Historians have disagreed about the significance of German imperial ambitions in the origins of the First World War. What is your view about the significance of German imperial ambitions in the origins of the First World War?

Sophie Bartlett
Claires Court Schools

Centre Number 51513
Candidate Number 9104

Historians have presented a variety of interpretations as to how significant a role German imperial ambitions played in the origins of the First World War. The terms of the Treaty of Versailles show that the heads of state of the victorious powers completely blamed Germany's aggressive foreign policy. This view is widely accepted and echoed in the work of historians such as Fritz Fischer and Barbara Tuchman. However, the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War were marked by tense relations between a number of nations, and for this reason it is important to consider other views, such as those of historian Hew Strachan who argue that Austria-Hungary's desperate attempts to regain control over its empire were a more significant cause. More recently, both revisionist and Marxist historians have taken a more holistic perspective. Historians such as Graham Allison and Eric Hobsbawm have looked at patterns throughout history to assessed whether a number of factors made war inevitable rather than a single country or event. I find this interpretation to be the most convincing as it considers the positions and motivations of several key players in the lead-up to the outbreak of war.

In order to assess the significance of German imperial ambitions, it is necessary to fully understand what those ambitions were. Former German Foreign Secretary and Chancellor von Bulow spoke of a "place in the sun" being essential to economic success and recognition as a global power. This referred to the African and Asian colonies of England and France. Furthermore they recognised the importance of a strong and internationally competitive navy in gaining and protecting colonies as well as being respected and feared by other countries. Fischer cites these aims as the main cause

of World War One (Fischer 1967). His main thesis focuses on how these aims led Germany to pursue aggressive foreign policy and deliberately seek out war in order to further expand their empire. Whilst Fischer presents a strong argument for the significance of German imperial ambitions in the origins of the First World War, it is important to consider the reliability and relevance of his supporting evidence. For instance, his reference to the imperial and military nature of the main German national holidays "the anniversary of Sedan symbolising victory over France, and the Emperor's birthday" (ibid.) is clearly factual, but much of his other evidence has been criticised in the academic community. This criticism has occurred due to Fischer's tendency to present the views of the far-right nationalist Prussian elite and Wilhelm II himself as the views of the German empire as a whole. Being written after the Second World War also has an impact on Fischer's views and how they are presented. With the horrific actions of Hitler in recent memory, and "German collectve guilt" accepted as a real phenomenon, he is likely to present aggressive foreign policy as a German national trait.

Fischer also highlights the significance of German imperial ambitions in the origins of the First World War by describing how the desire to expand the German empire was widespread throughout the political nation. Fischer focuses on how the structure of Germany and its political institutions gave rise to the dominance of right-wing nationalist views which called for aggressive foreign policy as a means to achieve world power status (*Weltpolitik*). This started with the huge amount of power and influence Prussia held over the other areas as "the most strongly represented state" (ibid.) and was exacerbated by the way in which Wilhelm's views on foreign policy were supported by the elite and then enacted without challenge. Wihelm is described as "entirely imbued with the concept that Monarchy came with Divine Grace" whilst still aiming to be a " 'modern king' " (ibid.). Fischer describes how "left-wing liberals and the social democrats, had come to accept the existing order" (ibid.) showing that Germany had not evolved to be as democratic as England and France, which left Germany with limited options as to how to compete with them. It therefore turned its attention to another area where it could compete with England: its naval prowess and extensive colonies. This resulted in Wilhelm's political plans which "stood on the construction of a great fleet" (ibid.), referring to the Naval Race between England and Germany, and Germany's belligerent behaviour in Africa—notably the Agadir Crisis in 1911. These demonstrate how Germany's imperial ambitions and desire for recognition as a world power created tensions could plausibly have caused the outbreak of war in 1914. Despite strong explanations and evidence for why Germany felt compelled to pursue aggressive foreign policy and enter an arms race with England, Fischer fails to consider the motivations of Britain and other powers in this pre-war period. Thus, I do not find Fischer totally convincing in his portrayal of the outbreak of war as due to unilateral, antagonistic behaviour on the part of Germany.

