The Causes of World War I

by Patrick Alessandra

The historiography of the causes of World War One has always been a field fraught with conflict. The political implications of where to place the blame in the aftermath of the war, and the sheer scale of the conflict have caused many a historian to put forth their own interpretations of why The Great War began that fateful summer in 1914. The historiography of World War I has fluctuated from blaming Germany, to the idea that the war was a horrible accident, to blaming Austria-Hungary's ethnic tensions, to more holistic views that take into account the millions of individual factors involved in modern times. Like so many areas of history, the causes of World War I are a source of endless contention for historians.

One of the biggest schools of thought in regards to the causes of World War I is exemplified by the writing of Fritz Fischer. In his book *Germany's Aims in In The First World War* first published in Germany in 1961, Fritz Fischer makes the case that The Great War was largely the responsibility of Germany. He paints a picture of ever escalating European tension fueled by Germany's angling for increased resources and status.[1] He emphasized the German antagonism with France as central to Germany's approach to general European war, which Germany saw as inevitable. In fact according to Fischer, the German leadership felt it needed a war to maintain Germany's status as a great power.[2] World War I happened because Germany needed it, and her statesmen and generals forced it to explode, out of fears of a rising Russia and a scheming France.[3]

In contrast to this Germany centric view, A. J. P. Taylor, in his 1977 book *How Wars Begin* puts forth a different interpretation. Taylor theorizes that the true culprit behind The First World War was inflexible railroad mobilization timetables.[4] They were timed and organized so precisely that if mobilization was paused after it began the country in question would be

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[1] Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), 88.
[2] Ibid., 49.
[3] Ibid., 55.
[4] A. J. P. Taylor, "The First World War," in *How Wars Begin* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), 110.

defenseless for weeks while new schedules were drawn up. Germany's timetables are particularly blamed by Taylor because they involved a direct deployment into Belgium and France to catch those nations by surprise.[5] As such, he ascribes the whole war up to a domino effect of increasing tensions and nations making escalations that has unintended and horrific consequences. Germany's overaggressive plan of mobilization though, was especially to blame. His views can best be understood by placing him in the Cold War context in which he was writing.

Moving out of the more ideological interpretations of Fischer and Taylor, Samuel Williamson in his 1991 book *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* makes the case that the war's outbreak was due to ethnic and class tensions in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and that Germany merely encouraged Austria-Hungary to take the actions it needed to in order to survive.[6] The picture Williamson paints is of a dying empire torn by national strife and struggling to hold itself together in the face of the nationalism of the South Slavs. His Austria-Hungary cannot stand any more defeats and humiliations. It has to crush Serbia no matter what in order to survive.[7] Germany's presence and assurances merely enable the Empire's leadership to risk upsetting Russia by attacking its ally: Serbia. Russia, the Austro-Hungarian leadership assumed, would back down in the face of German military might as it had previously and Austria-Hungary would restore a sense of national integrity by crushing Serbia. Things clearly did not go as planned and the war meant to save the Austro-Hungarian Empire destroyed it. However Williamson's book is more than likely influenced by the ongoing strife in the Balkans during the 1990's.

Moving further towards the present, David Fromkin in his 2004 book *Europe's last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* strikes a balance between the arguments of Williamson and Fischer. Fromkin theorizes that in actual fact World War I started as two wars. The war Germany prepared and pushed for against France and Russia, and the war Austria-Hungary needed against Serbia, which incidentally involved Russia.[8] Echoing Williamson, Fromkin reiterates the presence of ethnic and class tensions tearing Austria-Hungary apart, and the desperate need of the Austro-Hungarian leadership for a decisive show of military power and

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[5] Ibid., 117.

[6] Samuel R. Williamson Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 197.

[7] Ibid., 194.

[8] David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 260.

national unity against Serbia in order to maintain their existence as a state.[9] He also expands Williamson's point about Germany as enabler by going into detail on why Germany felt the need to support Austria-Hungary in the first place. Tying in Fischer's school of thought, Fromkin echoes him in stating that Germany needed to defeat Russia in order to secure its borders, so it supported Austria-Hungary's Serbian ambitions hoping to spark a confrontation, and make the Tsar back down. However, because their plans for war were so mismatched when it broke out the lack of coordination between Austria-Hungary and Germany severely weakened their opening moves.[10] The conflict and mutual needs of these two war plans and goal produced the First World War from the crisis in July 1914.

Most recently Margaret MacMillan in her 2014 book *The War that Ended Peace: the Road to 1914* adds a new spin on understanding the causes of World War One by regarding its origins as a failure of the forces that advocated peace to hold back such a conflict from happening.[11] MacMillan examines the slow erosion of the anti-war forces in the lead up to 1914 in great detail, noting every moment when anti-war parties, or individuals are convinced to support their nation's entrance into The Great War. She details the internal political struggles of all the great powers as they reacted to each other and their own people's nationalism, pacifism and patriotism. She concludes with the position that "the war was either everybody's fault, or nobody's."[12] All the powers and a variety of factors such as nationalisms, archaic senses of honor and realpolitik were responsible for the outbreak of war, and she carefully avoids pinning the lion's share of the blame on anyone or any nation.[13] Though Germany was one of the first to have its troops cross the borders of another nation, she argues that this was largely because France and the triple Entente were desperately concerned about not being perceived as the aggressors, and held back until after Germany had made itself look like the aggressor for posterity.[14] But the tension that sparked the conflict was exasperated by all sides. Representing the latest scholarship in the field MacMillan incorporates elements and research from Fritz Fischer, Samuel Williamson, and even A. J. P. Taylor's war by timetable theory. Her finished product is holistic and credits them all with a piece of the truth. The wider scope and added depth of MacMillan's book can be

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[9] Ibid.,263.

[10] Ibid., 299.

[11] Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914*, (New York: Random House, 2014), xxxii.

[12] Ibid., xxxv.

[13] Ibid., 599.

[14] Ibid., 619.

credited to the benefit of being the latest to write comprehensively on the subject. She has clearly read all of the above authors, and makes her contribution to the field by summarizing and clarifying them.

The field of the study of the causes of World War One has thus come a long way since Fritz Fischer's definitive critique of Germany's war aims. Various authors have in turn blamed impersonal forces or honed in on specific nations and their political anglings. The main center of focus has historically been the central powers and much fruitful scholarship has been made examining their motives. The scholarship is far from exhausted however. Many smaller aspects of this vast field need additional expansion. Books could be written on the motives of the Russian leadership in mobilizing when it did, or the extent to which British continental policy was responsible for creating such a dangerous network of agreements and alliances. One may be tempted to think that MacMillan has reached the peak of synthesis on the topic but she still leaves several areas open to new scholarship and examination. So long as nations experience nationalism and engage in brinksmanship examining the causes of World War One will be vital to avoiding a third one.