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Introduction by Robert Jervis, Columbia University

In introducing this Forum, I am reminded of the joke that when the latest entry into heaven is told that each newcomer is expected to tell the others about a major event in his life, he says that he will talk about a flood he witnessed. His guardian angel nods, adding “Just remember that Noah will be in the audience.” All of us have learned—and continue to learn—from the scholarship of Marc Trachtenberg, Dale Copeland, and Stephen Schuker, whose works blend history and political science.

Here, they have laid out a great feast for us. Although it is a lengthy one, readers should not be daunted because the authors are accomplished stylists, and the pages fly by. But, to return to my original metaphor, like any meal cooked by expert chefs, it may be best lingered over because the issues and arguments are enormously stimulating and of lasting significance. My introduction will map the main contributions and then ruminate on some of the questions they raise. This appetizer, if you will, can be skipped by those impatient to get to the main course.

Samuel Williamson Jr. and Ernest May begin their excellent 2007 review article by quoting Bernadotte Schmitt’s 1929 review of four books on the origins of World War I: “The failure of four fair-minded men, using the same materials, to reach a reasonable harmony of view or even a consistent statement of facts, is somewhat melancholy, though perhaps hardly surprising. But the fact is eloquent testimony to the complexity of the problem, and only through discussion by men of many nations will it ever be possible to arrive at anything approaching an identity of opinion.”¹ The statement is true today, and I am confident it will be true forever. Or perhaps there will be periods of consensus, as there have been in the past, but they will not last. Part of the reason is the normal perversity of scholars who, driven by both intellectual curiosity and professional incentives, will seek something new to say. This is more than a side point: if, over a century later, disinterested scholars cannot untangle the issues and agree in their judgments, it is not surprising that leaders and diplomats at the time had very different perspectives, could not fully understand each other, and were unable to find a way out. But those who seek lessons from history to make this a better world can only be discouraged by the fact that we cannot tell leaders what they should have done to have avoided this war.

Trachtenberg’s essay, which Copeland and Schuker find interesting but flawed, is not a full-scale review, but rather a coverage of selected topics. The first is a critique of Fritz Fischer’s famous thesis that Germany bore primary responsibility for the war and that its aggressive policy flowed from the domestic instability of the regime coupled with the belief that time was not on Germany’s side, which produced a strong drive to fight before Russian rearmament reached its culminating point in 1917. Starting with a close reading of the documents Fischer relies on, he argues that many of Fischer’s interpretations are overdrawn if not misleading and that domestic pressures in the form of social imperialism did not impel Germany to follow an expansive course. He then turns to the question of whether this was a preventive war. Here Trachtenberg agrees with the standard view that it was, but goes on to argue that this “point would not support the general claim that Germany was *primarily* responsible for the war if it could be shown that Germany’s rivals were also thinking in preventive war terms” (23). In the next section of his paper, this is what he does, pointing to numerous parallels in the thinking of German, Russian, and French leaders. He follows this with a discussion of the tangled question of the relationship between the German and the Russian mobilizations, although he notes

¹ Quoted in Samuel Williamson Jr. and Ernest May, “An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914,” *Journal of Modern History* 79 (June 2007), 335.

that no brief treatment can go into the depth that the subject requires. His main point, however, is that Fischer and others err in downplaying if not missing the extent to which the Germans were reacting to the Russian moves, and that the latter (along with the French) were duplicitous, which showed their awareness of the risks they were running.

The analysis of mobilizations leads to the vexed question of whether this was a “war by timetable,” to use A. J. P. Taylor’s famous phrase² and whether, as Trachtenberg queries, “the political process—which normally should have led to an agreement—was overwhelmed by forces suddenly and unexpectedly welling up from within the military sphere” (36). Trachtenberg is doubtful on two grounds, one empirical and the other theoretical (although they are related). Although Sir Edward Grey’s efforts are well known (if contested), they were only undertaken at the last minute and for the continental countries directly concerned; “it is astonishing how little attention was given...to that fundamental issue of what the terms of a settlement might be” (37). While those who point their fingers at the Central Powers correctly note that they never seemed to have contemplated anything less disruptive of the European order than a local war against Serbia, neither Russia nor France put serious thought into diplomatic solutions that might punish Serbia (and presumably curb its nationalist ambitions) without destroying its independence.

The second, theoretical point is that moving toward the brink of war and exploring diplomatic solutions could never be kept separate because it was the former that generated much of the pressure for the latter. That is, as bargaining theorists like Thomas Schelling stressed in the context of the Cold War, the danger of war, either calculated or inadvertent (when war was seen as mutually disastrous the latter was the more important), was the only thing that would make states compromise. While it is to be regretted that “the Germans waited until the very end to show any real interest in a political solution” (40) this can be explained by the conflicting incentives of the bargaining situation rather than reflecting a commitment to go to war.

After this, Trachtenberg opens what he calls “a broader perspective” (40). The analysis of Serbia’s role stressed by Christopher Clark in *The Sleepwalkers*³ is important, not only for fleshing out the picture, but for showing that the Austro-Hungarian grievances against Serbia were well-grounded and that we cannot simply dismiss as paranoid the conclusion that the Empire’s stability required a drastic change in Serbian policy, something that probably was out of reach without serious infringements on Serbia’s sovereignty (whether this was possible at all is another question). For Russia to protect Serbia, and for France to support Russia in this, was to clearly challenge the vital interests of Austria, and therefore of Germany.

This brings Trachtenberg to “the war guilt question” (47). As he notes, scholars now rarely speak of guilt, substituting the term “responsibility,” but Trachtenberg believes this is merely a euphemism. His main point is that scholars have too quickly jumped from the well-grounded historical judgment that Germany was very slow to make concessions to the conclusion that it is the guilty party. Not only do we need to consider the bargaining incentives discussed earlier, but looking at other cases shows the fallacy of equating intransigence with war. In the fall of 1939 it was Britain that refused to consider a political solution to the Polish problem, and two years later it was Germany rather than the U.S. that was trying to avoid war between them.

² A.J.P. Taylor, *War by Timetable: How the First World War began* (MacDonald and Company and American Heritage Press, 1969).

³ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

Trachtenberg does not end on this negative point, however: “There is only one way, it seems to me, to base these moral judgments on something more solid, and that is to connect them more directly to a body of theory....and to my mind the test here is whether the policies adopted make sense in our political terms: if they are attuned to the basic structure of power” (54) In the context of 1914, this means looking at “history as an interactive process,” paying attention not only to what each country was doing, but to what it was reacting to, and to leaders who were trying to make the best of bad situations.

Dale Copeland finds some of this perspective enlightening, but much of it off the mark because “it fails to consider the preference rankings of the various actors across the many outcomes that may or may not have come about in July 1914” (1). Unlike France and Russia, Germany not only sought to change the status quo, but preferred a continental war to a localized punishment of Serbia because this was a good opportunity—perhaps the last opportunity—to fight before Russia became too strong. Trachtenberg’s claim that France and Germany were fighting preventive wars as well is misleading, Copeland argues, because the Entente powers (correctly) believed that Germany was bent on war, which meant that even though their first choice was the status quo or, failing that, a negotiated solution, these outcomes were foreclosed by German policy. The apparent parallels in the thinking of all three states that Trachtenberg points to is then illusory; Germany was seeking a preventive war to ward off what it saw as looming decline, while France and Russia only mobilized because they saw war as inevitable, not in the indefinite future, but in the coming days. This also means that the exact sequence of the German and Russian mobilizations over which others have spilled so much ink is a distraction from the basic question of the difference in the states’ preferences.

Schuker’s position is close to Copeland’s, although he arrives at it by a somewhat different route. After discussing the politicized nature of the debate over German war guilt, he explains why Trachtenberg’s criticism of Fischer’s use of evidence is greatly exaggerated, noting not only the difficult circumstances under which Fischer conducted his research, but arguing why Fischer’s readings of the documents are not only reasonable, but usually convincing. Despite any criticisms of Fischer’s path-breaking work, much of the edifice survives.

Like Copeland, Schuker concludes that Trachtenberg’s attempt to show parallels between German thinking on the one hand, and French and Russian views on the other, is superficial. In the latter two countries, he argues, preventive war thinking was largely confined to the military, and in those states, unlike Germany, the military had little power. “Only in Germany did the governing elite conjure up an excuse to strike first” (19).

Widening the aperture of his focus, Schuker argues that the German impulse towards preventive war was not grounded in a careful analysis of its strategic position. “Did anyone threaten Germany in 1914? German leaders had no intelligence showing that Russia would turn hostile once it rebuilt its army, strategic railroads, and North Sea Fleet.... One cannot reasonably label a war ‘preventive’ by conjuring up an ill-defined hypothetical threat at some indefinite future time” (25). Compared to the other Great Powers, Germany was dominated both by worst-case if not paranoid thinking and a willingness to take moves that its leaders knew could destroy civilization to ward off dangers that could best be described as hypothetical.

This leads Schuker to critically engage Trachtenberg’s search for grounding moral judgments in power realities. Sometimes states act successfully—and morally—in the face of these (to Schuker’s example of Charles de Gaulle towards the end of World War II, I would add Winston Churchill’s unwillingness to consider negotiating with Germany in the wake of the fall of France), and this approach risks ignoring the different

values that states can embody (a trap that E.H. Carr, one of the “founders” of Anglo-American Realism, fell into in his classic *Twenty-Years’ Crisis*, especially in its 1939 edition that justified appeasement).⁴

I will not try to referee the dispute here. But since the essays are so thought provoking, I wanted to add a few thoughts that have been provoked. One starts with Schuker’s statement: “When we say that Germany held primary responsibility for the outbreak of World War I, we are at once giving an explanation and making a moral judgment (32). But why are we interested in making a moral judgment at all? In general, I think that much of the writing in the history profession over the past several decades has been unduly preoccupied with moral judgments, and indeed has often resorted to superficial moralizing by judging past events, people, and groups by today’s standards (and without worrying too much about the likelihood that others today or in the future have different standards). The authors in this Forum do not fall into this trap, and indeed, there is much to Paul Schroeder’s reply to my concern that making such judgments is a duty we owe to those who acted in the past.”⁵

Complicating factors arise, however. First, if we agree with Copeland that Germany preferred war to any possible negotiated settlement, and that the war was preventive for it in a different sense than it was for the Entente powers, can we stop there, or do we need to explore whether Germany sought to increase its power and whether its fears were well grounded or at least not pure fantasies? Schuker argues that they were, and is able to avoid what for him would be the hypothetical question of how to judge German behavior that was both aggressive and properly fearful. Similarly, many critics of American cold-war policy argue that it not only inflicted great misery on many other countries, but that these policies were not necessary to protect American security. But what if the world poses harder problems for contemporary leaders and the defense of legitimate interests requires massive bloodshed? Is responsibility then different than guilt?⁶ To an IR scholar, German fears for the country’s fate once Russia rearmed do not look unreasonable.⁷ Better policies might have been devised to deal with the problem, but it is not as though the Germans had no reason to worry.

A second and not unrelated way into the issue of responsibility is to follow Trachtenberg in looking at the murky question of which states were willing to consider compromises,⁸ with the implication that a lack of willingness indicates or constitutes responsibility for the resulting conflict. The question is certainly important in itself and does tell us a lot about the way people were thinking. But we should not be too quick to condemn intransigence, which may be a good bargaining tactic and also can support a political and morally justifiable position. Sometimes countries do have their backs against the wall and cannot retreat without sacrificing central values. Neither should we equate a willingness to use or threaten force to change a situation

⁴ E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis: 1919-1939* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1939).

⁵ The exchange is in Colin Elman and Miriam eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 385-416.

⁶ Note the interesting title of Annika Mombauer’s excellent review essay: “Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the origins of World War I,” *Central European History* 48 (2015): 541-564.

⁷ For a good use of the standard of reasonableness, see Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

⁸ Also see Mombauer “Guilt or Responsibility?” 558-561.

with a condemnable role in the resulting conflict. To do so endows the status quo with undue moral value, and on this point Carr was perceptive.

A third question is whether we need to judge the values for which each country was fighting or, to put it slightly differently, whether we need to compare the international order that followed the end of the war with that which we think would have been established had the other side won. Do we judge Germany guilty less because of what happened in July 1914 than because of what most of us believe the world would have been like had Germany prevailed? (Niall Ferguson's unconvincing judgment that this would have been quite benign is pertinent here.⁹) One could, of course, see a German victory as leading to a more malign world and still hold the leaders of the Entente powers responsible for the war. But in this case we are more likely to see them as heroic rather than guilty. More often, however, we are likely to believe that, at least in the modern era, states that are responsible for starting a major conflict seek to dominate and impose malign values on their adversaries. This association is most obvious in the analysis of the origins of World War II, but we can see it in the Cold War as well: revisionist historians not only place the burden of responsibility of this conflict on the U.S., but are less enamored of the American domestic system, the regimes it supported abroad, and the international order it brokered than are traditionalists.

Not only is this association between bad regimes and bad international behavior psychologically comforting, sparing us painful trade-offs,¹⁰ it also is anchored in some evidence and logic. It is also at least arguable that countries that repress their own people are more likely than others to lash out abroad, in part because, like revolutionary states, they are fearful and cannot otherwise feel secure.¹¹ Relatedly, they are likely to do a worse job of understanding their environments than is the case for more open societies.¹²

The deeper association between the quality of a regime and, even more, a national culture, and its foreign policy behavior is of course what supplies much of the moral heat to the debate about German responsibility for World War I, as both Trachtenberg and Schuker note. Almost all Germans agree that their country (in the form of the Nazis) was responsible for World War II and the Holocaust. But if they are also responsible for World War I, it is hard to make the later events seem like a one-off affair. Instead, the roots may be much deeper. This is the view of David Calleo, who argues persuasively that from 1871 on, the Germans made no room for others in the international order they sought to establish.¹³ Even more, as Schuker notes, Isabel Hull shows that from the colonial period through World War II, German military behavior sought the "absolute

⁹ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), ch. 6.

¹⁰ Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957); Stephen Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

¹² Ralph White, "Why Aggressors Lose," *Political Psychology* 11 (June 1990): 227-242; Dan Reiter and Allan Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹³ David Calleo, *The German Problem Reconsidered: Germany and the World Order, 1870 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

destruction” of Germany’s enemies.¹⁴ Here empirical analysis and moral judgment are inextricably joined. Furthermore, they are linked to the high probability of failure. Rendering others subservient will minimize the number and strength of allies a country can have; the quest for absolute destruction will lead to over-reaching. A country of this type will start wars, inflict untold misery on others, and eventually succumb to defeat. No wonder this is a picture most Germans reject—just as most Americans outside of the academy reject Cold War revisionism.

A fourth approach is to note that the question of guilt and responsibility arise, or at least carry heavy political weight, when we are dealing with events that end badly for all concerned. We do not agonize over who had responsibility for the Franco-Prussian war partly because of the fact that it ended in a quick Prussian victory. Perhaps the world would have been better off had Germany not unified, but the fact that it turned out well for Prussia drains the case of most of its analytical mystery (once we can understand the French miscalculations) and severs the link between responsibility and opprobrium. Had World War I ended quickly, either through negotiations or a victory, our debate about its causes would be very different. This also casts an interesting light on the ambivalent links between guilt and pre-war optimism or pessimism. On the one hand, if a state thought it was likely to win, and win quickly, then we will be predisposed to see it as more responsible for the war because it badly, perhaps pathologically, misjudged the situation and also was prone to be more aggressive. On the other hand, if the state was pessimistic, we are likely to blame it more because it knew it was headed for a catastrophe and should have made more strenuous efforts to avoid war even if this entailed political sacrifices.¹⁵

A final approach to these questions is to argue that here as in many cases, causation and responsibility are complex, not only in that many factors are involved, but that we need to understand changes over time, which historians are uniquely qualified to do. One actor can make moves that change the landscape that others confront, and if we only look at subsequent moves and events our picture will be distorted.¹⁶ The first day of my introductory world politics class I explain the Prisoner’s Dilemma, a game in which if played only once, as countries do when they stand at the brink of war, the only rational thing for each actor to do is to refuse to cooperate with the other even though the result is that each will be worse off than if both had cooperated. All the students who have been listening (a subset of them, to be sure) find this disturbing, but occasionally a naively perceptive one asks “Who put the people in this situation?” A good question indeed, especially for examining how political situations change over time. The argument about the respective roles of German and Russian mobilization can be seen in this light. Trachtenberg argues that, at least to a significant extent, Germany was reacting to what it learned Russia had done; Copeland and Schuker say that Germany

¹⁴ Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ For discussions of optimism and responsibility, see Mombauer, “Guilt or Responsibility?” 552-553; Williamson and May, “An Identity of Opinion,” 79.

¹⁶ For further discussion, see Robert Jervis, “Causation and Responsibility in a Complex World,” in Martha Finnemore and Judith Goldstein eds., *Back to Basics: State Power in a Contemporary World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 313-338. Also see John Gaddis, *The Landscapes of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

was set on moving ahead in any case and that the delays were largely a function of the need to place the blame on others.

This perspective may be even more valuable, if more difficult to capture, over the longer run. Paul Schroeder's argument about understanding Prussian and Austrian actions during the Napoleonic Wars is a very good illustration and has a counterpart for the events under consideration here:

I find it inexplicable that good historians can simply assert what is technically true, that Prussia started the war of 1806 or Austria that of 1809, and not ask themselves what could have induced so timorous and irresolute a king as Frederick William III, eager only to enjoy further peace and neutrality, to gamble everything on war against the French? Or what could make so narrow-minded and fearful a sovereign as Emperor Francis, whose highest ambition was to hang on to his hereditary estates in peace and who had been thoroughly beaten by France in three great wars, throw the iron dice again alone and unsupported in 1809? That demands explanation.¹⁷

Although I cannot do justice to Schroeder's rich account of either this episode or his parallel understanding of 1914, the basic point is that not only was Russia pressing in the Balkans, an area perhaps important to that country but vital to Austria, but Britain stood aside and allowed fundamental changes in the way international politics were conducted that put Austria's future at risk and destabilized the international system.¹⁸ It may well be that Germany and Austria bear the primary responsibility for what happened in July 1914, but others have a great deal of responsibility for how Europe got to that stage. Alternatively, it may be that German behavior after the assassination was reasonable given that the country was encircled by enemies, but it was its own earlier behavior that led to the encirclement. It should come more naturally to historians than to political scientists to see that the responsibility of a state at one point in time needs to be seen in the context of what it and others did previously.

Participants:

Marc Trachtenberg, an historian by training, is currently a Research Professor of Political Science at UCLA. He is the author of many works on twentieth century international politics. His most recent book, *The Cold*

¹⁷ Paul Schroeder, "Napoleon's Foreign Policy: A Criminal Enterprise," in Schroeder, *Systems, Stability and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 28. I think the analysis of both Trachtenberg and Schuker are compatible with the view that Austria-Hungary was driven by the "audacity of despair", to use Thomas Otte's memorable phrase: *The July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 508. Here might be the appropriate place to note that while Trachtenberg draws heavily on Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, I think Schuker's criticisms are on target and believe that while—or perhaps because—they lack as strong a storyline as Clark, much better are Otte, *July Crisis*, and Gordon Martel, *The Month that Changed the World: July 1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁸ See, for example, Schroeder, "Stealing Horses to Great Applause: Austria-Hungary's Decision in 1914 in Systemic Perspective," in Holger Afflerbach and David Stephenson, eds., *An Improbable War: The Outbreak of World War I and the European Political Culture before 1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 17-42. Schroeder, "Romania and the Great Powers Before 1914" *Revue romaine d'histoire*, Vol. XIV, No. 1 (1975): 39-53.

War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics, was published by Princeton University Press in 2012.

Robert Jervis is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University. His most recent book is *How Statesmen Think* (Princeton University Press, 2017). He was President of the American Political Science Association in 2000-2001 and has received career achievement awards from the International Society of Political Psychology, ISA's Security Studies Section, and APSA's Foreign Policy Section, and he has received honorary degrees from the University of Venice and Oberlin College. In 2006, he received the National Academy of Science's tri-annual award for behavioral sciences contributions to avoiding nuclear war.

Dale C. Copeland is Professor of international relations in the Department of Politics at the University of Virginia. He is author of *The Origins of Major War* (Cornell University Press, 2000) as well as *Economic Interdependence and War* (Princeton University Press, 2015), winner of the ISA 2017 Best Book Award of the International Studies Association.

Stephen A. Schuker is William W. Corcoran Professor of History at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *The End of French Predominance in Europe* (1976); *American 'Reparations' to Germany, 1919-33* (1988); and editor of *Deutschland und Frankreich vom Konflikt zur Aussöhnung. Die Gestaltung der westeuropäischen Sicherheit, 1914-1963* (2000). He is currently engaged in writing a study on West European security from 1914 to 1950. H-Diplo reviewed his essay on "J.M. Keynes and the Personal Politics of Reparations" in 2016: https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/ar546_0.pdf.

Article by Marc Trachtenberg, University of California, Los Angeles

A full century has now passed since the First World War broke out in 1914, but the question of what caused it remains unsettled. Historical opinion in this area continues to evolve; in recent years the change has been particularly dramatic. A half-century ago Fritz Fischer published his famous books essentially blaming Germany for the war, and for decades that basic judgment was widely accepted.¹ One of Fischer's main disciples, Imanuel Geiss, went so far as to say in 1972 that the "predominant part" Germany played in the outbreak of the war was "no longer debated and no longer deniable."² And even in 2007 another Fischerite, John Röhl, could still claim that "in the international historical fraternity," there was "something close to consensus that the war came about as a result of the policies pursued by Berlin and Vienna."³ But just a few years later it was clear that many historians had come to see things in a very different light. As Jonathan Steinberg notes (in commenting on some new work presented at a 2011 conference on the "Fischer Controversy 50 Years On"), "the Germans look less guilty; the others conspicuously more."⁴ Another well-known historian, Richard Evans, was more categorical. "The Fischer thesis," he points out in a review of six new books on the origins of the war published in 2014, "has not worn well," and, indeed, judging from the books he was reviewing, it was now "almost dead."⁵

For those scholars who still accept the Fischer thesis (and many still do), that trend is naturally dismaying—in large part because one their most convincing arguments was that they had essentially won the

¹ See especially Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961) [English translation: *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1967)]; and Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen: Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1969) [English translation: *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914* (New York: Norton, 1975)].

² Quoted in Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (London: Pearson, 2002), 163.

³ John Röhl, "The Curious Case of the Kaiser's Disappearing War Guilt: Wilhelm II in July 1914," in Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson, eds., *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 77.

⁴ Jonathan Steinberg, "Old Knowledge and New Research: A Summary of the Conference on the Fischer Controversy 50 Years On," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48:2 (April 2013) ([link](#)), 245.

⁵ R.J.W. Evans, "The Greatest Catastrophe the World Has Seen," *New York Review of Books*, 6 February 2014 ([link](#)). See also Samuel Williamson, "July 1914 Revisited and Revised: The Erosion of the German Paradigm," in Jack Levy and John Vasquez, eds., *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Hew Strachan, "Review Article: The Origins of the First World War," *International Affairs* 90:2 (March 2014) ([link](#)), esp. 438-439; and James Sheehan, "The Bloody Details: Who Was to Blame for World War I?" *Commonweal*, 19 April 2014 ([link](#)). For works that view the coming of war more as a tragedy than as a crime, see David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), esp. 14, and Thomas Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), esp. front blurb. In France, Fischer's work never had the kind of impact it had in Germany, or even in Britain and America. See Jean-Claude Allain, "Nekrologe: Fritz Fischer (1908-2000)," *Francia* 27:3 (2000), 233-235 ([link](#)), and Jean-Jacques Becker, "La Question des responsabilités allemandes au lendemain de la guerre mondiale, l'implication des historiens dans l'expertise et l'émergence d'une école historique," *Sociétés contemporaines* 39 (2000) ([link](#)), 93-94.

historiographical debate and their views had come to be almost universally accepted. The remarkable success, especially in Germany, of Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers*—a book which, as they saw it, tended to minimize Germany's responsibility for the war—was a particular source of concern. Röhl, for example, took the view that Fischer's "discoveries"—the "proof" Fischer had found of "German plans to unleash war in 1914 with the intention of dominating the Continent"—should have settled the issue once and for all.⁶ But the great success in Germany of Clark's book showed, in Röhl's view, that historical truth was in danger of being overwhelmed by nationalist emotion. "In my darker moments," he wrote, "it feels as if the arcane detective work we few truth-seekers are undertaking in the archives is no match for the overriding (and perfectly understandable) popular longing in Germany for a guilt-free national myth similar to the proud histories the British and French people can construct for themselves."⁷

But is it really true that these new interpretations are not the product of an honest effort to understand the origins of the war? Historical opinion has certainly changed in some major ways, but how exactly is that shift to be explained? And, at a more basic level, what are we to make of the Fischer thesis, especially in the light of all the new work that has been published in this area?

THE QUESTION OF EVIDENCE

For years Fischer's supporters have claimed that the evidence he presented was so massive and so compelling that his basic point about Germany's responsibility for the war was irrefutable. A 1962 review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of Fischer's 1961 book *Griff nach der Weltmacht* ("Reaching for World Power") was typical. "Startling as some of its conclusions must at first appear," the anonymous reviewer wrote, "it seems unlikely that they can be seriously challenged in view of the weight of the evidence that the author adduces."⁸ And Fischer provided much more evidence in his second major book on the subject, *Krieg der Illusionen*, published in 1969 (and which appeared in English in 1975 under the title *War of Illusions*)—a book which, unlike its predecessor, was devoted mainly to the period before the war. The two books provoked a massive debate, especially among German historians, but after the dust had settled Fischer's followers had no doubt who had won. "No serious German historian today," one of them wrote in 1975, "can venture to pit himself against the evidence compiled by the Fischer school."⁹

⁶ John Röhl, "Goodbye to All That (Again)? The Fischer Thesis, the New Revisionism and the Meaning of the First World War," *International Affairs* 91:1 (2015) ([link](#)), 155. On 154 Röhl refers directly to Clark's book: Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

⁷ Röhl, "Goodbye to All That (Again)?" 166.

⁸ Quoted in Mombauer, *Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*, 148.

⁹ John Moses, *The Politics of Illusion* (London: Prior, 1975), 127.

But are those claims correct? The question is of considerable importance, since in historical work hard evidence plays a fundamental role: conclusions are only as good as the evidence supporting them. And yet from the start many historians were not convinced that Fischer's arguments had been adequately supported by the evidence he had provided. Thus Gerald Feldman, who would later become America's most distinguished student of German history during the period of the First World War, published a review in 1971 of *Krieg der Illusionen*, Fischer's most important book on the war origins question. Feldman noted Fischer's "strong tendency to carry interesting points to their extreme conclusions without the benefit of evidence" and suggested that there was something unprofessional about Fischer's approach. "Fischer's passionate effort to demonstrate that Germany was guilty of launching an aggressive rather than a defensive preventive war," Feldman wrote, "might be helpful to an attorney for the prosecution, but it leaves the historian on the sidelines."¹⁰ And, indeed, when you actually read the documents Fischer cited to support his key claims, the problems Feldman was referring to are hard to miss.

Checking the Footnotes

Consider first a claim Fischer made in the context of his argument that a decision to start a war in the next couple of years had been made at the famous "War Council" of 8 December 1912. At that meeting, General Helmuth von Moltke, the Chief of the German Army's General Staff, argued that war was unavoidable and that the sooner it broke out the better. The Navy, however, was not ready for an immediate war, and because of its opposition the Emperor reluctantly agreed to a postponement. A few days later, the Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, learned that "the Emperor and Moltke had expressed themselves in favour of an early war." According to Fischer, Bethmann "adapted himself to this situation and now advocated to the Emperor the pursuit of an energetic pro-war policy," and in particular "pointed out that it was necessary to prepare the nation psychologically for a great war."¹¹

How well did Fischer back up those assertions about Bethmann? He provided no real evidence to support the very important claim that Bethmann now advocated "the pursuit of an energetic pro-war policy." The only proof provided was a comment the Emperor made to the effect that Bethmann's views had shifted: a year earlier he had said he would "never advise going to war" but had now accustomed himself to the idea of an

¹⁰ Gerald Feldman, review of Fischer's *Krieg der Illusionen*, *Journal of Modern History* 43:2 (June 1971) ([link](#)), 335. That view was widely shared at the time. Jacques Droz, for example, commented in 1973 that the "abrupt character" of some of Fischer's claims was "incompatible with the prudence that the historian must maintain." Droz, *Les causes de la première guerre mondiale: Essai d'historiographie* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 163-164.

¹¹ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 160-204, and Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen*, 231-288; the quotations are on 164 in the English version and on 235-236 of the original German version. Some of those claims have been accepted as fact by other scholars, who then use them to support their own arguments. See, for example, Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 67. Copeland's general argument here (which, as he acknowledges, is more extreme than Fischer's) has in turn been accepted by other political scientists. See, for example, Stephen Walt, "Good news: World War I is over and will not happen again," entry in Walt's blog in [foreignpolicy.com](#), 8 February 2003 ([link](#)).

armed conflict. Given Russia's policy in the Balkans and Germany's ties with Austria, Bethmann had certainly concluded that war could no longer be ruled out, and in that sense had "accustomed himself" to the idea that an armed confrontation was possible.¹² But that is by no means tantamount to saying he now favored an "energetic pro-war policy."

But what about Fischer's narrower claim about the Chancellor understanding how important it was to "prepare the nation psychologically for war"? The one piece of evidence he provided to support that claim was a memorandum Bethmann wrote on 14 December 1912, which had appeared in a well-known collection of German diplomatic documents published in the 1920s. But Bethmann had said nothing about the need to prepare the country for a great war. He began simply by referring to the information he had received about the Emperor urging the Army and the Navy to take advantage of the present readiness of the whole population to authorize whatever was necessary for the purposes of defense and prepare proposals to deal with whatever gaps still existed in Germany's defense posture. The bulk of the memorandum was a record of what the War Minister, General von Heeringen, and the State Secretary in the Navy Office, Admiral von Tirpitz, had to say about how they proposed to deal with the Emperor's request. Bethmann concluded by recording his response. For the time being he could not take a position on those proposals, but at first glance they seemed "entirely unfeasible" ("gänzlich undurchführbar"). He ended with a remarkable sentence which is worth quoting in full: "But I must insist most emphatically that you not commit yourselves behind my back with His Majesty, that the public should learn nothing about whatever preparations you undertake within your departments, and that press agitation of any sort to promote such projects cannot under any circumstances be tolerated." And this document was supposed to prove that the Chancellor thought the country needed to be prepared "psychologically for a great war"?¹³

A second example relates to Fischer's argument that "Russia tried to the end to prevent the war," and that Russia could not be blamed for ordering a general mobilization on 30 July—that Russia's responsibility

¹² On 2 December 1912 (that is, before the "War Council" took place), Bethmann, as Wolfgang Mommsen writes, "gave an unusually vehement speech in the Reichstag" in which he gave Russia "a scarcely concealed warning against an attack on Austria-Hungary, and made it clear that in such an event Germany would be prepared to go to war." Mommsen, "The Topos of Inevitable War in Germany in the Decade before 1914," in Volker Berghahn and Martin Kitchen, eds., *Germany in the Age of Total War* (London: Croon Helm, 1981), 33. That speech led to a sharp British warning, which in turn provoked the Kaiser into convening the "War Council." See John Röhl, *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 901-911; Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 159; and Imanuel Geiss, *German Foreign Policy, 1871-1914* (London: Routledge, 1976), 141. An extract from Bethmann's speech is available online ([link](#)). Bethmann had made the same point, with even greater clarity, in a November 28 speech to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Bundesrat: "If Austria has to fight for its position as a Great Power, regardless of the cause, then we must stand at her side so as not to have to fight alone at a later stage with a weakened Austria beside us . . . We cannot permit our ally to suffer any humiliation. We wish to avoid war for as long as that is possible with honour; if that should prove impossible, we shall face it with . . . firm resolve." Quoted in Röhl, "Goodbye to All That" ([link](#)), 164.

¹³ Bethmann Hollweg memorandum, 14 December 1912, in Johannes Lepsius, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy und Friedrich Thimme, eds. (for the German Foreign Office), *Die Große Politik der Europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914: Sammlung der Diplomatischen Akten des Auswärtigen Amtes* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1922-1927), vol. 39 ([link](#)), doc. no. 15623, 145-148. Fischer does, however, point out in a footnote that Bethmann insisted here that the two departments not pursue a press campaign to promote their efforts without first getting his approval. Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 164 n. 13.

cannot “be said to lie in the fact that on 30th July the Russian government decided to transform the partial mobilization [against Austria] into a general one [directed also against Germany].”¹⁴ Many historians, not just in Germany but in other countries as well, have regarded that move as decisive, but Fischer denies that this was the case, and to that end quotes a statement that “Bethmann Hollweg himself” made that very day at the Prussian State Council:

Although Russia [Bethmann said] had proclaimed a mobilisation its mobilisation measures could not be compared with those of the west European [powers]...Russia did not want a war, it had been forced by Austria to take this step.¹⁵

This comes across as very powerful evidence. The Chancellor seemed to be admitting, first, that Russia’s general mobilization was not nearly as decisive as, say, Germany’s would have been, and, second, that the Russian move was an understandable reaction to what the Austrians had done. And those points played an important role in supporting the claim that Germany was basically responsible for the war. For if, by Bethmann’s own admission, Russia’s mobilization was understandable, then the Russians could hardly be blamed for taking that step. And if the Germans themselves recognized that a Russian general mobilization would not automatically lead to war, then that meant negotiations could, in principle, have continued even after Russia mobilized; so if the Germans instead chose to respond to the Russian move by opting for war themselves, that could only mean that they had freely chosen to start the war and were just using the Russian mobilization as a welcome pretext to begin military operations.

Other scholars tended to accept that interpretation uncritically. Fischer’s argument in that passage was, for example, echoed by Volker Berghahn in a book published in 1973; Berghahn cited that passage from *Krieg der Illusionen* and used the same extract from Bethmann’s remarks on 30 July to support his claim that the Russian decision to order general mobilization was not “the crucial step that unleashed the First World War,” and that the Germans were merely using it as “a pretext for starting” the war.¹⁶ And the British scholar Niall Ferguson, relying on that passage in the Berghahn book, has repeatedly asserted that the once-common view that the Germans had to start military operations as soon as Russia mobilized against Germany was incorrect, that negotiations were still possible after that Russian mobilization order had been issued, and that if the Germans nonetheless began military operations right away, this was because the German generals were so intent on war. “The Russian argument that their mobilization” did not mean war, he says, “was privately accepted by Moltke and Bethmann.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 491.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 491-492.

¹⁶ Volker Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1973), 207.

¹⁷ Niall Ferguson “Public Finance and National Security: The Domestic Origins of the First World War Revisited,” *Past & Present* 142 (February 1994) ([link](#)), 145; Ferguson, “Germany and the Origins of the First World War: New Perspectives,” *Historical Journal* 35:3 (September 1992) ([link](#)), 732 n. 39; and Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 149-150.

