5 Origins of the war of 1914

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THE OBSESSION

The search for explanations of the war which began in 1914 has been almost obsessive. A reader who commanded a knowledge of the main European languages could spend a lifetime on the books and articles which have been produced on the subject without getting near the end; and the stream shows no sign of drying up. Why has it mattered so much, and why has the debate not been stilled by the passage of time?

One answer lies in the interests of historians and the nature of historical study. The coming of war in 1914 presents a tremendous challenge to historical explanation. The amount of evidence available is enormous. Historians have laboured on the subject for more than three-quarters of a century, using every tool and approach known to the profession. Students of diplomacy, military and naval affairs, politics, economics and society have all made their contribution; so have those concerned with the human psyche, modes of thought and states of feeling. The six weeks between the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo, and the British declaration of war on Germany on 4 August, have been subjected to the most minute scrutiny, with events traced day by day and hour by hour. At the same time, the underlying forces which may have influenced men's actions (for example, alliance systems, arms races, nationalism, imperialism) have been examined with equal diligence and intensity. With all this material and effort, it is incumbent upon historians to produce some results.

But we are far from dealing merely with the concerns of professional historians. The war of 1914–18 has weighed heavily on the minds of western European peoples, not least in Britain, where it was long (and surely rightly) called simply the Great War. There has been a profound sense that the war was a true turning-point in European history, the

end of the nineteenth century and the age of progress, and the beginning of our own catastrophic era. Through the scale of the fighting and the numbers of casualties, the war has also left its mark on folk memory, which persists even though the generation of those directly involved has almost completely died out. An event of such magnitude, which left so deep an impression, cries out for explanation.

There is a further reason for the obsession with the origins of the war. Remarkable to relate, the question has never ceased to be a part of contemporary politics. During the war itself, the question of its origins was an essential element in the struggle. Among the belligerents, morale depended to some degree on a conviction of the rightness of one's cause; and appeals for the support of neutrals (especially the United States) were often based on the same claims. In the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 a view of the origins of the war – crudely summed up as German war guilt – was made the basis for the demand for reparations to make good the loss and damage suffered by the victors during the war. For the next few years the Germans put a great effort into attacking the 'war guilt' thesis, for reasons which had more to do with undermining Versailles than with a search for strict historical truth. At the same time, a great deal of work was concentrated on how war came about in 1914, with the understandable objective of preventing the same thing happening again. The causes of war (not just of a particular war) were diagnosed so that they could be eliminated. During the Second World War the political outlook on the events of 1914 changed, but remained very much alive. Churchill telegraphed to Roosevelt in the night of 4–5 August 1941: 'It is twenty-seven years ago today that the Huns began the last war. We must make a good job of it this time. Twice ought to be enough.'[1] Views on the conduct of Germany in 1914 – that is, on the origins of the First World War – were thus closely connected with the politics of the Second World War. After that war was over, the question of the continuity or otherwise of the two World Wars became a part, especially in West Germany, of the crucial issue as to whether Hitler and Nazism were a complete aberration in Germany's history, or were part of an essential continuum. The same question is far from being forgotten in 1992, when the views of many people on the unification of Germany are coloured by opinions as to whether or not Germany began the wars of 1914 and 1939.

The problem of the origins of the war of 1914 has thus remained politically alive, and has become part of wider issues like the causes of war in general, and the nature of Germany. It is not surprising that the obsession retains its power. We still puzzle away at the old question:

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why did the wealthy, civilized, sophisticated countries of Europe in 1914 become involved in what proved to be so desperate and disastrous a struggle?

INTERPRETATIONS: THE EVENTS AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

To examine the interpretations which have been offered as to the origins of the war means looking at two sets of problems, posed respectively by the events and by the historiography.

In looking at the events, the conventional division into long-term and short-term causes of the war serves well. Long-term surveys start at different points according to the issues being placed at the centre of discussion. Some start in 1871 with the end of the Franco-Prussian war and the annexation by the newly-created Germany of the French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. This point of departure places Franco-German rivalry in the forefront of the picture, and other elements have their prominence decided by this perspective. Other accounts take the Balkans as the centre of attention, and begin in 1878 with the Treaty of Berlin and its temporary settlement of Balkan frontiers. Others again lead off in the 1890s, either with the making of the Franco-Russian alliance between 1892 and 1894, or with imperial rivalries in Africa and Asia throughout the decade.

Whichever starting-point is chosen, accounts of the distant origins of the war describe the building up of the alliance system which dominated European affairs in the years before 1914. Germany and Austria-Hungary were linked in the Dual Alliance, signed originally in 1879. These two powers were also linked with Italy in the Triple Alliance, signed in 1882; but by 1914 this arrangement had grown very uncertain, with Italy becoming increasingly detached from it. France and Russia were associated in an alliance which was concluded in 1894; and they were also attached to Britain by the loose arrangements often referred to as the Triple *Entente*. The terminology was important. Alliances were, in principle, binding agreements, under which the partners would go to war in certain circumstances. *Ententes* (the Anglo-French *entente* of 1904 and the Anglo-Russian one of 1907) involved no such commitment, being limited to provision for consultation and promises of diplomatic support. The Austro-German and Franco-Russian alliances formed solid, opposing elements in the European political system. This alliance system carried within it the danger that a dispute anywhere in the continent might draw in the great powers through their alliance commitments; and the *ententes* made British involvement also a possibility.

