



## **Historiography: who was responsible for the First World War?**

*This is a transcript of the [Historiography: who was responsible for the First World War?](#) podcast from [www.mrallsophistory.com](http://www.mrallsophistory.com)*

To understand why the debate about responsibility for the First World War matters, we need to think about what happened after the war. The Treaty of Versailles contained a War Guilt Clause – Clause number 231 – that said Germany was responsible for the outbreak of war. The War Guilt Clause was used to justify the punishment served on Germany, especially the reparations they had to pay. Germany's punishment under the Treaty of Versailles played a major role in causing enormous problems in international relations during the inter-war years, which themselves resulted in the outbreak of the Second World War. Therefore the issue of who was to blame for the war really is important.

Studying the historiographical debate is fascinating. So many different interpretations exist that it can be difficult knowing how to approach them. The key thing to remember is that they are only interpretations – the conclusions reached by these historians are not facts. Their views are shaped by a wide range of factors, not least of which is the time at which they were writing. You consequently have every right to question their opinions, and an effective evaluation will seek evidence to support or oppose their conclusions. Avoid simply name-dropping historians into an essay as if they are a list of facts. Instead, engage with the historiography to show an awareness of the complexity of the issues you are discussing.

One of the most important things to remember about the historiography of the First World War is that it shifted and adapted according to the time it was written. In his overview of the historiographical debate in the textbook *European Diplomacy 1870-1939*, Simon People divides the historiography into a number of key phases or eras. The years immediately following the war are referred to as “the Versailles phase” in which Germany and its Kaiser were exclusively blamed for causing the war. This is clearly the case in terms of the ‘War Guilt Clause’ of the Treaty of Versailles, and represents the broad desires of the European allies to cripple Germany. Even Wilson, often interpreted as the most moderate peacemaker at the Paris Peace Conference, said that the Kaiser had to go before peace could be negotiated.

As the inter-war period took hold, politicians and resentment towards Germany softened. This period saw the historiography focus more on the shared guilt of all the major powers. You could argue that Woodrow Wilson himself initiated part of this attitude, as his Fourteen Points identified secret treaties as a major barrier to world peace. The historian G. Lowes Dickinson supported this view in his book, *The International Anarchy*, published in 1926, in which he cited the secret pre-war treaties of Russia and Germany as evidence of shared blame.



The publication of diplomatic documents was spearheaded by Germany, keen to prove that all nations had a shared responsibility. It was not long before other European powers published their own diplomatic documents, which provided historians with masses of evidence. The French historian Renouvin used the documents to blame Germany, while von Wegerer in Germany pointed the finger at Russia and Britain. Meanwhile Sidney Fay, an American historian writing in 1929, argued that the combination of imperialism, militarism and alliances was at fault. The key thing to take away from these examples is that the inter-war period saw changing attitudes towards who was to blame, moving away from holding Germany solely responsible and seeing it more as the combined fault of Europe's old political elite. The new democracies, people hoped, would use the peoples' will to avoid such a catastrophe in the future. Such is the benefit of hindsight.

The historiographical period of shared-guilt was brought to an abrupt end with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Indeed, here was a German leader – this time Hitler – demonstrating an aggressive, expansionist, foreign policy. Luigi Albertini's study of the July Crisis, published in 1942-3, argued that the German government's adoption of the Schlieffen Plan caused the war since, in his view, the invasion of Belgium forced Britain to join. This was supported by the famed British historian, AJP Taylor, who also pointed the finger of blame at the Schlieffen Plan in his book, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1914*.

Then, in 1961, the book *Germany's Aims in the First World War* by Fritz Fischer caused a sensation. Fischer was a German historian with access to the Imperial Archives, who put forward new evidence – the September Programme by Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg – which shows that Germany had enormous territorial aims in 1914, much as Hitler did in 1939. In a second book a few years later, Fischer further argued that evidence from a War Council meeting in 1912 proved that Germany had a 'will to war', and that this drove their support of Austria-Hungary and declaration of the "blank cheque". The evidence he quoted was a diary in which von Moltke, the German Chief of Staff in 1912, is quoted as saying that, "in my opinion war is inevitable and the sooner the better".

It should be of no surprise, therefore, that Fischer is not without his critics. Many claim that the September Programme of 1914 cannot be used to conclusively prove that Germany had these aims before September 1914. Other critics highlight that his work focuses almost entirely on Germany alone and that, without considering the actions of the other European nations, it is impossible to fully apportion blame.

Since Fischer, other historians have had the opportunity to visit the archives of Europe and the debate rages on. Every so often a significant new piece of research is released that challenges us to consider new evidence, or reconsider old. Niall Ferguson has argued that Britain was most to blame due to its determination to challenge what he claimed were the misinterpreted actions of Germany. Indeed, he plays down suggestions of Germany's militaristic aims by highlighting the increasing influence of the Social Democrat Party in the



Reichstag. John Keegan, meanwhile, has found fault with the politicians and diplomats caught up in managing the July Crisis. His argument focuses on the role of the Kaiser and his 50 advisors. He puts forward the argument that Wilhelm II simply didn't know how to control this large and competitive group of diplomats and, "panicked and let a piece of paper determine events." Keegan therefore argues that with different personalities in charge, the war might never have happened. Swifter and clearer communication between the countries of Europe would have avoided the second-guessing that eventually transpired.

While the debate rages on, the general view amongst historians has increasingly become one that highlights the significant role of Germany in causing the war. In particular, Weltpolitik and Germany's role in the July Crisis are often singled out for blame although not always as part of a clear plan as proposed by Fischer. The fact remains that the causes of the First World War are complex, and using the historiography to support an argument one way or another is only part of the story.

Therefore, while including reference to the views of historians is something an examiner will take a positive view of, it is not a substitute for your own structured analysis of the question. Really good essays integrate historiography to support or challenge the argument being presented, and recognize that the views expressed by historians need to be evaluated against the context in which they were written, and the evidence they base their conclusions upon. Historians' ideas should be used to support or extend your argument, or provide you with a viewpoint against which to argue. Simply name-dropping historians as if their opinions are facts to be tossed around misses the point completely.