I will be discussing the whole Russian mobilization question in more detail a bit later, but for now I want to focus on the way Fischer used Bethmann's comments at the 30 July State Council meeting. It turns out that there are some major problems with his interpretation of those remarks. The most obvious one is that Bethmann was referring there to Russia's *partial* mobilization against Austria, announced the previous day, and not, as Fischer had led his readers to think, to a far more important move, Russia's *general* mobilization against Germany as well. Bethmann, in fact, could not possibly have been referring to a general mobilization (as something which had already been "proclaimed"), because the Germans did not even learn of Russia's general mobilization until the next morning.¹⁸

The second problem is even more serious. Bethmann, it turns out, was not expressing his own view (as Fischer had claimed), but was instead simply summarizing an explanation others had given, an explanation the Chancellor by no means fully shared. To see that this was the case, all one has to do is read the passage in its entirety (albeit in a different translation):

The Russian mobilization [according to Bethmann] had been explained, it was true, by statements that Russia's mobilization measures were not to be compared with those of the western European nations; that the Russian troops might stand fast in a state of mobilization for weeks to come; and that Russia did not intend to go to war, but had only been driven to take these measures by Austria. On the other hand, however, emphasis must be laid on the fact that the four Austro-Hungarian corps mobilized in the southern part of the Monarchy were not aimed against Russia, and also on the fact the corps mobilized in the north, in Bohemia, possessed more of a local value in view of the dubious political attitude of the Czechs.¹⁹

And whose argument was he presenting here? It is quite clear from another key source—the German Ambassador Count Friedrich von Pourtalès's report of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov's remarks the previous day defending Russia's recently-announced decision to order a partial mobilization against Austria—that Bethmann was summarizing the official *Russian* view. Sazonov, Pourtalès reported, had contended that Russia was responding to military measures Austria had taken. He argued that "in Russia mobilization was far from meaning war, as it did among western European nations" and that "the Russian army would doubtless be able to remain under arms for weeks to come without crossing the frontier." "Russia," Sazonov had said, "wanted to avoid war, if it were in any way possible."²⁰ Bethmann's comments on the 30th were thus clearly a

¹⁸ See, for example, Ulrich Trumppener, "War Premeditated? German Intelligence Operations in July 1914," *Central European History* 9:1 (March 1976) ([link](#)), 80-82.

¹⁹ Protocol of the Session of the Royal Prussian Ministry of State, 30 July 1914, in Karl Kautsky, comp., and Max Montgelas and Walther Schücking, eds., *Outbreak of the World War: German Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), 381; available online through subscribing libraries in the Artemis Primary Sources collection *The Making of Modern Law: Foreign, Comparative and International Law, 1600-1926* ([link](#)). For the German original: Karl Kautsky, comp., and Max Montgelas and Walther Schücking, eds., *Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch* (Charlottenburg: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1919), 2:176-177 (doc. no. 456) ([link](#)).

²⁰ Pourtalès to Foreign Office, July 29, 1914, in Kautsky, *Outbreak of the World War*, 303 ([link](#)), reprinted in Imanuel Geiss, ed., *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War: Selected Documents* (New York: Scribner's, 1967), 281. For the original text, see Kautsky, *Deutschen Dokumente*, 2:60 (doc. no. 343) ([link](#)).

paraphrase—at points practically a word-for-word paraphrase—of what Sazonov had said on the 29th, and this is yet further proof that Bethmann was referring to a partial and not to a general mobilization. And the Pourtalès telegram is not an arcane source. It was included in the important collection of German documents Karl Kautsky published in 1919; it is also covered in the major historical accounts; and every serious student of the July Crisis should be familiar with it.²¹ So Fischer’s use of Bethmann’s remarks was utterly misleading: Bethmann’s paraphrase of Sazonov’s defense of Russia’s partial mobilization was transformed into an admission on Bethmann’s part that Russia’s general mobilization was understandable and would not in itself trigger a war.

And why is it important to read the documents with particular care in this case? The main reason is that the interpretation Fischer gave of Bethmann’s remarks is simply not plausible. For it is very clear that Bethmann understood that Germany could not simply throw away what the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, called “the advantage of time” by holding off from military operations once Russia began to mobilize against Germany, and thus knew that a Russian general mobilization would lead directly to war.²² The whole Schlieffen Plan—Germany’s plan for fighting a two-front war—was predicated on the idea that Germany would have to move as soon as Russia ordered general mobilization. For if Germany was to have any hope of success, it would have to achieve important results in the west at the beginning of the war; that meant it would have to concentrate the bulk of her army in the west, thus leaving its eastern border relatively undefended; and it could do that only while Russia’s relatively slow mobilization was still running its course. If it waited until Russia had finished mobilizing, it would have to divide its armies between east and west and it would thus be too late to put that plan into effect with any hope of success; Germany would therefore have to move as soon as Russia’s general mobilization began. All this was common knowledge at the time, and Bethmann in particular understood why Russia’s general mobilization would more or less automatically lead to war. Indeed, Fischer himself quoted Bethmann as saying a week earlier that “should war break out it will result from Russian mobilisation *ab irato*, before possible negotiations. In that case we could hardly sit and talk any longer because we have to strike immediately in order to have any chance of winning at all.”²³

All this is quite striking, but let me give a third example of what seems to me a clear misuse of evidence. To support his argument about German policy in the July crisis, Fischer cited an important document, a letter that Gottfried von Jagow, the State Secretary in the Foreign Office, wrote to the ambassador in London, Prince Lichnowsky—a document which Fischer himself says summed up Germany’s attitude “in a nutshell.” According to Fischer, Jagow argued there that the time had come to launch a preventive war against Russia. “The struggle between Teuton and Slav,” he paraphrases Jagow as saying, “was bound to come . . . which being so, the present was the best moment for Germany, for ‘in a few years Russia . . . will be ready.’” But the original text made no reference to a “struggle between Teuton and Slav,” let alone to its inevitability. All Jagow did was to comment that in Russia “the feeling of the Slavic element is becoming more and more

²¹ See, for example, Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols. (London, 1952-1957), 2:549. The original version of Albertini’s three-volume study, *Le origini della guerra del 1914*, was published in Milan in 1942-1943.

²² For Grey’s comment, see Albertini, *Origins*, 2:339.

²³ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 484. On these matters in general, see Marc Trachtenberg, “The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment,” in Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) ([link](#)), 72-84.

hostile to Germany.” To be sure, Jagow stressed that at present Russia was “not ready to strike” and that the Russians were building up their power and would be “prepared to fight in a few years.” But the conclusion he drew was that Russia would therefore want to avoid war now, and that a “localization” of the Austro-Serbian conflict was still possible. Fischer thus turned Jagow’s argument on its head: Jagow’s point that war with Russia could be avoided was transformed through creative paraphrasing into an argument for provoking war with Russia before it was too late.²⁴

These are not the only examples one can cite. I in fact gave a couple of other examples, both also related to important claims Fischer had made, in an article I wrote on the July Crisis twenty-five years ago.²⁵ These were not trivial errors. Each of them related to a piece of evidence that provided important support for a key element in the Fischer argument. So these examples are enough in themselves to raise questions about the overall quality of the Fischer argument: if the building blocks are so defective, how strong can the larger structure be?

The “Cherry-Picking” Problem

As Feldman suggested, one often gets the sense that Fischer was building a case rather than weighing the evidence in an open-minded way. Fischer, for example, in keeping with his general interpretation, argued that the Germans were delighted when they learned that Russia had ordered general mobilization and that war was about to break out. The picture “of an Emperor in despair because of the war and a German government unhappy over the failure of the peace negotiations,” he wrote, was simply incorrect; the “real state of affairs” was “very different.” To prove the point, he quoted a passage from Admiral Müller’s diary. “The mood is brilliant,” Müller wrote; “the government has managed brilliantly to make us appear the attacked.” Röhl took much the same view. “The military leaders, the Chancellor, the Foreign Office, and any other statesmen and officers who learned of” the Russian mobilization, he wrote, “reacted to the news with relief. They could now make use of the Russian mobilisation, as they had intended from the start, as a pretext for proclaiming a threatening danger of war and launching attacks on France and Russia.” To support that interpretation, he quoted an extract from the diary of General von Wenninger, the Bavarian military attaché in Berlin, about the mood in the War Ministry at the time: “Beaming faces everywhere, handshaking in the corridors; they are congratulating each other on having cleared the ditch.” This comes across as powerful evidence: if the Germans were so pleased when war broke out, doesn’t that suggest that they had wanted it all along? So it is

²⁴ Fischer, *Germany’s Aims*, 59; Jagow to Lichnowsky, 18 July 1914, in Kautsky, *Outbreak of the World War*, 131-132 ([link](#)), and also in Geiss, *July 1914*, 123. For the original German text, see Kautsky, *Deutschen Dokumente* 1: 100 ([link](#)).

²⁵ The first relates to a distorted account of what for Fischer and his followers was a key piece of evidence supporting their view that a decision for war was made during the first week of the crisis, the record of a meeting the German journalist Viktor Naumann had with a high Austrian official on July 1, 1914. The second had to do with Fischer’s misuse of the Kaiser’s comment “now or never”; he made it seem that this referred to a general European war, whereas in reality it referred only to a “reckoning” with Serbia. See Trachtenberg, “The Coming of the First World War” ([link](#)), 51-52.

not surprising that the Müller and Wenninger diary entries are featured in many accounts by Fischer and his supporters.²⁶

The problem is that other evidence, which cuts in the opposite direction and bears directly on the attitude of the key policy makers, is not taken into account in this context. Bethmann, for example, judging from the tone of his remarks at the 30 July meeting of the Prussian State Council, was anything but delighted about the course of events: he emphasized “the fact that all Governments, including that of Russia, and the great majority of the nations, were peaceable themselves, but control had been lost, and the stone had started rolling.”²⁷ A European war, he had said earlier in the crisis, would lead to “the overthrow of all that exists.”²⁸ He had no illusions about what a great war would be like. “No one can have any conception of a world war,” he told the Reichstag in April 1913, “of the misery and destruction that it would bring to the nations. It would probably make all previous wars look like a childish game.”²⁹

Nor does the evidence show unambiguously that the Emperor was pleased by what was about to happen. Indeed, a long marginal comment he wrote on a diplomatic dispatch at the climax of the crisis on 30 July points in exactly the opposite direction. “The net has been suddenly thrown over our head,” the Kaiser wrote,

²⁶ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 504-505; Röhl, *Abyss*, 1086.

²⁷ Prussian Ministry of State meeting, 30 July 1914, in Kautsky, *Outbreak of the World War*, 382 ([link](#)) and Kautsky, *Deutschen Dokumente*, 2:178 (doc. no. 456) ([link](#)). This was not the only piece of evidence suggesting that Bethmann was thinking along these lines. On July 27 Bethmann’s confidant Kurt Riezler wrote in his diary: “A fate stronger than human power, as the chancellor sees it, looms over Europe and our people.” Kurt Riezler, *Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente*, ed. by Karl Dietrich Erdmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1972), 192. That comment was originally quoted in Karl Dietrich Erdmann, “Zur Beurteilung Bethmann Hollwegs,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 15 (September 1964), 527.

²⁸ Riezler diary, entry for 7 July 1914, in Riezler, *Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente*, 183.

²⁹ Bethmann Hollweg Reichstag speech of 7 April 1913, quoted in Wolfgang Mommsen, “Topos of Inevitable War,” 44-45. Jost Dülffer also quotes that extract from Bethmann’s speech and writes that “this was only one of his frequently cited characterizations of the horrors of war.” Jost Dülffer, “Die zivile Reichsleitung und der Krieg: Erwartungen und Bilder 1890-1914,” in Wolfram Pyta and Ludwig Richter, *Gestaltungskraft des Politischen: Festschrift für Eberhard Kolb* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1998), 26. And indeed, as Dülffer notes in another article, Bethmann was anything but confident about Germany’s chances in a war. See especially the extract from a letter Bethmann wrote in March 1913 quoted in Jost Dülffer, “Préfigurations de la guerre en Allemagne avant 1914,” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 171 (1993) ([link](#)), 14. That article was republished in Jean-Jacques Becker et al., eds., *Guerre et cultures 1914-1918* (Paris: Colin, 1994), and, in German, as “Kriegserwartung und Kriegsbild in Deutschland vor 1914,” in Wolfgang Michalka, ed., *Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse* (Munich: Piper, 1994), and in Jost Dülffer, *Im Zeichen der Gewalt: Frieden und Krieg im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003). As Dülffer shows, Bethmann was by no means an isolated figure in this regard. Stig Förster also points out that “prominent civilians,” like the military historian and journalist Hans Delbrück, echoed the warnings of military leaders like the elder Moltke, and notes somewhat tentatively that the “myth of the short-war illusion” was probably “just as wrong with regard to the general public as it is to the military leadership.” Stig Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871-1914,” in Manfred Boemeke, Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 366, esp. n. 86.

“and England sneeringly reaps the most brilliant success of her persistently prosecuted *anti-German world-policy*, against which we have proved ourselves helpless, while she twists the noose of our political and economic destruction out of our fidelity to Austria, as we squirm *isolated* in the net. A great achievement, which arouses the admiration even of him who is to be destroyed as its result!”³⁰ As for the top military leaders, their feelings were also not quite as Fischer and his supporters have portrayed them. Moltke, although he had pushed for war, was by no means delighted when the conflict actually broke out: he spoke, in a well-known memorandum written for Bethmann on 28 July, of a “war which will annihilate for decades the civilisation of almost all Europe.”³¹

Much the same point applies to another key Fischer argument. To make the claim that the German government during the July Crisis was from the start deliberately aiming at a great war—that it had decided “in early July to start the war at this moment in time”—Fischer had to deny that it had ever really thought that a “localized” Austro-Serbian conflict was a serious possibility.³² “As innumerable documents show,” he wrote, “Germany knew that Russia would never allow Austria-Hungary to act in the Balkans unopposed.”³³ But the evidence he cited in the passage that followed showed only that the German leaders at that point understood that escalation was possible, not that they knew that for all practical purposes “localization” was impossible.³⁴ And there is a good deal of evidence that points in the opposite direction. Most historians today,

³⁰ The Emperor’s marginal comments on Pourtalès to Foreign Office, 30 July 1914, in Kautsky, *Outbreak of the World War*, 349-350, reprinted in Geiss, *July 1914*, 294-295. For the original text, see Kautsky, *Deutschen Dokumente 2*: 132-133 (doc. no. 401) ([link](#)). Emphasis in original text.

³¹ Moltke to Bethmann Hollweg, 29 July 1914 (written the previous day), in Kautsky, *Outbreak of the World War*, 308 ([link](#)) and Geiss, *July 1914*, 284. For the original text, see Kautsky, *Deutschen Dokumente*, 2:67 (doc. no. 349) ([link](#)). Nor was Moltke particularly optimistic in a conversation he had with his adjutant, Major von Haefen, on the night of July 30-31. “This war,” Haefen reported him as saying, “will develop into a world war in which England also will take a hand. How it will all end, nobody today knows.” See Stig Förster, “Im Reich des Absurden: Die Ursachen des Ersten Weltkrieges,” in Bernd Wegner, ed., *Wie Kriege entstehen. Zum historischen Hintergrund von Staatenkonflikten* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000) ([link](#)), 244. [To download this article: click the link, for first image enter “212,” for last image enter “253,” check “Ja,” enter the four-digit code in the box, click “WEITER,” wait for the download, and then click “PDF-Datei”]. Förster’s source is a document from Haefen’s papers in the German military archives in Freiburg. Haefen had reported Moltke’s comment in an article he had published in 1917. See Albertini, *Origins*, 3:25. But the archival source was more revealing. According to the account Haefen gave there, Moltke broke down in tears when he made that prediction. See Stig Förster, “Angst und Panik: ‘Unsachliche’ Einflüsse im politisch-militärischen Denken des Kaiserreiches und die Ursachen des Ersten Weltkrieges,” in Birgit Aschmann, ed., *Gefühl und Kalkül: Der Einfluss von Emotionen auf die Politik des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2005), 85 ([link](#)).

³² Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 494.

³³ Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims*, 63.

³⁴ To be sure, there is other evidence not cited here that points in this general direction. Bethmann, for example, said in February 1913 it would be “almost impossible” for Russia to stand by while Serbia was crushed, and a German foreign office official was still arguing along these lines on 2 July. Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 206; Geiss, *July 1914*, 67-68. But documents of that sort are not conclusive. Given that Bethmann in 1913 still wanted to hold Austria back, it is not surprising to find him making that kind of argument; thinking that that policy was still intact, a foreign office official might naturally take the same line.

in fact, take the view that the Germans, at least during the early part of the crisis, believed that “localization” was a viable strategy. Even Geiss, writing in 1965, noted that the “dominant mood” among German leaders during the early part of the crisis was that Russia would not intervene in an Austro-Serbian war.³⁵

The Adequacy of the Evidence

In addition to these problems having to do with the misuse and the selective use of evidence, there is a third problem that should be noted: some key claims are not supported by much hard evidence at all. This point, to be sure, is by no means new. Feldman, for example, had noted in his review of *Krieg der Illusionen* that a couple of Fischer’s most important arguments were not satisfactorily supported by the evidence he had presented, and a leading French historian, Jean-Claude Allain, made much the same point in an obituary he wrote on Fischer in 2000.³⁶ But let me just give a couple of examples here.

The first relates to Fischer’s argument that a plan had been decided on at the beginning of July “to use the favourable opportunity of the murder at Sarajevo for the start of the continental war which Germany viewed as necessary”; “the German government,” he claimed in an earlier passage, “was determined from early July 1914 onwards to use this favourable opportunity for a war against France and Russia.”³⁷ But when one looks at the part of the book that deals with this phase of the crisis—the section called “The Occasion is Propitious—the First Week in July”—one finds no proof whatsoever that a decision of that sort had actually been made.³⁸ The evidence certainly showed that the Germans felt that the assassination provided Austria

³⁵ The 18 July Jagow to Lichnowsky letter referred to above is of particular interest in this context: Jagow still hoped and believed “that the conflict can be localized.” Jagow to Lichnowsky, 18 July 1914, in Kautsky, *Outbreak of the World War*, 131-132 ([link](#)). For additional evidence, see, for example, Konrad Jarausch, “The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg’s Calculated Risk, July 1914,” 56 (note also the title); and Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 416. For Geiss’s view, see Geiss, *July 1914*, 71. Even Röhl, who, like Fischer, claims that the German government decided in early July to start a European war, shows that German leaders at that point believed a “localized” Austro-Serbian war was a real possibility. He quotes, for example, from a diary entry recording the discussion at a meeting of the German leadership held on July 5—the general view, according to that source, was that if Austria moved quickly, “the Russians—although friends of Serbia—will not join in”—and then comments that this was the consensus view at that point. “This contemporary source,” he writes, is an unvarnished record of the unanimous stance taken by the Kaiser, the Reich Chancellor and the army leadership. There was no disagreement amongst them.” He then goes on to quote two other sources that point in the same direction. Röhl, *Abys*, 1025-1026. For Röhl’s general claim about Germany deciding on a major war at this point in the crisis, see *ibid.*, 1020, 1026; note also the title of his chapter 38, taking the story through the first week in July: “Summer 1914: The Decision for War.” The clear implication is that the decision for war was made during that period.

³⁶ Feldman review of *Krieg der Illusionen* ([link](#)), 335; Allain, “Nekrologe: Fritz Fischer” ([link](#)), 234.

³⁷ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 480, 515

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 473-80.

with a favorable opportunity for settling accounts with Serbia, but that is not the same as saying that they had decided this was a good time to provoke a European war.

A second example has to do with the claim that the policy of engineering a great European war was an integral part of Germany's drive for "world power." The July Crisis, Fischer wrote, "appears in its true light only when seen as a link between Germany's 'world policy,' as followed since the mid-1890s, and her war aims policy after August, 1914."³⁹ But, as Ferguson noted, "it is hard to see what, if any, direct connection there was between Germany's 'world policy' and the decision to support the Austrian strike against Serbia in 1914."⁴⁰ Klaus Epstein in 1962, Fritz Stern in 1967, and Jacques Droz in 1984, made much the same point.⁴¹ The basic problem here is fairly obvious. If you are investigating a death, you might note that the victim was a heavy smoker, never exercised, drank excessively, and had a serious heart condition; but none of that would be relevant if he had died in a plane crash. There has to be some demonstrable link (as Thomas Schelling put it in another context) between the "strategic background" and the "local foreground," but Fischer provided no direct evidence proving that Germany's leaders were "reaching for world power" in July 1914.⁴² And that evidence would be hard to find: one has the sense that Germany's earlier goal of displacing Britain as the world's premier imperial power had declined in importance—that by 1914 Russia had replaced Britain as the main enemy, that the focus had shifted away from creating a powerful navy to simply strengthening the army, and that with the deterioration of Germany's position in Europe Germany's basic orientation was more defensive than it had been.

³⁹ Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, 92. Note also the title of chapter 10 in *War of Illusions*: "War not for Austria's Interests in the Balkans but for Germany's Position as a World Power in Mitteleuropa." The body of the chapter, incidentally, provides little evidence to substantiate the assertion made in the title, and Fischer's claim about the importance of the Mitteleuropa idea in German policy before the war has been flatly rejected by serious scholars. See especially Georges-Henri Soutou, *L'Or et le sang: Les buts de guerre économiques de la Première Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 23.

⁴⁰ Ferguson, "Germany and the Origins of the First World War" ([link](#)), 730.

⁴¹ Klaus Epstein, "German War Aims in the First World War," *World Politics* 15:1 (October 1962) ([link](#)), 179; Fritz Stern, "Bethmann Hollweg and the War: The Limits of Responsibility," in Leonard Krieger and Fritz Stern, eds., *The Responsibility of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 268 and Jacques Droz, "Bulletin historique: Histoire de l'Allemagne de 1789 à 1918," *Revue Historique* 272:2 (October-December 1984) ([link](#)), 516. Fischer, according to Epstein, had argued "that at least after 1911 the dominant forces of German society deliberately aimed at war. His argument is, however, essentially an *a priori* construction without conclusive supporting evidence." "It is incontrovertible," Stern wrote, "that Bethmann consciously risked a world war, but there is no evidence that he did so in order to establish Germany hegemony." He had, however, been more supportive of the Fischer thesis in a famous talk he gave at the German Historical Association's meeting in Berlin in 1964—that is, in a very different political context. Speaking of the whole period from before 1914 through 1945 he asked: "Is the continuity of intentions and hopes, of style and aims, not altogether amazing?" Fritz Stern, "On Continuity in German History," *Journal of International Affairs* 22:1 (January 1968) ([link](#)), 133, and republished as "German Historians and the War: Fritz Fischer and his Critics," in Fritz Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) ([link](#)), 156.

⁴² Schelling to Bernard Brodie, 22 February 1965, Bernard Brodie Papers, Box 2, file "Schelling," UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA, quoted in Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 16.

What all this means is that Fischer's argument is not particularly impressive in traditional craft terms. That, however, is not the end of the problem.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ARGUMENT

All historical interpretations have a certain structure. A general thesis rests on a number of more specific claims, which in turn rest on the evidence given to support them. In Fischer's case, the core argument was supported by a number of key claims. But one by one those claims have been discredited, weakened or relativized.

The Social Imperialism Argument

One of Fischer's main claims was that Germany's international behavior is to be understood in domestic socio-political terms. He made the point quite explicitly at the beginning of *War of Illusions*: the government's aim, he wrote, "was to consolidate the position of the ruling classes with a successful imperialist foreign policy; indeed it was hoped a war would resolve the growing social tensions."⁴³ This linked up with a powerful argument being made at much the same time by Hans-Ulrich Wehler and a number of other German historians. Their argument was that Germany had modernized economically but not politically; real power remained in the hands of the established elites. The resulting tensions, they said, created a major problem for the ruling groups, and one of the ways the government sought to manage them was through an aggressive foreign policy—through "the diversion outwards," as Wehler put it, "of internal tensions and forces of change in order to preserve the social and political status quo."⁴⁴ A "social imperialist" policy, the argument ran, would enable Germany's rulers to use popular nationalism as a "long-term integrative factor which helped stabilise an anachronistic political and social structure."⁴⁵ German policy in the whole period down to 1914 was to be understood in those terms. But that theory served not just to explain German history in the

⁴³ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, viii. See also Fritz Fischer, *Bündnis der Eliten. Zur Kontinuität der Machtstrukturen in Deutschland 1871–1945* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1979). For the English translation: *From Kaiserreich to Third Reich: Elements of Continuity in German History, 1871-1945* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

⁴⁴ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1969), 115, quoted in Geoff Eley, "Germany, the Fischer Controversy, and the Context of War: Rethinking German Imperialism, 1880-1914," in Alexander Anievas, ed., *Cataclysm: The First World War and the Making of Modern World Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 29.

⁴⁵ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "Industrial Growth and Early German Imperialism," in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972), 87-89, quoted in Eley, "Germany, the Fischer Controversy, and the Context of War," 29-30 ([link](#)).

imperial period. The claim was even more far-reaching. The basic socio-political problem persisted well beyond the outbreak of the First World War, and “social imperialism” was the key to understanding German history in the whole period down to 1945: the Nazi phenomenon was to be seen in this context; there was a good deal more continuity in modern German history than people had thought; and one could in fact draw a straight line from Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to Nazi leader Adolf Hitler.⁴⁶

The social imperialism argument was enormously influential, and for a while it seemed that the key to understanding German foreign policy, and indeed modern German history as a whole, had been discovered. But before long a reaction set in. As early as 1976, James Sheehan remarked that the mode of analysis championed by scholars like Wehler seemed to be “becoming a new orthodoxy with its own unexamined assumptions and inherent limitations.”⁴⁷ Feldman was convinced by his own work on German society and politics in the period of the First World War that the continuity argument had been overdrawn—that the war itself marked an important break in German history.⁴⁸ A number of British scholars also found much to criticize in the new approach. Richard Evans objected to the view of the German Empire “as a puppet theatre, with Junkers and industrialists pulling the strings, and middle and lower classes dancing jerkily across the stage of history towards the final curtain of the Third Reich.”⁴⁹ Geoff Eley was at first “exhilarated” by the Wehlerite approach, but “developed big reservations quite quickly.”⁵⁰ In 1974 he published an important article criticizing a fairly narrow historical claim supporting the theory; the evidence, it seemed to him, just did not support the basic argument in some key areas.⁵¹ A leading French scholar, Raymond Poidevin, in his important book on Franco-German economic relations before the war, also reached some conclusions that related to one important part of the social imperialism theory, the idea that a bellicose imperialism was the glue that held the “alliance of elites” together.⁵² The top industrialists were supposed to be a major part of that “alliance,” but Poidevin, in his very extensive work in the German archives, could not find a single

⁴⁶ See the discussion in Eley, “Germany, the Fischer Controversy, and the Context of War,” 30-31 ([link](#)), and in Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 77-78.

⁴⁷ James J. Sheehan, review of Gerhard A. Ritter (ed.), *Gesellschaft, Parlament und Regierung: Zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus in Deutschland* and Michael Stürmer, *Regierung und Reichstag im Bismarckstaat, 1871-1880: Cäsarismus oder Parlamentarismus*, in the *Journal of Modern History* 48 (1976), 567 ([link](#)).

⁴⁸ Philipp Stelzel, “Rethinking Modern German History: Critical Social History as a Transatlantic Enterprise, 1945-1989” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010), 258 ([link](#)).

⁴⁹ Richard Evans, “Wilhelm’s Germany and the Historians,” in Evans, ed., *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 23. That metaphor, as Evans notes, had been used in a 1976 article by the German scholar Hans-Günter Zmarzlik.

⁵⁰ Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 78.

⁵¹ Geoff Eley, “Sammlungspolitik, Social Imperialism, and the Navy Law of 1898,” *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* 15:1 (June 1974).

⁵² Raymond Poidevin, *Les relations économiques et financières entre la France et l’Allemagne de 1898 à 1914* (Paris: Colin, 1969). The allusion is to Fischer’s *Bündnis der Eliten* (see n. 43).

document in which business leaders called for war.⁵³ Other leading scholars, especially Feldman, have reached similar conclusions.⁵⁴

A number of prominent German historians were also critical of the “social imperialism” thesis. Wolfgang Mommsen, by no means an arch-conservative, quoted in this context Bethmann’s remark in June 1914 to the effect that those who thought a war “might lead to a healthier state of affairs in Germany—in the conservative sense” were wrong, and that “on the contrary a world war with all its unpredictable consequences is likely to enhance the power of the Social Democrats—as they are preaching peace—tremendously, and might lead to the destruction of some thrones.”⁵⁵

The criticism was quite effective, and by the early 1990s few historians still thought that German foreign policy before the war was to be explained in essentially “social imperialist” terms. As Niall Ferguson pointed out at the very beginning of an important article published in 1994, the argument “that the German ‘ruling elites’ precipitated war to avert a domestic political crisis—to strengthen the patriarchal order and mentality’ and ‘halt the advance of Social Democracy’—no longer appears tenable.”⁵⁶

⁵³ The importance of Poidevin’s findings was stressed by other leading French specialists in this area when they dealt with the Fischer thesis. See Pierre Renouvin, “Nationalisme et impérialisme en Allemagne de 1911 à 1914 (d’après un ouvrage récent),” *Revue Historique* 245:1 (January-March 1971), 69-70 (review article on *Krieg der Illusionen*) ([link](#)); and Jacques Droz, “Bulletin historique: Histoire d’Allemagne (1789-1918),” *Revue Historique* 253:1 (January-March 1975) ([link](#)), 218.

⁵⁴ Gerald Feldman, “Hugo Stinnes and the Prospect of War before 1914,” in Boemeke, Chickering and Förster, *Anticipating Total War*, esp. 79, 84-85, 88, 92. See also Förster, “Im Reich des Absurden,” 214. One can say much the same thing about the attitude of business and especially banking circles on the Entente side. See, for example, René Girault, “Les Balkans dans les relations franco-russes en 1912,” *Revue Historique* 253:1 (January-March 1975) ([link](#)), 163: “on aurait même l’impression que le monde des affaires à Paris, spécialement la banque, témoigne d’une grande réserve face à l’action patriotique ou nationaliste du Quai d’Orsay en 1912-1913.” This is by no means a new argument. See, for example, Elie Halévy, “The World Crisis of 1914-1918,” in Halévy, *The Era of Tyrannies* (London: Allen Lane, 1967), 173-174.

⁵⁵ Wolfgang J. Mommsen, “Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914,” *Central European History* 6:1 (March 1973), 33 n.53; see also 36 ([link](#)). Note also David E. Kaiser, “Germany and the Origins of the First World War,” *Journal of Modern History* 55:3 (September 1983), 442-474 ([link](#)). The distinguished German historian Thomas Nipperdey was perhaps Wehler’s most prominent critic. See Thomas Nipperdey, “Wehlers ‘Kaiserreich’. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 1 (1975), 539-560.

⁵⁶ Ferguson, “Public Finance and National Security” ([link](#)), 141. See also interview with David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *German History* 22 (2004): 229-245 ([link](#)), and the editors’ introduction to Sven Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp, eds., *Imperial Germany Revisited: Continuing Debates and New Perspectives* (New York: Berghahn, 2011) ([link](#)), esp. 4-5. One of Torp’s own articles is of particular importance in this context: Cornelius Torp, “The ‘Coalition of ‘Rye and Iron’” under the Pressure of Globalization: A Reinterpretation of Germany’s Political Economy before 1914,” *Central European History* 43:3 (September 2010): 401-427 ([link](#)).

Some Key Historical Claims

The Fischer thesis also rested on a number of narrower historical claims. According to Fischer, for example, a “decision in favour of a war” with France and Russia was made at the December 1912 “War Council.” The war would begin at some point in the near future. In the meantime, he said, the German government began to prepare the country psychologically and economically for a great conflict.⁵⁷ That aggressive policy was possible, in his view, only because the Germans felt they would have no trouble winning such a war. The German army, he said, viewed its war plan—the famous Schlieffen Plan—as an “infallible recipe for victory.”⁵⁸ But it seemed that in the not-too-distant future that would no longer be the case. With the build-up of Russian and French military power, the balance (it was believed) was shifting against Germany, so war could not be put off indefinitely. The assassination of Franz Ferdinand provided the German government with the opportunity to put its general plan into effect: the Austrians would be pushed into taking action which the Germans knew Russia could not accept and the war that followed could be blamed on Russia. The German government’s goal during the July crisis was thus not to prevent war, but simply to stage-manage things so that its own people would feel they were fighting a defensive war—and maybe also to keep the British from intervening, at least right away. Because Russia made the “technical blunder” of mobilizing first (Geiss’s term), the German government was able to achieve that first goal: the war could be sold to the public as essentially defensive in nature.⁵⁹ But historians should not be taken in: in reality, Germany’s plan to use the assassinations at Sarajevo to start a continental war, Fischer said, had been “carried out successfully.”⁶⁰ And that interpretation is supported by the point that the Germans were delighted when Russia mobilized and the government was able to go to war with the whole country behind it. The fact that German leaders were so pleased seemed to suggest in itself that the Germans had wanted the war and had succeeded in forcing a full-scale military confrontation.

Each of these claims played an important role in supporting Fischer’s basic thesis that Germany was primarily responsible for the war. But a number of them are no longer widely accepted. Even those that are valid are now seen in a somewhat broader context—that is, in the light of new evidence about how other countries were dealing with these issues. That new approach has tended to deflate the significance of some of Fischer’s key points about Germany. Let me deal with them one by one.

What, first of all, are we to make of Fischer’s argument about the December 1912 “War Council”—that is, his claim that a basic decision for war had been made at that meeting, and that the policy Germany pursued over the next year and a half, culminating in the decision to provoke a war in July 1914, was to be understood

⁵⁷ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, chap. 9, and esp. 187 (for the quotation).

⁵⁸ Ibid., 389. See also Fischer, *Germany’s Aims*, 88, 92, and Fischer, “Twenty-Five Years Later: Looking Back at the ‘Fischer Controversy’ and its Consequences,” *Central European History* 21:3 (September 1988) ([link](#)), 217-218.

⁵⁹ Imanuel Geiss, “The Outbreak of the First World War and German War Aims,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 1:3 (1966) ([link](#)), 91.

⁶⁰ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 515; see also 470, 480, 494.

in that context? That argument struck most scholars from the outset as far too extreme, and, as Mark Hewitson has pointed out, it was eventually “abandoned by virtually all historians.”⁶¹ The basic problem, as most historians saw it, was that Fischer tended to portray German policy as far more systematic, more coherent, and more premeditated, than it in fact was.⁶² Even Fischer himself eventually abandoned the argument, going so far as to say in 1988 that he had never claimed that the war had been “planned for a long time ... not even by the ‘War Council’ of Wilhelm II on 8 December 1912.”⁶³ This was quite extraordinary, given that practically every scholar who has written on the subject, Fischer’s supporters as well as his opponents, thought that that was precisely what Fischer *had* been saying.⁶⁴ And the text itself shows unambiguously that he in fact did make that argument in *War of Illusions*.⁶⁵

The weakness of Fischer’s argument about the “War Council” was clear from the start, but that was not the case with the second claim I want to consider, the point that the Germans thought they would quickly win a European war. That argument, of course, was by no means new: Bernadotte Schmitt, for example, also thought that the Germans “faced the prospect of a general conflict with complacency and confidence” and

⁶¹ See, for example, Mommsen, “Domestic Factors” ([link](#)), 12-14; Mommsen, “Topos of Inevitable War,” 43-44 (notes 26 and 27); and Lothar Burchardt’s review of Fischer’s *Krieg der Illusionen* in *Francia* 3 (1975), 873-875 ([link](#)). Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 4.

⁶² This was a view many historians took of Fischer’s work in general. It seemed to Klaus Epstein, for example, “that Fischer perceives in pre-1914 Germany . . . far too much rational design where in fact there was mostly drift and muddle.” Epstein, “German War Aims in the First World War,” *World Politics* 15:1 (October 1962) ([link](#)), 179. See also Hans-Ulrich Wehler, “Historiography in Germany Today,” in Jürgen Habermas, ed., *Observations on “The Spiritual Situation of the Age”: Contemporary German Perspectives* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 233. Wehler referred here to the “misleading and indefensible character” of Fischer’s assertion “that in a methodical quest for world power, the German Reich had been preparing for war since 1912 and had merely translated the plans of the prewar period into action.” This article was originally published in German in 1979.