Despite its weakness in failing to consider the roles of other powers, Fischer's view is still respected in the historical community, and is supported by the work of other historians, for example Barbara Tuchman. Tuchman supports Fischer's views through her descriptions of how German war plans, the Schlieffen Plan, demonstrated the aggressive nature of Germany's imperially motivated foreign policy. As the granddaughter of the 1914 American ambassador Henry Morgenthau, Tuchman has a unique perspective on the period (Tuchman 1962). Also, as an American, her view is less likely to be unfairly harsh towards Germany—a pattern exemplified by the negotiations over the war guilt clause in the Treaty of Versailles. Despite this, the timing of Tuchman's writing is likely to have influenced her as, like Fischer, her writings are likely to be more critical of German behaviour and present a longstanding pattern of German belligerence as a result of the fairly recent events of the Second World War and Germany's behaviour under the leadership of Hitler. Furthermore, the book's use by President Kennedy as almost an instructional manual on how to avoid conflict escalation during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 demonstrates how she clearly advocated against aggressively ambitious foreign policy and a need for one country to overpower and control others. This purpose behind her writing would have affected the evidence Tuchman used to support her points, as well as causing her to place a disproportionate amount of blame on Germany as the traditional aggressor. Also, Tuchman's interpretation is relatively narrative, using evidence to explain what happened, rather than to support a judgement, further limiting its usefulness as a historical source.

A key point of Tuchman's argument is Germany's view that Belgian neutrality was merely an obstacle to imperial expansion and success (ibid.). She describes how Belgium's neutrality and independence was designed as a "safety zone" for Britain by Lord Palmerston as it served to protect Britain from the other continental powers with Belgium's coast acting as England's frontier (ibid.). With her focus on the Schlieffen Plan's Tuchman details how German leaders saw invading Belgium as both necessary and inevitable if they wished to be successful in war and establish Germany as more powerful than France, England and Russia. This demonstrates ignorance of other countries' vested interests in maintaining the status of Belgium as an " 'independent and perpetually neutral state' " (ibid.). She explains how this ignorance developed through the German prioritisation of imperial ambitions above diplomacy. Tuchman evidences this change in priorities through her comparison between the Schlieffen Plan and the Franco-Prussian wars. In the former—despite invading France to claim the provinces of Alsace-Lorraine—Bismarck respected the "inviolability of Belgium"; whereas in the latter it was seen as a decision based on " 'military necessity' '' to attack through Belgium in order to overpower France quickly and prove Germany's military prowess (ibid.). As the decision to invade through Belgium did precipitate the outbreak of the First World War, with Britain's entry on 4th

August 1914, Tuchman makes a well-argued case for how Germany's imperial ambitions clouded their judgement and resulted in poor decision-making which led to the outbreak of war. Despite this, Tuchman still fails to fully consider the other contributing factors, as whilst she explains that Belgian neutrality provided a degree of safety for Britain, she does not explain why Britain felt so threatened in the period leading up to the First World War. Her narrative style is effective in describing some of the relationships between powers in Europe, but does little to analyse the reasons behind these relationships and tensions and whether they developed to cause a war.

In evaluating the work of both Fritz Fischer and Barbara Tuchman and the ways in which they have presented German imperial ambition as the most significant factor in the origins of the First World War, it has become clear that it is essential to consider the involvement of other European powers in the lead up to war. Another important factor in the outbreak of war was Austria-Hungary and its relationship with its empire, in particular with Serbia. This dynamic is widely considered as significant due to the incendiary nature of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the consequences it had in escalating tensions between European powers into full-scale war. Strachan argues the significance of tension between Austria-Hungary, with its desperate attempts to regain control of its empire; and Serbia, with its increasingly threatening nationalist terrorism and strong ties to Russia (*The First World War An Historical Insight* 2013).

Strachan presents his interpretation of the causes of the First World War in the form of a documentary, providing a different insight into the situation. The use of previously unseen footage from archives in central Europe illustrates and provides evidence for his points, making them more compelling. In contrast to the views of Fischer and Tuchman, Strachan de-emphasises the significance of German imperial ambitions, stating "Germany hadn't looked for a fight" (ibid.) and only brought war closer through "incompetence and wishful thinking" (ibid.). Strachan instead places blame on the tensions in the Balkans, particularly between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. He presents convincing arguments as to how this power struggle escalated to result in war involving many other nations, but does not elaborate on the motivations of those nations. This is likely due to fact that the documentary was produced for a mass audience, causing Strachan to focus on the simplest cause for the origins of the First World War.