Long-term surveys also describe a series of European crises during the ten years before the outbreak of war in 1914. In 1905–6 the first Moroccan crisis saw a Franco-German confrontation over French claims on the then independent state of Morocco. During the period of tension, and at the conference at Algeçiras which resolved the crisis, the Anglo-French *entente* was consolidated and assumed a clear anti-German aspect. In 1908–9 there was a severe and prolonged crisis in the Balkans, set off by the Austrian annexation of the Ottoman province of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This was territory which was also coveted by Serbia, and the danger of the situation lay in the confrontation between Austria on the one hand and Russia, acting in support of the Serbs, on the other. With Germany offering ostentatious backing to Austria, there was outlined with ominous clarity the threat of a conflict between three great powers arising out of a comparatively minor Balkan incident. If such a conflict had come about, France would surely have been drawn in. The lines were drawn for a European war, which at that point did not come about because the Russian government decided it could not take the risk, and so withdrew support from Serbia. In 1911 the second Moroccan crisis brought another sharp dispute between France and Germany, in which Britain again supported France. In 1912–13 there occurred two series of wars in the Balkans, in which the independent Balkan states first combined to defeat the Turks, and then fell out among themselves over the division of the spoils. The greatest single consequence of these wars was that Serbia emerged with enlarged territory and heightened self-confidence, which was now turned against Austria.

These repeated crises produced three dangerous consequences. The most acute was a 'never again' mentality in Russia and Austria. The Russians felt that they could not afford to give way again in face of Austrian and German pressure. If they were in future called upon to support Serbia, they would have to make that support good. The Austrians felt that they had stood aside during the Balkan wars and allowed changes which were to their disadvantage. In another crisis, they would not be able to abstain, but would have to act. The second development was a sharp rise in Balkan nationalism, and particularly in Pan-Serb sentiment, posing an obvious threat to the multinational Austro-Hungarian empire. If Nationalism pursued its logical course, then Austria-Hungary was heading for disintegration. Naturally, the Austrian government saw powerful reasons to take drastic action – probably against Serbia – in self-preservation. Third, during the two

Moroccan crises the Anglo-French *entente* developed in such a way that France expected British support in the event of war, and Britain was implicitly committed to such support. In these ways, a scenario emerged which presaged that of 1914, and lines were drawn which in 1914 were followed to their logical conclusions. On the other hand, in all four crises a way out was found; by a conference, by diplomacy behind the scenes, or by one participant backing down rather than risking war. The European system was producing dangerous crises, but it was also working well enough to resolve them without a war between great powers.

So much for long-term accounts. When we move to the short-term causes of the war we are faced with the six weeks between 28 June 1914, when Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Habsburg empire, was assassinated at Sarajevo, and early August. The events of these six weeks have been traced in minute detail; the Italian historian Luigi Albertini devoted two massive volumes solely to this short period.[2] To take such trouble is, in itself, an act of historical interpretation; an assertion that the detailed record of those six weeks is crucial in explaining how the war came about. What stands out among the events and decisions of this brief period? First, the Austrian government held Serbia responsible for the death of the archduke, and delivered an ultimatum demanding Serbian compliance with a number of demands, including Austrian participation in the investigation of the crime. Serbia refused some of these demands. In this, Russia supported Serbia, and on this occasion (unlike in 1908–9) was prepared to mobilize, and ultimately to fight. Germany supported Austria to the hilt – 'signing a blank cheque' is the analogy often used. The likelihood of a local war involving Austria and Serbia thus opened out into the possibility of an eastern European war involving Austria, Germany and Russia. At that point the alliance system and military plans came into play. If Russia was at war with Germany, then France would be obliged to join in; and in any case, German military plans had been prepared to deal with the Franco-Russian alliance. Germany's Schlieffen Plan was designed to cope with a war on two fronts by attacking France first and defeating it in six weeks, leaving the German army free to mop up the slow-moving Russians at leisure. The Schlieffen Plan provided the link which was certain, whatever else happened, to turn an east European war into a general one. That left Britain and Italy to decide their course. The British government hesitated for a long time, but was eventually pushed by the German invasion of Belgium (another part of the Schlieffen Plan) to declare war on Germany. Italy declared its neutrality.

During the six weeks, events moved at a gathering pace, and it is easy to see why contemporaries used the metaphor of a river coming to rapids and ultimately a waterfall.[3] The archduke was assassinated on 28 June. On 5 July the German Kaiser Wilhelm II gave Austria a 'blank cheque', offering unconditional support, in the full knowledge that this might involve war with Russia. But then the Austrians took several days to draft and approve their ultimatum to Serbia, which was not actually delivered until 23 July. The Serbs replied on the 25th, accepting most of the terms but not all. On the 28th Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, and fired the first shots by bombarding Belgrade. In a sense the die was cast there and then: the crisis was over almost as soon as it really began. By the time another week was up, virtually the whole of Europe was at war. Russia ordered general mobilization on 30 July; Austria on the 31st. Germany, on 1 August, declared war on Russia, on 2 August delivered an ultimatum to Belgium, and on the 3rd declared war on France. On 4 August Britain declared war on Germany. Everything was done in due form with ultimatums and declarations of war properly delivered and received. The diplomatic etiquette of the old Europe was observed for the last time.

These were the events which historians have laboured so hard and long to explain. It is time to turn to the interpretations which have been put forward over the years. The first set of interpretations emerged in the era characterized by the debate on war guilt and the publication of diplomatic documents, stretching from 1914 to the Second World War. The period was dominated by two divergent themes: an attempt to allot responsibility – or, in a harsher word, guilt – for the outbreak of war; and a search for underlying causes of the war, which, if successful, would replace the concept of responsibility with the neutral idea of causality.

Anxiety about blame for causing the war was present before the war itself began, because nearly all the governments were concerned to convince their own peoples that a conflict, if it came, was a defensive one forced upon them by others. When battle was joined, the belligerent governments continued the process of casting blame upon their enemies by publishing carefully selected anthologies of diplomatic documents, designed (indeed, occasionally doctored) to demonstrate their own innocence. The Germans sought mainly to shift responsibility onto Russia, both generally in terms of Russian ambitions in the Balkans, and specifically because the Russians had been the first to mobilize and had thus taken a key step towards war. In France and Britain, Germany was presented as the main culprit; again, both

generally, through denunciation of German militarism, and particularly, as a result of the German attack on Belgium. Such views, which attained the status of beliefs, were of great importance in sustaining the will to fight through an unexpectedly long and costly war. The same arguments were also used to appeal for the sympathy of neutral countries, and the allied insistence on German war guilt gradually gained acceptance in the United States.