⁶³ Fischer, “Looking Back at the Fischer Controversy” ([link](#)), 214.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Feldman’s review of *Krieg der Illusionen* ([link](#)), 335; Konrad H. Jarausch, “World Power or Tragic Fate? The Kriegsschuldfrage as Historical Neurosis,” *Central European History* 5:1 (March 1972) ([link](#)), 79; Burchardt’s review of *Krieg der Illusionen*, 873-874 ([link](#)); Förster, “Reich des Absurden,” 239-240; Ferguson, “Germany and the Origins of the First World War” ([link](#)), 728; and Mombauer, *Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*, 149.

⁶⁵ Thus, for example, in the chapter in *War of Illusions* dealing with the “War Council,” Fischer refers in a passage dealing with the spring of 1913 to “the decision in favour of a war [that] had already been made even though the timing of its start had been postponed” (187). The title of that chapter (“Der vertagte Krieg”—literally “The Postponed War”) is also to be noted in this context. See also his later comment (389) about how “the need for a ‘preventive war’ against Russia and France had been agreed on” prior to the spring of 1913. It should also be pointed out that Imanuel Geiss, Fischer’s leading disciple, in a book published in 1976 also says that the German government in December 1912 in effect made a decision to go to war. See Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, esp. 145.

believed “they could easily defeat Russia and France”; those points supported his basic conclusion that Germany’s “primary responsibility for the fatal ending of the crisis” was “clear and overwhelming.”⁶⁶

It turns out, however, that at least some key figures in the army were far more pessimistic about how a great war would run its course than we had been led to believe. Fischer had claimed that the Germans felt strong enough in 1914 to provoke a war with France and Russia with the goal of achieving “Germany hegemony over Europe”—indeed, that they believed that the Schlieffen Plan was an “infallible recipe for victory.”⁶⁷ But as Stig Förster has pointed out (building on earlier work by Lothar Burchardt) Moltke himself took a very different view. Even in 1905, Germany’s top military officer had predicted that a war with France alone would be a “long and tedious struggle.” France, he thought, would not give up “before the strength of its entire people has been broken,” and “our own people too will be utterly exhausted, even if we should be victorious.”⁶⁸ In 1914 Moltke took the line (with a talk with Jagow) that Germany was barely able to face the prospect of war with confidence and that in the future things would be bleaker still.⁶⁹ And Moltke was by no means an isolated figure. Some important analyses produced within the General Staff in the years before the war had also reached the conclusion, as Förster put it, that the basic goal of surrounding and annihilating the French army, as called for in the Schlieffen Plan, was “absolutely unachievable.”⁷⁰ It seems quite clear, in fact, that the military leadership was by no means certain that a quick victory was within reach: the war, Moltke and at least some of his colleagues believed, might well turn into a long and grueling struggle.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Bernadotte Schmitt, “July 1914: Thirty Years After,” *Journal of Modern History* 16:3 (September 1944) ([link](#)), 203-204.

⁶⁷ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 389, 470.

⁶⁸ Förster, “Reich des Absurden,” 249; Stig Förster, “Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 54:1 (1995), 84; Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares,” 363-364 (for the quotations); and Lothar Burchardt, *Friedenswirtschaft und Kriegsvorsorge: Deutschlands wirtschaftliche Rüstungsbestrebungen vor 1914* (Boppard: Boldt, 1968), 24-26. Note also Moltke’s response to the Austrian General Conrad’s question in May 1914 about what the Germans would do “if you have no luck in the west and the Russians attack you in the east.” Moltke “shrugged his shoulders” and said, “I shall do what I can. We do not have superiority over the French.” Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, *Aus meiner Dienstzeit 1906-1918*, 5 vols. (Vienna: Rikola, 1921-25), 3: 669. Quoted in Holger Herwig, “Asymmetrical Alliance: Austria-Hungary and Germany 1898-1918,” in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, eds., *Entangling Alliances: Coalition Warfare in the Twentieth Century* (Canberra: Australian Military History Publications, 2005), 59, and in Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970), 246.

⁶⁹ “Now we are still more or less a match for them,” Moltke said, but in two or three years “our enemies’ military power will be so great that he did not know how he could deal with it.” This was not a tone of supreme confidence. Quoted in Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 402.

⁷⁰ Förster, “Reich des Absurden,” 249; and Förster, “Der deutsche Generalstab,” 85-86.

⁷¹ This is the basic picture that emerges from the three Förster articles cited in n. 68. See also Burchardt, *Friedenswirtschaft*, 14-29. According to Förster, Burchardt in that section “put much effort into demonstrating convincingly that, apart from Schlieffen and his followers, few German generals held a short-war illusion.” Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares,” 364 n. 81 (see also 345); and Förster, “Deutsche Generalstab,” 85 n. 85. But Burchardt did not actually go that far; his basic point was that some important military figures, and especially Moltke, were thinking in

Fischer also claimed that Germany, in late 1912, began to prepare seriously for a major European war. But as Förster has pointed out, the measures taken were fairly modest. “Even in the field of armament policy,” Förster wrote, “Imperial Germany was unable to prepare for total war.”⁷² Thanks to “Lothar Burchardt’s excellent investigation,” he noted, “the lack of economic preparations in Imperial Germany is now a well-established fact.”⁷³ For Förster, the element of irrationality was quite striking. If the Germans had been rational, there were in theory two possible courses of action open to them. They could have energetically prepared for a long war well before 1914, mobilizing all their resources to get whatever advantage they could, or they could have aimed at avoiding war altogether. But neither of those alternative policies was seriously pursued.⁷⁴ Instead the Germans accepted war—and indeed people like Moltke were quite bellicose—even though they understood what a war would be like and even though they had not systematically prepared for it. For Förster this situation is very hard to understand, but the least one can say is that the war was not the result of a “goal-oriented decision-making process.”⁷⁵

Niall Ferguson took the argument a step further. Ferguson’s point was that the German Reich was structurally incapable (in peacetime) of making the necessary effort and that the Germans’ inability to prepare seriously for war helps explain why they actually went to war in 1914.⁷⁶ For Ferguson, as for many other scholars, the deterioration of Germany’s relative military position was of fundamental importance. The “decisive factor in 1914 which pushed the Germans over the brink into war,” he wrote, “was the conviction of both military and civilian leaders that Germany could not win the arms race against its continental neighbours.” And the reason the Germans were losing—the reason why the balance was turning against Germany—was *not* that the Germans were economically incapable of keeping up. Germany, Ferguson suggested, “could and should have

terms of a relatively long (perhaps two-year) war. See also Lothar Burchardt, “Operatives Denken und Plänen von Schlieffen bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges,” *Vorträge zur Militärgeschichte* 9 (1988), 45-72, esp. 60-61, 67. For a summary of the most important evidence on this issue, see Holger Herwig, “Germany and the ‘Short-War’ Illusion: Towards a New Interpretation?” *Journal of Military History* 66:3 (July 2002): 681-693 ([link](#)).

⁷² Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares,” 369.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 370. Other indicators point in the same general direction. The lack of military coordination with Austria, for example, is astounding. Although some loose agreements covering this matter had been reached in 1909, more precise arrangements were not worked out during the crisis, and it was only at the last minute that Moltke asked Austria “to employ her main strength against Russia and not disperse it by a simultaneous offensive against Serbia.” But this the Austrians refused to do. Albertini, *Origins*, 3:45-46; Norman Stone, “Moltke and Conrad: Relations between the Austro-Hungarian and German General Staffs, 1909-1914,” in Paul Kennedy, ed., *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880-1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979) and Herwig, “Asymmetrical Alliance.” This hardly fits in with the picture of a German government carefully and systematically plotting a war of aggression.

⁷⁴ Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares,” 368-373, and Förster, “Reich des Absurden,” 250.

⁷⁵ Förster, “Im Reich des Absurden,” 213.

⁷⁶ Ferguson, “Germany and the Origins of the First World War” ([link](#)), 742-752, and Ferguson, “Public Finance and National Security” ([link](#)).

spent more on defense before 1914.”⁷⁷ Even on the eve of the war, “at a time of great international tension and domestic-political bellicosity,” Germany was spending a mere 3.5% of her national income for military purposes.⁷⁸ And if Germany was incapable of making the necessary effort—even the kind of effort her continental rivals were making at the time—this was for domestic political and institutional reasons.⁷⁹ But whatever the cause, the Germans knew in 1914 that the military balance was turning against them; the situation had already deteriorated to point where even now war was a “considerable gamble”; but things would be even worse two or three years down the road, and they took the plunge thinking that at least now they still had a certain chance of winning.⁸⁰

It is very clear, in fact, that this preventive war logic played an important role in shaping German policy in the July crisis. As Bethmann himself later admitted, “in a certain sense it was a preventive war.” German policy, he said, had been strongly influenced by the military’s claim that “today war is still possible without defeat, but not in two years.”⁸¹ But that point would not support the general claim that Germany was *primarily* responsible for the war if it could be shown that Germany’s rivals were also thinking in preventive war terms.

And it turns out, as Stefan Schmidt shows in his important 2009 book on French policy in the July Crisis, that one can also find the same kind of thinking in France. In early 1913, for example, according to a top British general, the French soldiers were “of the opinion that it would be far better for France if a conflict were not too long postponed.”⁸² General Edouard de Castelnau, the second highest-ranking French officer in the French army, was “in favour of a war now as being a good opportunity, France [and] Russia being ready, [and] Austria in a state of confusion.” And Castelnau was by no means an isolated figure. According to the

⁷⁷ Ferguson, “Public Finance and National Security” ([link](#)), 143

⁷⁸ Ferguson, “Germany and the Origins of the First World War” ([link](#)), 734, 743 (for the quotation), 751.

⁷⁹ Ferguson, “Public Finance and National Security” ([link](#)), 143.

⁸⁰ Ferguson, “Germany and the Origins of the First World War” ([link](#)), 733-734, 751.

⁸¹ Note by Conrad Haussmann of a meeting with Bethmann, 24 February 1918, quoted in Jarausch, “Illusion of Limited War” ([link](#)), 48. In 1919 Bethmann admitted to the historian Friedrich Thimme that in 1914 the military was convinced Germany could still win in a war, but that this would no longer be possible in a few years; “this, of course,” he said, affected “the way the Serbian question was dealt with.” Quoted in Mommsen, “Topos of Inevitable War,” 45 (n. 43). The point that German policy in 1914 was deeply colored by preventive-war thinking seems irrefutable, but some serious scholars still deny that this was the case. According to Hew Strachan, for example, Bethmann was not thinking in preventive war terms, and Moltke’s “own thinking on preventive war . . . played no role in July 1914.” Strachan, “Preemption and Prevention in Historical Perspective,” in Henry Shue and David Rodin, eds., *Preemption: Military Action and Moral Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) ([link](#)). And according to Thomas Otte “Bethmann had given no thought to a preventive war but had sought to localize the Austro-Serb conflict.” Thomas Otte, *July 1914: The World’s Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 517; see also 97.

⁸² Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Ausbruchs des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009) ([link](#)), 210. The point was by no means ignored in the older literature. See especially John Cairns, “International Politics and the Military Mind: The Case of the French Republic, 1911-1914,” *Journal of Modern History* 25:3 (September 1953) ([link](#)), 274, 276, 285.

British Ambassador in Paris, many Frenchmen at that time believed that “war is inevitable within the next two years and that it might be better for France to have it soon.”⁸³

During the July crisis, many French officers were pleased that war was about to break out under such favorable circumstances. “I have made it clear to the highest authorities,” Castelnau wrote on 30 July, at the peak of the crisis, “that from a strategic point of view we would never find a better occasion.”⁸⁴ The French military attaché in Berlin also thought that more favorable conditions would never be found—a view shared by French diplomats in St. Petersburg. And the Russian military attaché in Paris was struck, on 30 July, at the “unconcealed joy” he saw in the French general staff at the prospect of being able to take advantage of what to the French were such “favorable strategic circumstances.”⁸⁵ French military leaders, in fact, seemed sure that the Entente had the upper hand in military terms. They thought a war would be short and were confident their side would emerge victorious.⁸⁶ The French general staff, for example, had concluded in September 1912 that a war that broke out over the Serbian question would put the Germanic powers “at the mercy of the Entente.”⁸⁷ And General Castelnau told the Russian military attaché on two occasions in late 1912 “that he personally is ready for war and even that he would like a war.”⁸⁸

The political leadership was more prudent, but French leaders certainly felt they could take a tough line because the military situation was so favorable.⁸⁹ In May 1914, the Belgian Minister in Paris was struck by how chauvinistic and self-confident the French had become. The same men who two years earlier “showed lively fear at the very mention of a Franco-German conflict,” he wrote, had “changed their language. They

⁸³ Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik* ([link](#)), 210-211.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 209. Castelnau, however, was not being totally straight with the government. He told the political leadership that in strategic terms things would never be better, but he actually felt that in technical military terms things would be better if the war could be put off for a year. See the full extract from the Castelnau’s letter to his son of 28 July 1914 (which Schmidt quoted from in part) in General Yves Gras, *Castelnau ou l’art de commander, 1851-1944* (Paris: Denoël, 1990), 144.

⁸⁵ Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik* ([link](#)), 209-210; Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 482, 552. About a day later, the Russian attaché reported that the French War Minister, Messimy, “m’a déclaré sur un ton de sincérité enthousiaste la ferme décision du Gouvernement à la guerre.” See Jules Isaac, *Un Débat historique: Le Problème des origines de la guerre* (Paris: Rieder, 1933), 222.

⁸⁶ Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik* ([link](#)), 168-171, 207-209. See also Jan Karl Tanenbaum, “French Estimates of Germany’s Operational War Plans,” in Ernest May, *Knowing One’s Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 169.

⁸⁷ Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik*, 208 n. 419. See also Christopher Andrew, “France and the German Menace,” in May, *Knowing One’s Enemies*, 146.

⁸⁸ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 302. On these matters, see also Dominic Lieven, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), 238-240.

⁸⁹ Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik* ([link](#)), 209.

declare themselves sure to win.”⁹⁰ There was, moreover, a major political factor that affected the way the French approached the Austro-Serbian question. In a war that broke out over this issue, they could be sure to have Russia on their side; if war broke out over some other Franco-German dispute, they might not be able to count on Russian support. That calculation had a good deal to do with the fact that in the two years that preceded the outbreak of war the French took a very firm line on the Balkan question. In October 1912, French President Raymond Poincaré—the key French policymaker during this period—told the Russian Ambassador in Paris that he was “‘not afraid’ of the idea that it might prove necessary to ‘initiate a war under certain circumstances’ and that he was certain the states of the Triple Entente would prevail.”⁹¹ At times French leaders took an even harder line than their Russian ally. In late 1912, for example, Alexandre Millerand, the French War Minister, was annoyed that Russia was not tough enough on the Serbian question; France itself was willing to support Russia even if it meant war.⁹² This was not the only time French leaders reacted that way. As Albertini notes, on several occasions during the 1912-1914 period “the Russian attitude had been thought too submissive by France.”⁹³ During the July Crisis, Poincaré was upset when he heard that Russia had decided to advise the Serbs not to resist an Austrian invasion, but to trust their fate to the great powers. He considered this an “abdication,” a “black day” for the Franco-Russian alliance. He was also irritated by all the emphasis the Russians were placing on the importance of making sure that Britain was on their side. He wondered whether this was a “dérobade”: the Russians, it seemed to him, might well be trying to evade their responsibilities.⁹⁴

For me, perhaps the most revealing piece of evidence relating to this issue was buried in one of Schmidt’s footnotes. On 6 August, right after the war broke out, Poincaré was so confident of success, and so determined on war, that he thought that “the worst thing that could happen to us” would be for Germany to accept an American offer of mediation. A full-scale war, he felt, would in that case not take place, but “as we would not be the victors, the peace would not be favorable for us, Germany would remain as powerful as ever, and we would be exposed, before long, to new threats.”⁹⁵ The idea was that war was better than a status quo peace—that it was better to have a war now than risk being exposed to German threats in the future (when France, presumably because Russian interests might not be as firmly engaged, would be less able to deal with

⁹⁰ Quoted in Eugen Weber, *The Nationalist Revival in France, 1905-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 159.

⁹¹ Quoted in Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 297. Clark’s source is a book by the Russian historian V.I. Bovykin published in the USSR in 1961, but the document itself—a letter from Izvolski to Sazonov of 14 October 1912—is available in German translation in *Die Internationalen Beziehungen im Zeitalter des Imperialismus*, series 3, vol. 4, part 1, no. 46 (the quotation is on 49).

⁹² Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 301-302.

⁹³ Albertini, *Origins of the War of 1914*, 2:188. See also Jules Isaac, “La Crise européenne et la grande guerre: à l’occasion d’un livre récent,” *Revue Historique* 176:3 (1935) ([link](#)), 429-430.

⁹⁴ Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik* ([link](#)), 80-81, 92.

⁹⁵ Poincaré diary notes, quoted in Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik* ([link](#)), 210 n. 428.

them). Didn't this reveal that Poincaré, like Bethmann, was thinking at least to a certain degree in preventive war terms?⁹⁶

The Russians, for their part, were by no means making every effort to avoid an armed conflict in the period before the war. Earlier, when Piotr Stolypin was the leading figure in the government, the assumption had been that war absolutely had to be avoided—that Russia was in no position, as Stolypin himself put it, to pursue “an aggressive foreign policy.”⁹⁷ After his assassination in 1911, he was succeeded as Prime Minister by Count Vladimir Kokovstov, who saw things much the same way. But Kokovstov did not have the same degree of authority that Stolypin had had, and there were strong forces in the government favoring a much tougher policy. War Minister Sukhomlinov had pressed in November 1912 for military measures which, in Kokovstov's view, might well have led to war; when Kokovstov objected, Sukhomlinov replied (according to Kokovstov's later account, published in 1935) that war was unavoidable anyway, that “it would be profitable for us to begin it as soon as possible,” and that he and the Tsar “believe in our army and know that a war would bring us nothing but good.” Kokovstov took the view in a meeting of the Council of Ministers held the next day that since Russia was “unprepared for war,” the government had to pursue a less confrontational policy; Sukhomlinov, on the other hand, “affirmed the splendid condition of our army and the remendous progress made in the matter of its equipment.” And most of the Ministers seemed to side with Sukhomlinov. The hard-liners were clearly in the ascendant. In early 1914 Kokovstov was dismissed as Prime Minister; by July 1914 it was clear that the avoidance of war was no longer the main priority.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ In his book (369-370) Schmidt denied that the French were thinking along those lines. But according to Jonathan Steinberg's report of a conference held in London in 2011, “Stefan Schmidt spoke on how the French fought a ‘preventive war’—a point on which, in discussion, Gerd Krumeich [another specialist in this area] agreed with him.” Steinberg, “Old Knowledge and New Research” ([link](#)), 247. And Albertini writes that Poincaré's share of the responsibility for the war “was in availing himself of the mistakes committed by Austria and Germany to carry through the revanche and restore to France Alsace and above all his own Lorraine.” Albertini, *Origins*, 2: 197. He does not, however, provide much evidence to support this claim, but given Albertini's deep familiarity with this whole subject his views have to be taken seriously. Jacques Droz, one should note, thought in 1973 that Poincaré's policy was deeply influenced by this sort of thinking: “Poincaré et ses collaborateurs estimaient, puisque l'entraînement à la guerre était ‘fatal,’ qu'il fallait engager celle-ci dans les conditions les plus favorables.” Droz, *Causes de la Première Guerre mondiale*, 176.

⁹⁷ See David McDonald, “A Lever Without a Fulcrum: Domestic Factors and Russian Foreign Policy, 1904-1914,” in Hugh Ragsdale, ed., *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 284, 296 ([link](#)).

⁹⁸ H.H. Fischer, ed., *Out of My Past: The Memoirs of Count Kokovstov* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1935), 348-349; and McDonald, “Lever Without a Fulcrum,” 302 ([link](#)). Those two sources are the basis for Clark's account in *Sleepwalkers*, 220. For a discussion of this passage from Kokovstov's memoirs, see Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 266-268. Although Lieven does not think Kokovstov's account should be accepted uncritically, he does not say that he misrepresented Sukhomlinov's position or the views of other members of the government. On the shifts within the Russian leadership during this period, see also *ibid.*, 291-296. For the basic thrust of Russian policy in July 1914 (very different from the old Stolypin-Kokovstov line), see *ibid.*, 320-323. On the hardening of Russian policy in this period, see also Ronald Bobroff, “War Accepted but Unsought: Russia's Growing Militancy and the July Crisis, 1914,” in Levy and Vasquez, *Outbreak of the First World War*, esp. 233-237.

This does not quite show, however, that even people like Sukhomlinov really hoped that a war would break out “as soon as possible,” or even that they actually believed that Russia was strong enough to risk an armed conflict. Sukhomlinov’s real views were very different. During the July crisis, for example, he took a hard line in official meetings with other government leaders; but at the same time he tried to make sure through more informal channels that the Foreign Minister, Sazonov, knew how weak Russia in fact was.⁹⁹ It was thus probably a mistake for Clark to suggest that Sukhomlinov’s November 1912 remarks should be taken at face value.¹⁰⁰ But the mere fact that Sukhomlinov felt he had to take a hard line, not just at key ministerial meetings but also by sponsoring bellicose articles in the press, is quite revealing.¹⁰¹ They tell us something about the world in which Russia’s leaders found themselves—about the mood in Russian political circles during this period.

As Dominic Lieven points out in his new book on Russian policy during this period, Slavophile sentiment was strong within the “social and economic elite” at the time—that is, in the segment of society “on which the regime depended.”¹⁰² The press especially “put the government under great pressure to adopt dangerous policies.”¹⁰³ Russia’s leaders “could not and did not ignore public opinion.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the “*raison d’être* of the new constitutional order [established in 1905] was to rebuild bridges between the regime, the propertied elites, and Russian educated society.”¹⁰⁵ People like Sazonov thus believed in principle “in the need for a foreign policy reflecting national sentiment.”¹⁰⁶ That meant that they were under pressure to pursue a Slavophile policy—a policy which, to one extent or another, they personally felt was the right policy to pursue.¹⁰⁷ And indeed, for Lieven, “aspects of Slavophilism” were “of vital importance to Russian policy

⁹⁹ Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 323, citing a volume of memoirs published in 1973. See also William Fuller, “The Russian Empire,” in May, *Knowing One’s Enemies*, 111, and William Fuller, *Civil-Military Conflict in Imperial Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 241.

¹⁰⁰ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 220.

¹⁰¹ Two Sukhomlinov-inspired articles in the *Birsbevaia Viedemosti*—the one published on 13 June 1914, was called “Russia is Ready, France Must Be Also”—are of particular interest in this context. Both created quite a stir, especially in Germany. See David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 351, 359, 364.

¹⁰² Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 263.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁰⁷ For Lieven, it was not a question of the government giving way to “public opinion.” Instead, he sees “a consensus developing on the fundamentals of foreign policy between the dominant element in the Foreign Ministry and mainstream public opinion.” *Ibid.*, 180. See also *ibid.*, 127.

before 1914”; Russia in 1912, in his view, was pursuing a “Slavophile foreign policy.”¹⁰⁸ Sazonov, in particular, was not just “committed to sustaining Russia’s traditional role in the Balkans,” but he brought “to this commitment an instinctive Slavophilism rooted in his conception of what it meant to be a Russian.”¹⁰⁹

By July 1914, most Russian leaders were thinking in those terms. The old imperative to avoid war was not nearly as important as it had been in period through 1911. The sense now was that Russia could not give way on the Serbian question; if this meant that there would be a showdown with the Germanic Powers over this issue, then that was something the Russian leadership was prepared to accept.¹¹⁰ And that view was not limited to the government. Sazonov himself later recalled the atmosphere in St. Petersburg after the Balkan Wars: in society circles “in close touch with certain Court and military centres, there was a rooted conviction that a favourable moment was approaching” for settling accounts with Austria-Hungary.¹¹¹ In some Russian circles, the prospect of war was even welcomed. Lieven quotes a comment Mikhail Rodzianko, the Duma’s president, made in the spring of 1913 in a meeting with the Tsar: “We must take advantage of the general enthusiasm. The Straits must belong to us. War will be accepted with joy and will serve only to increase the prestige of the imperial power.”¹¹² And Clark quotes a January 1914 editorial “from the military journal *Razvechik*, widely viewed as an organ of the imperial General Staff”: “Not just the troops, but the entire Russian people must get used to the fact that we are arming ourselves for a war of extermination against the Germans and that the German empires [*sic*] must be destroyed, even if it costs us hundreds of thousands of lives.”¹¹³ But few leaders actually hoped for a war; most, however, were willing to accept a confrontation over Serbia, almost without regard to what the military realities were. The Russians, like the Germans, were now prepared to risk war over that issue.

Why are parallels of this sort worth noting? Fischer’s thesis that Germany was primarily responsible for the First World War was supported by a number of key claims: that German policy in July 1914 was rooted in a sense that the sooner war broke out, the better; that the Germans felt in July 1914 that “the occasion was propitious” for a great war, which they were confident they would win; that their main goal in the July Crisis was thus not to avoid war but to stage-manage things so Germany could appear to her own people as forced into the conflict; and that German leaders were delighted when war broke out—suggesting that the Germans had wanted the war, and perhaps had even planned it. But none of this could support the claim that Germany

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 8, 270.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 233-234. Lieven also refers in this passage to “Sazonov’s strong Orthodox and Slavophile sympathies.” See also *ibid.*, 127.

¹¹⁰ *Memoirs of Count Kokovstov*, 349; Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 322-324.

¹¹¹ Serge Sazonov, *Fateful Years* (New York: Stokes, 1928) ([link](#)), 78, quoted in Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) ([link](#)), 22.

¹¹² Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 263.

¹¹³ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 420.

was *primarily* responsible for the war—that the “overwhelming share” of responsibility for the war rested on Germany’s shoulders—if one saw the same sort of thing on the Entente side.¹¹⁴

And the parallels are quite striking: “beaming faces everywhere, handshaking in the corridors” at the War Ministry in Berlin on 31 July; “unconcealed joy” at French general staff headquarters in Paris on 30 July. Moltke and his colleagues think in 1914 that in strategic terms things would never be better for Germany; but their counterparts in France especially think “that from a strategic point of view we will never find a better occasion.” German strategy places a great premium on rapid, offensive, action. But French strategy was also very offense-oriented from 1912 on; indeed, the French were more tempted to attack Germany by way of Belgium than we had been led to believe.¹¹⁵ The Germans give Austria a “blank check,” but France gives Russia a “blank check” of her own.¹¹⁶ The Germans sabotage efforts at mediation, but the French (and even the British) make little effort to hold Russia back, and Poincaré rules out American mediation on August 6—not because he believes it would not work, but rather because he is afraid it would succeed and head off the conflict, which he is sure his side would win. The German government, moreover, might have taken certain steps to prepare the country psychologically for war.¹¹⁷ But the Russian and French governments were at the same time conducting a campaign (in which bribery played a key role) to get the French press to take a more pro-Russian line and to accustom French opinion “to the idea of a (European) war arising out of the Balkan conflict.”¹¹⁸

And while the German leaders certainly wanted to stage-manage things so that their own people would view the war as defensive, one finds the same sort of calculation on the Entente side. The thought that “the opponent must be allowed to appear the aggressor,” as Clark notes, crops up “in all the key decision-centres

¹¹⁴ Geiss, *July 1914*, 367; see also 364.

¹¹⁵ Georges-Henri Soutou, *La Grande illusion: Quand la France perdait la paix, 1914-1920* (Paris: Tallandier, 2015), 32-35.

¹¹⁶ Isaac, *Un Débat historique*, 43-44. Soutou also uses this term. See Soutou, *Grande illusion*, 53.

¹¹⁷ See John C.G. Röhl, “An der Schwelle zum Weltkrieg: Eine Dokumentation über den ‘Kriegsrat’ vom 8. Dezember 1912,” *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* 21 (1977), esp. 89-90.

¹¹⁸ Isaac, “Crise européenne” ([link](#)), 425. In the early 1920s, the Soviet government had allowed Boris Souvarine, then a prominent member of the French Communist Party, to gather evidence in the Tsarist archives relating to this issue. The key documents were published in the newspaper *L’Humanité* in 1923-1924, and in 1931 a full collection appeared: Arthur Raffalovitch, *“L’Abominable vénalité de la presse,” d’après les documents des archives russes (1897-1914)* (Paris: Librairie du Travail, 1931) ([link](#)). The documents in that collection are generally viewed as authentic; decades later, René Girault found the originals in the Russian archives. See Patrick Eveno, *L’Argent de la presse française des années 1820 à nos jours* (Paris: CTHS, 2003), 70. One of the most striking revelations was the involvement of the French government, and indeed of Poincaré personally, in this effort to influence the press. It is also important to note that the goal here was not just to assuage the concerns of the bondholders so as to keep the money flowing; more fundamental foreign policy concerns on the part of both governments also came into play. See especially Kokovtsov to Poincaré, 30 October 1912, 332-333; Isvolsky to Sazonov, 23 October 1912, and 14 February 1913, 325-329, 362-366; Raffalovitch to Davidov, 11 December 1912, 345-347; and Sazonov to Kokovtsov, 15 February 1913, 368-372. See also René Girault, *Emprunts russes et investissements français en Russie, 1887-1914* (Paris: Colin, 1973), 543 n.10, and Girault, “Les Balkans dans les relations franco-russes en 1912” ([link](#)), 173-174.

on both sides during the last days of the crisis.”¹¹⁹ Thus the French government was very much concerned with making it seem, again both with an eye to Britain and for domestic political reasons, that their country would be fighting a purely defensive war.¹²⁰ People like Poincaré were under no illusion that the French people would happily go to war for the sake of Serbia; the fact that the war began with a German attack on France and that Germany declared war on their country before they had to declare war on Germany, was exactly what they wanted. Poincaré noted the reaction in the French cabinet when on 3 August news of the German declaration of war was received: “never has a declaration of war been greeted with such satisfaction.”¹²¹ The strategy was quite clear. Robert Doughty quotes some notes of the 30 July cabinet meeting—“for the sake of public opinion, let the Germans put themselves in the wrong”—and then goes on to point out how successful that strategy was.¹²² As John Keiger notes, Poincaré’s strategy in the crisis “did not waver from ensuring that France should appear the injured party to unite the country in a defensive war and to ensure that she obtained the necessary diplomatic and military support from countries such as Britain and Italy.”¹²³ But all this is quite normal. Tactical considerations of this sort are bound to loom large on the eve of a war, no matter what the basic policy was, and it is only to be expected that governments in such circumstances would take such political considerations into account. The U.S. government, for example, immediately before Pearl Harbor, was also thinking in those terms.¹²⁴

The Russian Mobilization

¹¹⁹ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 484.

¹²⁰ Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik* ([link](#)), 289, 305-307, 314, 323, 354, 358.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 354.

¹²² Robert Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 51-54. See also the extract from Poincaré’s diary quoted in Gerd Krumeich, *Armaments and Politics in France on the Eve of the First World War: The Introduction of Three-Year Conscription 1913-1914* (Leamington Spa: Berg Publishers, 1984), 229.

¹²³ John Keiger, *Raymond Poincaré* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179; see also 182. See also Albertini, *Origins*, 3: 85 and Isaac, *Un Débat historique*, 152.

¹²⁴ Thus Secretary of War Henry Stimson, in a widely quoted October 16 diary entry, referred to a meeting Roosevelt had called at the White House that day to consider the Japan problem: “and so we face the delicate question of the diplomatic fencing to be done so as to be sure that Japan was put into the wrong and made the first bad move—overt move.” Henry Lewis Stimson Diaries [microfilm edition] (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1973), entry for 16 October 1941. In another frequently cited diary entry, Stimson quoted Roosevelt as saying on November 25 that “the question was how we should maneuver them [the Japanese] into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves.” *Ibid.*, entry for 25 November 1941.

One of Fischer's most important claims had to do with Russia's decision to order general mobilization. The Russians, he argued, could not be blamed for ordering general mobilization on 30 July and thus triggering the catastrophe. Russia's "responsibility" lay only in the fact that she was not prepared to "stand by while Serbia was destroyed" and she herself was "completely pushed out of the Balkans." Given that the Central Powers were preparing to crush Serbia, he implied, it was natural that the Russians would prepare for war. In any event, Russia's decision to order general mobilization was not of fundamental importance, for if Russia had not made that move, Germany, in his view, would have gone to war anyway.¹²⁵

Indeed, according to Fischer, the Germans were actually pleased that Russia had made that decision because it gave them a suitable pretext for starting the war. Germany's overriding goal during the climactic phase of the July Crisis was to make sure that Russia could be blamed for the conflict, and to that end her political leaders preferred to wait until Russia ordered general mobilization before taking that measure themselves. Germany's military leaders were chafing at the bit to start the war, but Bethmann and the Foreign Office, although not opposed to that idea in principle, felt that for political reasons it would be much better if Russia mobilized first. They wanted to be able to blame the war on Russia and claim that German policy was essentially defensive in nature. In that way they could get the whole nation to support the war and would increase the odds that the British would stay out of the conflict. And they were willing to pay a certain price in military terms to achieve those goals.¹²⁶ The Germans, the argument runs, were at no point really interested in avoiding war; they just wanted to make sure that Russia "played the role of the aggressor."¹²⁷

The main problem with that argument is that Fischer essentially ignores the role that Russian military measures short of general mobilization played in driving the crisis. The reader thus does not come away with the sense that the German generals, in pressing for military action, were reacting to what the Russians were doing; it seems instead to be a case of aggression pure and simple. Fischer certainly portrays Germany's military leaders as set on war, determined not to waste valuable time with political maneuvering.¹²⁸ Clark, on the other hand—and he was by no means the first scholar to do so—emphasizes the importance of the far-reaching pre-mobilization measures the Russian government decided upon at two key meetings held on 24 and 25 July. These measures, he writes, "were highly likely (if not certain) to further escalate the crisis"; they were "fraught with risk"; and in taking these steps the Russian leaders "greatly increased the likelihood of a general European war."¹²⁹

The Russians certainly knew that those measures, which would allow Russia to mobilize more quickly when the time came, could provoke Germany into taking counter-measures. The mere fact that they hoped to keep

¹²⁵ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 491-492, 498.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 492-494.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 496.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 492-93.

