



Dinner Party Historiography - The Origins of World War One

Directly after World War One, there was an immediate backlash against Germany, who was officially blamed for the war in the "War Guilt" clause of the Treaty of Versailles. However, in the 1920s old hatreds began to fade and some historians started to suggest that blame should be spread more widely. In the 1930s, the rise of Hitler led to the appeasers maintaining this compromising position, whilst anti-appeasers reinforced the traditional interpretation of German guilt to shore up their case for firm action against the Nazi regime.

Directly after World War Two, there was an immediate attempt to reintegrate Germany back into Europe, so many historians again leaned towards the 'collective responsibility' position with regard to World War One, and insisted that Hitler was a unique, unprecedented monster before World War Two. This is why the suggestion by AJP Taylor and Fritz Fischer that Germany was to blame for World War One, and that Hitler just picked up where the Kaiser left off, was so controversial.

In recent years the debate about responsibility for World War One has become more interesting still. Intentionalists within both camps focus on the actions and intentions of key individuals (and even the role of chance). Structuralists instead focus on the role played by institutions and social structures, with individuals becoming just pawns in an impersonal, almost inevitable tragedy.

The Dinner Party Seating Plan Challenge!

Here are 18 historians with different viewpoints about the Origins of World War One. Your job is to cut up these cards, read each one carefully, and arrange a dinner party reception designed to ensure that nobody ends up sitting adjacent to anybody that they will argue with too much, but will instead sit adjacent next to somebody or several people that they broadly agree with!

Work alone at first, then compare your ideas with a partner and with the class. Stick down your cards on sugar paper when you are happy with your seating plan, and provide a key to explain why each 'table' has been arranged in that particular way.

Discussion points: (a) Where would you seat yourself, and why? (b) If a fight was to break out between two tables of people – or two key individuals – which would they be, and why?

Gerhard Ritter

The German leaders were helpless and often anguished victims of circumstances: carried into war against their will by the inexorable unfolding of military plans which they did not devise and whose political consequences had never been properly foreseen.

Robert Pearce

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

David Stevenson

A self-reinforcing cycle of heightened military preparedness...was an essential element in the conjuncture that led to disaster...The armaments race ... was a necessary precondition for the outbreak of hostilities...the arms race did precipitate the First World War.

Ruth Henig

What really marked out the decade before 1914 was a failure of statesmanship and hope. By 1912, most European governments had come to believe that a general European war was inevitable and that the problems which plagued them at home and abroad could no longer be settled by negotiation and diplomacy...In these circumstances, war seemed to offer an attractive way out...The balance sheet in 1918 proved how wrong they had been.

J.M. Roberts

The French engineer-turned-philosopher, Georges Sorel...attributed all great achievements to violence...It is not, therefore, in the diplomatic documents, or the plans of the war offices that the whole story of the origins of the war can be found. When they have been [read], there still remain important questions about mass psychology.

Holger Herwig

The leaders in Berlin...saw war as the only solution...There was no 'slide' to war, no war caused by 'inadvertence' but instead a world war caused by a fearful set of elite statesmen and rulers making deliberate choices.



Fritz Fischer

Imperial Germany was an unholy alliance of Germany's military, industrial, and political leaders bent on maintaining the power of authoritarianism at home and hegemony abroad...There is no doubt that the war which the German politicians started in July 1914 was not a preventive war fought out of fear and despair...[the German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg was] the Hitler of 1914.

Emil Ludwig

A peaceable, industrious, sensible mass of 500 million [European people], was hounded by a few dozen incapable leaders, by falsified documents, lying stories of threats, and chauvinistic catchwords, into a war which in no way was destined or inevitable...A man need not have been a Bismarck to prevent this most idiotic of all wars.

A.J.P. Taylor

The dynamic unleashed by the process of unification...gave way to the imperial ambitions of Wilhelm II and logically culminated in the tyranny of Hitler's Third Reich...[The German] bid for continental supremacy was certainly decisive in bringing on the European War...Schlieffen, Chief of German General Staff from 1892 to 1906, though dead, was the real maker of the First World War. 'Mobilization means war' was his idea. In 1914 his dead hand automatically pulled the trigger. The sole cause for the outbreak of war in 1914 was the Schlieffen Plan.

James Joll

What is more important than the immediate responsibility for the actual outbreak of war is the state of mind that was shared by all belligerents, a state of mind that envisaged the probable imminence of war and its absolute necessity in certain circumstances.

John Keegan

International ... policy was indeed, in the opening years of the twentieth century, guided not by the search for a secure means of averting conflict but by the age-old quest for security in military superiority.

Niall Ferguson

So decisive was the British victory in the naval arms race that it is hard to regard it as in any meaningful sense a cause of the First World War...Had Britain stood aside [in 1914], continental Europe could have been transformed into something not wholly unlike the European Union we know today...It was the British government which ultimately decided to turn the continental war into a world war, a conflict which lasted twice as long and cost many more lives.

Jay Winter

The best way to understand this question of who was responsible for the outbreak of the First World War is to eliminate those of lesser responsibility. Nobody in London, nobody in Paris, nobody in St. Petersburg wanted the small war to turn into a big war. That conversion of the Balkan War into the Great War was not conjured up anywhere other than in Berlin and in Vienna. If there is a smoking gun, it's in one or the other of those capitals.

Vladimir Lenin

The war of 1914-18 was imperialist (that is, an annexationist, predatory, war of plunder) on the part of both sides; it was a war for the division of the world, for the partition and repartition of colonies and spheres of influence of finance capital...imperialist wars are absolutely inevitable under such an economic system, as long as private property in the means of production exists.

David Lloyd George

We muddled into war...The nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay...The nations backed their machines over the precipice...not one of them wanted war; certainly not on this scale...I felt like a man standing on a planet that had been suddenly wrenched from its orbit and was spinning wildly into the unknown.

Sidney Fay

The greatest single underlying cause of the War was the system of secret alliances which developed after the Franco-Prussian War. It gradually divided Europe into two hostile groups of Powers who were increasingly suspicious of one another and who steadily built up greater and greater armies and navies...the system made it inevitable that if war did come, it would involve all the Great Powers of Europe.

Hans-Ulrich Wehler

The war can be understood as the diversion outwards of internal tensions and forces of change in order to preserve the social and political status quo...to counter the disruptive effects of industrialization on the social and economic structure of Germany, [whose leaders had] a penchant for authoritarian politics and a hostility toward democracy.

James Edmonds

The responsibility for the outbreak of war rests with the German people; but the Kaiser Wilhelm II is so far responsible that he alone might have stopped it and did not do so.