The war ended in 1918, and in 1919 the major victorious powers – France, Britain, Italy and the United States (these last two belligerents from 1915 and 1917 respectively) – prepared the terms of peace to be imposed on Germany. They embodied in the Treaty of Versailles the acceptance by Germany of the responsibility for forcing the war upon others by her aggression; namely Article 231, commonly called the 'war guilt clause'. This assertion set the pattern for much of the historical discussion during the next twenty years. Some historians, particularly in France, continued to maintain that Germany bore either the whole, or at any rate the major, part of the blame for the war.[4] The German government, on the other hand, threw itself into a campaign to disprove the war guilt clause, and so to undermine the validity of the peace treaty, especially its reparations section. The Germans published a massive series of diplomatic documents, *Die grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette* ('The High Policies of the European Governments'), which appeared in forty volumes between 1922 and 1926 – a remarkable feat in itself. German historians devoted much care and energy to editing these documents, and also produced books and articles to reach a wider readership. The burden of much of their argument, as set out, for example, in Max Montgelas's *The Case for the Central Powers* and Erich Brandenburg's *From Bismarck to the World War*, was that Germany had not sought war; if it had, there had been better opportunities in 1905 or 1909 than in 1914. On the other hand, Russia and France *had* wanted war: Russia for the control of the straits into the Mediterranean, France for Alsace-Lorraine; and the president of France, Poincaré, and the Russian ambassador in Paris, Iswolski, had actually conspired to bring war about.[5] This conspiracy theory, directed against France and Russia, was also taken up by 'revisionist' writers in France, Britain and the United States. The debate on war guilt thus crossed national boundaries, becoming a general discussion in which the German case gained wide acceptance.

At the same time there developed a very different strand of thought. The British historian, G. P. Gooch, argued in his *Recent Revelations of European Diplomacy* that in 1914 all the belligerent states had good reasons for their actions. Serbia sought to unite the South Slavs; Austria-Hungary wished to save itself from disruption; Russia could not abandon Serbia; Germany had to support Austria, its one safe ally, just as France had to stand by Russia; Britain could not afford to watch France be defeated and then face a victorious Germany alone. If each country had sound reasons for going to war, then the question of guilt became virtually meaningless, and attention should move to a diagnosis of the *causes* of the war – a very significant change of emphasis.[6]

This search for the causes of the war of 1914 became closely linked with a movement to discover the roots of war itself, with a view to eliminating them. This had long been a concern among utopian thinkers, but the catastrophe of the Great War brought a new urgency to what had often been a somewhat abstract discussion. Several diagnoses commanded attention. Socialists argued strongly that war was the product of capitalism, and of imperialism which Lenin had described as the highest stage of capitalism. There had been a struggle for markets, raw materials and fields for investment, which had led to competition to seize parts of Africa, eastern Asia and the Middle East. Such arguments gained considerably in force when Lenin was no longer an obscure scribbler in a Zurich library, but the ruler of a great state. Moreover, socialism was a growing force over much of Europe in the 1920s, and its views commanded much respect. The case against imperialism fitted closely with that against secret diplomacy. Wars, notably that of 1914, were caused by the machinations of professional diplomats, usually (if not exclusively) aristocrats, who wove their webs of alliances irresponsibly, outside the control of parliaments, the press or public opinion. This case had a strong appeal in Britain, where there was a widespread (and well-founded) belief that the true extent of British commitments to France had not been revealed to Parliament, or even to the Cabinet. This again was bound up with another general explanation of the war: that it was the result of the alliance system, which had bred mistrust and hostility, and in 1914 had transformed what might have been a local conflict into a European war. The next step was a simple one. The alliances had taken the form of armed camps, and war was the result of armaments and arms races. The evidence for this thesis was readily to hand in the Anglo-German naval race, in which the two countries had built battleships in open competition with one another; and in the Franco-German rivalry in the size and equipment of their armies, which came to a head with the German Army Law of 1913 and the French three-year conscription law of the same year. All these explanations could be rolled together in the general assertion that the whole system of conducting relations

between states had been wrong. Lowes Dickinson summed the whole view up in the title of his book, *The International Anarchy*.[7]

This flood of discussion and research on the origins of the war was, as we have already seen, motivated as much by political as by historical concerns. It none the less resulted in a vast work of historical elucidation, not least in the establishment of the precise chronology of events during the six weeks of the war crisis. A classic example of this kind of work is the masterly exposition by Luigi Albertini on the dates of the Russian and Austrian mobilizations, which finally laid to rest the long controversy as to which had been first – not a negligible matter when it was plain that mobilization was a crucial step towards war. In this way, even the often arid 'war guilt' controversy could produce enlightenment; and the search for general causes inspired excellent books on, for example, the diplomacy of imperialism and the Anglo-German naval rivalry.[8]

The Second World War brought a pause in speculation about the origins of the First. Many historians served in the forces or in other forms of war work; nearly all had pressing demands on their time and energies. But this distraction was only temporary. The second war was bound to revive questions about the first. Were the two in fact separate? Did the almost unquestioned German responsibility for the events of 1939–41 cast any light on the issue of war guilt in 1914? Among Germany's enemies there was a strong tendency to believe that it did. Even Soviet historians, firm in their assertions that 'imperialism' was to blame for the war of 1914, came to think that the German imperialists were probably more to blame than others. The next great wave of historical debate about 1914, associated primarily with the name of the German historian Fritz Fischer, took shape in the shadow of questions raised by the Second World War.