¹²⁹ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 473-476, 478, 480. This is important because Albertini underestimated the importance of German concerns about these Russian pre-mobilization measures and thus tended to portray Germany as less reactive and more aggressive than she in fact was. Note, for example, the discussion of Bethmann's important warnings to Russia on 26 and 29 July in Albertini, *Origins*, 2:428, 553-554.

them secret shows that they knew they were risky: if they were risk-free, they could have taken these steps openly. And the Russians, like everyone else, understood that if Germany did respond, matters could escalate very quickly. After all, the whole point of the Schlieffen Plan was to capitalize on the fact that Germany could mobilize more quickly than Russia: the Germans could therefore leave their eastern border relatively undefended at the beginning of the war, concentrate the bulk of their army in the west, and have some hope of knocking France out of the war before having to face a fully mobilized Russian army. They could therefore not just sit on their hands as Russia prepared for war; they would in that case have to divide their army between east and west, and decisive military action in the west would be impossible. They were thus under pressure to move before the Russian mobilization process went too far.¹³⁰

Indeed, for the Russians the whole point of proceeding as far as they could with their pre-mobilization measures before provoking a German response—by moving ahead as secretly as possible, and, as one widely-quoted Russian document from November 1912 put it, by engaging in “clever diplomatic negotiations” designed to “lull to sleep as much as possible the enemy’s fears”¹³¹—was to prevent Germany from being able to implement the Schlieffen Plan successfully. The French for their part, at the peak of the crisis on 30 July, urged the Russians to claim that in the interest of peace they were slowing down their military preparations, but at the same time to continue to move ahead in this area.¹³² It is obvious the Germans had no monopoly on duplicity. But the risks such tactics entailed were obvious—there is always a risk that the enemy would see through those maneuvers—and this was scarcely a course of action the Russians would have followed if their primary goal was to keep matters from escalating. General Dobrorolsky, head of the Russian army’s mobilization section in 1914, later wrote (in a widely quoted passage) that after the key decisions the government had made on 24 July, “the war was already a decided thing, and all the flood of telegrams between the governments of Russia and Germany were nothing but the staging for an historical drama.”¹³³ That view is perhaps too extreme, but the pre-mobilization decisions made on 24-25 July were, as Clark says, of enormous historical importance.¹³⁴ If, to use Thomas Schelling’s phrase, the crisis can be understood as a

¹³⁰ On these matters, see Trachtenberg, “Coming of the First World War” ([link](#)), 76-80. For some new evidence showing that at least some French officials were aware of the problem, see Soutou, *Grande illusion*, 57.

¹³¹ Quoted in Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 484, and in many other accounts. See especially Sidney Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1928), 308 ([link](#)). As Fay notes (2:292n), this and other interesting documents relating to the Russian mobilization, captured by the Germans during the war, were analyzed in two German works published in the immediate post-war period: Robert Hoeniger, *Russlands Vorbereitung zum Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Mittler, 1919) ([link](#)) ([pdf](#)), 34-35, and Gunther Frantz, *Russlands Eintritt in den Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1924), 236. One should also note in this context that on 29 July Sazonov “solemnly assured” the German ambassador that “no steps” were being taken against Germany, which was certainly untrue. See Albertini, *Origins*, 2:550.

¹³² Izvolski to Sazonov, 30 July 1914, quoted in Isaac, *Un Débat historique*, 202.

¹³³ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 486, quoting Serge Dobrorolsky, “La Mobilisation de l’Armée russe en 1914,” *Revue d’histoire de la guerre mondiale* 1:1 (1923), 68 ([link](#)).

¹³⁴ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 475.

poker-like “competition in risk taking,” the Russians, in making those decisions, had upped the ante in a very dramatic way.

And as it turned out the Germans did get wind of what the Russians were doing. This point was often noted in the older literature on the war origins question, and in 1976 Ulrich Trumpener provided important new information on the subject.¹³⁵ Fischer had interpreted the pressure the German military authorities were putting on the government at the peak of the crisis to move ahead with a mobilization of their own simply in terms of their desire to waste no more time and get the war started; they were thinking “exclusively in terms of keeping strictly to the strategic time-table.”¹³⁶ But the impression you get, especially from the Trumpener article, is that the generals were pressing for action mainly because of what they were learning about what the Russians were doing—and how that was undermining Germany’s own strategic position. As Moltke wrote in his famous 28 July memorandum: “The military situation is thus becoming from day to day more unfavorable for us and may, if our prospective opponents go on preparing themselves at their leisure, lead to disastrous consequences for us.”¹³⁷ The implication was that the pressure the generals were exerting was more understandable than Fischer had led his readers to think.¹³⁸ But strictly speaking there was not much that was new here: many historians in the pre-Fischer period (and not just in Germany) had made precisely that point.¹³⁹

The issue is important because it bears on one major question often discussed in the older literature on the origins of the war. It was sometimes claimed that the political process—which normally should have led to an agreement—was overwhelmed by forces suddenly and unexpectedly welling up from within the military sphere. “Appalled upon the brink,” Barbara Tuchman, for example, wrote, “the chiefs of state who would be ultimately responsible for their country’s fate attempted to back away but the pull of military schedules dragged them forward.”¹⁴⁰ Such claims always had a certain appeal because they tended to let the political leadership, in every country, off the hook. But does the story of the climactic phase of the July Crisis support that line of argument?

¹³⁵ See L.C.F. Turner, “The Russian Mobilization in 1914,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 3:1 (January 1968) ([link](#)), 79-80; Trumpener, “War Premeditated?” ([link](#)).

¹³⁶ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 492-493.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Trumpener, “War Premeditated?” ([link](#)), 74. See also Geiss, *July 1914*, 284.

¹³⁸ Trumpener ends his article with the following comment: “Altogether it may be concluded that the army authorities in Berlin had considerably more, and better, information on the scope and tempo of Russia’s ‘premobilization’ measures than is reflected in the various collections of diplomatic documents and other civilian government records from that period which were published after the war. At least in terms of their own view of the responsibility they carried, both Falkenhayn’s and Moltke’s ‘clamor’ for German (and Austrian) ‘countermeasures’ in the last days of July thus becomes perhaps a bit more understandable,” 85.

¹³⁹ Jules Isaac’s analysis of this issue in 1933 is particularly worth noting: Isaac, *Un Débat historique*, 214-223, esp. 220.

¹⁴⁰ Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 72.

This issue is more complex than one might think. On the one hand, Russian policy *seemed* to be changing dramatically. At the key meetings held on 24 and 25 July, the Russian government had opted for a very tough line. It was important to show Germany, the most influential member of the government thought, “that we had come to the end of the concessions we were prepared to make”; in any event, Russia should “take all the steps which would enable us to face an attack.” The government as a whole decided that it was Russia’s duty to stand with Serbia, even if it meant war.¹⁴¹ But on the 27th Sazonov appeared to take a much softer line. The moment had come, he told the German ambassador, for the powers “to build a golden bridge for Austria.” “There must be a way,” he said, “of giving Serbia her deserved lesson while sparing her sovereign rights.”¹⁴² This runs against Clark’s claims that “Sazonov had never acknowledged that Austria-Hungary had a right to counter-measures in the face of Serbian irredentism,” and that “Sazonov had denied from the start Austria’s right to take action *of any kind* against Belgrade after the assassinations.”¹⁴³ On the other hand, it doesn’t quite mean, as Fischer suggests, that Sazonov was now “entirely ready to come an astonishingly long way to meet Austria’s standpoint.”¹⁴⁴ The reference to Serbia’s “sovereign rights” suggested that Sazonov might not have been giving anything away at all, and that a superficially conciliatory line was just a tactic that could serve to help steer Russia through the danger zone—that is, it could help reduce the risk that Germany would act while Russia was getting ready for war. And one should note that at about the same time as Sazonov was talking about building a “golden bridge,” he was cabling his ambassador in Paris, with regard to some information he had received that the French government might want to hold Russia back: “if it is a question of any pressure for moderation at St. Petersburg,” he wrote, “we reject this from the outset, as we have from the beginning adopted an attitude which we cannot modify.”¹⁴⁵ For the historian, the problem is that it is still unclear what exactly Sazonov was prepared to offer Austria.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, looking at the July Crisis as a whole, it is astonishing how little attention was given in any capital to that fundamental issue of what the terms of a settlement might be—of how it might be possible to give Austria “full satisfaction” and yet still respect Serbia’s “sovereign rights.” The whole question of the origins of the war turns, to a certain degree, on whether it might have been possible to square that particular circle.

But in principle a negotiation was not out of the question; even if Sazonov was simply trying to buy time, his real intentions could be drawn out in the course of negotiations. And Germany, for her part, also seemed

¹⁴¹ Dominic Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1983), 143-144.

¹⁴² Pourtalès to Foreign Office, 28 July 1914, Kautsky, *Outbreak of the World War* ([link](#)), 263. For the original text, see Kautsky, *Deutschen Dokumente* 2:4-5 (doc. no. 282) ([link](#)).

¹⁴³ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 480-481. Emphasis his. Note also Williamson’s comment, in summarizing the results of new work on the origins of the war: “Under no circumstances were Paris and St. Petersburg prepared to allow any chastisement of Serbia.” Williamson, “July 1914 Revisited and Revised,” 35.

¹⁴⁴ Fischer, *Germany’s Aims*, 75.

¹⁴⁵ Sazonov to Izvolski, 27 July 1914, *Die internationalen Beziehungen im Zeitalter des Imperialismus*, series 1, vol. 5, doc. 116, 105 ([link](#)), and quoted in Albertini, *Origins*, 2:401. Note also the discussion in Isaac, *Un Débat historique*, 135.

¹⁴⁶ The main works on Russian policy in 1914, like the Lieven and McMeekin studies cited above, do not go into the subject.

ready, at practically the last moment, to change course. The Germans persisted with their “localization” strategy as long as they did because they thought the Russians were bluffing.¹⁴⁷ It was only when, on 29 July, Bethmann learned that the Russians had ordered a partial mobilization against Austria that he gave up the game, and indeed, in one of the most dramatic episodes of the crisis (strangely ignored by Clark) demanded, at 3 a.m. on the morning of the 30th, that the Austrians accept a negotiated solution: “we must decline to let ourselves be dragged by Vienna, wantonly and without regard to our advice, into a world conflagration.”¹⁴⁸

And the British, on the 29th, also began to play a more active role. The Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, as is well known, warned the Germans that Britain would probably intervene if a continental war broke out; but at the same time let them know that if mediation were accepted, “he would be able to secure for Austria every possible satisfaction; there was no longer any question of a humiliating retreat for Austria, as the Serbs would in any case be punished and compelled, with the consent of Russia, to subordinate themselves to Austria’s wishes.”¹⁴⁹ Two days later he was prepared to go a bit further and promise the Germans that if they came up with a reasonable proposal, not only would he support it but he would also make it clear to France and Russia that if they did not accept it, Britain would have “nothing more to do with the consequences”—that is, that Britain would not intervene on their side.¹⁵⁰ Britain would thus be giving everyone the strongest possible incentive to reach a compromise; in theory it thus seemed that a negotiated settlement was within reach; but all these efforts came too late. As Luigi Albertini wrote in his great study of the origins of the war, Grey was:

acting in a manner which displayed both political wisdom and diplomatic skill. What is to be regretted is that he took this action only when the conflagration was on the point of breaking out and not six or seven days earlier. His telegram had probably not even been drafted when Berlin learnt the news of Russian general mobilization and the time for negotiations was gone for good. The pity is that his mind moved too slowly. In the days when these words of his would have been decisive he fumbled round, saying and advising everything but what was

¹⁴⁷ Thus one key Foreign Office official (Zimmermann), according to a Bavarian diplomat in Berlin on 18 July, was “counting on the fact that ‘bluffing’ constitutes one of the most favored requisites of Russian policy, and that while the Russian likes to threaten with his sword, he still does not like so very much to draw it on behalf of others at the critical moment.” Quoted in Pierre Renouvin, *The Immediate Origins of the War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928), 74. Even as late as 30 July, another Bavarian diplomat reported, Bethmann was not sure whether the measures Russia and France had taken were a “simple bluff” or something more serious. Quoted in Isaac, *Un Débat historique*, 163n.

¹⁴⁸ See, for example, Trachtenberg, “Coming of the First World War” ([link](#)), 84-92; this episode is discussed at length in many accounts of the crisis.

¹⁴⁹ Lichnowsky to Foreign Office, 29 July 1914, Kautsky, *Outbreak of the World War*, 322 ([link](#)). For the German original, see Kautsky, *Deutschen Dokumente* 2:86-88 (doc. 368) ([link](#)).

¹⁵⁰ Grey to Goschen, 31 July 1914, in G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, vol. 11 (London: HMSO, 1926) ([link](#)), 215-216.

needed on the one hand to restrain Russia and France and on the other to make Germany and Austria see reason.”¹⁵¹

Russia’s general mobilization, it can thus be argued, prevented the political process, which would normally have resulted in an agreement, from running its course. This is a powerful argument, and it is largely correct, but it should not be taken too far because there is a certain problem of endogeneity here. The major powers might have been moving toward a negotiated settlement, but this was only because the risk of war was now very real. It was not as though there was a political process that was running its course on its own, and that process was suddenly cut short by external pressure generated from within the military sphere. The military measures had played a key role in getting the political process started; it was only because the threat of war was real that people, at the last minute, had become so interested in a negotiated settlement in the first place. Military measures of the sort the Russians were taking were obviously very risky. But it was precisely because of the risks they entailed that they were important indicators of resolve—they suggested to one’s adversaries, and even to one’s friends, that one might really be willing to go all the way.

The basic problem is that credibility and risk are two sides to a coin. There is a certain element of tragedy here: the same forces that bring a political process into being can also prevent it from coming to fruition. Military preparations, in other words, are a two-edged sword. On the one hand, they can utterly transform an adversary’s policy, by convincing him that one is not bluffing and that political action is necessary if war is to be avoided. On the other hand, the information they provide about the degree to which one is committed to a hostile policy can tip the balance and trigger a preventive war: “if they’re so hostile to us now, while we’re still more or less able to hold our own in military terms, there’ll be no living with them in the future when our situation will be worse, so maybe it’s better to have it out now than to put off the inevitable confrontation to a later date.” Indeed, the main function of a tough line might well be to elicit information that would allow a decision of this sort to be made. There is no telling *a priori* which of these effects would prove more powerful; in 1914, as his behavior on the night of 29-30 July shows, Bethmann was pulled in both directions.¹⁵² As it turned out, it was that latter effect that prevailed, but it is not hard to imagine a different outcome. Part of the tragedy in 1914 was that the Russians were moving too quickly on the military front, while the British were moving too slowly on the political front—and this was compounded by the fact that the Germans waited until the very end to show any real interest in a political solution. But the story could easily have been different.

A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

Fischer was mainly interested in analyzing German policy. But could one really make a judgment about who bore *primary* responsibility for the war by studying just one country’s policy, no matter how important that country was? In reaching a judgment in this area, most scholars take it for granted that the policies of the

¹⁵¹ Albertini, *Origins*, 2:643. The episode is discussed at length in Albertini, *Origins* 2:642-643 and 3:52-54.

¹⁵² See Trachtenberg, “Coming of the First World War” ([link](#)), 91-92.

other main actors—Russia and France, Britain and Austria, and Serbia as well—also need to be studied, and it was natural that historical work on the war origins question during the post-Fischer period would develop in that direction. This, on the whole, was a trend which even most Fischerites welcomed.¹⁵³ But that broader focus was bound to lead to a more balanced view. To study countries other than Germany is to become aware of the choices their leaders made in the pre-1914 period; it leads to the view that their policies mattered, and thus that the story was more complex than a simple focus on what the Germans were doing might lead one to think.¹⁵⁴ So a broader approach was bound to lead to a somewhat different way of framing the issue.

It was not, however, just a question of rounding out the picture. The new work that was done on countries other than Germany also yielded major substantive findings. People came to have a better appreciation, for example, for the aggressiveness of Serbian policy. One of the most striking features of Clark's *The Sleepwalkers*—and this is by far the most important work on the war origins questions to have appeared in recent years—is his emphasis on the importance of Serbian irredentism.¹⁵⁵ This issue had of course been dealt with in the older literature. Jules Isaac, for example, quoted a report the French minister in Belgrade had sent to Paris in November 1912: “What King Peter [of Serbia] told [the French] General Sancy at Uskub [Skopje] represents the thinking of the entire Serbian people: the Balkan War will lead inevitably to an Austrian cataclysm, and the only question is whether it is better to set it off right now or wait a few years.”¹⁵⁶ But evidence that became available after Albertini wrote his monumental work on the origins of the war over seventy years ago shows that Serbian policy in 1914 was even more bellicose than many historians had realized.¹⁵⁷ The French ambassador in Belgrade, for example, reported in 1913 that the Serbian finance minister had told him that a “war against Austria will be a blessed hour for us; we await it with impatience and you know with what joy our people will take part in it.”¹⁵⁸ And on 26 July 1914, after the Russians had

¹⁵³ See, for example, Annika Mombauer, ed., *Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 17. Volker Berghahn is an exception. See Volker Berghahn, “Origins,” in Jay Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) ([link](#)), 37.

¹⁵⁴ It is in large part for this reason that Dominic Lieven's new book on Russian policy before the war is of particular interest. His study brings out the fact that key figures in the Russian elite disagreed with Sazonov's policy, sometimes in very fundamental ways. As Lieven points out (143), this suggests that alternative courses of actions were quite conceivable and that the policy choices that were made were thus of fundamental importance. See especially Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 133-143 (Rosen and Giers), 216 (Kuropotkin), 249 (Trubotskoy, on the Balkan League). Similarly, Dobrorolsky remarked in his important 1923 article on the Russian mobilization that if different individuals had been in charge of the Russian military in 1914—if people like Milyutin and Obruchev had been in charge—war could have been avoided at the time. See Dobrorolsky, “La Mobilisation de l'Armée russe en 1914,” 147 ([link](#)).

¹⁵⁵ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, esp. 26-27, 34-39, 47, 63-64.

¹⁵⁶ Descos to Poincaré, 26 November 1912, *Documents diplomatiques français*, 3rd series, vol. 4, 577, quoted in Isaac, *Un Débat historique*, 49n.

¹⁵⁷ For a summary of relatively recent findings, see Samuel Williamson and Ernest May, “An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914,” *Journal of Modern History* 79:2 (June 2007) ([link](#)), 350-353.

¹⁵⁸ See Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik* ([link](#)), 44-45. As Schmidt points out in that passage, the professional historians who published the main French collection of documents, the *Documents diplomatiques français*, wanted to

begun to prepare seriously for a war, the Serbian ambassador in Russia (and former high Serbian foreign office official) wrote the foreign ministry that his country now had a “splendid opportunity” to “achieve the full unification of the Serbs. It is desirable, therefore, that Austria-Hungary should attack us. In that case, onwards in the name of God!”¹⁵⁹

All this has had a certain impact on the way the war origins question has been dealt with. It is not just that in parceling out blame for the outbreak of the war of 1914, people now tend to give “little Serbia” (to use Röhl’s term) a greater share.¹⁶⁰ It has also had a major effect on how the policies of the major powers are viewed. Austria’s decision to bring matters to a head with Serbia is viewed more sympathetically. Thus David Stevenson, in a recent work on “the First World War as political tragedy,” writes that “much of the Austrian sense of grievance was justified” and that the “Serbian evidence confirms that Austria-Hungary had good grounds for rigorous demands.”¹⁶¹ The same point applies to Germany’s decision to back Austria to the hilt. German policy now comes across as more defensive in nature; many historians now think that German preventive war thinking, in particular, is to be interpreted more in the context of what was going on in the Balkans and much less in terms of a general drive for “world power.” It was, after all, the Balkan crisis that gave rise to the view that a major European war might well be inevitable, and preventive war thinking takes hold only when people begin to see things that way.¹⁶²

And scholars are now inclined for the same reason to take a more jaundiced view of Russian and French policy. Russia was in effect underwriting Serbia’s irredentist goals and could pursue that policy only because she had been guaranteed French support.¹⁶³ With regard to Russia, those arguments are by no means entirely new. It had been clear since the 1920s that Russian policy in the Balkans was anything but status-quo-oriented: it was widely noted in the earlier historical literature that the Russian government had encouraged the Serbs to feel that their “promised land lies in the territory of the present Austria-Hungary,” and that before long Austria would be “smashed.”¹⁶⁴ Albertini, for example, quotes a document the French foreign ministry prepared in July 1914 dealing with Austro-Russian relations: “In regard to the Southern Slavs, the

include this document in that publication, but Foreign Ministry officials objected and were ultimately backed up by the foreign minister, who decided the issue.

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 468.

¹⁶⁰ Röhl, “Goodbye to All That” ([link](#)), 154.

¹⁶¹ Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 10.

¹⁶² Note, for example, the role this issue played in the discussion at the December 1912 “War Council” ([link](#)).

¹⁶³ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 481. See also Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 240.

¹⁶⁴ The main evidence was presented in Miloš Bogićević [Bogichevich (English); Boghitschewitsch (German); Boghitchevitch (French)], *Die auswärtige Politik Serbiens: Geheimakten aus serbischen Archiven*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Brückenverlag, 1928) ([link](#)), 280, 299, and vol. 3 (Berlin: Brückenverlag, 1931) ([link](#)), 167. The key documents Bogićević (and others) had presented were generally cited in the main historical studies. See, for example, Bernadotte Schmitt, *The Coming of the War, 1914*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1930), 1:135 ([link](#)); Albertini, *Origins*, 1:375, 486; Fay, *Origins of the World War* ([link](#)), 1:383-385, 399-403, 483-486.

Russian programme was defined in December last by the Tsar's minister to Belgrade, M. de Hartwig:—'After the question of Turkey, it is now the turn of Austria. Serbia will be our best instrument.'¹⁶⁵ Even the hard-line French statesman, Raymond Poincaré, found Russian aggressiveness in that area impossible to ignore. When shown, during a visit to St. Petersburg in 1912, the text of the main treaty establishing the Russian-sponsored Balkan League, he commented that it contained "the seeds of a war not just against Turkey but against Austria as well"; the document containing Poincaré's remark was published in 1931 and was by no means ignored in the older historical literature.¹⁶⁶ Jules Isaac, for example, referred to that remark in an extraordinary review article he published in 1935. Isaac insisted on the importance of what Russia was doing in the Balkans: the policy of the Germanic powers had to be seen in this context; to play down the aggressiveness of Russian policy would make Germany and Austria seem more aggressive than they in fact were; an honest analysis should therefore not sweep this part of the story under the rug.¹⁶⁷

But those old arguments now have a stronger evidentiary base. Clark, for example, cites some notes made at the time by a French diplomat in St. Petersburg, giving his sense for what the Russian government was up to. "The Russians," that diplomat wrote in 1913, "are prepared to take no account whatsoever of Austria and to proceed toward the liquidation of Turkey without concerning themselves with her [i.e., Austria's] interests."¹⁶⁸ Clark also notes that, as the July Crisis was coming to a head, the Tsar was thinking in terms of a "partition of Austria-Hungary."¹⁶⁹ Another scholar, David Stevenson, was struck by the shift in Russian military policy after 1909: "From a 'purely defensive weapon' the army was to be turned into a 'first-class offensive' one"; the goal was to allow Russia to pursue a more assertive foreign policy.¹⁷⁰ Sean McMeekin, for his part, emphasizes the aggressive thrust of Russian policy before the war—especially with respect to the Turkish Straits, but also with respect to Austria itself. In April 1914, he points out, St. Petersburg's most

¹⁶⁵ Albertini, *Origins*, 2:190. See also Isaac, *Un Débat historique*, 49n. Isaac quotes from two documents from the *Documents diplomatiques français* which support this general point.

¹⁶⁶ Poincaré-Sazonov meeting, August 1912, *Documents diplomatiques français (1871–1914)*, 3rd series, vol. 3 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1931), 34. The remark was quoted, for example, in Pierre Renouvin, *La Crise européenne et la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Alcan, 1934), 131. The reaction of one key Russian Foreign Ministry official is also worth noting. In August 1912, Prince Trubetskoy, "after agreeing to return to the Foreign Ministry to head the Near Eastern Department" was shown the text of the treaty; despite his Slavophile sympathies, "he was so horrified that he almost resigned on the spot." Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 249.

¹⁶⁷ Isaac, "Crise européenne" ([link](#)), esp. 425–426, 437–439, 445–446. In this 36-page article, Isaac provided a detailed and very sharp critique of the Renouvin book cited in the previous footnote; the thrust of his criticism was that Renouvin had played down the role of Russia and France in the crisis culminating in the war. Given the sharpness of the analysis, it is a measure of the seriousness of the French historical profession that the two men remained friends after that review. Note especially Renouvin's letter to Isaac quoted in André Kaspi, *Jules Isaac: Historien, acteur du rapprochement judéo-chrétien* (Paris: Plon, 2002), 126.

¹⁶⁸ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 296–297.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 468.

¹⁷⁰ David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 157 ([link](#)).

influential newspaper “was openly advocating the dismemberment of the Habsburg Empire.” And the following month, the French ambassador asked a leading member of the Russian government what Russia would do if the Austrian Emperor “were ever to step down due to old age.” “First of all,” the Russian replied, “we would be obliged to annex Galicia. Our minister of war, General Sukhomlinov, explained to me just the other day that the possession of Galicia is indispensable to the security of our frontier. And besides, it is basically Russian territory.”¹⁷¹ And Ronald Bobroff quotes from a document he found in the Russia archives, a letter Sazonov wrote to one of his ambassadors in December 1912. Russia’s goal in dealing with the Balkan crisis, the foreign minister said, was to “provide itself the possibility of preferential or even exclusive influence” in the region; this was “the red thread across all the questions which require resolution.”¹⁷²

With regard to France, the shift in perspective is perhaps even more striking. The tendency in recent years had been to assume that French policy was fairly passive and that France had been more or less dragged into the war by its alliance with Russia—that the main fear was that if France did not stand by Russia her alliance with that power would collapse.¹⁷³ In the older literature, however, some major scholars had taken a very different view. French policy, they pointed out, had changed dramatically in 1912: from that point on, it was clear to the Russians that France would go to war on Russia’s side if an armed conflict broke out over the Serbian issue. The support Poincaré gave to Russia’s Balkan policy from 1912 on—a policy he knew might well lead to a war with Austria—was always very revealing in this connection.¹⁷⁴ With regard to the July Crisis itself, France (as Albertini, for example, noted) did little to hold Russia back and seemed more interested in making sure that Russia would attack Germany quickly than in avoiding war.¹⁷⁵ And that older view was revived—but with stronger supporting evidence—by the German historian Stefan Schmidt in a book he published on the subject in 2006. It was clear from his analysis that French policy was not nearly as passive as most historians had come to believe. The French, it turns out, had not only promised full support for Russia in the event of war but were at times upset by what they saw as Russian weakness and actually encouraged the Russians to pursue a tough policy.¹⁷⁶ And Clark, in his book, relied heavily on Schmidt’s analysis. All of this, of course, has a direct bearing on the Fischer thesis. The point is often made by scholars who stress Germany’s responsibility for the war that Austria could never have pursued the policy she did unless she had been assured

¹⁷¹ Paléologue to Doumergue, 3 May 1914, French Foreign Ministry Archives, Political and Commercial Correspondence, 1896-1918, Russie: Politique Etrangère, vol. 46, cited in McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 22 ([link](#)). See also Soutou, *Grande illusion*, 40.

¹⁷² Bobroff, “War Accepted but Unsought,” 245-246.

¹⁷³ See Marc Trachtenberg, “French Foreign Policy in the July Crisis, 1914: A Review Article,” H-Diplo/ISSF essay series, no. 3, published in H-Diplo on 1 December 2010 ([link](#)), 2-3.

¹⁷⁴ See especially Isaac, “Crise européenne” ([link](#)), 426-432, 438, 444-445, 446. On the shift in policy in 1912, note also Girault, “Les Balkans dans les relations franco-russes en 1912” ([link](#)), 155-156.

¹⁷⁵ Albertini, *Origins*, 2:598-600. See also Droz, *Causes de la Première Guerre mondiale*, 176-177; and Isaac, *Un Débat historique*, 202, 214.

¹⁷⁶ Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik* ([link](#)), 80-81, 92; discussed in Trachtenberg, “French Foreign Policy in the July Crisis” ([link](#)), 5. See also Isaac, “Crise européenne” ([link](#)), 429-431, 438 (and esp. n. 3).

of German support, and that point is of course quite valid. But for many scholars nowadays it seems reasonable to apply that same standard when we're looking at French policy.

And all this is linked to certain judgments about what constitutes proper political behavior. Russia was pursuing what Paul Schroeder called a “very bold offensive policy” in the Balkans.¹⁷⁷ Given that Germany was Austria's ally, the Russians were playing with fire. And they could pursue that policy only because they were sure of French support. And even Britain, in the final analysis, was willing to back her Entente partners on this issue. The basic conviction that lies at the heart of the new perspective on 1914 is that Russia and France, and even Britain, had no business pursuing policies of that sort. Schroeder's own views on this subject are quite clear. The Entente powers, he feels, should have understood that Austria, as a great power, could not be expected to put up with what Serbia was doing—to do nothing (as he puts it) while she was “slowly but surely” being strangled. The other powers should have understood that, for the sake of the system as a whole, Austria's most fundamental interests needed to be respected. The traditional system of European great power politics—the “ethos, rules and incentives of the Bismarckian era”—should not have been abandoned. And Schroeder clearly believes that Russia and her supporters in the West were mainly responsible for destroying that system.¹⁷⁸

That basic philosophy also lies at the heart of Clark's argument in *The Sleepwalkers*. Clark, like Schroeder, thinks that the erosion of the traditional system—a system based on the assumption that none of the great powers should be pushed too far and that the most basic interests of every power in the system needed to be respected—was of fundamental importance. The Russian foreign minister, he notes, “had never acknowledged that Austria-Hungary had a right to counter-measures in the face of Serbian irredentism. On the contrary, he had endorsed the politics of Balkan irredentism and had explicitly aligned himself with the view that Serbia was the rightful successor to the lands of unredeemed South Slavdom within the dual monarchy, an obsolete multi-ethnic structure whose days, in his view, were in any case numbered.”¹⁷⁹ For Clark, Russia's claim “to act as protectress of Serbia” had no real justification: the doctrine of pan-Slavism “was no more legitimate as a platform for political action than Hitler's concept of *Lebensraum*.”¹⁸⁰ But by 1913 Russia's hostility to the Habsburg Monarchy and “its utter disregard for Vienna's interests” in the Balkans “could be taken for granted”; the real problem was that the policy was now backed by Russia's partners, since without their support Russia could never have pursued such a risky strategy. “The reluctance of the international community to see that Austria faced genuine security threats on its southern periphery and had the right to counteract them,” Clark writes, “reflected a broader shift in attitudes.” The western powers no longer saw Austria as an essential part of the European political system—as a “fulcrum of stability in

¹⁷⁷ Paul W. Schroeder, “Embedded Counterfactuals and World War I as an Unavoidable War,” in Paul Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 186 ([link](#)).

¹⁷⁸ Paul W. Schroeder, “Stealing Horses to Great Applause: Austria-Hungary's Decision in 1914 in Systemic Perspective,” in Afflerbach and Stevenson, *An Improbable War*, 23-28, 39, and (for the quotations) 37, 40.

¹⁷⁹ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 481.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 279.

central and eastern Europe.” They had come to think of Europe “in terms of alliance blocs, rather than as a continental geopolitical ecosystem in which every power had a role to play.”¹⁸¹

THE WAR GUILT QUESTION

The decline of the Fischer thesis is thus not hard to understand. Indeed, Jonathan Steinberg, reflecting on the papers presented at the 2011 “Fischer Controversy Fifty Years On” conference, wondered why Fischer’s view had “remained so unquestioned” for so long.¹⁸² I cannot deal with that very important issue in this paper, which—as I am sure any reader who is still with me would agree—is already too long.¹⁸³ Instead I would like

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 288. See also Georges-Henri Soutou, “La Première guerre mondiale: une rupture dans l’évolution de l’ordre européen,” *Politique étrangère* 65:3-4 (2000), 842-843 ([link](#)) ([pdf](#)); Georges-Henri Soutou, “Le Concert européen, de Vienne à Locarno,” in Jean Bérenger and Georges-Henri Soutou, eds., *L’Ordre européen du XVIe au XXe siècle* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1998) ([link](#)), esp. 129-130; and Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 215, 311.

¹⁸² Steinberg, “Old Knowledge and New Research” ([link](#)), 245.

¹⁸³ The main point here is that historical analysis in this area was deeply influenced by political considerations—and that applies not just to Fischer’s opponents but to his supporters as well. See Arnold Sywottek, “Die Fischer-Kontroverse: Ein Beitrag zur Entwicklung des politisch-historischen Bewusstseins in der Bundesrepublik,” in Imanuel Geiss und Jürgen Bernd Wendt, eds., *Deutschland in der Weltpolitik des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Düsseldorf: Bertelsmann 1973); Wolfgang Jäger, *Historische Forschung und politische Kultur in Deutschland: Die Debatte 1914-1980 über den Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984), esp. chap. 4; Klaus Große Kracht, “Die Fischer-Kontroverse: Von der Fachdebatte zum Publikumsstreit,” in his *Die zankende Zunft: Historische Kontroversen in Deutschland nach 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005); and Stephan Petzold, “Fritz Fischer and the Rise of Critical Historiography in West Germany, 1945-1966: A Study in the Social Production of Historical Knowledge,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Aberystwyth (2010). Note also Imanuel Geiss, *Studien über Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1972), esp. 165-166, 195-196; Richard J. Evans, “The New Nationalism and the Old History: Perspectives on the West German Historikerstreit,” *Journal of Modern History* 59:4 (December 1987) ([link](#)), esp. 762 and the sources cited there; Helmut Böhme, “‘Primat’ und ‘Paradigmata’: Zur Entwicklung eines Bundesdeutschen Zeitgeschichtsforschung am Beispiel des Ersten Weltkrieges,” in Hartmut Lehmann, ed., *Historikerkontroversen* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2000); Rüdiger Hohls and Konrad Jarausch, eds., *Versäumte Fragen: Deutsche Historiker im Schatten des Nationalsozialismus* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2000); Philipp Stelzel, “Working toward a Common Goal? American Views on German Historiography and German-American Scholarly Relations during the 1960s,” *Central European History* 41:4 (December 2008): 639-671 ([link](#)); Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Der grosse Krieg und die Historiker: Neue Wege der Geschichtsschreibung über den Ersten Weltkrieg* (Essen: Klartext, 2012); and Röhl, “Goodbye to All That (Again)?” ([link](#)), 166. The point applies even to Fischer himself. Fischer had joined the SA in November 1933 and remained committed to the Nazi cause even in the latter part of World War II. Geiss thought Fischer’s historical work (in the words of Stephan Petzold) “represented an effort to come to terms not only with his country’s but also his own Nazi past.” Perhaps “make amends for” might be a better way of putting it. See Stephan Petzold, “The Social Making of a Historian: Fritz Fischer’s Distancing from Bourgeois-Conservative Historiography, 1930–60,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48:2 (April 2013) ([link](#)), 272, 278, 282.

to end by considering how everything I have said so far relates to the basic claim that Germany was “primarily responsible” for the war.

Perhaps the key point here is that this question is not, strictly speaking, an historical issue at all. When people talk about who should be held responsible, what they really mean is who was to blame for the war—who the guilty parties were. The term “responsibility,” of course, sounds less judgmental and more professional; by using it one seems to be making a causal and not a moral judgment. Scholars, of course, would want to give that impression: historical analysis is supposed to be a search for understanding; an historical work is not supposed to be a bill of indictment. And yet when people say that a given country was mainly responsible for the war they *are* making a moral judgment. They are saying that its behavior was not justifiable, not excusable, not legitimate. They are saying that it ought to have behaved differently, while its opponent’s behavior is “understandable.” They are not just saying that it played a major role in the story.

People talk as though historical analysis, if it is taken far enough, can tell us who the responsible parties really are. The assumption is that if one looks at enough evidence, one can reach definitive and more or less objective conclusions about who to point the finger at. But two observers might agree on the facts and even on why all the actors behaved the way they did, and yet disagree as to who should be held responsible for the conflict. In the 1914 case, who is to say (as Albertini put it) “whether politically and morally Austria had the better right to defend her existence or Serbia to liberate her brethren”?¹⁸⁴ Since there is no absolute standard for making moral judgments in such cases, historical analysis, no matter how good it is, cannot in itself tell us who is “responsible” for a conflict. Judgments are made by applying a set of moral standards “from the outside”; they do not emerge automatically from within the story; and so simply reconstructing the story can never in itself fully answer the “war guilt question.”

