In the autumn of 2011 a major international conference was convened at the German Historical Institute in London to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Fritz Fischer’s *Griff nach der Weltmacht*.1 Fischer’s book sparked a ferocious controversy because of his trenchantly revisionist claims about the nature of German policy before 1914 and the causes of the First World War. Specifically, he argued that policy-makers in Berlin had developed a series of expansionist war aims and that they had unleashed war in Europe in order to achieve them. The claim that Germany bore prime responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War directly challenged the established consensus in Germany and much of the wider world that no single power had started the war and that its origins should rather be sought in structural or systemic factors.

The charge of German ‘war guilt’ embodied in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles had been widely discredited in the inter-war years, supplanted by an understanding that the conflict had been an accident. This was the view embodied in David Lloyd George’s famous characterisation in his *War Memoirs* that the world “slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war.”2 In resuscitating the charge of ‘war guilt’ in the 1960s Fischer not only mounted an academic challenge to established interpretations and methodologies. In the aftermath of a second global war for which German leaders were indubitably responsible, his claims raised uncomfortable political questions about

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continuity in modern German history and, indeed, the nature of German national identity. The proceedings of the 2011 conference have now been collected into a theme issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, guest edited by Annika Mombauer. They cast considerable new light on the Fischer controversy and the origins of the First World War and provide much food for thought about broader historiographical issues in our discipline.

John Keiger’s contribution to the collection focuses on the response of French historians to the Fischer controversy. His point of departure is the puzzling fact that, despite the seismic importance of the First World War for France, Fischer’s work excited little interest there and the subject of the war’s origins still remains relatively under-studied. His explanation focuses chiefly on the structure of the historical discipline in France, its professional sociology and the role of powerful ‘gate-keepers’ in shaping the direction and nature of historical inquiry.

The key figure here is Pierre Renouvin, Professor of the history of international relations at the Sorbonne since 1933 and the doyen of French international historians. Renouvin was an extremely influential individual in the French academic establishment, not least because the mandarin status of the professoriate conferred on senior figures “monopolistic control over the subject of doctoral theses through a network of national committees”: “the award of any doctorate and any appointment to, or promotion in, any university position” (372) was dependent upon the power of patronage. Where the First World War was concerned, Renouvin’s authority was reinforced by his status as a Western Front combat veteran, twice severely wounded, and his pioneering scholarship on the war and its origins in the inter-war years. He had served as the editor of the *Revue d’histoire de la guerre mondiale*, played a key role in the compilation of the official collection of French documents on diplomacy before 1914, and written scores of articles and books on the topic. The broad thrust of his work was to contradict the powerful revisionist trend that sought to undermine the notion of German “war guilt” (and even, in some cases, to shift the blame for the war onto France). As he wrote in 1934, “the firm decision taken by Germany, even at the cost of a European conflict, to ‘bail out’ an Austria-Hungary threatened with disintegration by nationalist movements, is without doubt the essential explanation of the 1914-1918 war” (372).

In view of this, it might have been expected that Renouvin would welcome Fischer’s reassertion of German responsibility for precipitating the war, all the more so because it came from across the Rhine. Yet in fact he responded to *Griff nach der Weltmacht* with a “stinging review” (365) in *Revue Historique*. While Renouvin noted that Fischer had uncovered some important new documents, and offered some valuable reassessments of key personalities and events, he criticised his total neglect of French scholarship and

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concluded that his overall argument simply confirmed the views that French historiography had advanced in the inter-war years. For Keiger, Renouvin’s dismissal of Fischer’s work was a key reason for the book’s failure to ignite any real controversy in France, or to stimulate any serious new investigation into the origins of the war, even after the French archives on 1914 were opened in 1964. (*Griff nach der Weltmacht* was not even published in French translation until 1970.4) Renouvin implied that there was little new to say about the origins of the war, and given his hegemonic power within the discipline of international history in France, this strong steer was apt to be heeded by junior scholars.

The neglect of research on the origins of the war, and France’s role in it, has continued ever since. In part, Keiger speculates that this was due to the sophisticated methodology for studying international history elaborated by Renouvin and his Sorbonne successor Jean-Baptiste Duroselle. The particular ways in which they emphasised the deep underlying forces – both material and cultural – shaping international relations and characterised the decision-making process were not such as to encourage more traditional research into the diplomacy of 1914. Scholars in the school that grew up around Renouvin and Duroselle thus explored various aspects of international relations before the war, but none adequately tackled the issue of the war’s origins as such. This state of affairs persisted even after fresh archival materials, including significant collections of private papers, became available from the 1970s, and even though – in theory – there was no reason why the methodologies of Renouvin and Duroselle could not have been applied to the question. Instead, the study of First World War came to be dominated by the new breed of cultural historians, such as Jean-Jacques Becker, who were more interested in issues such as the soldiers’ experience and commemoration than traditional political or diplomatic matters. Meanwhile, international historians tended to focus on more recent topics: craving and valorising empirical novelty, they have moved forward “in step with the chronological opening of the public archives” (371) and have left more distant subject areas to lie fallow. Thus the most significant work on the war’s origins in relation to France has been done by foreign historians, including Keiger himself.

French historiography on the topic even today remains “stunted, if not non-existent” (373). Although Renouvin died in 1974, he still casts a long shadow over the field, with French historians reluctant to trespass upon the “domain réservé” (373) that he had staked out in the inter-war years. When Duroselle wrote about the origins of the war just before his death in 1994, he did so without engaging with new archival evidence and essentially followed the orthodox Renouvin line that Austria-Hungary and Germany risked general war and thus bore the lion’s share of the blame (albeit “without the deterministic

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Fischerite premeditation” (373)). Nor has any other French historian mounted a serious investigation into the new sources that have become available, either in relation to France’s role or to that of any other power or to the origins of the war more generally.