In 1961 Fischer published a substantial book, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* ('Grasp for World Power'), which was translated into English in 1967 under the feeble title of *Germany's Aims in the First World War*.[9] However, what the English title did make clear was the fact that the book was mainly about Germany's aims during the 1914–18 war, and only its introductory section was devoted to the pre-war period and the question of the origins of the war. Yet this section contained enough explosive matter to set off shock waves: first in Germany, and then among all who were still concerned with the events of 1914. What did Fischer have to say? First, he declared that Germany bore a large part of the responsibility for the outbreak of the war – which was scarcely new for many people in other countries, but was dynamite in German historical circles. Second, he argued that important groups within the

German ruling élite (the general staff, landowners, industrialists, bankers, leaders of the Pan-German League, and university professors) had long held expansionist views, and were willing to go to war to fulfil them. Third (and here Fischer followed the Italian historian Albertini very closely), he maintained that in the July crisis the German government was prepared to risk a general European war arising out of a local war between Austria and Serbia, and that Germany had systematically encouraged Austria to go ahead with an attack on Serbia even when it became clear that the conflict could not be localized. This transformed the analogy of the blank cheque: Germany had not given Austria a blank cheque, but had actually written the amount itself. And the amount meant European war.

Fischer based his arguments on a mass of research in the German archives, penetrating beyond the published collections of diplomatic documents which had been the basis of earlier accounts. He also broke from the usual pattern, which had halted examinations of the origins of the war when fighting began. Because Fischer was essentially concerned with the war, and only partly with its origins, he used material from after the outbreak of hostilities to illuminate the situation before they began. He discovered a particularly explosive piece of evidence in a memorandum by the German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, dated 9 September 1914, setting out a draft programme of war aims which amounted to complete German domination of Europe, west and east. Fischer claimed that this document was not simply the result of euphoria at a moment of apparent victory, but was in fact the crystallization of views which were common in German ruling circles before the war began, and indeed represented Bethmann's own aspirations. Bethmann, in fact, emerged from Fischer's book not as the well-meaning but inadequate statesman of inter-war history, but as a fully-fledged advocate of German expansion.

Fischer's book thus reopened the war guilt issue, which with the passage of time had been moving into the background in favour of an examination of causes; and he also provoked a sharp reassessment of Bethmann-Hollweg, one of the prominent personalities of 1914. He thus breathed new life into old controversies. But he also opened up a new way of looking at the whole problem. In 1969 he followed up *Griff nach der Weltmacht* with *Krieg der Illusionen* ('War of Illusions'), dealing in detail with the years 1911–14, and trying to make good his earlier summary assertions that the German war aims of September 1914 were not mere improvisation but were the product of expansionist aims which had been present for some time. In this process, Fischer developed the argument that foreign policy had been largely decided

by *internal* issues. He analysed the tensions between the old ruling groups in Germany, represented by the monarchy and the landowning aristocracy (the Junkers), and the newer industrial and commercial groups, such as the industrialists of the Ruhr and the shipping magnates of Hamburg. The extraordinary economic growth of Germany at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century strengthened the position of the newer groups, stimulated demands for a world policy, and brought about a naval competition with Britain which the more conservative elements would never have contemplated. Both these groups were hostile to (and often afraid of) the rising force of socialism. The German Social Democratic Party was the largest and best organized in Europe, and came to be the largest single party in the Reichstag. Its language was anti-militarist, and it attacked the Prussian constitution, which preserved a parliamentary system based on the 'orders' of the eighteenth century, thus retaining a privileged position for the aristocracy. Fear of socialism caused many in the ruling groups to consider war, either as a means of uniting the nation against a foreign enemy, or alternatively as providing an opportunity to crush the socialist party.

In developing this argument, Fischer attacked a long-standing tenet of German historical writing, summed up in the phrase 'the primacy of foreign policy'; the view that foreign policy was essentially decided according to the external interests of the state, and not by internal factors. But this was not an attitude confined to Germany. Most writing about the causes of the war in the inter-war period had been based on diplomatic documents and had used the methods of diplomatic history. It was true that a number of historians had asserted in rather general terms the significance of economic forces; and the internal tensions within the Habsburg empire had long been recognized as one of the forces leading to war. But the main focus had been on the embassies, foreign ministries and chancelleries of Europe, with an occasional glance at the general staffs. To assert the primacy of *internal* politics, and to claim that the war had come about for mainly domestic reasons, was to open a new angle of vision upon events.

To examine this assertion became the work of another generation of historians. An American writer, Arno J. Mayer, started the ball rolling by proclaiming the need for a concentration of research on the internal causes and purposes of war. He, like others before him, thought in terms of the causes of war in general, though referring particularly to the war of 1914. Broadly, his thesis was that decisions for or against war in all the major belligerent capitals were essentially part of internal tensions and struggles between the forces of order (or conservatism)

and those of change (or revolution). Mayer accepted that sometimes these tensions were so acute that governments would take a cautious line, for fear that war might be fatal to the existing order of things; but he asserted that the opposite was more often the case. Internal tensions, he claimed, tended to incline governments to go to war to strengthen their own position – which chimed in with Fischer's arguments about the rulers of Germany going to war in 1914 to bring about national unity and preserve their own authority.[10] The whole interpretation presupposes a high degree of far-sighted calculation on the part of ruling groups. How far can it be demonstrated?

The strongest case is also the oldest and most obvious: that of Austria-Hungary. The Habsburg empire had grown up over many centuries, and preserved many of the characteristics of a past era. Its principle of legitimacy was dynastic, and the empire in effect consisted of the long-inherited lands of the Habsburg family. The force of nationalism, which developed so strongly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, threatened its very existence. The empire lost territory, and suffered dangerous damage to its prestige, through the unification of Italy and Germany. In 1914, the most dangerous threat seemed to be from the South Slav movement for union between Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. There was much talk of Serbia becoming 'the Piedmont of the South Slavs'. Such a union would at once detach important territories from Austria-Hungary, and would almost certainly give such encouragement to other nationalities within the empire as to lead to its rapid dissolution. It was this fear of the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian state, arising from its nature as a multinational empire, which impelled the government in Vienna to strike at Serbia in 1914 in the desperate hope of cutting away external support for internal dissension.