What this means is that when we deal with these issues, we reach a point where what we are really arguing about is how states should behave—that is, about the *standards* that should govern their political behavior. Those arguments can be informed by historical analysis, but that analysis cannot in itself actually resolve these issues. This does not mean, however, that these moral issues are not worth talking about, or that the historian has no role to play in those discussions. Those issues cannot, and should not, be ignored; and we can get a handle on them by thinking about them in particular historical contexts. When we do so, we can, I think, get some insight into these issues of judgment which we cannot get in any other way.

Consider, for example, some of the common arguments that support the claim that Germany was mainly responsible for the conflict. Germany, it is often argued, was willing to run the risk of a great war and was unwilling, during the crisis, to work for a reasonable compromise; it was therefore mainly her fault that the crisis ended the way it did. “As Germany willed and coveted the Austro-Serbian war,” Fischer wrote, “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 general war in 1914.”¹⁸⁵ In 1944 Bernadotte Schmitt had taken much the same view. “The Austrian demands,” he wrote, “were intended to precipitate war between Austria and Serbia; and Austria refused all mediation, even though Serbia in very large measure accepted the demands. Germany not only approved the Austrian policy but urged

¹⁸⁴ Albertini, *Origins*, 2:372.

¹⁸⁵ Fischer, *Germany’s Aims*, 88.

immediate action against Serbia.” While both powers “would have liked to restrict the war to Serbia, they faced the prospect of a general conflict with complacency and confidence,” believing they could “easily defeat France and Russia.” The Entente powers, on the other hand, “proposed mediation in various forms and offered several compromises, but in vain.” His conclusion was unambiguous: “Since Austria would not have acted without German approval and support, the primary responsibility of Germany for the fatal ending of the crisis is clear and overwhelming.”¹⁸⁶

And of course much of this is true. Germany and Austria were intransigent during the crisis and from the start were prepared to risk war over the Serbian issue. Perhaps their opponents were not quite as accommodating as Schmitt and Fischer suggested, and certainly the Germans were not confident that they could “easily defeat” their enemies, but these points are ultimately of secondary importance.¹⁸⁷ What *is* important is that Germany and Austria were clearly willing to run the risk of a great European war. But does that *in itself* mean that their behavior was illegitimate?

The first point to make here is that *all* the major European powers, as events were to show, were ultimately willing to risk war over the issue. Germany and Austria of course “deliberately faced the risk of a conflict with Russia and France” in 1914, but Russia and France and even Britain in the final analysis were also willing to risk war with the Central Powers. But those facts in themselves do not mean that one side or the other (or both) should be held responsible for the conflict. We certainly do not apply that standard in other cases. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, according to Richard Neustadt and Graham Allison, President Kennedy “chose a path of action that, in his judgment, entailed a one-in-three chance of nuclear war.”¹⁸⁸ Kennedy, of course, is generally viewed as a hero for having pursued the policy he did during that crisis. But suppose the crisis had not been settled peacefully. Assuming Neustadt and Allison are correct, would we then have to condemn Kennedy for having run that risk? If so, isn’t it odd that our judgment of Kennedy should turn not on his behavior but on what the adversary did, since whether war broke out depended on whether or not the Russians gave way? Does it make sense to say that the Germans were guilty in 1914 because the Russians would not back down, but Kennedy was a hero in 1962 because they did?

Or to give another example: in March 1939, in giving a guarantee to Poland, British leaders adopted a policy which they knew, if they held to it, would put their country on a collision course with Nazi Germany. “There was probably no way,” the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, told his Cabinet colleagues at the time, “in which France and ourselves could prevent Poland and Roumania from being overrun. We were faced with the dilemma of doing nothing, or entering into a devastating war. If we did nothing this in itself would mean a great accession to Germany’s strength and a great loss to ourselves of sympathy and support in the United States, in the Balkan countries, and in other parts of the world. In those circumstances if we had to choose

¹⁸⁶ Schmitt, “July 1914: Thirty Years After” ([link](#)), 203-204.

¹⁸⁷ On the issue of whether the Serbians really did “in very large measure” accept the Austrian demands, see Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 457-69. Clark basically says no. Albertini, *Origins*, 2:364-372, and Isaac, *Un Débat historique*, 124n., take much the same view.

¹⁸⁸ Richard Neustadt and Graham Allison, afterword to Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (New York: Norton, 1999) ([link](#)), 102. The authors base their claim on Theodore Sorensen’s comment that it seemed to Kennedy during the Missile Crisis that the odds of the Soviets going “all the way to war” were “somewhere between one out of three and even.” Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 705.

between two great evils he [Halifax] favoured our going to war.”¹⁸⁹ That policy, as it turned out, was abandoned and over the summer the British tried hard to reach a settlement with Germany that involved the transfer of Danzig to the Reich. But if the British had dug in their heels—if they had refused to consider a negotiated arrangement that Germany might conceivably have accepted—would we then say that they bore a large share of the responsibility for the war that ensued? And if, as one leading scholar has repeatedly argued, that hard line was rooted in the sense that Britain could not keep pace with Germany in the arms competition and that matters would therefore have to be brought to a head in the near future, would that be further proof that Britain should at least in some measure be held responsible for the war?¹⁹⁰

If the answer is no—if we do not think Britain should in that case be held responsible for any war that broke out—then we have to ask why the 1914 case is different. The Germanic powers, one could say, had taken the initiative in 1914; British policy in 1939, on the other hand, was essentially reactive in nature. But in 1962, it was the Americans who took the initiative. Just as Germany and Austria seized on the assassination of Franz Ferdinand to bring matters to a head with their enemies, so Kennedy took advantage of the deployment of the Soviet missiles in Cuba to bring matters to a head with the USSR: at the time the missiles were discovered, he believed that a confrontation with the Soviets over Berlin was unavoidable, and he wanted to have it out with the USSR while the Americans still had the upper hand in strategic terms. Many scholars hold it against the Germans in 1914 that their behavior was strongly influenced by preventive-war thinking—by the idea that if war was inevitable, given the way the military balance was shifting, the sooner it broke out the better. But that kind of thinking also played a key role in shaping U.S. policy in 1962. Was Kennedy’s policy illegitimate for that reason alone?¹⁹¹

Much the same point could be made about U.S. policy toward Germany in 1941. Hitler at that point wanted to avoid war with America, at least for the time being, but President Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted to bring America into the war as soon as he could. Given political realities at home, this meant, he told Churchill, that he had to pursue an increasingly aggressive policy in the Atlantic: “The President said that he would wage war, but not declare it, and that he would become more and more provocative. If the Germans did not like it, they could attack American forces.”¹⁹² Again, preventive war thinking played a key role in shaping the policy. The feeling was that the Germans would probably win their war with Russia, but would need two full years before they could bring “order out of chaos in the conquered areas,” and during that period would prefer to avoid an armed conflict with America. If the United States just sat on its hands and allowed Germany to consolidate its position, an eventual war with Germany would be very difficult, and perhaps unwinnable.

¹⁸⁹ Cabinet Committee on Foreign Policy meeting, 27 March 1939, C.P. 74 (39), 15, Cab 24/284 ([link](#)), f. 229 (frame 334).

¹⁹⁰ See Richard Overy, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 2d ed. (London: Longman, 1999), 62, 69-73; Overy, “Germany, ‘Domestic Crisis’ and War in 1939,” *Past and Present* 116 (August 1987), 167-168 ([link](#)), reprinted in Overy, *War and Economy in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 231-232; and Overy with Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Road to War* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 100. I deal with these issues in a related paper, “Some Notes on British Policy in 1939” ([link](#)).

¹⁹¹ See Marc Trachtenberg, “Preventive War and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Security Studies* 16:1 (January-March 2007) ([link](#)), 13-15.

¹⁹² W.M. 84 (41), 19 August 1941, CAB 65/19, “Most Secret” typewritten attachment ([link](#)), frames 208-210.

Time was thus “of the essence”: it was important to go to war before the enemy could “recoup from his struggle with Russia.”¹⁹³ Should we condemn Roosevelt for pursuing a policy rooted in this sort of thinking?

These questions have a certain bearing on how we deal with the issue of who should be held responsible for the coming of war in 1914. To be sure, these other cases differ from the 1914 case in all sorts of ways. But that is precisely the point. The simple yardsticks we apply—was a given country willing to risk war? was it prepared to compromise? was it thinking in preventive war terms?—are simply not good enough. We should not look at just one small part of the picture. If a judgment is to be made, we have to look at the whole context, and it is the policy in its entirety that has to be examined.

Or to make the point another way: if the goal is peace, one can easily adopt the view that defensive policies are morally superior to offensive ones, because both sides can more readily accept the status quo than a change which, in all probability, would be disadvantageous for at least one of them. But even that standard would not generate unambiguous moral judgments, for policies can be defensive on one level and offensive on another.¹⁹⁴ In the 1914 case, the Germanic powers were on the defensive at the most basic political level: Austria’s survival as a great power, and thus Germany’s political position in Europe, were being threatened. But during the July crisis, Germany and Austria had gone on the offensive—it was they who insisted on bringing the Serbian problem to a head—and the Germans especially had a military strategy that emphasized rapid offensive action. In making moral judgments, is it clear which level we should focus on, or what weight we should assign to the different levels of policy? A scholar who has absorbed the political sensibility associated with neorealist theory might think that since all states seek above all to survive and all states are bound to be concerned with the balance of power, the fundamental policy of the Central Powers was “understandable”; another scholar, working in a different tradition, might take a very different view. But there is no reason to think that either view is in some absolute sense more compelling than the other.

The one thing that can be said is that in making these judgments we should take care to apply the same standard to all parties in the conflict. One can say, for example, that the Germans should have realized that they were playing with fire in giving a blank check to Austria, and they should never have pursued such a reckless policy. But by the same token the Russians should have realized that they were also playing with fire in backing Serbia to the extent they did. Many scholars, of course, take the opposite view and argue that Austria and Germany should have seen how committed Russia was, and that if they insisted on throwing down the gauntlet, then they, and not Russia, were mainly responsible for what happened. But the basic principle here is rather odd. It amounts to saying that the more committed one is to a particular policy, no matter what that policy is, the less one should be held responsible for the outcome—that the other side should have seen how committed you were and drawn back, and if it failed to do so, then it and not you should be held responsible for the war that resulted. But to take the view that throwing the steering wheel out the window relieves one of responsibility for whatever happens is to encourage people to engage in irresponsible

¹⁹³ See Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton University Press, 2006), chapter 4 ([link](#)), esp. 118-120, and Trachtenberg, “Preventive War” ([link](#)), 22-28. The quotations come from Admiral Harold Stark and General George Marshall, “Joint Board Estimate of United States Over-All Production Requirements,” 11 September 1941, and appended “Estimate of Army Ground Forces,” *American War Plans, 1919–1941*, ed. Steven Ross, vol. 5 (New York: Garland, 1992), 160-201, esp. 193-194.

¹⁹⁴ I am grateful to the political scientist Stephen Van Evera for sensitizing me to this aspect of the problem.

behavior. This, it seems to me, is not a view we should want to adopt if our goal is to construct a stable international system.

What all this means is that the moral issues are harder to get a handle on than one might think. The simple yardsticks people use to make judgments do not in themselves provide us with an adequate basis for judgment. The question then is whether there is any standard we should apply that is not, in the final analysis, more or less arbitrary. Should we just throw up our hands and say that people are free to base their thinking on whatever set of values they happen to hold?

There is only one way, it seems to me, to base these moral judgments on something more solid, and that is to connect them more directly to a body of theory—that is, to base them more directly on our fundamental understanding of what, in general, makes for a stable international system. If one basic moral imperative is to avoid general war, judgments about policy ought to be rooted to a certain extent in a certain theory of what makes for war—that is, in a *political* theory. The standard thus becomes more political and less overtly moral in nature: are the policies adopted the sorts of policies that make for a stable international order? And to my mind the test here is whether the policies adopted make sense in power political terms: if they are attuned to the basic structure of power—to the same basic structure of power—they would be in harmony with each other, and the system would be relatively stable.¹⁹⁵ So the test should have to do with whether a policy made sense in power political terms—with the degree to which a country took fundamental power realities into account when deciding on a course of action.

This, I think, is a standard that many scholars apply, perhaps without quite fully realizing that they are doing so. Britain, for example, was ready to go to war with France in 1898 during the Fashoda Crisis. But even though the issues at stake would be regarded today as relatively trivial, few scholars today would condemn Britain's willingness to risk war at the time, in large part I think because that country so clearly had the upper hand in power political terms. The same basic point could be made about Bismarck in the period of German unification, or even about Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis. One would not, of course, want to push the point too far: we sometimes admire countries, like Poland and Finland in 1939, or Britain in 1940, who do not give way even when the power balance seems stacked against them. And that kind of feeling still affects the way some people view Austrian policy in 1914. The Austrians themselves at the time seemed to see things in that light. "We have to go for all or nothing," the Austrian Army Chief of Staff, General Conrad, said after the assassination; "in 1912-1913 it would have been a game with some chances of success, now it is a sheer gamble." Still, he thought, the war had to be fought: "So ancient a monarchy and so glorious an army cannot be allowed to perish ignominiously." The Emperor, Franz Josef, took much the same view.¹⁹⁶ The sense that it was better to go down with a bang than with a whimper is understandable, and should perhaps be taken into account when making a judgment. But the main criterion we should apply, it seems to me, is whether a

¹⁹⁵ See Marc Trachtenberg, "The Question of Realism: An Historian's View," *Security Studies* 13:1 (Fall 2003), 3-43 ([link](#)), and reprinted with some minor changes in Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) ([link](#)).

¹⁹⁶ Quoted in Avner Offer, "Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honor?" *Politics and Society* 23:2 (June 1995) ([link](#)), 227.

given course of action makes sense in political terms—that is, in the light of power realities as they existed at the time.

That ‘political’ approach, moreover, corresponds to a certain view of history—a tendency to see history as an interactive process, a process driven more by fear than by greed, a process in which simple aggressiveness, or lust for territory, or a desire for hegemony, does not necessarily play a major role. That view might, in certain cases, turn out to be incorrect, but it often makes sense to adopt it as a working hypothesis because it directs our attention to a side of the story that a more moralistic approach might blind us to. And the point applies with particular force to the 1914 case. It is the easiest thing in the world to minimize or ignore what Germany was reacting to—both the basic policy Russia, supported by its Entente partners, was pursuing in the Balkans, and the pre-mobilization measures the Russians were taking during the July Crisis—and thus give the impression that this was a case of German aggressiveness pure and simple. But if the goal is to understand why these events took the course they did, then that approach simply will not do, and a more balanced approach is clearly in order.

And this kind of approach is of particular value because it helps bring the historical problems into focus. What kind of policy, you ask yourself, would have made political sense for Germany in 1914? The Germans had a strong interest in preventing Britain, and even France, from intervening actively if the Austro-Serbian problem led to war with Russia, and thus had a strong interest in adopting a purely defensive posture in the west. After all, the new German empire was willing in 1871 to pay the enormous political price that the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine entailed—that is, a permanently hostile France—in order to acquire a more defensible border with that country. And in 1914 Britain would probably have stayed out of the war if neither France nor Belgium had been invaded. The British Prime Minister, in fact, assured the Germans at the last minute that if the Germans stayed on the defensive in the west and fought the war in the east, Britain would stay out.¹⁹⁷ As for France, Poincaré would have found it much harder to bring his country into such a war if it were not attacked at the outset. And yet Germany adopted a military strategy that almost guaranteed that the war would be fought with the three Entente powers. A child could see the problem, and you have to wonder why it was never dealt with adequately. Much the same point could be made about German naval policy: it should have been obvious that Britain would do whatever it had to in order to maintain its naval lead, and that a policy of challenging Britain in this area was bound to turn it against Germany and lead it to mend fences with France and Russia. Why then did Germany pursue the policy it did in this area? Even the way Germany blocked negotiations during the July Crisis makes little sense. By agreeing to talks but then making demands that were unacceptable to Russia but which at least Britain would find reasonable, Germany could have increased the chances of achieving its fundamental goal of keeping Britain out of the war—and of splitting the Entente, if war could be avoided—so why did the German government not adopt those tactics?¹⁹⁸ Indeed, its whole approach made little sense in power political terms: if Bismarck had seen how his

¹⁹⁷ See Otte, *July Crisis*, 486, 492.

¹⁹⁸ That such tactics might have been effective is suggested by the fact that opinion in the governing Liberal Party was relatively sympathetic to the Austrian point of view. See D.C. Watt, “The British Reactions to the Assassination at Sarajevo,” *European Studies Review* 1:3 (July 1971) ([link](#)), esp. 243-247.

successors were conducting Germany policy, he would have turned over in his grave. But Germany was by no means unique in this regard: you can make similar points about the policies of all the other powers.¹⁹⁹

The danger here is that that sort of approach can lead to the conclusion that understanding what happened is beyond the reach of rational analysis. And it is easy—perhaps a little too easy—to conclude from the new historical literature on the origins of the war that this was in fact the case. Thus Förster points out that Moltke believed a war would destroy European civilization for decades to come, but nevertheless insisted on one: “All this looks crazy,” Förster comments, “and it would be hard to believe if it were not so well documented.”²⁰⁰ Avner Offer, writing in 1995, also emphasizes the non-rational side of the story.²⁰¹ And in Clark’s account, the key decisionmakers were unable to see reality for what it was. Their vision was clouded by one-sided “narratives” that lead them to behave the way they do. His analysis, in fact, has a certain constructivist flavor: he sees policymakers as prisoners of a “virtual reality” of their own making.²⁰² There is certainly something to arguments of that sort. But I wonder whether these approaches take us where we need to go.

The Förster view, for example, was that the Germans should have understood that war could no longer serve as a viable instrument of policy, and that a strategy of deterrence was the only rational alternative.²⁰³ But if people are certain that military forces will not be used, how can those forces have any deterrent effect? And indeed if you rule out military action, you put yourself at the mercy of your adversary. “If the quest for peace turns into the *sole* objective of policy,” Henry Kissinger pointed out, “the fear of war becomes a weapon in the hands of the most ruthless.”²⁰⁴ For that reason alone, no great power before 1914 would have pursued such a policy. The problem, then, is not human irrationality; it is the system itself that creates this dilemma.

And what are we to make of Clark’s idea that statesmen were trapped “within narratives of their own making”? It is hard to tell, from the evidence he presents, just how ‘trapped’ they really were. In the Russian narrative, for example, “the entire history of Russia’s sponsorship of Serbian expansionism” was “elided from

¹⁹⁹ For an argument along these lines about French policy before the war, see Trachtenberg, “French Foreign Policy in the July Crisis” ([link](#)), 11-12.

²⁰⁰ Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares,” 373-374.

²⁰¹ Offer, “Going to War in 1914” ([link](#)).

²⁰² Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, xxviii, 161 (for the reference to “virtual reality”), 350, 407-411, 558; and Clark interview with Robert Siegel of National Public Radio, 23 April 2013 ([link](#)). Again, the theme is not entirely new. Jules Isaac, in his 1935 article on the war origins question, makes a similar point. “Le Passé et le présent nous enseignent, assez clairement, que la férocité humaine existe, avec un certain art de se déguiser et, sous ce déguisement, de se faire illusion à elle-meme.” Isaac, “Crise européenne” ([link](#)), 442. The work of the evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers on self-deception is of particular interest in this context. See especially Robert Trivers, *The Folly of Fools: Deceit and Self-deception in Human Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

²⁰³ Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares,” 354, 374.

²⁰⁴ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 70; emphasis his. See also Henry Kissinger, *For the Record: Selected Statements, 1977-1980* (Boston: Little Brown, 1981), 192.

view.”²⁰⁵ But that scarcely proves that the Russian leadership did not understand what its own policy had been. My own feeling is that we should not be too quick to embrace explanations of this sort. Whatever people said—and many statements are made for tactical purposes, even in private meetings within governments—the issues involved were so serious that policymakers had a very strong incentive to take hard political realities into account. The issues, one suspects, must have been debated energetically within political circles at the time. Russia and its friends might insist, with varying degrees of intensity, that Serbia’s sovereignty had to be respected. But given how the Entente powers had in recent years treated the Boer republics, Morocco, Turkey, Persia, and China, that stance must have raised eyebrows, and it would be interesting to see how those issues of consistency and basic principle were dealt with at the time.

Over the past century the whole issue of the origins of the First World War has received an enormous amount of scholarly attention, but we have by no means reached the end of the road. Many key questions remain unanswered, and, as some of the new works have shown, historical analysis can still shed new light on important aspects of the problem. But even if ultimate answers are elusive—or perhaps because the core issues are so hard to resolve in any definitive way—scholars will remain fascinated by this problem. It is not at all clear where the road will lead, but the journey itself will be very much worth taking.

²⁰⁵ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 411.

Response by Dale C. Copeland, University of Virginia

“Germany is Responsible!” The Weaknesses of the New Historiography on the Origins of the First World War

Marc Trachtenberg has offered us a thoughtful review of some of the recent literature on the origins of the First World War. He nicely summarizes the overarching thesis of this new historiography,¹ namely, that Germany cannot be held as the state ‘primarily’ responsible for the onset of the war, since great powers outside of the German alliance structure—most importantly, France, but to a lesser degree Russia—also helped bring about war through their ill-conceived and at times aggressive actions. In doing so, this new historiography on World War I seeks to call into doubt a core element of the ‘Fisher thesis’—that German leaders manipulated the system into a war that only Germany wanted. The new work suggests that because France and Russia were both willing to accept war in 1914 as a better option than a war later on under worse circumstances, many powers, and not just Germany, had ‘preventive’ motivations for total war. In essence, this means that even if we accept that German fears of decline were determinative in shaping Berlin’s hard-line behavior in July 1914, the other powers are also to blame given their own desires to fight ‘sooner rather than later.’

As I will discuss, there is a great deal to agree with in Trachtenberg’s comprehensive review and in his critique of the Fischer thesis, particularly his analysis of German and Russian concerns leading up to 1 August 1914. Yet, in its acceptance of the main conclusion of the new historiography—that all the great powers, save perhaps for Britain, had some reason for war in 1914—Trachtenberg’s analysis suffers from a fundamental flaw. It fails to consider the preference rankings of the various actors across the many outcomes that may or may not have come about in July 1914, through either non-action or negotiation. To truly understand the calculations of the actors, we need to know how they felt about the full spectrum of possible outcomes, from a continuation or renegotiation of the current status quo to a localized war in the Balkans to a continental war with or without the support of allies.² In accurately summarizing the new literature, Trachtenberg falls into the same trap that it is entangled in. It is not enough to show that Russian and French leaders were willing to have a war in 1914 if this willingness was based, as Trachtenberg suggests, on their assumption that war was “inevitable” anyway. If war was inevitable *because the Russians and French knew Germany sought war sooner rather than later*, then their calculations were based fundamentally on whether they would be able to fight a continental war with the other as a strong ally, or whether they might have to fight alone against a superior German army. In short, while both Russia and France preferred a continuation of the status quo, given Russia’s strong growth in economic and military power, if the status quo were taken off the table due to Germany’s clear desire for a preventive war, then a war ‘now’ with the Franco-Russian alliance strong was preferred to a war where Germany was able to pick France and Russia off one by one.

¹ The Trachtenberg essay provides a full survey of this literature. See in particular Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2012); Dominic Lieven, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2015); Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2013); Thomas Otte, *July Crisis: The World’s Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

² This focus on preferences builds upon the seminal work of Jack Levy, “Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914,” *International Security* 15 (Winter 1990-1991): 151-186.

In the end, the whole debate comes down to this: was there any great power that had “deadlock” preferences through July 1914, preferring continental war to a negotiated peace, or were all the states risk-acceptant “chicken” actors that preferred a peace to general war, but where the dynamics of the crisis led them into an unwanted crash? Trachtenberg clearly leans to the latter position. He correctly shows that military mobilization schedules did not push the political leaders into preemptive strikes. But he suggests that the crisis itself, by reinforcing mistrust, made it hard for either side to swerve by the end of July, despite no actor having a preference for general war prior to the outbreak of the crisis in late June 1914.

The problem with this view is straight-forward. It ignores two puzzles that book-end the events of July 1914 and that tell us a great deal about the preferences of Berlin compared to those of the other capitals. First, why did Berlin on 5-6 July push Austria-Hungary to take a very firm stance with Serbia when Berlin had restrained Vienna in 1912-1913 in the face of Russian mobilization on Austria’s border? Second, why did Berlin surprise St. Petersburg with a declaration of war on 1 August 1914, when there was still a possibility of a negotiated solution to the crisis? The answers to these puzzles reveal much about German ‘deadlock’ preferences by May to July of 1914, and why Berlin sought to manipulate the system into war. I have written extensively about these puzzles elsewhere, so I will only quickly reiterate the main pieces of evidence here.³ But by ignoring the questions of Berlin’s behavior in 1912-1913 and on 1 August 1914, Trachtenberg leaves us with the impression that no state really wanted general war prior to the July Crisis, but they all tragically fell into one through risk-taking behavior that ultimately prevented any side from swerving when it still had the chance. This essay will call that conclusion into question. It will show that by June 1914 Germany was the only state in the system that preferred general war to a continuation of the status quo peace, and that it used the declaration of war on Russia to ensure that Russia and its own ally Austria would not be able to negotiate a peace that would deny Germany its desired preventive war.

The Importance of Trachtenberg’s Argument

Trachtenberg’s comprehensive and insightful essay helps clear up a number of important misunderstandings in the fields of history and political science. First, he shows that German officials’ prime motivation for their hard-line behavior in July 1914 was indeed their worries that Germany’s declining power position, especially relative to Russia, would leave it vulnerable to attack in the future. Security concerns, not domestic politics, were the key to German decision-making. A critical part of the Fischer’s original thesis—namely, that German leaders went to war at the peak of German power in order to resolve class conflict at home—is clearly incorrect. In fact, these leaders worried that war, even if victorious, would lead to the destruction of German and European civilization.⁴ Trachtenberg also nicely demonstrates that the German military did not expect the war to be short, nor was it terribly confident in victory. Despite this pessimism, German leaders nonetheless engaged in aggressive behavior in July 1914. Fears of Germany’s declining power position in the system drove this behavior—whether one sees this as a willingness to take the risk of general war to achieve more moderate

³ See Dale Copeland, “International Relations Theory and the Three Great Puzzles of the First World War,” in Jack S. Levy and John Vasquez, eds., *The Outbreak of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), chapters 3-4; Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), chapter 3.

⁴ See also Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, chap.3 on the evidence against the social imperialist argument.

ends such as a local war in the Balkans, as Trachtenberg does, or whether one believes that Berlin preferred continental war to even a contained Balkan war that led to Austria's crushing of Serbia, as I do.

The second major point that comes out of Trachtenberg's essay, which I also agree with, is that the German government 'went on the offensive' during the July crisis both diplomatically and militarily, and yet that it did so largely for 'defensive' reasons rooted in pessimism about the future. Moreover, the essay reinforces an important point of Fischer's that Berlin spent much of July 1914 seeking to cast the blame for any general war that might break out onto Russia. Trachtenberg contends that France, and to a lesser extent Russia, also adopted quite offensive postures. But his emphasis on Germany's hard-line behavior is important, since this means that Germany was at least one of the powers responsible for pulling the great powers into the abyss of total war. Whether it is the only one, the analysis below will help us sort out.

On a related point, Trachtenberg also nicely dispatches another important myth of traditional historical and international relations scholarship, namely, that military mobilization schedules forced the political leaders to take their nations into war (the 'ball-was-rolling-and-could-not-be-stopped' argument). Negotiations in the final days of July were not only still possible, they were still ongoing, as Trachtenberg notes. Leaders, in short, could have chosen to reach a negotiated solution. Why they failed to reach such a solution thus becomes a major unanswered question of historiography. I disagree with Trachtenberg's answer—that like the Cuban Missile Crisis, both sides were playing a dangerous game of chicken, and that sometimes leaders allow war to happen because the crisis itself reveals the true extent of the other's hostility and the necessity of standing up to its aggressive tactics. But getting the mobilization-caused-preemption argument off the table greatly simplifies our analytical task.

Finally, Trachtenberg's essay helps us see that the Russians, unlike the Germans, had no real interest in playing chicken over the Balkans in 1914, let alone in having the system fall into general war. While a few Russian officials might have talked about the need to increase Russian power by the taking of the Turkish Straits, the vast majority of top officials knew that their program to build up the Russian military (with French financial help) would not be completed until 1917 or after. They thus sought to buy time for this buildup, and had a good self-interested reason for wanting to avoid any major conflicts for at least a few more years. As in 1912-1913, St. Petersburg in 1914 was willing to defend the status quo in the Balkans if Austria looked poised to overturn it. But if one is looking for another country other than Germany who might have wanted general war in 1914, that country, Trachtenberg shows, would be France not Russia.⁵ Trachtenberg offers some important pieces of evidence revealing the extent to which some French (especially military) officials by July 1914 saw war as desirable, given the various options left open to France. Yet, as I will show below, this was not truly "preventive" thinking on the French part, but only a French concern about Russia (and Britain) leaving France in the lurch against the German juggernaut. Still, Trachtenberg helps to refocus our attention away from tangential arguments about Russian imperial desires in the Mediterranean, and put it back where it belongs: on the problem of war in the core European system.

⁵ Austria-Hungary certainly wanted a localized war in the Balkans that it could win quickly and at low cost. Yet it also clearly had no interest in a system-wide war that would lead to war with its biggest adversary, Russia. For this reason, through July 1914 Berlin continually worried that Vienna would get cold feet and back away from war with Serbia if that meant war with Russia.

The Problem with “the Trachtenberg Thesis”

I applaud Trachtenberg’s effort to provide a balanced analysis of the latest findings of the diplomatic historical literature, and to offer an argument rooted in the dynamics of crisis diplomacy that might help guide future research by both historians and political scientists. Once he has dispatched the specious arguments regarding Russian pan-Slavic aggression, German diversionary motivations, and military mobilization schedules, he seems by a process of elimination to arrive at a potentially new thesis for why the war ultimately occurred. The Germans, the French, and the Russians were willing to countenance the risk of a general war none of them desired because, at least for the Germans and French, now seemed a better time to wage it than later, if war was indeed inevitable. As the crisis itself revealed just how aggressive the adversary was, both sides resigned themselves to allowing the war to occur, because the possibility of fighting it later seemed even less palatable. The problem with the Trachtenberg’s argument is that he has not grappled with, let alone eliminated, the most important challenger to both his own thesis and the arguments of the new historiography: namely, the contention that the top German civilian leaders preferred general war from late June 1914 onward, and never wavered from their effort to bring on that war under optimal diplomatic and military circumstances, circumstances that were mostly of their own making.

The argument that Germany deliberately sought general war in 1914 requires that we deal with the two puzzles laid out in the introduction: why German leaders held the Austrians back from war in the Balkans in the winter of 1912-1913, and why Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August 1914, even though Berlin did not expect to be at war with Russia for many weeks. The difference between my argument and the Trachtenberg thesis can be elucidated by specifying the preference rankings of the main actors across five possible outcomes: the maintenance of the current status quo peace (“SQ”), a negotiated peace within the crisis (“NP”), a localized war in the Balkans only (“LW”), a continental war where the actor has support of its allies (“CWA”), and a continental war where a state has to fight without the support of allies (“CWW”).⁶ Critical to the Trachtenberg thesis is the notion that, prior to the onset of the July crisis, no actor preferred general war (i.e., continental or world war) to the status quo, but that at least some of the countries believed they could use the crisis to force concessions from their adversaries. Thus, as Trachtenberg emphasizes, the actors took the risk of general war in order to realize their strategic ends. They were pure ‘chicken’ actors. For the Germans, Trachtenberg stresses their desire to achieve a localized war that would help the Austrians reestablish their position in the Balkans. The Germans’ preference ranking in late June 1914 was thus

LW > NP > SQ > CWA > CWW

meaning that German leaders would risk continental to help the Austrians, but if forced to choose, would accept the current status quo to general war. The French and the Russians in late June also had, according to Trachtenberg’s reasoning, chicken preferences. Yet they saw the possibility of achieving a negotiated peace that forced the Austrians or Germans to swerve as worth the risk of total war:

NP > SQ > LW > CWA > CWW

⁶ For simplicity’s sake, for now I will leave aside the question of whether the actors believed Britain would get involved in the battle for supremacy on the continent (i.e., “world war”). I cover this in some detail in Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, chap.4.

or perhaps

NP > SQ > CWA > LW > CWW

if one sees Russia preferring general war to the crushing of its Serbian ally.

My position contends that Germany, alone among the key great powers, wanted general war in 1914 and therefore did not desire a return to the status quo, or even a negotiated peace or localized war that gave Austria most of what it wanted. Germany's preference ranking, driven by fears of the long-term rise of Russian economic and military power, was thus

CWA > LW > NP > SQ > CWW.

This ranking means that Berlin had strong reasons to make sure Russia mobilized its forces first so it could be blamed for the war. This would not only ensure Austria's participation on Germany's side, but also encourage the masses within Germany to support all-out war against the system. Note by this ranking, Germany is not a 'risk-taking' chicken actor as the United States was in the Cuban missile crisis, but rather a 'deadlock' actor that prefers a certain type of general war (continental war with Austrian support) to everything else.

How do we demonstrate that this latter ranking of preferences is the correct one? First, we need to show that when it came to Austria, the German leaders were well-aware that pushing Austria to go against Serbia would lead Russia to mobilize against Vienna, and that general war would then be difficult to prevent. In other words, we need to show that Berlin entered into the July crisis fully aware that localized war (LW) was extremely unlikely, and indeed was only a desirable fall-back outcome should continental war prove impossible to provoke.

In the Balkans crisis of 1912-1913, Germany's behavior toward Austria was the exact opposite of its policy in 1914, with Berlin restraining Vienna vis-à-vis Serbia rather than pushing it. There is a straight-forward reason for German leaders' moderation at this time: they did not believe that conditions were yet ripe for preventive war. So while they did want to help Austria shore up its regional position, Vienna was permitted to make aggressive moves only when it was clear that Russia would not intervene. By July 1914, with Germany's military power at its peak, Berlin's Balkans policy shifted to a hard-line stance which would force Russia to mobilize, thus thrusting the blame for major war on to Russian shoulders.

From December 1912 to March 1913, during the First Balkan War, both Austria and Russia remained in states of mobilization and military readiness on their common border. Yet an uncontrolled escalation to war was avoided. Why was the German military machine not mobilized in response to Russian mobilization, as in 1914? The answer is clear: the internal deliberations of December 1912 had made clear that Germany still needed more time to complete Germany's military buildup and to finish the construction of the Kiel Canal in the north.⁷ In January 1913, Austrian Foreign Minister Count Berchtold sent Friedrich von Szápáry on a secret mission to Berlin to clarify the German perspective. Szápáry was told that the Germans had no desire

⁷ Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, chap.3; Copeland, "International Relations Theory and the Three Great Puzzles of the First World War.

for war.⁸ Just to make sure Vienna got the message, however, both German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg and Army Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke sent letters to their respective Austrian counterparts. The Chancellor's letter on 10 February reminded Berchtold that "for Russia, with her traditional relationship to the Balkan states, it is almost impossible without an immense loss of prestige to be an inactive spectator of a military action on the part of Austria-Hungary against Serbia." Hence, "to bring about a forcible solution—even if many interests of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy were to urge it—at a moment when a prospect, even if only a distant one, opens up of settling the conflict in conditions essentially more favorable to us, would in my opinion be an error of incalculable magnitude."⁹

Moltke's letter to Austrian Army Chief of Staff Franz Conrad on 10 February, like the Chancellor's, did not advise the Austrians to abandon thoughts of war, but only to hold off until it could be fought under better circumstances. Significantly, Moltke's main concern was that Russia be blamed for any war so as to find an effective basis for the propaganda campaign back in Germany. "[A] European war must come sooner or later in which ultimately the struggle will be one between Germanism and Slavism," he told Conrad. "But the aggression must come from the Slavs."¹⁰ Thus the crisis which, in terms of mobilization, bore the closest parallel to July 1914, was resolved without war by mid-March 1913.

