

The Origins of World War One

For a century historians have debated the origins of World War One. Several interpretations have emerged in this time, with historians continuing to seek a greater understanding of why the war occurred.

The outbreak of war

Even before the outbreak of hostilities, great importance was placed on establishing the country responsible for the war. In order to convince their people to fight, each country benefitted from providing a just cause. This meant depicting the enemy as the aggressor, and proving their own involvement was defensive.

The British, Belgians, French, Russians and Serbs believed they were responding to the aggression of the Central Powers.

The Germans argued they had been subjected to "encirclement" and had no option but to react.

The Austro-Hungarians wanted to avenge the murder of Franz Ferdinand.

The War Guilt Clause

At the end of the war, the allied victors laid the blame at the door of Germany. Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles compelled Germany to accept responsibility for starting the Great War and required vast reparations and concessions as punishment.

The interwar period

In the interwar period revisionists (many based in Germany) set about proving World War One was not the responsibility of Germany alone. One theory was the alliance system (Triple Entente and Triple Alliance), competition over empires, and the arms race, made conflict inevitable. This theory was widely accepted for four decades.

The Fischer thesis

In 1961 Fritz Fischer published a controversial new thesis which held Germany largely responsible for World War One. Fischer maintained that the Kaiser was determined to secure European hegemony, arguing German aggression was evident in Weltpolitik, the Schlieffen Plan (1905), the War Council (1912) and the September Programme (1914). He also drew attention to Germany's antagonization of Britain and France during the Moroccan Crises (1905/ 1911) and claimed the Germans exploited the July Crisis (1914) in order to start a war.

The German historical establishment responded to Fischer with outrage. On the whole, however, a new consensus emerged holding the Central Powers responsible. Historians also paid attention to the role of Austria-Hungary, some asserting the death of Franz Ferdinand was seen as a "golden opportunity" for the country to increase its power in the region.

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Recent historiography

In recent years, historians have returned to examining the role of Britain, France and Russia in the outbreak of war. This has added weight to the argument war was a result of imperial competition, with several countries engaged in projects to build empires. The resultant arms race, and increasing tension between European powers, made war inevitable. This has led to a shift away from attributing blame, and towards reaching an understanding of why the war began.

Article by John Tiplady.

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Sources

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