This is the clearest case of internal tensions leading a government to undertake a foreign war in 1914. Its basis was understood perfectly well even in 1914, and modern historiography has added little to the essential argument. At the other end of the scale stand Britain and France, where domestic affairs appear to have played little part in decisions for war. In Britain there were indeed grave domestic problems, notably in Ireland, where there was a danger of civil war arising out of the conflicting aspirations of Irish nationalists and Ulster Unionists. But there is no evidence that the Prime Minister, Asquith, or the Foreign Secretary, Grey, sought to involve Britain in European war to escape from domestic crisis. On the contrary, the Ulster problem absorbed so much energy and attention that the European war crisis came as a bolt from the blue for most of Asquith's cabinet. Grey

worked hard to preserve peace. His own thoughts were dominated by the position of France; and the mind of a divided cabinet was finally clarified by the German attack on Belgium which provided a simple moral imperative. In France, there were of course long-term internal divisions dating back to the revolution of 1789, and much sound and fury over the three-year military service law of 1913. But France had lived with such long-term dissensions and sharp political storms for a long time, and there is no sign that French politicians saw European war as a way out of them.

Somewhere between these two extremes lie the cases of Russia and Germany. In Russia there were many influences at work within an ill-organized system of decision-making. One school of thought looked back to the disastrous experience of the war against Japan in 1904–5 which had led to revolution in Russia, and argued that in order to achieve stability at home it would be best to keep out of war abroad. Others, however, held that the regime needed to restore its prestige, both at home and abroad, by a success in foreign policy in Russia's traditional sphere of interest in the Balkans and the straits. Another powerful influence was that of the Pan-Slavs, who believed strongly that Russia must support the Serbs in 1914, especially since it had let them down in 1908–9, during the Bosnian crisis. Between these various pressures upon the tsar, whose own actions seem often to have been governed by a cloudy but sincere belief that both he and his country were in the hands of God, there seems to have been little scope for rational long-term calculation. War might stave off revolution, by drawing people into a common effort, or it might have the opposite result, as it did in 1905. There was no agreement. As for Germany, Fischer undoubtedly makes a very strong case that internal pressures were leading towards war, as a means of resolving differences between the old Prussian ruling classes and the new industrial and commercial élites, and also as a means of forestalling the socialist threat. But it is hard to demonstrate the precise links between such pressure and the actual decisions taken in 1914.

Only in Austria, therefore, is there a clear case for the primacy of internal political calculations in the decisions for war in 1914. In the other countries it is hard to find any single pattern of explanation that fits them all – which is hardly surprising in view of the wide differences between their political systems and circumstances.[11]

The line of approach based on the internal causes and purposes of war has proved valuable in broadening the concept of what is relevant to the origins of the war, but less productive in substance than the efforts put into diplomatic history, which tells us more about actual

decision-making. There has been, in fact, some return to the study of the small élites which conducted foreign policy. Zara Steiner in her book on Britain and the origins of the war, and John Keiger in his similar study of French policy, both conclude that the Foreign Office and the Quai d'Orsay had much more influence on decision-making than other bodies, and that the main calculations involved were those of national interest and prestige, as understood at the time by the groups of ministers and officials closely concerned with foreign policy.[12]

Both the diplomatic and the 'internal causes' approaches to the problem rely essentially on the view that politicians and officials make decisions based upon calculation, whether of national interest or of the long-term security of a ruling group. This presumption was challenged in one of the most original contributions to the debate on 1914, made by James Joll in his inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics in 1968, entitled '1914: The Unspoken Assumptions'. His thesis was that statesmen, when under extreme pressure, in circumstances which they do not fully understand, and when they cannot foresee the consequences of their actions, act not upon calculation but on instinct. 'In moments of crisis, political leaders fall back on unspoken assumptions', which are themselves drawn from deep layers of tradition, upbringing, and education. The trouble for the historian is that because such assumptions are unspoken, and for that matter unwritten, they are uncommonly difficult to ascertain. Taking Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, as a key example, Joll argues that it is a mistake to try to make a sophisticated analysis of his policies. His guiding principle was a schoolboy sense of honour; and not just any schoolboy, because Grey (like Joll himself) was a product of Winchester, and his unspoken assumptions were those of a self-conscious Wykehamist. This is a highly specialized diagnosis. We have some remarks made by Grey about his days at Winchester which partly bear it out, though unhappily Grey tells us that only fellow Wykehamists can really understand what it means to be a Wykehamist, which rather narrows the circle of comprehension. To extend the approach to others, we need to know a great deal about the family background and education of the men of 1914, and also about the general climate of opinion and sentiment within which they grew up.[13]

This is a fascinating speculation, whose implications spread out much more widely than the boundaries of the 1914 debate. But, as Joll is well aware, it is an approach that is hard to follow through. True, Grey was a Wykehamist. He was also a long-serving Foreign Secretary, who worked closely with very able and strong-minded Foreign

Office officials. His memoranda show that he thought in terms of the balance of power and British strategic interests, as well as in terms of honour, in the shape of his personal word to the French. In the crisis of 1914, these two modes of thought pulled together towards the same conclusion, and it would be very hard to say whether at any particular point Grey fell back upon one rather than the other.

REFLECTIONS

The pursuit of explanations for the outbreak of war in 1914 has led a long way. It has also spread out in different directions, some of which involve not so much discussion of the events of 1914 as interpretations of the nature of the past as a whole, and of our understanding of it. It was the refrain at the close of an article by Joachim Remak that 'We have complicated things too much'.[14] Can we not, even in so complex a subject, simplify them a little? Where do we stand?

The problem has always had two parts: the elucidation of events and the finding of a framework of interpretation. The first remains a matter for detailed research, and it is only the second which can be pursued here. The long historical debate has left us with two main problems: how we strike the balance between the idea of guilt (or responsibility) for the war and that of understanding its causes, and what relative importance we attach to underlying forces and immediate events.