In late June 1914, the situation was different. Germany was now ready to launch a preventive war against the system. It thus used the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand to push Austria to attack Serbia, knowing that war with Russia would be highly likely. The German preference for general war from the start of the July crisis is shown by two comments made by Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg to his personal secretary Kurt Riezler, one on 6 July, the day after Austria had been given a blank check to destroy Serbia, and one on 8 July. On 6 July, Riezler records that Bethmann's news of the discussions with the Austrians "gives me an unnerving picture."

Russia's military power [is] growing rapidly; with the strategic extension [of Russian railways] into Poland the situation is untenable. Austria increasingly weaker and immobile... An action against Serbia can lead to a world war [*Weltkrieg*]. From a war, regardless of the outcome, the chancellor expects a revolution of everything that exists.... Generally, delusion all around, a

⁸ Samuel R. Williamson, *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 133.

⁹ Quoted in Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 436.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 437. Later that summer, when it again appeared that Vienna wanted to use a new Balkans war to intervene against Serbia, Chancellor Bethmann wrote Berchtold that Austria should let the Balkans states fight themselves. If Austria attempted to use force, then "it would mean a European war. This would most seriously affect the vital interests of Germany and I must therefore expect that before Count Berchtold make any such resolve, he will inform us of it." *Ibid.*, 456.

thick fog over the people.... The future belongs to Russia, which grows and grows, and thrusts on us a heavier and heavier nightmare.¹¹

This passage highlights three points. First, and most importantly, is the clear statement that general war was critical due to Russia's growth. Second, Bethmann was not pushing Germany towards war to solve a domestic crisis. Instead, he expected that war, regardless of whether Germany won or lost, would only increase the likelihood of social revolution at home. Third, Bethmann was aware even by 6 July that any great power war would likely be a general war, not a localized war in the Balkans.

Riezler's diary notes for 8 July speak more directly to German preferences. The Chancellor told Riezler that what happened after this point would depend on Austrian, Russian, and French behavior. "If the war comes from the East, so that we go to war for Austria and not Austria for us, then we have the prospect of winning it." But "if the war does not come because the czar does not want it or because an alarmed France counsels peace, then we still have the prospect [*so haben wir doch noch Aussicht*] of maneuvering the Entente apart over this matter."¹² Bethmann's comments not only express the expectation that general war was more likely than a localized war, but it reveals that the former was preferred to the latter. If war "comes from the East"—that is, if Russia is seen to be the initiator—then the Austrians would likely fall into line, and victory is possible. Yet if war was averted, Germany would "still" have the prospect of splitting the Entente. The "still" is critical here since it indicates that localized war was seen as the second-best outcome (as in: 'if we can't get A, then we can still get B'). Moreover, note that general war might be avoided not because Germany did not desire it, but because Russia, possibly restrained by France, might decide against intervention.

This takes us to the final days of July and the surprise German declaration of war on Russia on Saturday 1 August 1914. As I show elsewhere, Bethmann and Moltke had worked together to get the German military to hold off on mobilization until word was received that Russia had gone to general mobilization.¹³ On Friday morning, July 31, the news arrived that Petersburg had indeed taken this step (leading to the 'beaming faces' at military headquarters that Trachtenberg describes). By Friday afternoon, Bethmann was preparing an ultimatum and then a declaration of war against Russia that would make sure that there was no way for Russia and Austria to find a diplomatic solution to their stand-off. The ultimatum was dispatched to St. Petersburg that afternoon, telling the Russians to back down within twelve hours or face German mobilization. But Bethmann makes no mention that Berlin was preparing to follow a Russian rejection of the ultimatum with a declaration of war, as was already planned as the ultimatum was being drawn up.¹⁴

Berlin had to worry that Russia might back out by capitulating to Austrian demands. So by giving the Russians a short time-frame to back down from mobilizing, and then surprising them not with mobilization, but a declaration of war, Berlin would make it impossible for Austria and Russia to reach a negotiated peace.

¹¹ Kurt Riezler, *Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente*, ed. Karl D. Erdmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1972), 182-183.

¹² *Ibid.*, 184.

¹³ Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, chap.4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 105-114.

Notice that there was no military reason for declaring war until German forces were ready to attack Russia. Recognizing this, the civilian leaders kept the decision to declare war secret from all the top military leaders (except Moltke) until after it was a *fait accompli*. It also makes no sense to argue, as Bethmann tried with his outraged military, that Germany was compelled to follow international law, which required declarations of war before attacking.¹⁵ Considering the unannounced plunge into neutral Belgium three days later, this argument was clearly absurd. Moreover, Berlin deliberately held back the declaration of war against France, even though France was to be attacked weeks before Russia.¹⁶

One might think that this surprise declaration of war was just a bureaucratic screw-up. But we have two important pieces of direct evidence that show that it was a calculated act. A senior official in the German Foreign Office made a slip on 31 July. He admitted to a representative of a neutral power who then told George Buchanan, British ambassador in Petersburg, that “the only thing which [the German] Government fears was that Russia would, at the eleventh hour, climb down and accept [the ultimatum].”¹⁷ Even more damning is a comment by Army Chief of Staff Moltke, the only individual in the military informed of the plan to declare war on Russia.¹⁸ On 1 August, just after the Kaiser had signed the mobilization order, Moltke was recalled and told of an English promise to keep France neutral. Wilhelm, overjoyed with the idea that France would stay out of the war, called for an immediate halt to deployment in the west. Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller’s diary records Moltke’s emotional response:

This we cannot do; the whole army would fall into disarray and we would end all chances of winning. Besides, our patrols have already invaded Luxembourg and the division from Trier is immediately following up. All we need now is for Russia to back off as well [*Jetzt fehlte nur noch, dass auch Russland abschnappt*].¹⁹

Far from fearing Russian attack, Moltke is worried that Russia might also want peace! The fact that Moltke could say this in the presence of Germany’s most important civilian and military leaders, and that Müller records no reaction, suggests either that his opinion was already well-known, or that they agreed with it. Either way, it is clear that the biggest fear in Berlin in the last days of peace was not that war might occur, but that it might not.

Trachtenberg has what might seem to be a plausible response to the above: not only did some French military leaders also expressed ‘unconcealed joy’ at learning in late July that war was imminent, but French strategy was ‘also very offense-oriented from 1912 on.’ So even if, as Trachtenberg shows, there were almost no

¹⁵ Ibid., 112-13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 114-16.

¹⁷ Buchanan’s paraphrase, in *My Mission to Russia*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little Brown, 1923), 209.

¹⁸ As to why Moltke was the only military leader informed, and why he was so crucial to the whole plan for war, see Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, pp.112-114 and Copeland, “International Relations Theory and the Three Great Puzzles of the First World War.” On Moltke’s preventive war motivations, see Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Immanuel Geiss, ed., *Julikrise und Kriegsausbruch 1914*, vol. 2 (Hanover: Verlag, 1964), doc. 1000(d).

Russian officials by July 1914 who actually hoped for a war, many French officials, especially in the military, apparently welcomed the possibility. The problem with this argument is straight-forward. It takes the similarity in feelings and military posturing between two different sets of state officials and then jumps to the conclusion that their motivations and strategic thinking must have also been similar. Thus Trachtenberg suggests that both the German and the French leaders were driven by “preventive war” logics, believing that war now was better than war later.

Such an analytical leap is not justified. Preventive-war thinking is not, as Trachtenberg suggests, the idea that because general war is inevitable it is better that it be fought now rather than later. Rather, it is the notion that because my state is declining deeply in relative power and there is little I can do to avoid this decline, I must bring on war now rather than allow rising states to overtake me and attack me later with superior power. The first idea poses the givenness of general war as an exogenous fact, one that forces states to give up any hope that the status quo peace or a negotiated peace can be sustained. States are then left to maneuver over how the war will play out – most importantly in our case, whether they will have to fight a continental war without the support of their allies, or with it. True preventive war logic does not pose war as inevitable. Instead, leaders are forced to ask themselves: Should we choose to bring on general war now, or should we rest in the status quo, or accept a negotiated peace if it is offered us? In terms of our preference rankings, then, the first notion leaves the actor with highly truncated set of possible outcomes, namely, CWA (continental war with allies) versus CWW (continental war without allies). Needless to say, any actor facing an inevitable general war would prefer CWA to CWW. In true preventive thinking, however, state leaders must decide whether they prefer SQ (status quo) or NP (negotiated peace) to CWA, or whether they want to bring on a general war now to ‘prevent’ a continuation of the peace that is leading to decline.

It is clear by the evidence presented above, and by Trachtenberg’s own argument, that the Germans had true preventive-war concerns—they feared the long-term rise of Russian power, and therefore had to determine whether they should bring on war in 1914 or allow the peace to continue. They chose the former. And by the very act of so choosing, and indeed of signaling publicly for more than a year that a preventive war against the system might be necessary, they made the other actors in the system realize that war was indeed probably inevitable, precisely because Germany wanted it. Given that, France, the state that knew it would be the first to be attacked in any general war, had to ensure that it received immediate and all-out help from both its formal Russian ally and, if possible, from its entente partner, Britain. It is this fact that explains France’s desperate efforts in late July to make sure that the Russians were on board and would act quickly if it became clear that Germany was using the Balkans crisis to bring about its long-desired preventive war.²⁰

²⁰ Fear that France would have to face Germany alone in a general war had been a French obsession for decades, and it became especially pronounced after 1911 and the Agadir crisis. Thus, as Christopher Clark shows, the French made strong efforts during 1912 to signal to St. Petersburg that France would support Russia if it felt it had to stand up to the Austrians in the Balkans, and that France expected the same from Russia regarding the western front. At times French diplomatic language in 1912 seemed to suggest that France even wanted the Russians to bring on war in the Balkans so that the two allies could deal with the German threat. But through 1913 and 1914, as Clark’s work reiterates, French policy was oriented to providing loans that would help Russia complete its army buildup and railway construction, and to tightening alliance ties so that Russia would mobilize against the German frontier in the early stages of any general war. France itself passed a Three Year Law in the summer of 1913 to close the gap between the French and German armies, at least in size if not quality. Buying time for all these objectives was critical, and thus the overwhelming majority of key French decision-makers by June 1914 preferred to keep the peace for at least a couple

It is also this fact that leads Paris to an important action late in the July crisis that Trachtenberg's essay completely overlooks: namely, France's decision to pull its troops ten kilometers back from the border in late July/early August. This was designed to signal to French allies, in particular Britain, that France had no aggressive intent and that it had no desire to provoke Germany into a preemptive "shoot-first-to-avoid-being-shot" war.²¹ Needless to say, given that the French had come to see war as inevitable, they were simply trying to ensure that they fought it with their allies rather than without them. But that poses a larger question: Had the French not believed that war was inevitable because Germany wanted it, what would their overall preferences have been? It is, I think, perfectly clear that given that Russia was still growing (with French financial aid) and that its railway system would not be completed until 1917, the French knew they needed time to allow Russia to finish off its war preparations. In short, if peace could be maintained until 1917, such an outcome would have been greatly preferred in Paris, for the simple reason that Russia would by 1917 be that much more able to help split the superior Germany army in the early stages of general war. Thus if the status quo or peace option had still been on the table through June-July 1914, the French preferences would have been

SQ > NP > CWA > CWW

meaning that if Germany had restrained Austria in 1914 as it had done in 1912-1913, that would have been just fine with the French. Trachtenberg's evidence that some French officials 'preferred war' is mostly from late July, long after it had become clear that the status quo peace and even localized war were now off the table, due to German intransigence.

The French in late July thus did only what any rational actor would have done under the circumstances: they acted to ensure that their Russian allies would have the resolve to act and act quickly should Germany maneuver its forces for the attack on France, and they made sure the British and Russians could not blame France for provoking Germany into war. By pulling their troops back ten kilometers, they gave the Germans their last chance to show the world that they also preferred the status quo or negotiated peace to general war. Yet as the declaration of war on Russia on August 1 reveals, peace was the last thing the Germans wanted at that point. Accordingly, they got their forces ready for the plunge into Belgium and France, held off on a declaration of war against France "in the hope that the French will attack us,"²² and when the French did not oblige, simply proceeded with the execution of Moltke's revised Schlieffen Plan.

The French, as we have seen, were not thinking in preventive war terms, which places the initiation of general war above the continuation of the status quo or a negotiated peace. They simply wanted to fight the "inevitable war" on the best terms possibly, and thus were pleased to find that Russia was indeed mobilizing against Germany in support of France, and that the key officials in the British cabinet (in particular, Foreign

more years, as long as the Franco-Russian alliance remained strong. See Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 293-313, 351-352, 419-420.

²¹ Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, 115-116.

²² For Bethmann's note to the Kaiser on Sunday August 2, see Max Montgealas and Walter Schucking, eds., *The Outbreak of the World War: Documents Collected by Karl Kautsky*, trans. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), doc. 629. See Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, 115.

Secretary Sir Edward Grey) were becoming convinced of the need to help France should Germany attack. Only Germany wanted general war because of the belief that its long-term power position in the system was in deep and irreversible decline.

Conclusion

We have seen that once we detail the preference rankings of the various actors, there is only one state in the system that had clear ‘deadlock’ preferences for general war, and that state was Germany. German desires for war in 1914 were the direct result of fears of the rise of Russia. Given Russia’s size—three times Germany’s population and forty times its land mass—as well as growing French economic aid, it did not seem possible to stop its long-term economic and military growth. General war thus had to be initiated, even if victory was uncertain and war itself would likely cause a “revolution of everything that exists,” as Bethmann had predicted. Yet because the Germans were making this lesser-of-two-evils choice, the Russians and French by the end of July had to act as though peace was no longer an option. If war was indeed inevitable, given German choices, then the Entente powers had to make sure Germany did not pick them off one by one due to their own reluctance to fight a general war before Russia had completed its war preparations.

What does all this mean for the “insights” of the new historiography? This literature has done the field a service in showing that states other than Germany did indeed engage in risky actions in July 1914, actions that helped the Germans blame others for the war that only Germany wanted. But it has not shown that the key decision-makers within the Russian or even French governments were in general agreement that continental war was preferred to allowing peace to continue. And this is not surprising, since everyone knew that Russia was still growing in power and thus that the Entente should postpone general war until Russia had completed its military buildup and its all-important strategic railways. It was thus up to the Germans to decide whether to make war “inevitable” or not. In 1912-1913, they held the Austrians back to make sure they had completed their own war preparations and had a crisis that could shift blame onto Russia. In 1914, they were ready. They thus gave the Austrians a blank check, and pushed Vienna to choose the hardest line possible against Serbia, knowing that Russia would have to respond, as it had in 1912-1913, to protect its Serbian ally. The Germans then made sure that the Austrians and Russians would not find a diplomatic solution by declaring war on Russia weeks before they expected to truly engage the Russian army on the field of battle. They thus got the general war they wanted under the best possible circumstances—with Russia seemingly the aggressor, Austria committed to fighting on the Russian front, and Britain delaying deployment of its expeditionary forces in a vain hope that a negotiated peace might be achievable.

I’ve said this before in print, but let me say it again here. If an account of the origins of the First World War cannot explain the puzzles of why Germany held back the Austrians in 1912-1913 but pushed them in 1914, and why German civilian leaders would surprise the system (and their own military) with a declaration of war against Russia on 1 August 1914, then the account has no real explanation of the war.²³ Scholars can spend hundreds of pages detailing that there were certain officials in France and Russia who seemed to ‘want’ war as much as the Germans did by late July 1914. But this effort to diffuse the responsibility for the war across many states is fruitless if it is clear that France and Russia were responding to the fact that general war appeared inevitable anyway, because of Germany’s evident desire for it. Shoring up the cohesiveness of an alliance to fight a war that an adversary clearly wants is not the same as preferring general war to the status

²³ Copeland, “International Relations Theory and the Three Great Puzzles of the First World War.”

quo or a negotiated peace. And there was no consensus among decision-makers in France or Russia that war should be preferred to peace prior to the onset of the July crisis, and for good reason: the Entente needed to buy time for Russia's military growth. Interestingly, Trachtenberg and the new historians implicitly acknowledge this fact, since their focus is on the documents of the latter half of July—that is, once it became clear that war might indeed be inevitable, given German-Austrian actions. And since the evidence that key French and Russian officials wanted to initiate war prior to July 1914 is weak, they dilute the notion that Germany preferred general war to peace by arguing that German officials only took the risk of general war, but that they would have preferred localized war in the Balkans to everything else. Berlin officials thus stumbled into a war they didn't ultimately want, just as French and Russian officials did. The dynamics of the crisis were thus "responsible" for war, not Germany per se.

I have only provided a sampling of the evidence that shows both that the Germans did not think localized war likely, and that they only saw it as a fall-back outcome should general war prove impossible to provoke (because the Russians, perhaps given French caution, refused to take the bait).²⁴ But once we shift our perspective and see that the Germans were seeking general war from late June onward, our whole understanding of the war changes. We see that the Germans carefully manipulated the diplomatic exchanges to make sure that a negotiated peace would not be feasible. We see that they surprised Russia with a declaration of war to make sure Russia and Austria would not be able to reach an agreement that would prevent the war from going forward.

In the end, Trachtenberg has provided a solid review of the new historiography, and rightly shown that the social imperialist strand of Fischer's original thesis is without foundation. Yet in accepting that German leaders were indeed driven by preventive war motivations, he only reaffirms that they were in a "now or never" mind-set that made the choice of general war seem better than the choice of continued peace. And by summarizing the new literature's view that French and Russian officials felt war might be "inevitable," Trachtenberg only reinforces the fact that these officials knew that a peace that would allow for Russia's rise was now no longer in the cards, precisely because Germany would not allow it. Thus Paris and Petersburg made sure that their alliance was both strong and would react immediately should Germany proceed with war, knowing that if they did not hang together, they would surely hang separately.

Perhaps the irony of the new historiography is that, in its effort to 'spread the blame' across many states, it ends up reinforcing the fact that only Germany was responsible for the total war that broke out in early August 1914. Every political leader, and every international relations scholar, knows that war is never "inevitable" in the sense that it happens independently of human decision-making and policy choice. Trachtenberg nicely shows what the new literature reiterates, namely, that no mobilization schedules, no 'accidents,' no preemptive needs to shoot first, were driving the escalation process that led to actual war by August. So why would French and Russian officials believe, as the new historiography indicates, that war was inevitable by late July 1914? The only answer is: the preventive continental war that German leaders had been openly talking about in the German press for over a year was now very likely going to be a reality. In short, it was Germany's choice that made war "unavoidable" for the other players in the system. The other players thus adjusted their own decision-making to make sure war came about under the best possible conditions, and

²⁴ See Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, chapters 3-4.

given German military superiority and military plans, this meant prompt all-out mobilization in support of the larger allied cause.

The Fischer thesis in its social imperialist form may be dead. But in its preventive war dimension, it is alive and well. The amazing thing about a preventive war explanation for the First World War is that, by its very nature, it helps to explain not only why one state, the superior but declining state, would want to initiate general war against the system. It also explains why the rising states in the system would have a strong preference to let the status quo peace continue into the future. After all, they are increasing the strength of their alliance bloc, and thus have every reason to want to “buy time” to maximize their total power. This is exactly why the French and the Russians did not end up exploiting the First and Second Balkan Wars in 1912-1913 to initiate a continental war. It was up to the Germans, the senior partner in the German-Austrian relationship, to decide whether to use the Balkans as a means to bring on a more general war. On 5 July 1914, they did exactly that.

Response by Stephen A. Schuker, University of Virginia

Dust in The Eyes of Historians: A Comment on Marc Trachtenberg's "New Light."

Whenever a new synthetic essay by Marc Trachtenberg appears, international historians rejoice. Trachtenberg's knowledge of the literature in the twin fields of international history and international relations stands almost without peer. His command of the written language turns every one of his productions into an aesthetic pleasure. I have assigned his sparkling article on "The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment" to undergraduates for a quarter of a century.¹ Trachtenberg envisioned that earlier piece as an enterprise in intellectual housekeeping. Writers on strategy in the postwar period, from Hermann Kahn and Bernard Brodie to Thomas Schelling and on to the next generation of scholars, had developed their thinking about the workings of a multipolar international system partly by examining the origins of World War I.² One can imagine various systemic explanations for the outbreak of a war, namely how states relate to each other in a given international system. The alternative is a unit explanation, in which the policy adopted by one preponderant power effectively narrows the parameter of choice for others. Trachtenberg's great contribution was to show that the fashionable systemic explanations for the catastrophe of 1914 failed to comport with the facts.

The wartime British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, at the peak of his later infatuation with Adolf Hitler, wrote in his memoirs that "the nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay."³ None of them, he asserted, sought war on the scale that ultimately developed.⁴ Hostilities erupted, in his retrospective view, owing to a concatenation of signaling problems. The six major powers suffered from poor coordination between political and military authorities within each government, low levels of trust between countries, and faulty threat perception. In an era characterized by competing strains of nationalist and imperial ideology as well as rapid changes in military technology, misunderstanding of other powers' intentions and miscalculation of the possible consequences proved disastrous.

One can readily understand why in the 1950s this way of framing the problem would appeal to political scientists anxious to ensure that the Cold War between the superpowers did not turn accidentally into a shooting war. The establishment in 1963 of a Moscow-Washington "hotline"—an always-on teletype machine between the Kremlin and the Pentagon that would obviate slow communication or missed signals in the event of future crisis—derived in part from the preoccupation of strategist Thomas Schelling with

¹ "The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment," in his *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton, 1991), 47-99.

² For a useful compilation of writings on strategy in this era, see Marc Trachtenberg, ed., *The Development of American Strategic Thought, 1945-1969*, 6 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987-1988).

³ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, 6 vols., rev. ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1933-1937), 1:32.

⁴ On Lloyd George's own political evolution, so typical of British Liberals, see Stella Rudman, *Lloyd George and the Appeasement of Germany, 1919-1945* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011).

precluding the alleged miscalculations of 1914 as well as those of 1962.⁵ This focus on miscalculation and misunderstanding went so far that the U.S. government subsidized an early computer simulation in which participants were assigned to play the roles of the respective 1914 decision-makers. The exercise concluded that, given the evidence surveyed, on a rational basis the war was wrong to have broken out.⁶

Meanwhile, historical investigation of the origins of World War I had proceeded along a different trajectory. The great majority of citizens in Western Europe and the United States harbored no doubt in 1918 that Germany had deliberately caused the war (insofar as one employed the words ‘cause’ or ‘responsibility’ in their ordinary-language meaning without casuistic quibble). They also believed that, for four years, the Reich had carried out a sustained campaign of aggression both in east and west with unparalleled ferocity by the previous standards of advanced industrial societies. The Kaiser’s forces had committed gratuitous atrocities against civilians as well as the opposing armies. By simply brushing aside the idealized principles of international law they had, some thought, put themselves outside civilized limits. They had behaved, as Kaiser Wilhelm had said in an incautious speech at the time of the Boxer Rebellion, like “Huns.”⁷

No doubt one could argue that the European powers had all fallen short of ideal comportment in their previous colonial undertakings. The British naval blockade of the Reich had likewise breached traditional rules of engagement. All the same, the relentless annexationism of German governing authorities, acting with the overwhelming approval of domestic public sentiment, as well as the conduct of their occupation troops, seemingly belonged in a different category altogether. German activities in occupation stretched the notion of ‘military necessity,’ at least as critics saw it, to a point approaching national dishonor.⁸ To be sure, Allied propagandists, having discovered the power of mass communication for sustaining morale, exaggerated German failings disproportionately. Still, the policy of deporting Belgians for slave labor and the plans for ethnic cleansing of vast areas in Poland, though often disbelieved in the interwar period, eerily prefigured policies that the Nazis would adopt on a larger scale one generation later.

The social composition of German political elites and their geopolitical objectives evolved between the two world wars. Certain Social Darwinist assumptions about the country’s proper place in the world nevertheless carried over explicitly from the first conflict to the second.⁹ To examine the outbreak of war in 1914 as a

⁵ Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁶ Charles F. and Margaret G. Hermann, “An Attempt to Simulate the Outbreak of World War I,” *American Political Science Review* 61:2 (June 1967): 400-416.

⁷ John C.G. Röhl, *Wilhelm II. Into the Abyss of War and Exile, 1900-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 77; for the context, Sabine Dabringhaus, “An Army on Vacation: The German War in China, 1900-1901,” in Manfred F. Boemeke et al., eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 459-476.

⁸ Isabel V. Hull argues in *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 6-43, 187-191, that German imperialists in Southwest Africa had already acted qualitatively more brutally than did other Europeans.

⁹ Hitler evidently never read Darwin, or even the work of his racist German popularizer, Ernst Haeckel. Robert J. Richards, *Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 192-242. Most of the German elite, however, acquired familiarity with

bloodless exercise in cabinet diplomacy excludes an essential component of the story as contemporaries saw it. Professor Trachtenberg's suggestion in his most recent essay that no absolute standard exists for making moral judgments when nations conflict, a subject to which I shall later return, would have made little appeal to Allied statesmen forced to defend their countries in 1914. In short, World War I quite properly took on from the outset an ideological and moral meaning that the limited conflicts of the nineteenth century, however destructive, did not. Even Kaiser Wilhelm, describing the war in June 1918 as a fight between two distinct world views (*Weltanschauungen*), emphasized the difference: "Either the Prusso-German-Teutonic world philosophy—justice, freedom, honor, and virtue—must in honor prevail, or the Anglo-Saxon alternative, falling prey to the worship of filthy lucre. In that struggle, one or the other world view must necessarily be overcome."¹⁰

The Allied statesmen who convened at Versailles in 1919 considered Germany guilty beyond question of taking advantage of a Balkan crisis in order to launch a Continental war and of holding rigidly to such expansive war aims as to make a compromise settlement impossible. The victors decided on prudential grounds, however, not to include an explicit war-guilt clause in the peace treaty. Instead, setting forth a tort to establish a legal predicate for reparations, they crafted Article 231. That article obliged the German government to accept mere civil—as opposed to criminal—responsibility for causing the losses suffered by their nationals "as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies."¹¹ The follow-on treaty provisions acknowledged that the Reich could not cover the full bill and would only have to make compensation up to its capacity to pay. Yet the Germans, who had expected up to autumn 1918 to win the war and dictate a Carthaginian peace in the west as they had earlier done in the east, reacted with unadulterated outrage.

After the Scheidemann cabinet and most of the Peace Conference delegation resigned, the fledgling Weimar regime cobbled together a successor team prepared to sign the Versailles Treaty at the last minute to ward off an invasion. But hardly anyone in political circles intended to fulfill its terms, least of all those applying to reparations. The Berlin government fastened on what it inaccurately called the 'war-guilt clause' as a stain upon its honor, and it used an aberrant interpretation of that clause instrumentally as a means to undermine the treaty as a whole. The *Auswärtiges Amt* created an entire division to combat war guilt. That unit published forty volumes of heavily edited documents reaching back to 1871, subsidized learned and popular journals

the ideas of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1899), and Hitler and Goebbels, like Prince Max of Baden and other Wagnerians earlier, came particularly to admire him.

¹⁰ Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction, op. cit.*; idem., *A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law during the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Larry Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Richard Cobb, *French and Germans, Germans and French: A Personal Interpretation of Two Occupations, 1914-1918/1940-1944* (Hanover: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 1983); Imanuel Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen* (Lübeck: Matthiesen, 1960); Werner Basler, *Deutschlands Annexionspolitik in Polen und im Baltikum, 1914-1918* (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1962); Christian Westerhoff, *Zwangsarbeit im Ersten Weltkrieg: Deutsche Arbeitskräftepolitik im besetzten Polen und Litauen, 1914-1918* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012). For the quotation from the Kaiser, see Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961), 838.

¹¹ Foreign Office, *The Treaty of Versailles between the Allied & Associated Powers and Germany (with amendments)* (London: HMSO, 1925).

devoted to the cause, and lavishly funded private scholars who deemed the Versailles imputation unfair.¹² Meanwhile, the most unremitting of the wartime annexationists developed a remarkable amnesia about the political positions that they had espoused just a few years earlier. The labors of the subsidized propagandists and the efforts of the Weimar regime's opponents to conjure up an alternative image of a heroic past proved wildly successful in misleading public opinion abroad as well as at home. Not everyone accepted General Erich Ludendorff's assertion that Germany had almost won the war until stabbed in the back by Jews and Socialists on the home front. Yet few dared to challenge the equally false narrative that the Allies had entered into a pre-Armistice agreement and then betrayed their word.

In retrospect, the majority of specialists today consider the Versailles treaty a reasonable compromise among conflicting interests. That document treated Germany with relative moderation, surely compared with the terms that Germany would have imposed had the fortunes of war turned the other way. The treaty also figured as a flexible instrument that allowed for modification as time went on.¹³ Within a few years after 1919, however, a completely ahistorical wave of revulsion against the peace settlement gained traction, particularly in the English-speaking countries. The demographic and material losses proved so overwhelming that most people stopped considering what would have happened had Germany prevailed and put its own radical peace program into effect.

In the United States, a powerful current of opinion maintained that the country should have stayed out of war altogether; in Great Britain, some members of the younger generation ventured the view that their country had fought on the wrong side.¹⁴ Some bizarre effusions along this line still receive a respectful reception today.¹⁵ The public mood changed with startling rapidity. By 1925 Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, who in 1919 had barely escaped indictment as a war criminal, achieved international acceptance as Reich President, while Gustav Stresemann, once tagged as "Ludendorff's young man" because of his voluble parliamentary support for annexationism, had become a much-admired Foreign Minister in line for the Nobel Peace Prize.¹⁶ Characteristically, Stresemann, like so many contemporaries, never repented. In the last speech before his death, he asserted that the war had broken out through misunderstanding in which

¹² Holger Herwig, "Clio Deceived: Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany after the Great War," *International Security* 12 (October 1987): 5-44; also Herman Wittgen, *The German Foreign Office Campaign against the Versailles Treaty. An Examination of the Kriegsschuldreferat in the United States*. PhD diss., University of Washington, 1979.

¹³ Manfred Boemeke et al., eds., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment After Seventy-Five Years* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ See, for example, Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to All That* (London: Penguin, 1929); Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (London: Gollancz, 1934); also Selig Adler, *The Isolationist Impulse: Its Twentieth-Century Reaction* (London and New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1957).

¹⁵ See Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

¹⁶ On Ludendorff's "young man," see Jonathan Wright, *Gustav Stresemann: Weimar's Greatest Statesman* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 67.

Germany played the smallest part. Ideally, he opined, the Allies should refund all reparation payments with interest.¹⁷

In these circumstances, the asseverations of German propagandists about war origins fell on fertile soil. To put the ongoing controversy over war aims and Professor Trachtenberg's two contributions to it in proper perspective, it is helpful to keep in mind the extent to which changing judgments on 1914 have tracked contemporary politics. The constructive leadership that the Federal Republic of Germany exercises in Europe today makes it hard to conceive that the Reich acted according to quite different precepts a century ago. The seeming democratization of the Weimar Republic made a similar good impression in the 1920s, and scholars pounced on each new volume of *Die grosse Politik* as it wended its way across the Atlantic.¹⁸ The competing British and French foreign-policy documentary series, begun retrospectively in 1926 and 1929 as the German collection approached completion, never quite caught up in the court of public opinion. Serious historians like Sidney B. Fay of Harvard sought to exploit the mass of documents fairly, but often displayed credulity about German claims. Meanwhile, fluent popular writers such as Harry Elmer Barnes, piggy-backing on Fay's work, won a wide following with less scrupulous accounts that fanned public prejudices.¹⁹ Bernadotte Schmitt succeeded in reaching a more balanced conclusion from the fragmentary data at hand, but he wrote at such tedious length that few outside the academy paid close attention.²⁰ In England during the same period, a few unreconstructed generalists continued to hold that Wilhelmine Germany's "arrogant megalomania and instinctive preference for methods of violence" had set off the war, but the Germanophile instincts of Chatham House set the predominant tone among international-affairs specialists.²¹

Idealists on the left in both countries nurtured exaggerated hopes for the League of Nations, and that enthusiasm combined with a mania for disarmament to produce the credulous assumption that armaments in and of themselves generate wars.²² In the United States Senate, the Nye Committee hearings, chaired by

¹⁷ Sitzung des Reichsausschusses, 30 Sept. 1929, *Nationalliberalismus in der Weimarer Republik: Die Führungsgremien der Deutschen Volkspartei 1918-1933*, ed. Eberhard Kolb et al., Pt. 2 (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1999), 837-863.

¹⁸ *Die grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette, 1871-1914. Sammlung der diplomatischen Akten des Auswärtigen Amtes*, ed. Johannes Lepsius et al., 40 vols. (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte m.b.h., 1922-1927).

¹⁹ Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1926-1929), Harry Elmer Barnes, *The Genesis of the World War: An Introduction to the Problem of War Guilt*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1926-1938).

²⁰ Bernadotte Schmitt, *The Coming of the War, 1914*, 2 vols. (New York and London: C. Scribner's Sons, 1930).

²¹ T.G. Otte, "'Outcasts from History': The Fischer Controversy and British Historiography," *Journal of Contemporary History* [hereafter *JCH*] 48:2 (2013), 383.

²² Donald S. Birn, *The League of Nations Union, 1918-1945* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Peter J. Yearwood, *Guarantee of Peace: The League of Nations in British Policy, 1914-1925* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Gerald Nye of North Dakota, served to propagate the conclusion—notwithstanding strong empirical evidence to the contrary—that in 1917 munition makers and international bankers had maneuvered the country into taking part in an obscure quarrel not America’s own.²³

In English-speaking countries, not surprisingly, school curricula followed public fashion. The younger generation came to believe as an article of faith that World War I had broken out owing to the conveniently disembodied forces of militarism, imperialism, nationalism, or international anarchy (that is to say, the absence of a functioning international organization). The ‘merchants of death,’ so schoolchildren learned, had fanned the flames of conflict. Statesmen of all countries had fallen into the trap although the common people fated to suffer all longed for peace.

During World War II Anglo-American opinion underwent another course correction, albeit by no means a rapid one. Some historians began to emphasize elements of continuity between the Second and the Third Reich. Sir Lewis Namier found that, in contrast to the Western parliamentary regimes, Germany had never developed a viable democratic tradition. The avatars of the 1848 Frankfurt Assembly had routinely placed a malignant form of exclusive nationalism above liberalism.²⁴ Later writers would enlarge on this concept of a German *Sonderweg*, or special path of development. A.J.P. Taylor wrote provocatively in *The Course of German History* that the Nazi regime “represented the deepest wishes of the German people.”²⁵ Still, the so-called war guilt clause of the Versailles Treaty remained for a time in ill repute.

Then, in 1950, mostly using public sources, Hans Gatzke published his remarkable Harvard Ph.D. dissertation showing that Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg and his World War I successors, acting with public approval except among a fringe of Independent Socialists, had indeed sought through calculated aggression to achieve permanent hegemony in Europe.²⁶ Gatzke’s work, however, found no palpable echo in the Federal Republic. Nor did the three volumes on war origins by Luigi Albertini, which never appeared in German at all.