Keiger clearly deprecates the fact that Renouvin’s views still dominate the field, almost ninety years since they were first enunciated, but he strives to detect some optimistic portents. So he reports the views of Robert Frank, a subsequent holder of the Sorbonne chair, that an “epistemological revolution” (374) might finally be afoot in French international history, as a result of recent interdisciplinary engagements with various strands in International Relations and transnational history. Moreover, he draws attention to a recent work by a German historian on French policy before the war, Stefan Schmidt’s Frankreichs Aussenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914. Schmidt has revived some of the critical ideas about French policy in the summer of 1914 that had originally figured in the 1920’s campaign to mute German ‘war guilt’: far from playing a purely passive role, for Schmidt France in fact took a notably hard line in the crisis, especially during the crucial meeting with the Russian leadership in St Petersburg in the second half of July. Fischer’s intervention ultimately proved to be a damp squib where French historiography was concerned. Would it not be ironic, Keiger ponders, if another provocative work by a German historian almost fifty years later were to serve as a “sort of nationalistic prod” (375) for French historians finally to work afresh on this topic?

Keiger’s article is an important and thought-provoking critical historiographical intervention. It performs a valuable service in piecing together some of the reasons why French historians were largely unperturbed by Fischer and have neglected the subject of the war’s origins ever since. Moreover, in seeking those reasons in extra-empirical factors, and especially in disciplinary politics broadly defined, it offers insights which are evidently transferable to many other debates within international history. The article might have been improved by a slightly firmer editorial hand: there are some exasperating repetitions and inconsistencies, and the arrangement of material is sometimes a little illogical (for example, we encounter Renouvin several times before we are given his full biographical details). It would also have been helpful to have had a fuller and more precise discussion of how Fischer’s methodology (and, indeed, his interpretation) contrasted with those of Renouvin and Duroselle, since this remains a little obscure. Furthermore, while Keiger is undoubtedly right that Renouvin’s dominating presence discouraged other French historians from taking up the issue of war origins in the 1960s and beyond, the emphasis he places on Renouvin’s review of Griff

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6 For a more recent extended discussion, see Robert Frank (ed.), Pour l’histoire des relations internationales (Paris, 2012).

nach der Weltmacht in this respect might be questioned. For one thing, the great bulk of that review deals – as one might expect given the balance of the book’s content – with Germany’s war aims throughout the conflict rather than with the origins of the war. For another, not all readers will agree with his characterisation of Renouvin’s review as “stinging,” given the praise it lavishes on Fischer’s research and, indeed, his wider scholarly achievement.

Some additional evidence on this matter has been provided by Stephan Petzold in an important doctoral thesis (as yet unpublished) on the Fischer controversy.8 Petzold makes extensive use of the private papers of Fischer and numerous other German historians to probe behind the scenes of the public debates and to uncover the strategic professional manoeuvring of the participants. He reveals that Fischer embarked on an active campaign to promote his book, and mobilised his transnational network of contacts to encourage foreign historians to review it in their leading national journals; this was only natural since foreign scholarship generally tended to be more critical of Germany’s role in 1914 and had in consequence helped to inspire Fischer in his own writing.9 Inter alia, Fischer had written to Renouvin in December 1961 and asked him to review Griff nach der Weltmacht. While the subsequent review of course contained some criticisms, Petzold sees it as an important contribution to the “overwhelmingly positive” reception the book received abroad.10 Petzold also reveals that Renouvin proved unreceptive to the direct efforts of Gerhard Ritter – one of Fischer’s key antagonists – to persuade him to block, or at least to discourage, the publication of a French translation. Ritter argued in private correspondence in October 1962 that the entire German guild of historians was opposed to Fischer’s distortion of the truth, and that a translation might damage Franco-German amity; but Renouvin maintained that despite occasionally “excessive conclusions” the work was original and important, and fully merited translation.11 For Petzold, therefore, Renouvin was in fact a key member of Fischer’s

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11 Petzold, ‘Fritz Fischer and the Rise of Critical Historiography’, 184. Renouvin and Ritter had worked together in the early 1950s in the Franco-German historians’ commission that attempted to arrive at agreed interpretations of contentious issues: it was hoped that incorporating these into school history teaching in the two countries might promote political reconciliation. On the origins of the First World War, the commission concluded that the documents did not allow for the attribution of a premeditated will to war to any single power. Ritter sought to remind Renouvin of this finding in their correspondence, in order to co-opt him into his anti-Fischer campaign, but to no avail. Keiger suggests that Renouvin’s past experience of collaborating with Ritter in the commission might have contributed to his ‘severe position’ (366) on Fischer’s book. However, as is argued here, whether he in fact adopted such a position is open to
global network of supporters, whose prestige helped Fischer enormously in his battles with his more conservative colleagues in West Germany.

This evidence suggests that Keiger's argument may need some refinement, or additional nuance, but it does not detract from its fundamental value. He casts important new light on French scholarly neglect of the origins of the First World War, and adds to our understanding of the international dimensions of the Fischer controversy. Moreover, he fruitfully directs our attention to issues of disciplinary politics which are an integral part of the lived experience of practitioners of international history, but which are too seldom incorporated explicitly into our historiographical discussions.


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