The concept of war guilt in 1914 has had a long run, and seems still to have life left in it. It has always involved very difficult questions. What does it mean? What is there to be guilty of? No state or government can be thought of as bearing guilt simply for going to war, because war has been a part of human history. More specifically, during the half-century before 1914 all the major belligerent powers had been engaged in war: Prussia and the Habsburg empire in 1866; Prussia and France in 1870–1; Britain against the Boer republics, 1899–1902; Russia against Japan in 1904–5; Italy against Turkey in 1911–12. Most powers had fought colonial wars. Even that arch-neutral and isolationist power, the United States, was fighting a campaign in Mexico at the very time that war began in Europe. Before 1914 all governments accepted Clausewitz's dictum that war was the continuation of policy by other means. All were prepared for war, and all recognized that in certain circumstances (involving honour, security or ambition) it was necessary and proper to go to war. Of what, then, could any state be guilty in 1914, when all the powers shared the same view of war?

The answer, of course, involves hindsight. The conflict that took place between 1914 and 1918 was not just a war; it was a catastrophe.

The scale, intensity and cost of the fighting were greater than anything known before. The former rules ceased to apply, and the idea of war as an instrument of policy became unacceptable in many eyes. For any state to have deliberately launched such a European disaster was indeed a responsibility, and guilt became a natural description. But to make such an assumption involves a shift in perspective which is in itself scarcely historical. In 1914, no government believed that it was embarking on a war which would last for over four years. It was the almost universal conviction that the conflict would be severe, and would involve vast armies, but would be short – 'over by Christmas' was a common saying. This means that we must look in the first instance for origins commensurate with the idea of a brief, though probably intense, conflict. What causes were sufficient for governments to begin, to accept, or to risk a war of a limited, late nineteenth-century type – *not* the Great War with which our memory is obsessed?

This affects our view of the other balance which has to be struck, that between long-term forces and immediate decisions. It has naturally been believed that anything so tremendous as the war of 1914–18 must have had deep-rooted and powerful causes. As the search has widened to include the causes of war itself, the conduct of whole groups, or the roots of human conduct, this belief has taken a greater hold. But if we are seeking the causes, not of such vast events, but of what might have been a third Balkan war, or a wider version of the Franco-Prussian War, must such explanations be invoked?

The answer is probably not. An exception at once springs to mind: the tension between nationalism and the multinational Habsburg empire, which remains crucial. Other long-term explanations relying on underlying forces moving towards war have all tended to break down at the actual point of contact with the events of 1914. The argument, much used in socialist circles in the 1920s and 1930s, that the war was the result of capitalist and imperialist conflicts over raw materials, markets and fields for investment was weakened by detailed research which showed that disputes over territory in Africa or Asia had often crossed the lines of alliances within Europe. Moreover, the most serious of such conflicts outside Europe had been between Britain and France on the one hand, and Britain and Russia on the other; but these disputes had been resolved peacefully, and the former rivals had fought on the same side in 1914. Again, there was much close cooperation between German and French bankers and industrialists in the complex of coal, iron ore and steel industries which spanned the boundaries between their two countries. In the actual crisis of 1914, some German industrialists were in favour of war, but others were

dismayed at the prospect of disruption and loss which war would bring. The study of the underlying forces of economics and imperialism produces as much evidence of international cooperation and opposition to war as it does of pressure towards conflict.

Even the apparently powerful explanations in terms of arms races appear much less clear-cut under close examination. True, the German and French armies were built up in competition with one another. So were the German and British fleets. But the war of 1914 did not emerge directly out of Franco-German conflict, but from conflict between Austria-Hungary and Russia, which had not been engaged in an arms race; and the Anglo-German conflict also came late in the actual crisis of 1914. What did contribute directly to the course of events in July and August was not the general issue of arms races, but the detailed strategic planning for the use of those armaments, especially on land. The role of the Schlieffen Plan, by which if Germany were involved in war with Russia it would *have* to attack France first, was crucial. As soon as the state of an 'imminent danger of war' was declared in Germany, then the plans for mobilization moved with a momentum which could not be stopped; and the German plan for mobilization was also a plan for operations. The one ran directly into the other.

Much the same is true of the long-term explanation from the alliance system. It is true that this system was likely to turn a local dispute into a general war; but the case of Italy also shows that it was possible for a country to ignore its alliance commitments in favour of a calculation of its immediate interests. The alliances worked when they continued to represent vital interests: for example, France and Russia dared not risk isolation, while Germany could not afford to see Austria-Hungary disintegrate; but they did not impose predetermined answers in 1914.

We must return to the exception to this line of argument. The underlying force which exerted a direct and decisive influence on decision-makers in 1914 was the conflict between Balkan nationalism and the multinational Austro-Hungarian empire. Balkan nationalism was a force which had been at work since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gradually, the hold of the Ottoman empire in Europe had been prised loose and one Balkan state after another had attained independence. Then, in a last effort in 1912–13, the Turks had been driven back to a small enclave round Constantinople and the straits, and Austria-Hungary remained as the sole target of Balkan nationalism. In 1914 this nationalism was primarily embodied in Serbia, which had emerged from the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 with substantial gains in territory, and with aspirations to create a Greater

Serbia, or perhaps a new South Slav state. In either case, the Serbs looked north, towards the populations of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes within the borders of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Here indeed was a tide which had been rising for almost a century; and the Austro-Hungarian empire was looking unhappily like a sandbank. What were its rulers to do? In 1908 they had contemplated a plan to attack Serbia, but had in fact stopped short at the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1912–13 they had simply watched while the Balkan Wars were fought and Serbian power was increased. The result was that in 1914 a sense of desperation had developed, and there was a strong impulse to take action – almost any action – to remove the threat from Serbia. It was seen as a matter of self-preservation.

This is not to say that the long-term, underlying forces had no weight – far from it. Though they did not, in most cases, predetermine the choices made by governments in 1914, they did ensure that war, when it broke out, could not be limited. The smouldering fire of Anglo-German naval rivalry, the intense need for security which lay behind the alliances, and the unappeasable hunger of nationalism all became concentrated in the struggle once it had begun. The war which began in Europe in the summer of 1914 was bound to be more than the sum of immediate events and specific decisions. It would be a concentration of deep and long-standing antagonisms, not easily to be resolved.