Trachtenberg considers Albertini’s compendious volumes the gold standard for studies appearing before Fischer’s discoveries in the German archives. Doubtless he is right. After his dismissal as editor of the Liberal newspaper *Corriere della Sera* in 1925, Albertini dedicated the rest of his life to a painstaking study of war origins. With a single associate who knew German, he interviewed many participants. Despite its virtues, however, Albertini’s *magnum opus* could not take account of the sources made available subsequent to 1941 that permitted Fischer to revolutionize the field. Albertini’s work only appeared in English between 1952 and

²³ Walter Millis, *Road to War: America, 1914-1917* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1935); John E. Wiltz, *In Search of Peace: The Senate Munitions Inquiry, 1934-1936* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963).

²⁴ Lewis Bernstein Namier, *1848: The Revolution of the Intellectuals* (London: Cumberlege, 1944).

²⁵ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of Germany since 1815* (London: Methuen, 1945).

²⁶ Hans W. Gatzke, *Germany’s Drive to the West* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1950).

1957, and recognition of its merits came slowly.²⁷ This brief publishing history helps explain why many American political scientists in the 1960s and beyond, when using the outbreak of war in 1914 as a test case of their theories, tended to rely on oft-repeated misstatements of facts or misconstruction of evidence.

When trying to reestablish a 'useable past' in the early postwar Federal Republic, most German academics found it convenient to treat the Nazi period as an aberration. They longed to banish rather than to come to terms with the less happy ghosts of previous decades. An astonishingly high percentage of the postwar intellectual and political establishment covered up its earlier enthusiastic membership in the Nazi party and institutions.²⁸ Fritz Fischer's discoveries therefore struck like a bombshell. Fischer's personal biography shines light on the psychological background to the interpretive controversy. The son of a clerk and grandson of a peasant—an unusual background for a professor in highly stratified interwar society—Fischer set out in the turbulent later 1920s to study Lutheran theology at the University of Berlin. He found himself attracted to the German youth movement at a time when left-wing Nazis' aspirations for a more egalitarian social structure ran parallel in some respects to the communitarian impulses that informed his religious convictions.²⁹ On a class basis, Fischer came to despise (and continued all his life to disdain) the conservative-nationalist and socially restrictive orientation of his high-bourgeois elders who occupied the commanding heights of the historical profession.³⁰

Those sentiments, reinforced by careerist self-interest, possibly suggest why Fischer joined the Nazi Party (NSDAP) in 1938 and avoided the slightest crisis of conscience either as a rising professor in Hamburg or as a soldier on the Eastern front. His two-year postwar experience as a POW and sustained interchanges with British and American academics, however, transformed him. Those encounters led him not only to repudiate the Nazi belief-system and historical world-view completely, but to perceive the Third Reich as a seamless prolongation of a deeply flawed conservative-nationalist tradition that had characterized German public life for a century or more. As an apologetic and 'restorationist' ideology came once more to dominate the history profession in West Germany, Fischer stood as a natural outsider. That stance allowed him to assume the task of examining the plethora of previously closed archival sources for the Kaiser's war fortuitously opened in the mid-1950s and to report without equivocation '*wie es eigentlich gewesen.*'

Trachtenberg makes much of the small exaggerations or inconsistencies in wording that he discerns in Fischer's two big books. The circumstances in which Fischer labored allows us to relativize such infelicities. Fischer began his archival investigations in 1955-1956, shortly after the Allies returned the originals or microfilms of records that they had seized in 1945. As the overwhelming primary-source bibliography in *Griff*

²⁷ Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols. (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1952-1957).

²⁸ Malte C. Herwig, *Die Flakhelfer: wie aus Hitlers jüngsten Parteimitgliedern Deutschlands führende Demokraten wurden* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2013).

²⁹ Although a commonplace today, the idea that National Socialism contained a pronounced egalitarian strain seemed heretical when David Schoenbaum proposed it in *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).

³⁰ See the insightful contribution by Stephan Petzold, "The Social Making of a Historian: Fritz Fischer's Distancing from Bourgeois Conservative Historiography, 1930-60," *JCH* 48:2 (2013): 271-289.

nach der Weltmacht demonstrates, Fischer traveled incessantly in the years 1957-1960, accompanied only by a secretary and his faithful assistant, Imanuel Geiss, who gathered the materials for a parallel two-volume set of documents.³¹ Facilities for copying were rudimentary. As anyone who worked behind the Iron Curtain in the creaky Potsdam and Merseburg repositories can attest, living conditions remained primitive, the food close to inedible. Even those possessed of the sternest Prussian virtues must have felt some temptation to cut corners. By any reasonable measure, Fischer's accomplishment rates as heroic, but no solitary scholar could have processed that volume of material himself. Luckily, Fischer could draw (for both his major books) on complementary research by devoted post-doctoral assistants, including Helmut Böhme on the social and economic background, Peter-Christian Witt on finance, Dirk Stegmann on party politics, Klaus Wernecke on public opinion, Peter Borowski on the Ukraine, and Pogge von Strandmann on Bethmann Hollweg and the Pan-Germans. These scholars all rose to preeminence in the next generation, and one can properly speak of them collectively as a 'Fischer school.'

As a firm believer in traditional Rankean methodology, Fischer set out without polemical intent. *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, in his original formulation, meant simply a striving for world power on a par with that of Great Britain and the United States. Fischer attributed to Germany no more than 'a considerable part' of responsibility for causing the war. After another decade of research for *Krieg der Illusionen*, during which time he widened his methodological lens to take more account of the press, party politics, economic pressure groups, and the intangibles of public opinion, he became ever more certain that Berlin bore 'primary' responsibility for the catastrophe. The governing classes as a whole, he found, had purposefully aimed at a 'Greater Germany' at least from 1897 onward. Bethmann Hollweg's 'policy of the diagonal,' whatever his ponderation and private virtues, made him ineluctably into the true representative of the combined élites that sought European hegemony, in the final analysis through an appeal to arms.³²

Accordingly, Fischer rewrote the opening chapters in a new edition of the 1914-1918 book to reflect that considered judgment. Note that Fischer's first volume tops the scale at 900 pages of small type; his second book on 1911-1914 weighs in at 800 pages with an abbreviated scholarly apparatus. Warned that Anglophone readers consider such prolixity self-indulgent, Fischer and his team cut the English translation in each case by one-third. Some criticisms voiced by Trachtenberg may reflect compressions and debatable translations.³³

³¹ Imanuel Geiss, *Julikrise und Kriegsausbruch 1914: eine Dokumentensammlung*, 2 vols. (Hannover: Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschehen, 1963). The English-language version that appeared in 1968 contains only half of the original.

³² For a uniquely balanced assessment of Bethmann's merits and deficiencies as a leader, see T. G. Otte, "The Limits of the Possible: Some Reflections on Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg and the July Crisis of 1914," H-German Forum, 17 Dec. 2014, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/35008/discussions/55746/ann-h-german-forum-first-world-war-otte-december-2014>.

³³ Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschlands, 1914/18* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961), rev. ed. 1971), English abbreviation, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1967); *Krieg der Illusionen. Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1969), English abbreviation, *War of Illusions: German Policy from 1911 to 1914* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975). Subsequently, Fischer's convictions became ever more certain, though he did not live to flesh out fully his thesis of the continuity in

Evidently, Fischer did not fully anticipate the public storm that would arise when he burst into print in 1961. Yet surely he must have intuited what to expect from his senior professional colleagues. Denazification at German universities did not progress very far during the first two decades after World War II. No transformative *Stunde Null* took place in the academic ranks. The national-conservative historians who still occupied—or reoccupied—the major chairs continued to admire the achievements of Prussia and to venerate the virtues of the *Kaiserreich*. Many who would mount the barricades against the Fischer thesis sought themselves to finesse a dubious past. Some voluble critics, like Egmont Zechlin of Hamburg, Theodor Schieder of Cologne, and Werner Conze of Heidelberg had themselves taken a considerable part in crafting National-Socialist policies for Eastern Europe. The Clausewitz biographer Hans Rothfels of Tübingen had failed to win the honorary Aryan status he craved, but likewise considered Prussian militarism and all of its emanations beyond reproach.

Gerhard Ritter of Freiburg, who spearheaded the initial attack on Fischer in the flagship journal, the *Historische Zeitschrift*, possessed the necessary gravitas and political cover to assume the lead because he had had fortuitously taken a minor role in the 1944 aristocratic putsch against Hitler.³⁴ The quintessential national-conservative grandee, Ritter had always admired the authoritarian state (though not military supremacy), and he remained at heart a monarchist. He had written admiring biographies of Martin Luther, Frederick the Great, and the Prussian reformer, Baron vom Stein.³⁵ Although sympathetic to Nazi foreign policy at least through 1940, Ritter at length became alienated on religious grounds owing to *Gleichschaltung* of the Lutheran church. He consistently advocated the idea of Greater Germany, but claimed to find no parallel in execution between 1914 and 1939.

Whatever Fischer purported to have discovered in the files for the earlier period, Ritter vehemently denied that the documents spoke for themselves. Fischer had not only cherry-picked his citations, Ritter charged, but he had interpreted every disputed point to the detriment of his own country. Ritter categorically repudiated the notion that Berlin had nurtured a concrete plan to dominate Europe in 1914; on the contrary, the Reich had found itself surrounded by enemies with ‘enormous’ armaments in a series of crises from 1905 onward. One cannot take the bellicose marginal notations of Kaiser Wilhelm on dispatches seriously, he contended, nor confuse General Helmuth von Moltke’s understandable threat perception with bellicosity. Bethmann had acted defensively to maintain the status quo by supporting his country’s sole credible ally. In retrospect, the Habsburg Empire might not have possessed the internal strength to survive, but at the time one could hardly tolerate drawn-out negotiations or show weakness in the greater German cause. Although deficient in sure political instincts and often plagued by doubts, the always honorable Bethmann, in Ritter’s telling, had never

German history from Bismarck to Hitler. See his abbreviated exposition of the *Sonderweg* thesis in *Bündnis der Eliten: zur Kontinuität der Machtstrukturen in Deutschland, 1871-1945* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1979).

³⁴ “Eine neue Kriegsschuldthese? Zu Fritz Fischers Buch, ‘Griff nach der Weltmacht,’” *Historische Zeitschrift* 194:3 (1962): 646-668. For a sympathetic analysis of Ritter’s works and accomplishments, see Klaus Schwabe, intro. and ed., *Gerhard Ritter. Ein politischer Historiker in seinen Briefen* (Boppard, 1984), 1-170, this episode addressed, 144-153.

³⁵ Gerhard Ritter, *Luther, Gestalt und Symbol* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1925); *Luther, Gestalt und Tat* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1947); *Stein: eine politische Biographie*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1931); *Friedrich der Grosse: ein historisches Profil* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1936).

sought a preventive war. Rather, he had striven for localization until the military timetable, notwithstanding his sincere efforts, drew him into wider hostilities.

Summoning his own youthful memories, Ritter insisted that his educated contemporaries had innocently favored the beneficent expansion of German economy and culture in order to shield Central Europe from American protective tariffs. They in no way shared the crude pretensions of the Pan-German League. The carefully articulated war aims of 1914-1918 thus amounted, as he portrayed them, to nothing more than the 'pipe dreams of patriotic Germans.' One can readily understand in psychological terms why the conservative grandees would cling to those positions in the *Historikerstreit* that raged in the press and at professional conferences over the next few years. If Fischer had gotten the story right, they not only had to fear social displacement, but the basic convictions on which they had integrated their lives also could scarcely survive.³⁶

Ritter's broadside set off a fierce debate in the Federal Republic pitting the pillars of the historical profession, who echoed Ritter with less substantive knowledge, against Fischer and a small group of younger acolytes, supported by the German weekly *Der Spiegel* and scattered non-professional opinion journals. Few people actually bought the book: only half the first printing sold within a year. Discussion focused not so much on the continuity of German war aims between 1914 and 1918, although surely that had a bearing on what came earlier, as on the opening chapters concerning war origins. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) political establishment perceived Fischer's narrative as a serious danger to the good name of the Federal Republic. Theodor Schieder, editor of the *Historische Zeitschrift*, telephoned the Auswärtiges Amt to warn of "national catastrophe." The reverberations of his demarche went as high as State Secretary Karl Carstens, a former SA and party member and later president of the Bundesrepublik, who after an in-house review denounced Fischer's 'untenable theses.'³⁷

In 1964 the issue revived in an acute fashion because the Washington embassy proposed to sponsor Fischer for an American lecture tour. Karl-Dietrich Erdmann of Cologne, a silky-smooth establishment historian of the younger generation with excellent CDU connections despite a brown-flecked past, pressed the government to cancel funding until a congress of historians could meet to refute the Fischer heresy. Gerhard Ritter, phoning Foreign Minister Gerhard Schröder directly, called Fischer's calumny worse than the war-guilt clause at Versailles. The matter came up in the Bundestag. The government withdrew the subsidy, but eventually twelve leading American historians of Germany arranged for the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) to sponsor the tour. When I met Fischer at a Harvard reception given by my thesis adviser, William L. Langer, he struck me as a mild-mannered and self-effacing scholar who could not quite fathom the obloquy that had come his way. At Yale, somewhat intimidated, he even expressed sympathy for Bethmann Hollweg's predicament.

³⁶ Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," *JCH* 48:2 (April 2013): 251-270; Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Schwabe et al., *Gerhard Ritter. Ein politischer Historiker in seinen Briefen*; Hans-Ulrich Wehler, ed., *Deutsche Historiker* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969).

³⁷ I take this and the following paragraphs from Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer controversy," *ibid.*

The agitation in the Federal Republic nevertheless spiraled onward. Chancellor Ludwig Erhard seized the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Hitler's attack on Poland to reiterate that no major power bore 'sole guilt' for the outbreak of war in 1914; Bundestag President Eugen Gerstenmaier piled on by denouncing the 'self-flagellating fraternity' that dared to make comparisons between Germany's bid for hegemony in the first war and the second. Among dispassionate historians abroad, the book nonetheless made its way.

At the German Historical Congress in October 1964, Fritz Stern of Columbia University carried the day by asking whether one could plausibly describe modern German history as a series of industrial accidents without wondering whether something had not gone wrong with the enterprise as a whole. Gerhard Ritter sniffed predictably: "what can this American from nowheresville (*hergelaufene Amerikaner*) tell us about German history?"³⁸ All the same, over the following decades, one variant or another of the Fischer thesis came to dominate historical interpretation, at least in the English-speaking world. And so it still does, despite unconvincing challenges at the margin today.

Professor Trachtenberg rehearses an impression vouchsafed by the eminent Jonathan Steinberg, who chaired a conference on the subject in 2013, that "the Germans look less guilty, the others conspicuously more."³⁹ The published papers from that conference, however, hardly impugn the Fischer thesis; they simply shift attention to countries heretofore less studied. Admittedly Fischer and his students, for all their zeal in bringing new documentation to light, remained methodologically conventional. While Fischer widened the scope of inquiry in his second book to embrace party politics, pressure groups, and public opinion, he took for granted that ultimately decisions made by those at the top of bureaucratic hierarchies (whether civilian, military, or industrial in nature) constitute the raw materials for history; he did not anticipate the 'cultural turn' of the next academic generation or explore the impalpable aspirations of societies from the bottom up. Nor did Fischer address the post-modern challenge to objectivity. He never inquired whether one can ever assert apodictically that a confluence of historical events led to a predetermined outcome.⁴⁰

When Trachtenberg cites the social historian Richard Evans, however, as proclaiming *ex cathedra* that the Fischer thesis is "almost dead," one senses the impatience of an expert on pestilence, feminism, and family with the tedious minutiae of diplomacy. The cutting edge of the profession has moved on, as a sampling of recent scholarship confirms. Certainly, insightful cultural history can fill in the chiaroscuro behind diplomatic events.⁴¹ Yet when Jay Winter's authoritative *Cambridge History of the First World War* allots perhaps half its

³⁸ Pogge von Strandmann, "Fischer Controversy," 268. The translation is my own.

³⁹ Jonathan Steinberg, "Old Knowledge and New Research: A Summary of the Conference on the Fischer Controversy," *JCH* 48:2 (2013), 245.

⁴⁰ Annika Mombauer, "The Fischer Controversy. Documents and the 'Truth' about the Origins of the First World War," *JCH* 48:2 (April 2013): 290-314.

⁴¹ For a good example, see Holger Herwig and David Stevenson, eds., *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

space to social and cultural matters on which the populations of various countries tended to have converging experiences lending themselves to homogenization, one wonders whether some perspective has gotten lost.⁴²

If one asks narrowly whether the specific documents discovered by Fischer have stood the test of time, it is hard to dispute that they have. John Röhl, who provides a minutious hour-by-hour account of the July crisis in his exhaustive 1,500 page biography of Kaiser Wilhelm for this period, concludes that “the prime responsibility of the German and Austro-Hungarian governments for precipitating the Great War in July 1914 is no longer seriously questioned.”⁴³ Röhl musters extraordinary emotional power in showing how a small coterie of civilian and military officials in Berlin, convinced believers all in the Social-Darwinist imperative of a Teuton struggle against the Slav, made a decision with malice aforethought to encourage and indeed to demand Austrian military action against Serbia in July 1914. In doing so, they took an explicit risk of a Continental war with the probable involvement of England. And as Röhl demonstrates on the basis of diaries and letters that have recently become available, the impulse for war did not result from this or that fateful choice by the chancellor during the crisis, but rather from a “long meditated decision-making process” through which the Court, the Wilhelmstrasse, the generals and admirals, the entire political elite, and even the liberal Jewish grandees in the press had reached a broad consensus. Röhl’s demonstration ought to persuade even those generally skeptical of conspiracy theories. Insofar as anything can be sure in history, this looks like an open-and-shut case.⁴⁴

We have known ever since bowdlerized excerpts from the diary of Bethmann’s amanuensis, Kurt Riezler, appeared in 1972 that the Chancellor held the conviction, despite characterological trepidation, that the time had come to strike: “If war doesn’t come, if the Tsar doesn’t want it or a distraught France advises peace, we still have the prospect of using this maneuver to break the Entente apart.”⁴⁵ Konrad Jarausch’s 1973 biography, notwithstanding the disappearance of Bethmann’s private papers, provides additional insight into the Chancellor’s lugubrious outlook in the wake of his wife’s death, his obsessive fear of Russia, and his determination to go forward because any successor would handle the contending pressures worse. Bethmann, like most of his contemporaries, believed both in Social Darwinist struggle and Hegelian historical determinism. “A fate greater than human power,” he declared, shaped his actions.⁴⁶ Riezler had recently explained, in a high-toned academic book written under a pseudonym with Bethmann’s imprimatur, that

⁴² See J.M. Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For Winter’s basic orientation, see also his *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War and European Cultural History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴³ John G.C. Röhl, *William II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile*, 911.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 980-1109.

⁴⁵ Kurt Riezler, *Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente*, ed. K.D. Erdmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972 (8 July 1914)). See also the new formulation summarized by Röhl in his introduction (“Bethmann Hollweg und die Vorgeschichte des Weltkriegs”) to Kurt Riezler, *Aus dem Grossen Hauptquartier. Kurt Riezlers Briefe an Käthe Liebermann, 1914-1915*, ed. Guenther Roth and John G.C. Röhl (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016), 39.

⁴⁶ *The Enigmatic Chancellor: Bethmann Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 149-184. See also Bethmann’s other private comments to Riezler at his Hohenfinow estate during the crucial weeks.

Germany stood in a zero-sum conflict with England. If the Reich could not exploit other powers' fear of war to expand, it stood ineluctably fated to decline.⁴⁷

Additional confirmation has come with the belated discovery of Riezler's private letters to his fiancée expressing admiration for Bethmann's preternatural skill in setting the stage for war (*Inszenierung*) without his hand showing openly. The war was not exactly intended, Riezler explains, but nevertheless "taken into account," and it had "broken out at the most favorable moment."⁴⁸ The amanuensis provides still more insight into the "tragic" circumstances that made it impossible to withdraw from Belgium or Poland following the opening moves. German troops had behaved like "the worst barbarians," so that one could never dare to set those countries free.⁴⁹

Of course, Trachtenberg did not have access to the latest Riezler materials. Yet he might have noted the relative paucity of fresh evidence on German policy pointing credibly the other way. In fact, if one compares the documents on war origins published by Imanuel Geiss in 1963 with the excellent new collection brought together by Annika Mombauer fifty years later, one is struck by their similarities.⁵⁰

Since the 1960s, researchers at Vienna's Ballhausplatz have shed more light on the single-minded resolve of Dual Monarchy officials (Hungarian Premier István Tizsa excepted) to liquidate the Serbian problem once and for all and to achieve economic dominance in the upper Balkans.⁵¹ A tendency has likewise developed to stress the virtues of Austria-Hungary as a polity worth preserving.⁵² The sanguinary Yugoslav wars of the 1990s have meanwhile called renewed attention to the cult of violence and assassination ingrained in Serbian culture and the close connections between the Black-Hand terrorists and the Belgrade state apparatus headed by the serpentine Nicola Pašić. Christopher Clark's elegantly crafted best-seller, *The Sleepwalkers*, which when it appeared fluttered the doves on both sides of the Atlantic, offers authentic insight on Serbia.⁵³ For France, Russia, and especially Germany, however, one encounters in Clark's work mostly recycled old positions rather than the creation of new ones. With all due respect for his coruscating prose, Clark's

⁴⁷ J.J. Ruedorffer, pseud., *Grundzüge der Weltpolitik in der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1914), 214-232; Wayne C. Thompson, *In the Eye of the Storm: Kurt Riezler and the Crisis of Modern Germany* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1980), 44-45.

⁴⁸ Riezler to Käthe Liebermann, 22 Aug. 1914 (Brief Nr. 6), in *Aus dem Grossen Hauptquartier*, 124-125.

⁴⁹ Riezler to Käthe Liebermann, 29 Aug. und 12 Oct. 1914 (Briefe Nrs. 12 and 48), 132, 181, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Imanuel Geiss, *Julikrise und Kriegsausbruch. Eine Dokumentensammlung, 2 vols.* (Hannover: Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschehen, 1963); Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

⁵¹ Marvin Fried, *Austro-Hungarian War Aims in the Balkans during World War I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁵² Pieter M. Judson, *The Hapsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁵³ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 13-64.

depiction of German policy could have come with modest emendation from the pen of Gerhard Ritter sixty years ago.

* * *

With this historiographical background on Fischer and his cultural milieu, let us return to Trachtenberg's 1991 critique of the principal political-science theories about the origins of the war. We will then contrast that position with his current views.⁵⁴ In his 1991 formulation, Trachtenberg groups the prevailing political science interpretations under four rubrics. He rejects as "quite weak" what he calls the "extreme" Fischerite view that German leaders deliberately adopted a plan in the first week of July 1914 to "engineer a war with Russia and France." "Bellicose rhetoric" suffused German public life before the war, he concedes, and General von Moltke, the Chief of Staff, had pushed on several previous occasions for a preventive war before Russia became too strong. Bethmann admitted that the argument had "a certain force," and Undersecretary Arthur Zimmerman of the Auswärtiges Amt apparently rated the chances of a conflagration in early July at 90 percent. But all that did not amount to an actual plan. Indeed, Kaiser Wilhelm II, who habitually made violent marginal comments on telegrams, just as regularly lost his nerve in a clinch, and that is precisely why Bethmann sought to keep him away on a North Sea cruise as long as possible.

Trachtenberg distinguishes this extreme position from what he deems a more moderate version in which Berlin took an uncompromising position on the Serbian question in full knowledge that the policy would "probably" lead to general war and with the further ratiocination that "it would not be so bad" if such a war broke out while the Reich held the whip hand militarily. Fischer himself inclined toward the more moderate version, and one cannot repress the thought that Trachtenberg is splitting hairs by drawing a sharp dividing line between the two.

Trachtenberg very likely formed his preference for the "more moderate" interpretation partly owing to the influence of the Kautsky documents—the collection put together by a Reichstag investigating committee headed by the Socialist Karl Kautsky following the reestablishment of peace.⁵⁵ The Kautsky team did good work in putting together those documents that were available in Germany in 1919. Even the French President on the outbreak of war, Raymond Poincaré, expressed surprise, when he read through the compilation in the mid-1920s, to find no vast plan or methodic preparation for conquest in Berlin, but only "a crazy chaos composed of foolishness, deceit, inconsistency, and lack of seriousness."⁵⁶ The "real criminals," Poincaré concluded, had hatched their plans in Vienna, although they could not have acted without German support. One can readily understand why the Kautsky documents pointed in that direction. But Fischer had access to a range of materials not available to Kautsky, and those later discoveries could have led Trachtenberg to an alternative weighing of the evidence.

⁵⁴ See footnote 1, *supra*.

⁵⁵ Karl Kautsky, et al., eds., *Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch*, comp. Max Montgelas and Walter Schücking (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsantalt für Politik und Geschichte, 1922).

⁵⁶ Raymond Poincaré, *Au Service de la France* (Paris: Plon, 1928), 5:532.

Trachtenberg offered his greatest insights by disposing elegantly of the third and fourth interpretive schemes adduced by the older generation of political scientists. The third interpretation, which Albertini had also found compelling in his day, turned on some combination of miscalculation, misperception, misunderstanding, the internal dynamics of crisis, and misreporting by ambassadors with an agenda of their own. The fourth interpretation stresses the inadvertent outbreak of war owing to the rigidity of mobilization plans and the 'cult of the offensive' that prevailed among military strategists in 1914. The third and fourth explanatory models to some extent overlap. But none of them, Trachtenberg maintains, stands up under close scrutiny.

The claim that military leaders successfully pleaded the necessities of the mobilization schedules or imposed their tactical desiderata on civilian leaders does not, according to Trachtenberg, correspond to the facts in any of the countries concerned. Universally, the civilians acted owing to calculations of high policy and did not yield to the logic of technical military requirements. In Great Britain, the Cabinet as a whole retained the final say on all decisions; the military played no political role at all. That is the essence of cabinet control. Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey could make or keep no commitments himself without securing approval from his frequently obstreperous colleagues.⁵⁷

In France, the military enjoyed neither prestige nor political influence in the wake of the Dreyfus affair. The pacifist-minded coalition of the left and center-left parties who held three-quarters of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies following the April-May 1914 parliamentary elections continued to view the soldiers with intense suspicion. For years the squabbling French military had failed to agree on a strategic concept. And when in early 1912 General Joseph Joffre proposed an advance to Namur to counter an anticipated German penetration of Belgium from the northeast, Premier Poincaré turned him down flat. Privileging high policy above tactical advantage, Poincaré pointed out that such a move would alienate Great Britain. On the other hand, Joffre's lame substitute, Plan XVII for a deployment in the direction of the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, could not possibly win the war alone, and consequently made France more dependent on its Allies.⁵⁸ Predictably, Plan XVII bogged down quickly when the test of war came. French success in stopping the advancing German forces on the Marne represented a triumph of improvisation and luck.⁵⁹

In Russia, the Tsar held ultimate power. The devotedly peace-minded Nicholas II (whatever his deficiencies as an executive) resisted agitation from the war hawks in the Duma and the St. Petersburg press. When the Chief of Staff told him that mobilization could not be stopped, he replied, "stop it all the same." He gave way

⁵⁷ Thomas G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁵⁸ Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ See Jan Karl Tanenbaum, "French Estimates of German Plans," in Ernest R. May, *Knowing One's Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 150-171; also Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik in der Julikrise* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009), 366.

reluctantly only when Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov persuaded him that Germany had in effect already made an irreversible choice for war.⁶⁰

The German case is the most problematic. The Reich had by any measure the most modern economy in Europe, but retained an atavistic governing structure. The mercurial and cyclothymic Kaiser Wilhelm II imagined himself an untrammelled seventeenth-century monarch ruling by divine right. All civilian and military officials, including those in Prussia, theoretically served at his pleasure. Since Wilhelm fell prey to a kaleidoscope of violent emotions reflecting his unresolved inner turmoil, policy formation remained characteristically unpredictable. That is indeed one reason why surrounding nations considered Germany so dangerous. Wilhelm's control over the administrative machine declined after 1908-1909 when a prolonged domestic crisis made his unfitness to govern manifest. Mindful of the events that had led to his predecessor's dismissal, however, Bethmann Hollweg preferred to manipulate the Kaiser and to feed him information selectively rather than to confront him.⁶¹ The military and naval chiefs enjoyed more prestige for cultural reasons in Germany than elsewhere, but it is untrue that either General von Moltke or Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz could have overridden the government. Although Moltke and the General Staff had agitated for war against Russia on many occasions since 1912, the final decision remained in the hands of the civilians.

In his day, Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen would have preferred a one-front war to annihilate the French army. Even so, the deployment plan adopted at the end of his tenure in 1905 provided instead for a coordinated two-front war in which the Reichsheer would overcome the French before turning on the Russians, who were going through a notably weak patch following the end of the Russo-Japanese war. The outlines of the scheme soon leaked to the French; hence strategic surprise became impossible. General Staff planners revised the deployment schedule annually to reflect changes in weaponry, logistics, and troop levels, but no one—either civilian or military—challenged the concept, which presupposed an aggressive war in both west and east, however gussied up as preventive in intent. Germany abandoned any alternative deployment program after 1912. In the end, the Schlieffen Plan failed because the road and rail lines in Belgium and Northern France could accommodate only 22 corps compared with the 33 necessary for the right wing to break through before reinforcements arrived. Yet that outcome did not suggest any tyranny of the military timetable. To the contrary, as Trachtenberg points out, when Kaiser Wilhelm demanded that Moltke hold up the advance because of a mistaken (and soon corrected) report that Britain might remain neutral, Moltke had no choice but to comply.⁶²

Trachtenberg is equally persuasive in questioning the notion that a 'cult of the offensive' led to war. Robert Jervis has elucidated the so-called security dilemma, which holds that when states arm to increase their

⁶⁰ On the Tsar's waffling, see William Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914* (New York, 1992), 446-48; Dominic Lieven, *The End of Tsarist Russia* (New York, 2015), 334-337.

⁶¹ Christopher M. Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II* (Edinburgh, 2000), treats Wilhelm as a figure of fun whose flights of fancy few took seriously. The Kaiser's prerogatives make that interpretation problematic.

⁶² On the course of civil-military relations in Germany, see Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst unter Kriegshandwerk. Das Problem des 'Militarismus' in Deutschland*, 4 vols. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1954). Terence Zuber's work, *The Invention of the Schlieffen Plan* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2002) has led to a still-unresolved controversy.

security, other states in the system react (if they afford it) by doing the same.⁶³ A higher level of armaments, under some circumstances, may lead to preemption or inadvertent war. Stephen Van Evera points out that all armies in 1914 nurtured “the cult of the offensive,” namely the belief that the country adopting an offensive strategy obtains an initial advantage in combat.⁶⁴ In reality, trench warfare in 1914-1918 would teach the opposite lesson. The nation fighting defensively from a prepared position on the ground held the upper hand given the specific technology of the period. Nevertheless, the disproportionate firepower of Europeans against autochthones in the age of imperialism fostered this peculiar prewar misapprehension.⁶⁵ Even the French, with an aging population less than two-thirds that of the Germans, subscribed to the common delusion.

In France and England, however, the cult affected strategy, but never policy. Even Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, head of the Auswärtiges Amt from 1910 to 1912, conceded that those countries nourished too deep a commitment to peace to initiate hostilities. Nor did Russian leaders, deeply conscious of their own military inferiority to Germany in 1914 and the difficulties of mobilization and concentration in a country with rudimentary transport facilities, have any motive for preemption. Only in Germany did the governing elite conjure up an excuse to strike first. Bethmann, Moltke, and Foreign Minister Gottlieb von Jagow all took as an article of faith that when Russia developed the power to strike, it would do so.⁶⁶

“In a certain sense,” Trachtenberg quotes Bethmann as saying retrospectively, “it was a preventive war.” Yet that belief rested on paranoid fantasy and a model of Social-Darwinist inevitability that had struck deep roots in German high as well as popular culture. Prince Lichnowsky, the German Ambassador to London, reminded Jagow that anticipatory fear of the Russian colossus went all the way back to the days of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, but that a real threat had never materialized. Jagow expressed certainty that the window of opportunity was closing all the same. As Trachtenberg rightly notes, Bethmann sought to maneuver Russia into mobilizing first in order to fix the blame on St. Petersburg and shore up support from the Social Democrats at home. Tactical preemption mattered little. In contemporary terms, he followed a ‘second-strike strategy.’

Trachtenberg concludes that strategic thinkers of the 1950s and 1960s proved reluctant to abandon the theory of inadvertent war in 1914 because they “wanted to believe” this myth about the past. It fit in all too conveniently with the lessons they sought to draw for the present. One might nevertheless expect that, having disposed of the “systemic” explanations for the war, Trachtenberg would move by a process of elimination to the obvious “unit” explanation. If German leaders considered the war as “bound to come eventually” and thus either initiated it or (in the weaker formulation) decided to “just stand aside and let it come,” then the inquiry should shift to German cultural predilections and domestic politics. What made the governing elites in Berlin

⁶³ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); idem., “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30:2 (January 1978): 167-214.

⁶⁴ Stephen Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security* 9:2 (Summer 1984): 58-107.

⁶⁵ Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁶⁶ Officially, all ministers in the Second Reich bore the title state secretary.

choose this particular moment to seek European dominance by force of arms? Could they not afford to wait and let the superiority of German economic performance lead to a gentler form of Continental hegemony through ‘soft power,’ as actually happened toward the end of the twentieth century?⁶⁷ Unfortunately, Trachtenberg does not pursue that line of thought. And when he returns to the subject for a second look twenty-five years later, he reverses course and concludes that responsibilities for the 1914 conflagration were widely shared after all.

* * *

We are conditioned to think that the passage of time and the fading of emotions facilitate a longer perspective and therefore a more dispassionate view of the past. The rekindled debate over war origins sparked by the centenary of that event figures as an exception to the rule. Christopher Clark has garnered phenomenal popular success both in the English-speaking countries and in the Federal Republic by reviving the old systemic explanations of which Trachtenberg so neatly disposed twenty-five years ago. Clark has not only crafted a compelling story, but his book tells patriotic Germans what many long to believe, and up to the present relatively few scholars have checked the footnotes.⁶⁸ In part because it serves to assuage the residual guilt that some contemporary Germans feel, Clark’s book has become a publishing phenomenon, selling over one hundred times the distribution of Fischer’s first study for a comparable period.⁶⁹ For Clark, the war resulted from “rapid-fire interactions among executive structures with a relatively poor understanding of each other’s intentions operating with low levels of confidence and trust.”⁷⁰ If all powers bore some responsibility, then a multilateral investigation might make sense. A “broader approach,” Trachtenberg observes, leads inevitably to a different way of framing the issue. But whether a more complex frame provides “a more balanced view” as Trachtenberg says it does, or rather leads to a loss of focus, depends on the nature of the evidence. The virtue of complexity is not a fact, but merely an assumption to be proved.

Clark purports to decry “the blame game.” He calls it “meaningless” to adjudge one nation more right than another in conflictual interactions—a point that Trachtenberg also raises late in his essay without definitively resolving it.⁷¹ Despite the theoretical disclaimer, when it comes down to cases Clark invariably adopts the German point of view and invites readers to think the worst of the imperialistic Russians, the devious French,

⁶⁷ Two Jewish plutocrats, the Hamburg banker Max Warburg and the shipping magnate Albert Ballin, sought in vain to persuade the Kaiser that Germany was gaining in relative strength every year and could afford to wait, but Jews in the Second Reich stood somewhat outside the mainstream. The statistical data in Ingvar Svennilson, *Growth and Stagnation in the European Economy* (Geneva: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 1954) supports their prognostications ex post.

⁶⁸ John C.G. Röhl, however, has done so, and in *Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Concise Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 151-152, he identifies several specific cases where Clark apparently suppresses or misattributes crucial evidence.

