proved that it is unfair to place sole blame for the war on Germany?

Hungary in its quarrel with Serbia, following the **assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand**, was of decisive importance. Its 1879 alliance with Austria-Hungary was a defensive arrangement, which certainly did not commit Germany to military action in the circumstances of 1914. Indeed, the evidence surrounding Germany's role in the events of that summer is controversial. Although historians have written of Germany giving Austria a 'blank cheque' for a showdown on 5–6 July, the Serbian government's conciliatory reply to the **Austrian ultimatum** was described by the kaiser as '...a splendid victory. With this every reason for war disappears.' He did, however, add that Austria should occupy the Serbian capital until there was evidence that its demands were being met.

It may be that Germany aimed to disrupt the *entente* between Russia, France and Britain, and to strengthen its own bonds with Austria, without resorting to war. There is strong evidence that, by 1914, Germany was increasingly concerned by the growth of Russian power and the corresponding weakness of Austria. The main gainers from the **1912–13 Balkan Wars** had been Russia and its client states in the region, primarily Serbia. It was also important for Germany to support Austria — its only reliable ally — against Serbia in order to avoid the perils of diplomatic isolation. It might be that the Russian tsar's shock over the murder of royalty, and his awareness that his country's rearmament was not complete, would enable Serbia to be punished without Russian intervention.

On the other hand, it seems that Germany was prepared to face the risk of war if Russia did choose to fight in support of Serbia. The work of Niall Ferguson and other historians suggests that the German leadership believed that it stood a better chance of winning in 1914 than in a few years' time. By then the continued growth of the Russian and French armies, and the completion of Russia's strategic railway building programme in Poland,