In the light of this review of underlying causes, it is time to look again at the immediate decisions of July and August 1914. The places to start must be Vienna and Belgrade. After all, the first declaration of war was by Austria-Hungary on Serbia, on 28 July. The government in Vienna, as we have seen, believed that it was acting in self-preservation. It deliberately forced war on Serbia by delivering an ultimatum which was designed to be rejected. The Austrian government chose a Balkan war, and risked something worse, almost certainly in the belief that it had no alternative. The Serbian government, too, played its part at this stage, partly by conniving at the nationalist terrorism which produced the assassination of the archduke, and partly by choosing to take up the Austrian challenge. If Austria-Hungary sought self-preservation, Serbia sought self-aggrandisement, and believed that with Russian help it could win a renewed Balkan war.

This takes us to Russia. The methods of Russian decision-making were confused and its aims uncertain. But it was clear by the middle of July that Russia would support Serbia, if necessary by war; and Sazonov, the Russian foreign minister, indicated this plainly to the German and Austrian ambassadors on 18 July. Why was this? Strategic and economic interests in the straits can be adduced: the importance of

controlling the entrance to the Black Sea, and of securing free passage for Russian exports by the same route. But the prime reasons were surely sentiment and prestige. The restricted circles which made up public opinion in Russia were Pan-Slav in sentiment, and demanded support for Serbia; and Russian prestige – its standing as a great power, capable of backing up its protégé – was at stake.

Again, such motives were amply sufficient for a confrontation, and even a war, on a Balkan issue. Yet the risk of a wider conflict was clearly present; and at this point we must turn to Germany. Germany held the central position in the wider European crisis – central in terms of geography, diplomacy and military action. Geographically, German intervention would turn a Balkan war into a European one. Diplomatically, German support for Austria was bound to stiffen Austria's resolution, which otherwise might have wavered. Militarily, German war plans entailed an immediate attack on France, not Russia. We know what Germany did. It gave complete support to Austria, accepting the near-certainty of a Balkan war and risking a European conflict. The German government also followed the course set out in its military planning to its final conclusion in the invasion of Belgium and France, which changed the whole scale and character of events. The successive waves of historical writing have confirmed this record of German actions, and it is not surprising that debate has concentrated heavily upon the motives which lay behind them. The motives can be easily summed up, but the balance between them is almost impossible to strike. The most straightforward of them and the most readily avowed, were to maintain the Austrian alliance, without which Germany would be alone in a hostile continent, and to score a spectacular diplomatic (or, if necessary, military) success to break free from the encirclement which the Germans genuinely feared and resented. Less clear-cut were the further motives stressed by Fischer: the drive to make Germany a world power, and the bid for unity at home to pre-empt the socialist danger. It is with these latter reasons that we move away from motivation commensurate with a limited war, and move to that more appropriate to something wider and more drastic.

This survey has left France and Britain to the last. In so far as France played an active part in the crisis of July 1914, which does not appear to have been very far, it was by supporting Russia, for the well-established reason that she could not afford to lose the Russian alliance and face Germany in isolation. But France's main role was passive, and the French government never had to take the decision whether or not to go to war in support of Russia. The Germans first presented an ultimatum demanding the occupation of French fortresses to ensure French

neutrality, and then simply invaded the country through Belgium. In these circumstances the French government had very little to decide. As for Britain, its actions in 1914 had only marginal influence on the course of events. Grey tried to check the move towards war by twice proposing a conference; but such a conference would have put Germany in a minority, and his proposals made no headway. The European war had begun by 2 August, and the question was whether (or perhaps only when) Britain would join it. From the point of view of the origins of the war, this was not a vital question.

It was as the scope of the crisis widened, and a likely Balkan confrontation became a certain European war, with some world-wide aspects, that the long-term, underlying causes of friction came into their own. Imperial rivalries, the arms races, and the alliance system provided the framework within which the crisis of July 1914 took place. They also meant that war, when it came, rapidly involved wider issues than those which were at first at stake. The alliance system represented fundamental security for Germany, France and Russia. Imperial rivalry and the naval race between Britain and Germany meant that, once war had begun, their empires and fleets were at stake; which, for the Britain of that day, meant the very fundamentals of its existence. Thus the underlying forces, which appear to have had little effect on decision-making during the war crisis itself, greatly affected the war which actually came about.

The tragedy was that the war of 1914 became the war of 1914–18 – the Great War. It might not have been so. After all, by the time the Schlieffen Plan ground to a halt, the advance guards of the German armies could see the Eiffel Tower. They were no more than twenty miles from the outskirts of Paris. At that stage, the exhaustion which had overcome marching men, and the French concentration of a new army, brought about the battle of the Marne. The war in the west was not to be decided in six weeks, as the Germans had hoped. By that time, who in western Europe cared what was happening in Serbia? The war had started with a Balkan crisis, but it had rapidly become something much greater. And it is that greater event which historians have been trying to explain for the past seventy-five years.

NOTES

1 Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 3 (London, 1950), p. 381.
2 L. Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols (Oxford,

1952–7); Italian original published in 1942–3. Vols 2 and 3 deal with the crisis of July 1914.

3 There are valuable chronologies of events in V. R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (London, 1973), and Z. S. Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1977).

4 Solid arguments for Germany's primary, though not exclusive, responsibility may be found in Pierre Renouvin, *La Crise européenne et la grande guerre*, 2 vols (Paris, 1934), and B. E. Schmitt, *The Coming of the War*, 2 vols (New York, 1934). Both books have stood the test of time remarkably well.

5 M. Montgelas, *The Case for the Central Powers* (London, 1925); German original published in 1923. E. Brandenburg, *From Bismarck to the World War* (London, 1933); German original published in 1924.

6 G. P. Gooch, *Recent Revelations of European Diplomacy* (London, 1927). Gooch had outlined his ideas in a lecture to the British Institute of International Affairs in Dec. 1922.