⁶⁹ See Klaus Gietinger and Winfried Wolf, *Der Seelentröster: wie Christopher Clark die Deutschen von der Schuld am Ersten Weltkrieg erlöst* (Stuttgart: Schmetterling, 2017).

⁷⁰ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 240, similar formulation, 557.

⁷¹ See, for example, Clark, op. cit., 560.

and the self-satisfied hypocrites in the British Foreign Office. Thus Raymond Poincaré is tactless and threatening, René Viviani surly and preoccupied, Maurice Paléologue untrustworthy, Sergei Sazonov increasingly coercive, and Sir Edward Grey conspiratorial and ignorant of the world. By contrast Bethmann Hollweg in his telling is restrained and formidable, Count Leopold von Berchtold prudent and conciliatory, and General Helmuth von Moltke quite rightly concerned about the deepening imbalance between the two blocs. There are six hundred pages more of such stuff. One can do a lot with well-placed adjectives. The comparison might strike some readers as excessive, but Ritter and the other national-conservative historians of the 1950s could have wished for nothing more. One sympathizes with the reviewer of Riezler's latest collection of letters in saying, "sleepwalkers, please wake up!"⁷²

How does Clark, in contrast to Trachtenberg, deal with Fischer? He simply ignores him.⁷³ He brings no new material to bear on German policy, and the other revisionists who have followed him contribute very little more.⁷⁴ It is surprising, therefore, to find a scholar of Trachtenberg's eminence now prepared to accept a number of claims made by Clark and his fellow revisionists at face value, and to add to them a direct assault on the Fischer thesis. It would try the patience of readers to rehearse each and every additional instance in which Trachtenberg has come to believe that Fischer misstated the evidence. But it is worthwhile checking a few.

Trachtenberg first addresses the so-called War Council called by the Kaiser on 8 December 1912. This event was less momentous than it seemed because, in contrast to other such meetings, only military representatives attended. Bethmann and the Foreign Minister took no part. As background, longstanding negotiations for a British neutrality pact had broken down. Viscount Haldane, the influential Secretary of State for War in Asquith's Liberal cabinet, had confirmed (unsurprisingly) that Britain could not pledge to stay neutral in the event Germany purposed to annihilate France. Six days earlier, Bethmann had made a militant speech to the Reichstag supporting Moltke and promising to "stand firm and unflinching in the event of a threat to Austria's great-power status." The ever-choleric Wilhelm wanted to go further because the news from London confirmed his apprehension of a necessary racial war between the Teutons and the Gallo-Slavs, with the shameless nation of shopkeepers hypocritically supporting the latter. At the 8 December meeting Moltke likewise declared war unavoidable and specified "the sooner the better." Grand Admiral von Tirpitz, on the other hand, argued for postponing the fight for eighteen months in order to widen the Kiel Canal to accommodate the latest battleships and to prepare the submarine base in Heligoland. The result, Fischer accurately reported, "was pretty well zero."⁷⁵

Like a juggler, Bethmann needed to keep many balls in the air at once. He accorded priority to a massive increase in the army. To accomplish that task he had to propitiate the Kaiser, manage public opinion, and overcome Reichstag resistance to heavy new taxes all at once. Absent a decision to "strike soon," as he put it,

⁷² Gerd Krumeich review, Feuilleton, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 May 2016.

⁷³ Clark mentions Fischer slightly only once, op. cit., 561.

⁷⁴ Among those following in Clark's wake, see particularly the gargantuan work of political scientist Herfried Münkler, *Der Große Krieg: Die Welt 1914-1918* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2013).

⁷⁵ Fischer treats these events in *War of Illusions*, 160-204.

he needed to induce the navy to accept a lower order of precedence. The general assumption in the ensuing negotiations was that a great racial war was coming eventually, although Bethmann had not wholly abandoned hope of squaring England somehow. No doubt Fischer would have done better to say that Bethmann had ‘accustomed himself’ to the prospect of war, and to leave out the words “energetic pro-war policy.” The difference, all the same, amounts to parsing words.⁷⁶

Trachtenberg accuses Fischer of “another clear misuse of evidence” in paraphrasing an 18 July 1914 *apologia pro vita sua* that the State Secretary in the Foreign Office, Gottlieb von Jagow, sent to the ambassador in London, making an implicit but unmistakable case for preventive war. By this time, German advance preparations for mobilization had approached completion. Jagow knew that the ambassador, Prince Karl-Max Lichnowsky, opposed the war spirit already coursing through Berlin. Jagow did not happen to use the shorthand phrase “struggle between Teuton and Slav” here, although, like others in the Berlin bureaucracy, he often did so elsewhere.

Aside from that, Fischer’s characterization of this key letter seems to me perfectly fair. The missive did sum up German attitudes “in a nutshell.” Fischer supplies us with the sort of deep reading that, in other contexts, we have come to expect from Trachtenberg himself. Jagow considered an “absolute stabilization of Russian hegemony in the Balkans inadmissible.” The Reich had to back Austria unconditionally because a few years hence the declining Hapsburg Empire would no longer retain the capacity to act. Whether localization was possible here depended strictly on the Entente. He did not exclude localization if the Entente backed down after a small fuss. France and Britain did not want war, he conceded, and Russia would remain for some years to come unready for conflict. In fact, the Sazonov government had shown itself “peace-loving and halfway friendly to Germany.” But governments change, and the general mood of the Slavic race (*Slaventum*) grew steadily more hostile. In a few years, having built up its army, strategic railroads, and Baltic fleet, Russia would overturn the balance of power and stifle Germany. “I do not wish for preventive war,” Jagow concluded, “but if the opportunity offers itself, we must not recoil” (*dürfen wir nicht kneifen*).

Nothing could be plainer. And Lichnowsky, one of the few diplomats in the German Foreign Service to keep his head, made an unanswerable reply. Since the days of Bismarck, the General Staff had idly talked of a prophylactic war. Yet Russia’s interests focused on the east. It had no motive for attacking Germany, and Germany no reason gratuitously to create a second irreconcilable enemy. Austria-Hungary stood far from collapse, but it could not hope to annihilate South Slav nationalism through military expedients. In any event, German economic interests were already penetrating the Balkans at Austria’s expense. Germany should by all means maintain the Austrian alliance, but not to the point of self-destruction (*Niebelungentreue*). Why did Vienna not formulate its demands so that, with suitable pressure on London and St. Petersburg, they could be made acceptable to Belgrade? Once the guns went off, localization would become impossible.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ See the account in Röhl, *Wilhelm II, 1900-1914*, 874-916.

⁷⁷ See Jagow to Lichnowsky 18 July and Lichnowsky to Jagow, 24 July, in Kautsky, *Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch*, Nrs. 72 and 161. On Lichnowsky’s honorable conduct throughout, see *1914: Delusion or Design: The Testimony of Two German Diplomats*, ed. John C.G. Röhl (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973). Note Lichnowsky’s sly dig at former chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, likewise a practitioner of aggressive *Weltpolitik*. Bülow had fatuously promised *Niebelungentreue* to Austria during the 1909 Bosnian annexation crisis.

Space forbids the dissection of the numerous other “non-trivial” errors that Trachtenberg purports to find in Fischer’s work. In some cases he caricatures the views of the protagonists and then, using his celebrated rhetorical virtuosity, disproves the caricature. For example, he accuses Fischer of portraying Bethmann as “from the start deliberately aiming at a great war.” In fact, Fischer, following the diary of the eyewitness Kurt Riezler (whose interpretation also influenced the later biographer Jarausch), credits Bethmann with a more subtle mind than that. It would be more correct to say that Bethmann deliberately “ran the risk of war” in order to dissociate the Entente. And he, like Jagow, did not shrink back when the opportunity for war offered itself, knowing as he surely did that, given the vast dispersion of the Russian army and Sazonov’s peaceful inclinations, Russian mobilization figured as a defensive measure and could always be countermanded.

In other cases, when the sources conflict, Trachtenberg fails to observe the best evidence rule. He quotes the eyewitnesses General Karl von Wenninger observing “beaming faces everywhere” upon learning of Russian mobilization and Admiral Georg von Müller, chief of the Kaiser’s naval cabinet, minuting that “the government has managed brilliantly to make us appear the attacked.” He then contrasts those confidential sentiments with Bethmann’s vague assertion at a semi-public Prussian State Council meeting, obviously framed to get back to the Social Democrats, that “control had been lost.” Which statements deserve more credibility? At another point, Trachtenberg points out that Moltke expressed pessimism whether Germany would ultimately prevail. And so he did: Moltke, as Annika Mombauer has shown, had a complex and pessimistic character. All the same, Moltke’s anxieties did not alter his position; he had pressed the case for preventive war repeatedly since 1912, and he never changed his mind.⁷⁸

Finally, Trachtenberg seeks to undermine the broad thesis that Germany had followed a special path of development (*Sonderweg*) at least since Bismarck’s day. He declines to concede that the widespread longing in German society for “a fitting share of world power” from 1897 onward determined specific actions of the Reich in 1914. Reasonable people can differ on such questions of broad interpretation. Whether one calls the phenomenon a “rye-iron alliance” (Eckart Kehr), or “social Imperialism” (Hans-Ulrich Wehler), or avoids labels altogether boils down to a question of book marketing.⁷⁹

One can also frame the issue non-ideologically. Germany in 1914 had the second largest economy in the world (six times larger than in 1850), but a backward political regime that did not match. Rising powers usually make uncomfortable neighbors for declining powers. Bismarck had set up a simulacrum of a parliamentary regime with no ministerial responsibility. Veto power rested with a *Reichsrat* in which Prussia held a working plurality of seats, and in Prussia a three-class voting system preserved preponderance of the elites. The *Reichstag* was elected by universal suffrage, but enjoyed limited power. This jerry-rigged system functioned tolerably well so long as Bismarck stayed around to keep the Concert of Europe in place, but it ran into trouble when the mentally unbalanced Wilhelm II came to the throne. Over time Wilhelm became an increasingly troublesome presence both in the foreign and domestic spheres.

⁷⁸ Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁷⁹ Eckart Kehr, *Der Primat der Innenpolitik* (Berlin, 1965); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1969).

By 1912 the Socialists held one-third of the *Reichstag* seats, yet special interests including the *Junkers*, bankers, and Ruhr industrialists retained disproportionate power by controlling Prussia. Those same interlocking and intermarrying classes dominated the bureaucracy, the army, and the high-prestige dueling clubs at German universities. A secret fund derived from confiscation of the Hanover treasury in 1867 subsidized the non-Socialist press. The elites came generally to share Social-Darwinist racial beliefs about their country's place in the world and its mission to expand, although relative moderates of the Hans Delbrück or Max Weber type imagined that dominance could be secured by intimidation without resort to war. Many conservatives believed that foreign adventures would divert the interests of the masses from franchise reform. Bethmann Hollweg repudiated that view, but he encountered increasing difficulty trying to coordinate so many conflicting forces through the 'policy of the diagonal.' The very incoherence of German policy-making, in which the Kaiser constantly interfered—always belligerently though frequently changing his substantive position—made the problems of management and continuity worse. From the period of the Bernhard von Bülow chancellorship onward, other powers (even the United States) began increasingly to perceive Germany as a disruptive force.⁸⁰ However one analyzes the telegraph chatter of July 1914, the persistence of aggressive war aims in 1914-1918 and the revival of somewhat the same territorial war aims under the Nazi regime cries out for elucidation. If seeming continuity characterized German foreign policy, does one not have to address the political culture across regimes and over time?

It is not surprising to find Christopher Clark portraying the outbreak of war as an accident for which Russia, France, and even Great Britain held more responsibility than Germany. But Trachtenberg elegantly dispatched the inadvertent-war thesis in his renowned 1991 article. Even if he finds Fischer's fundamental argument "not particularly impressive in traditional craft terms," it would seem his implicit obligation to come up with a plausible alternative.

Trachtenberg musters the *tu quoque* contention that, if German leaders thought in preventive-war terms, so too did various French military officers. Bethmann acknowledged in 1918 that "in a certain sense it was a preventive war," and Moltke had been beating the drums for years to launch such a war while the *Reichsheer* retained the upper hand. Preventive war is often defined as action taken to prevent the adverse side from acquiring the capability to attack or to reverse the balance of power.⁸¹ But did anyone threaten Germany in 1914? German leaders had no intelligence showing that Russia would turn hostile once it rebuilt its army, strategic railroads, and North Sea fleet. As Lichnowsky tried to persuade Jagow, past history suggested the contrary. Russia might well seek to expand in a different direction, or even experience revolution! One cannot reasonably label a war "preventive" by conjuring up an ill-defined hypothetical threat at some indefinite future time.

⁸⁰ Volker Berghahn, *American Big Business in Britain and Germany: A Comparative History of two 'Special Relationships' in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 57-112.

⁸¹ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

Trachtenberg relies on Stefan Schmidt's monograph to suggest that one can also find preventive-war thinking in France.⁸² Yet can anyone reasonably imagine a primarily agricultural nation of 41 million launching a preventive war voluntarily against a highly industrialized state of 68 million?⁸³ This issue calls attention to the fallacy of mirror-imaging. In Germany, military men enjoyed extraordinary prestige and had vital influence on questions of war and peace. (Gerhard Ritter devotes four thick volumes to this subject.⁸⁴) The *Reichstag* had comparatively little influence, Kaiser Wilhelm II, despite his emotional lability, a great deal. In France, the military had no political clout following its embarrassment in the Dreyfus affair and stayed strictly within the confines of its duties. In the Third Republic the Chamber of Deputies, elected by universal male suffrage, stood as the ultimate repository of power; the Cabinet remained beholden to the Chamber. And the April-May elections in 1914 resulted in a stunning victory for the forces of the left and center-left, with a swing so substantial as to cast doubt on the willingness of the legislators to perpetuate the three-year military service law. The great majority of Frenchmen, especially in the provinces, focused on quotidian matters and did not closely follow international affairs. The nationalist revival of earlier days appeared to have run its course. Public attention riveted in late July 1914 on the trial of Madame Caillaux, who had shot the editor of *Le Figaro* in an affair of the heart, pushing diplomacy off the front pages.⁸⁵

According to Trachtenberg, Major General Edouard de Castelnau told a British officer in 1913 that he espied a "good opportunity" because Russia would have to support France if hostilities began in the East. That utterance has no political significance. Castelnau, often called the 'fighting friar,' was the leading Catholic layman in the army and a notorious anti-Dreyfusard; he had zero influence on high policy. Moreover, Sir Arthur Nicolson, the Permanent Undersecretary in the Foreign Office, immediately contradicted the report. Schmidt is obliged to concede that he found not a single reference in either the French or British archives to any responsible official proposing to use the Balkan imbroglio as an excuse for preventive war.⁸⁶

Nor did the French really care in 1914 about the ultimate disposition of the Serbian problem, except insofar as it bore on Russian determination to mobilize in support of France. In fact, when Ambassador Paléologue greeted Premier Viviani and President Poincaré on their arrival in St. Petersburg before the crisis reached its peak, Viviani made clear that he stood ready to work on the Russians to permit a limited military triumph by Vienna. He explained France's disinterest in salty language: "We don't give a rat's ass about Serbia" (*nous nous*

⁸² Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Ausbruchs des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009).

⁸³ On the still-pervasive effects of the humiliating defeat in 1871, see Claude Digeon, *La crise allemande de la pensée française, 1870-1914* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1959).

⁸⁴ *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk. Das Problem des "Militarismus" in Deutschland*, 4 vols. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1954).

⁸⁵ Eugen Weber, *Nationalist Revival in France, 1905-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 129-62; Georges Bonnefous, *Histoire politique de la Troisième République* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957), 2:1-32; Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁸⁶ Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik*, 210-211.

en foutons de la Serbie).⁸⁷ And Trachtenberg, in my opinion, likewise misperceives the stance of President Poincaré, who unfortunately fell victim to two generations of subsequent German defamation.⁸⁸ One can reasonably conclude from Schmidt's research that Poincaré and the French cabinet found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. They hoped for a generally acceptable compromise in the Balkans and wished to restrain the Russians, but above all, in their own parochial interest, had to stress fidelity to the alliance. They feared expansive Russian war aims both at Constantinople and in Galicia, but in the more immediate term a partial Russian mobilization against Austria that permitted the Reich to divert more units to the Western front figured as the worst of all possible worlds. Thus France was "dragged into war in spite of itself," as Poincaré would later explain.⁸⁹

No doubt Poincaré, as Trachtenberg points out, discouraged meddling by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. But Wilson understood not the first thing about the issues involved. The fact that Poincaré didn't want him or his simple-minded secretary of state butting in proves nothing. Even Ambassador Myron Herrick scoffed at Wilson's offer to mediate.⁹⁰ A far more important factor limited France's options. The country lacked heavy artillery and a sufficient complement of officers to command the additional conscripts trained under the three-year draft. Thus it necessarily stood in an inferior position when the balloon went up. Without British and Russian intervention, Paris would have fallen within a month.⁹¹

* * *

The most surprising part of Trachtenberg's essay addresses Russia's role in the crisis. Trachtenberg has read the fine studies of Dominic Lieven, William Fuller, and Ronald Bobroff, all based on acquaintance with the primary sources and mature reflection.⁹² Unaccountably, he accords more credit to the second-hand narratives of the less than trustworthy Clark, the iconoclastic interwar amateur Jules Isaac, and the Ottoman enthusiast Sean McMeekin.⁹³ He goes so far as to call Clark's book "by far the most important work on the war origins

⁸⁷ Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 359.

⁸⁸ On persistence of the Poincaré-la-guerre myth, see John F. V. Keiger, *Raymond Poincaré* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 193-239.

⁸⁹ Poincaré to Paléologue, 9 March 1915, Paléologue reply, 16 April 1915, *Documents diplomatiques français* 1915, Vol. 1, No. 320 (Paris, 2002); on partial mobilization against Austria, Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 357.

⁹⁰ Keiger, *Poincaré*, 202.

⁹¹ Paul Guillaumat, ed., *Correspondence de guerre du Général Guillaumat, 1914-1919* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), 1-28. Guillaumat served as military secretary to the Minister of War. Admittedly, Poincaré did not realize the full extent of French inferiority until two weeks into hostilities. Keiger, *Poincaré*, 203-205.

⁹² Dominic Lieven, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War, and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2015); William C. Fuller, Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 391-464; Ronald Bobroff, *Roads to Glory: Late Imperial Russia and the Turkish Straits* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

⁹³ Jules Isaac, *Un débat historique. Le Problème des origines de la guerre* (Paris: Rieder, 1933); Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

question to have appeared in recent years.” Thus Clark’s anti-Russian predilections assume an unwonted credibility. Lieven, by contrast, reliably chronicles events as they occurred on the basis of extensive work in primary sources. These include, crucially for the 1914 events, the papers of Finance Minister Petr Bark and the long-serving ambassador to London, Alexandr Benckendorff, both at the Columbia Bakhmeteff Archive. Perhaps the best way to make comparisons is first to summarize best evidence as formulated by Lieven, Fuller, and Bobroff, and then to set against their findings the more controversial features of Trachtenberg’s interpretation. One cannot, of course, accept as a balanced source the documents on war origins published by the Bolsheviks in order to discredit their predecessors, as some analysts used to do.⁹⁴ Indeed, in evaluating the older literature on this subject, one must keep in mind Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation that history resembles a picture gallery whose walls display no more than a handful of old masters hanging among a multitude of copies. Here is a particular case in point.⁹⁵

The Russian armed forces recovered very slowly from the debacle of the Russo-Japanese War. After 1906, they remained for some years lamentably unprepared to fight again, both in terms of weaponry and morale. Both P.A. Stolypin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, and Foreign Minister A.P. Izvolski held that the internal situation forbade conduct of an aggressive foreign policy. The shift from a long-service to a peasant-based conscript army posed formidable problems for a multiethnic Empire where western-style nationalism remained underdeveloped, and in which revolutionary socialist parties posed a continuing threat to the regime.⁹⁶ The Tsar and his ministers alone made policy. Under normal circumstances the noisy Slavophiles among the St. Petersburg intelligentsia and the Duma exerted no more than peripheral influence. In terms of concrete interests, almost three-quarters of Russian foreign trade, and virtually all grain exports, exited through Odessa and passed through the Bosphorus. Russia’s main foreign-policy aim necessarily lay in securing naval supremacy in the Black Sea, assuring free passage of the Straits, and controlling Constantinople in the event that the Ottoman Empire gave up the ghost. The Turks had closed the Straits during the Libyan and Balkan wars, underscoring the issue’s vital importance. Although Russia supported the Balkan League against the Ottomans in 1912, what happened in the upper Balkans rated as no more than a second-order concern.

Relations with Germany seemed generally unproblematic up to 1913. The volume of commerce burgeoned. Russian leaders stood in awe of German attainments and did not share the paranoid fantasies of the German governing class about an ineluctable racial war. Rather, the Russians sought to placate the Kaiser and Bethmann Hollweg. They agreed to greenlight construction of the Berlin to Baghdad railway and to connect it to their own railroad net in the Caucasus. St. Petersburg became nervous, however, when in 1913 Berlin

⁹⁴ Extreme right-wing Germans eagerly disseminated those documents. See *Die internationalen Beziehungen im Zeitalter des Imperialismus. Dokumente aus den Archiven der zarischen und der provvisorischen Regierung*, ed. M.N. Pokrowski, pub. by Otto Hoetzsch, 8 in 11 vol., (Berlin: Verlag der R. Hobbing, 1931). In his day job, Hoetzsch served as Russian specialist for the DNVP and the *Kreuzzeitung*.

⁹⁵ Quoted in T. G. Otte, “Postponing the Evil Day: Sir Edward Grey and British Foreign Policy,” *International History Review* 38:2 (2016), 251.

⁹⁶ By the prewar decade, most peasants submitted to three years of primary education, but fell short of functional literacy for military purposes. Ben Eklof, *Russian Peasant Schools, Officialdom, Village Culture, and Popular Pedagogy, 1861-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

dispatched a mission under General Otto Liman von Sanders to help rebuild the Turkish army, and yet more anxious when London agreed to sell new dreadnoughts to bolster the Turkish navy.

In 1908 Foreign Minister Izvolski had stood prepared to make a deal with his Austrian counterpart, A.L. Aehrenthal. Calculating that Russia could not prevent Austrian incorporation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in any case, Izvolski acquiesced in return for Austrian support of a new dispensation permitting Russian warships to pass the Straits. The proposition fell through when Aehrenthal announced it prematurely and Britain declined to go along. The perceived humiliation outraged the Slavophiles, and their newspaper *Novoe Vremia* initiated a virulent press campaign designed to warn the foreign ministry off from future concessions. Despite frosty relations, however, both the Russian and Austrian governments still preferred to put off radical territorial change in the upper Balkans, insofar as that proved feasible. Russia backed down again when the powers set the boundaries of Albania at the end of 1912. The sinister Nicolai Hartwig, Russian minister in Belgrade, suffered from what General George Marshall during World War II would later call “localitis.”⁹⁷ He supported Serbian irredentism and often went beyond his brief, but he did not speak for his ministry.

Lieven describes Sergei Sazonov, the foreign minister from 1910 onward, as one of the kindest and most decent men ever to occupy that office. Sazonov doubted whether France and Russia together could muster enough military strength to deter German aggression. After his appeasement of Germany failed, he hoped for a defensive naval alliance with Great Britain. London, however, declined to play. Sazonov assumed immediately upon hearing of Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s assassination that Serb military elements stood behind it. The murder distressed him all the more because he feared that the Polish Socialist Party might embrace similar tactics in the Russian part of Poland. Thus, he did not sympathize with the radical Serbs. Nevertheless, owing to an intelligence failure, he did not realize that Berlin had given Vienna a ‘blank check’ on 5-6 July 1914. He grasped the seriousness of the situation only when reports arrived ten days later that Austria planned a military strike. The terms of the Austrian ultimatum of 23 July further caught him off guard because it appeared to demand, not condign punishment, but the end of Serb independence. Sazonov reasoned that if he surrendered outright for the third time in five years, Russian prestige in the Balkans would disappear. Dire consequences for domestic public order might follow. Sazonov advised the Tsar that Vienna and Berlin would not have framed the ultimatum in the way they did unless they sought a general European war. Nicholas, a notably pacific character, expressed incredulity. He could not believe that his cousin ‘Willy’ would act in such a fashion.

Addressing the cabinet on 24 July, Sazonov acknowledged the risks, but argued that if Russia backed down once more it would be considered a decadent state and expose itself to additional challenges. Other ministers expressed ambivalence at best. “No one in Russia desired war,” declared the influential agriculture minister, Alexandr Krivoshein. Concession, on the other hand, provided no guarantee of peace. Some ministers spoke in euphemisms at the meeting, but owned up to the looming catastrophe privately. The War and Navy ministers foresaw “indisputed inferiority” to the Central powers on the battlefield until 1917-1918, although they feared accusations of cowardice were they to go public. The Minister of Internal Affairs reminded the officer in charge of mobilization that “revolutionary ideas are dearer to the masses than a victory over Germany.” In the end, cabinet members drew up the weakest possible resolution. They would advise the Serbs to fulfill Austrian demands insofar as they did not jeopardize national independence, and they would

⁹⁷ Forrest Pogue, “George C. Marshall, Global Commander,” Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, www.usafa.af.mil/dhf/harmon_series/hml.htm

ask Austria to extend the ultimatum timetable. Nevertheless, if cornered, they would not abandon their responsibilities. The wily Serb Prime Minister, realizing that he had boxed the Russians in, decided to roll the dice by neither accepting nor rejecting the ultimatum. That maneuver gave the Austrians an added incentive to act before the great powers could intervene.⁹⁸

Everyone in official St. Petersburg recognized that the army remained distressingly unprepared for the trials ahead. In the years 1909-1011, War Minister Vladimir Sukhomlinov had carried out a massive redeployment, shifting the army's center of gravity from the Western districts to the Volga region so that it could respond to threats from either direction. The new force posture meant that, in the event the Central powers launched an offensive, the army would have to execute a strategic withdrawal to the interior and could not quickly come to France's aid. In spring 1912, when it became manifest that Sazonov's campaign to appease Germany had failed, the army reversed field once more and adopted a western-oriented defense. The new concept, however, required splitting available forces between a German front to uphold the Franco-Russian alliance and an Austrian front to put down a prospective popular revolt in Poland. The army needed to expand by 40 percent to carry out that double mission, and execution would take until 1917 at the earliest. The army would also have to develop strategic railroads to the west, which it had neglected for a decade. In the meantime, it would take the forces forty days to fulfill their mobilization commitment under the French alliance.

Recognizing the dire circumstances, the Tsar called another meeting of key ministers and a few military men on 25 July to discuss the way forward. This meeting authorized partial mobilization of the four western military districts facing Austria, but delayed execution. The conferees sought mainly to send a 'signal' to Germany and Austria, and owing to typical confusion the working-level military officers failed to inform them that partial mobilization would obstruct full mobilization later on and throw the Warsaw military district into chaos. Once Austria declared war and shelled Belgrade on 29 July, partial mobilization lost its rationale. Germany had no intention of forcing Austria to accept mediation. Nicholas, grasping at straws to save the peace, reluctantly agreed to order full mobilization, then withdrew permission, and finally under intense pressure gave his consent once more on the afternoon of 30 July.

The Russian army could stand fully mobilized on the borders for several weeks without taking action. German mobilization under the Schlieffen plan, on the other hand, unavoidably meant war. Thus the sequence of the Russian and German mobilizations had little relevance, except insofar as they allowed Bethmann Hollweg to manipulate the Social Democrats at home. Russia entered the war in a mood of funereal gloom. The country lacked an advanced industrial infrastructure, functional communications, and up-to-date technology. The Russians would have to count, as William Fuller puts it, on magic and miracles.⁹⁹ And those would be in short supply.

How does Trachtenberg treat this story showing how Russian leaders got entangled in a predicament not of their own choosing? Thinking boldly, he expresses interest in proposed alternatives to Sazonov's steady policy of solidifying the Entente and using French loans to finance infrastructure development. Russia could instead, he imagines, have given up on the intricacies of the European balance of power altogether and deemphasized

⁹⁸ For this and the following paragraphs see Lieven, *End of Tsarist Russia*, 313-332; Fuller, *Strategy and Power*, 423-451; Bobroff, *Roads to Glory*, 37-115.

⁹⁹ Fuller, *op. cit.*, 451.

the Black Sea and the Straits. It should have concentrated, as “Easterners” had proposed before the 1904-1905 war with Japan, on developing the resources of Siberia and Central Asia while positively encouraging German expansion along the Atlantic trade routes. Trachtenberg even suggests that, with different people in charge, Russia could have avoided war in 1914. How would the Reich have reacted to such a “Eurasian” reorientation? Would France, feeling aggrieved at being left in the lurch, still have provided loans? And how, precisely, could Russia have managed the crisis of 1914 differently? It seems idle to speculate on counterfactuals so far removed from the narrow choices within which policy moved. Given the European balance that existed, with Russia having limited maneuvering room owing to military weakness and precarious domestic security, it is hard to imagine a change of personnel producing a different outcome.

Trachtenberg strings together in a gossamer web all the old charges, some with a kernel of truth but most distorted or exaggerated, about Russia’s nefarious policies in the Balkans. One hundred years of calumny, starting with the Bolsheviks’ denunciation of their predecessors, spring once more to life. The War Minister, General Sukhomlinov, allegedly called the possession of Galicia “indispensable.” If the radical Pan-Slav newspaper, *Novoe Vremia*, advocated dismemberment of Austria-Hungary, that demand by assimilation becomes the policy of Sazonov as well. Pan-Slavism, Trachtenberg reminds us, “was no more legitimate as a platform for political action than Hitler’s concept of Lebensraum.” Yet the Tsar, he claims, notwithstanding his professions of peace, contemplated the “partition of Austria-Hungary” on the eve of war. Russia was also “underwriting Serbia’s irredentist goals” and, since Germany figured as Austria’s ally, thereby “playing with fire.” France and Britain heedlessly backed that policy and failed to comprehend that, for the sake of the European Concert, they had to respect Austria’s “fundamental interests.” As the July crisis deepened France—thinking solely of its own security concerns—“did little to hold Russia back.”¹⁰⁰ At the denouement, Russia’s general mobilization “prevented the political process, which would normally have resulted in an agreement, from running its course.” We are back, at the end of this bill of indictment, to the railway timetables. Half a century of scrupulous research vanishes down the drain.

* * *

Trachtenberg closes his essay with a thought-provoking albeit ultimately unsatisfying discussion of how states should act in the international system. When we say that Germany held primary responsibility for the outbreak of World War I, we are at once giving an explanation and making a moral judgment. I perceive no substantive difference between the two. When Clark insists that the office of the historian is not to judge, but simply to explain, he sets the stage for absolving Germany and holding Russia, France, and England responsible for what happened.¹⁰¹ Trachtenberg asserts that “there is no absolute standard for making moral judgments in such cases.” That may well hold true in certain situations. Yet in other cases such standards do exist, and moral philosophers who write on “just war” attempt to identify rules and offer prescriptive

¹⁰⁰ Georges-Henri Soutou intimates that a small group of French policy-makers led by Poincaré, Paléologue, and the secretive former ambassador Théophile Delcassé sought through pregnant silences in 1913-1914 to transform the Franco-Russian alliance into an offensive combination (*La Grande Illusion: Quand la France perdait la paix, 1914-1920* (Paris: Tallandier 2015), 55-64. The idea evidently intrigues Trachtenberg, but no concrete evidence supports it.

¹⁰¹ Clark, op. cit., xxix-xxx.

judgments.¹⁰² The moral philosophers sometimes err because they do not truly understand the circumstances about which they pontificate, but that defect does not invalidate the enterprise in principle. It would astonish me to learn that Trachtenberg really believes, for example, that no absolute standard exists for judging whether the United States or Nazi Germany had the better case in World War II.

In the era before the French Revolution, when armies remained small and proxies did the fighting, kings conducted frequent dynastic wars simply to enlarge their territories or increase revenues. Morality might not play much of a role, if any at all. The rise of nationalism and the creation of mass citizen armies in the nineteenth century, however, introduced a different tone into many conflicts. In the American Civil War, for example, both sides fought for principles (though naturally different ones), and the outcome determined how both Northern and Southern societies would develop thereafter. Moreover, explanation is not necessarily justification. In 1914, one can explain why the Austro-Hungarian government believed that it faced an existential threat, even if dispassionate observers thought that the regime could hang on. Assuming the validity of the threat perception, one can sympathize up to a certain point with General Conrad von Hötzendorf's sentiment that "so ancient a monarchy and so glorious an army cannot be allowed to perish ignominiously."¹⁰³ The breakup of the Habsburg polity in 1918 did plunge Eastern Europe into a morass of competitive nationalist excess, economic protectionism, and foreign exploitation that lasted seventy years.¹⁰⁴ Albertini asks rhetorically in his magnum opus, "who is to say whether politically and morally Austria had the better right to defend her existence or Serbia to liberate her brethren?" Following the Croatian genocide of the 1940s, the Serbian genocide of the 1990s, and the breakup of Yugoslavia into six rival states and one UN protectorate, one can estimate (at least *ex post*) which result would have best promoted the general welfare.

By contrast, one is hard put to imagine any plausible explanation of Germany's conduct in 1914 except for paranoid fantasy, faulty risk perception, and a breakdown of the structures undergirding rational decision-making. Sometimes leaders must take prudent risks. Occasionally they must wage preventive war, if to do so proves realistic and necessary under the circumstances. Thus, in 1941, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt launched an undeclared Atlantic naval war with Germany after receiving considered advice from General Marshall and Admiral Harold Stark about the nature of the menace and the forces available to meet it.¹⁰⁵ In contrast, Bethmann Hollweg's self-described "leap into the dark" and Moltke's insistence on waging war even

¹⁰² See Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*. As of this writing, the Harvard College Library lists 381 works addressing this subject.

¹⁰³ Avner Offer, "Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honour," *Politics & Society* 23:2 (June 1995), 227, cited by Trachtenberg in "New Light," *supra*.

¹⁰⁴ On the war after the war, see Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

¹⁰⁵ Steven T. Ross, ed., *U.S. War Plans, 1938-1945* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 103-158 (11 September and 19 December 1941); William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Undeclared War, 1940-1941* (New York: Harper for the Council on Foreign Relations, 1953).

though he believed that it would destroy European civilization seem at first glance inconsistent with the sober conduct of affairs. One finds nothing comparable on the part of Poincaré, Sazonov, or Grey.¹⁰⁶

Trachtenberg seeks to identify precepts for the conduct of international affairs that have universal applicability in political theory. The goal cannot be simply the preservation of peace, since a show of weakness will encourage aggression and undermine the stable international order that Trachtenberg holds in such high regard. He writes more favorably about policies attuned to the basic structure of power, namely ones weighing whether a given course of action makes sense in the light of “power realities as they exist at a given time.” And yet that precept too, for various reasons, falls short of a universal principle. How can one discern precisely what the balance is? Power realities are ever changing. What is more, a rising power dissatisfied with the existing political balance or a declining power anxious to punch above its weight may struggle against such predetermined realism, often with passing success. Sometimes leaders find it advantageous to ignore power realities altogether, as General Charles de Gaulle of France did with considerable efficacy toward the end of World War II. Perhaps the policymaker will find no satisfactory axioms applicable in all circumstances except to maintain an orderly decision-making process, to keep a cool head in a crisis, and to exercise prudent judgment. A knowledge of historical precedent would also help.

¹⁰⁶ On the leap into the dark, see Riezler, *Tagebücher*, 187 (14 July 1914); Andreas Hillgruber, *Germany and the Two World Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 37.