7 L. Dickinson, *The International Anarchy* (London, 1926). Dickinson's book was primarily an argument in support of the League of Nations as the solution for the ills of pre-1914 international relations.

8 W. L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism*, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass., 1935); E. L. Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy* (Oxford, 1935).

9 F. Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (London, 1967).

10 See Mayer's outline presentation of his argument in 'Internal causes and purposes of war in Europe, 1870–1956: a research assignment', *Journal of Modern History*, 41 (1969); and also A. J. Mayer, 'Domestic causes of the First World War', in L. Krieger and F. Stern (eds), *The Responsibility of Power: Historical Essays in Honor of Hajo Holborn* (New York, 1967). For the full development of his ideas, see A. J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York, 1981).

11 For this section see above all J. Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (London, 1984), ch. 5, pp. 92–119. Joll's conclusion, after discussing the various belligerent powers, is that 'no single explanatory model is applicable to all of them' (p. 119). For a close examination of the British case, see D. Lammers, 'Arno Mayer and the British decision for war, 1914', *Journal of British Studies*, 12 (1973).

12 Steiner, op. cit.; J. Keiger, *France and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1983).

13 J. Joll, '1914: The Unspoken Assumptions', Inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics (Apr. 1968), reprinted in H. W. Koch (ed.), *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalry and War Aims* (London, 1972); quotation on p. 309.

14 J. Remak, '1914 – the third Balkan war: origins reconsidered', *Journal of Modern History*, 43 (1971); see esp. pp. 363–4.

FURTHER READING

An excellent review of the whole problem may be found in J. Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (London, 1984; a second edition is being prepared). Other general discussions are in L. Lafore, *The Long Fuse: An Interpretation of the Origins of World War I*, which concentrates on Balkan issues; J. Remak, *The Origins of World War I* (New York, 1967), which is brisk and straightforward on a complicated subject; and L. C. F. Turner, *Origins of the First World War* (London, 1967). H. W. Koch (ed.), *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalry and War Aims* (London, 1972), is a collection of scholarly essays. B. Tuchman, *The Guns of August: August 1914* (London 1972), is a vivid and highly readable narrative. I. Geiss (ed.), *July 1914: Selected Documents* (London, 1972), presents key documents on the war crisis, with an illuminating and combative introduction.

Among older books, S. B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, 2 vols (New York, 1928), B. E. Schmitt, *The Coming of the War, 1914*, 2 vols (New York, 1928), and G. P. Gooch, *Before the War: Studies in Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 2 vols (London, 1936 and 1938), remain well worth reading, and illustrate aspects of the historiographical debate between the wars. L. Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols (1952–7), is a historical landmark and repays close study; vols 2 and 3 treat events between the assassination of the archduke and the declarations of war in immense detail. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918*, puts the events of 1914 in a long historical perspective.

On individual countries, the following may serve as starting-points. **Austria-Hungary**: F. R. Bridge, *From Sadowa to Sarajevo: The Foreign Policy of Austria-Hungary, 1866–1914* (London, 1972). **France**: J. F. Keiger, *France and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1983). **Germany**: V. R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of the War in 1914* (London, 1973). F. Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (London, 1967), and *War of Illusions* (London, 1975),

command a special place in the historiography of the subject. They are discussed in J. A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion: The Fischer Controversy in German Historiography* (London, 1975). **Great Britain**: Z. S. Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1977); F. H. Hinsley (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of Sir Edward Grey* (Cambridge, 1977). **Italy**: R. Bosworth, *Italy and the Approach of the First World War* (London, 1983). **Russia**: D. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1983). **Serbia**: V. Dedijer, *The Road to Sarajevo* (London, 1967).

Strategic issues and military competition are discussed in a collection of essays edited by P. M. Kennedy, *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914* (London, 1979). On armies and military plans: G. Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan* (London, 1958); D. Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871–1914* (Cambridge, 1981); J. Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy, 1900–1916* (London, 1974); S. R. Williamson, *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969). On navies and the naval race between Britain and Germany: A. J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, vol. 1: *The Road to War, 1904–1914* (London, 1961); J. Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent: Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet* (London, 1965).

On imperial and economic rivalries, see D. K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire, 1830–1914;* C. M. Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas: The Great War and the Climax of French Imperial Expansion* (London, 1981); M. Beloff, *Imperial Sunset*, vol. 1: *Britain's Liberal Empire, 1897–1921* (London, 1969).

6 The Great War and its impact

Philip Bell

The origins of the First World War have remained an obsession because we have failed to understand them. The war itself has remained an obsession because we appear to understand it only too well, and even after so many years we are still appalled and shaken by what we see. The Great War means, above all, the trenches and mud of the western front; Verdun, the Somme and Passchendaele; casualty lists, war memorials and the Last Post. It appears too as a vast symbol of futility, a conflict in which immense effort and sacrifice were misdirected and wasted, achieving nothing. The picture is clear and stark, but how far should we accept it? There are surely questions which need to be examined. On the military side, why did the conflict on the western front take the shape that it did, and are we right to allow that battle zone to fill our horizon to the extent that it does? Next, what were the politics of the war, and why was there no compromise peace despite the immense length and cost of the military conflict? Finally, how true is it that nothing was achieved?

We must start with military events. The outbreak of war in 1914 meant that the fate of Europe was to be decided by force, and we must concentrate first on how that force was used. In the military pattern of events, it is natural to look first at the western front. It was in the west that the length of the war was largely decided. In this process, the first three or four months of the conflict were crucial. It was the German objective, set out in the Schlieffen Plan, to knock France out in six weeks by a great offensive, swinging in a wide arc through Belgium and ultimately hooking round behind Paris. By the beginning of September 1914 this plan had attained immense successes, and yet had failed in its essential purpose. The successes were plain on the map as a virtually unbroken advance to within a few miles of Paris. The failure was that the offensive came to a halt without the French army being destroyed or the government forced to surrender. For this failure there