Firstly, Strachan discusses the problems faced by Austria-Hungary in controlling an empire made up of 10 different nationalities by "trying to resist change of any kind" (ibid.). Emperor Franz Joseph was strongly against political reform and described himself as an "old-school" (ibid.) monarch, and his insistence on clinging to these outmoded methods of dealing with his people caused tension amongst the different groups in his empire who felt oppressed. Strachan supports this point through references to nationalist demonstrations in Vienna in 1905, riots in Budapest in 1912, and the

fact that ethnic unrest was widespread across the Austro-Hungarian empire by 1914, with Serbia in particular described as a "nest of revolutionaries" (*The First World War An Historical Insight* 2013). The documentary includes descriptions, as well as video and photographic evidence, of how the Austro-Hungarian emperor dealt with these threats through, which was mainly through the use of the military and the suppression of local parliaments, leading to the empire being described as a repressive and undemocratic "prison of nations", and therefore depicting both sides in critical light (ibid.). He also references the poor political decisions taken by Archduke Franz Ferdinand in his conduct towards Serbia, and his underestimation of the level of threat that they posed. He discusses how the Archduke chose to visit Sarajevo on Serbian national day, which was a "natural focus for hatred of the Hapsbergs", yet his car drove slowly with the top down and security was very light, with minimal police and no army presence (ibid.). Nevertheless, he does state the assassination itself was an act of state-sponsored terrorism when he says that "Serbia as good as pulled the trigger itself" (ibid.). Finally, Strachan's description of Austria-Hungary's response to Serbia in the early days of the war shows how they were very personally motivated: 200 hundred Serbs were arrested and hung in Sarajevo alone and 4000 more Serbian civilians were killed in pogroms and other military activity (ibid.). Strachan makes it clear that, for Austria-Hungary, the war was "against whole peoples" (ibid.) not just against an enemy army. Overall, Strachan creates a picture of Austria-Hungary as cruel in their treatment of their subjects, yet desperate to retain their control over them. Their underestimation of the Serbian threat and their harsh response to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand gives the impression that the leader was politically ignorant, and let to tensions between the two countries having disastrous consequences.

Whilst Strachan presents a clear picture of Austria-Hungary's significant role in the origins of the First World War, he does not provide any significant insight into what motivated Germany to offer them unconditional support, briefly explaining this away as an "extraordinary oversight" (ibid.). This means that his description of the origins is incomplete and less convincing, as he only includes evidence which supports his thesis, that the First World War was a Balkan dispute that got out of control. He ignores other information that was vital to the outbreak of war, such as building tensions between Germany and England, and decisions made in Russia, France and Italy as well.

Neither the interpretations of Fischer and Tuchman—who felt most significant reason for the outbreak of war was German imperial ambitions—nor of Strachan, who felt that war broke out due to tensions between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, attempt to explain why all the European powers became embroiled in conflict. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to consider systemic causes, in which the whole situation made war more likely, or even

inevitable. These provide a better insight into the origins of World War One as a number of interlinked factors which impacted upon relations between the powers and their behaviours towards each other.

Graham Allison favours the theory of "Thucydides' Trap" to explain the start of the First World War. This originated from Thucydides' study of the conflict between Athens and Sparta, in which he concludes it was "the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta" which "made war inevitable" (Thucydides, cited in Allison and Hastie 2017). Allison draws parallels between this situation of a rising power and a threatened ruling power resulting in conflict in ancient times, and the relationship between Britain and Germany leading up to the outbreak of World War One.

Allison's thorough methodology allows him to present a convincing argument as to how the outbreak of the First World War was inevitable due to the forces of "Thucydides' Trap": he did not just apply the pattern to the lead-up to the First World War, but also to sixteen other cases which he identified from the late 15th Century up to the present day. He described how he "followed the judgments of leading historical accounts" and resisted "the temptation to offer original or idiosyncratic interpretations of events." (Allison 2019). This demonstrates how he directly used sources, rather than letting his own personal beliefs influence the information which he used to support his arguments—thus making them more convincing. He was also clear in his definitions of rise, rule and conflict, allowing his work to be easily understood. Despite this it is important to note that there is not a standard, numerical measure of national power which encompasses all elements. For example, GDP is useful in measuring the wealth and productivity of a nation, but is unable to reveal the size of its empire. Allison does well to acknowledge this and explains how he has considered dominance of both "geographical areas" and "in a particular domain" (ibid.) such as industry or the military. Allison's study also includes cases in which a "Thucydides' Trap" did not result in conflict. This lack of selection bias is important in convincing the reader as it shows them two sides and allows them to form their own opinion, but presents them with the relevant information to do so. Overall, Allison's methodology helps him to create a factual and convincing argument which is supported by pertinent information.

Allison and Hastie (2017) apply the pattern more specifically to the relationship between Britain and Germany. He explains how the naval race between the two powers exemplified the "Thucydides' Trap" that had formed. He echoes Thucydides' comments on the fear that the rise of Athens instilled in Sparta (Thucydides, cited in ibid.) when he describes how Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty at the time, viewed the rapidly increasing German sea power not as a "national security challenge but an existential threat to Britain's survival." (ibid.). He is convincing in explaining how this mindset led to the inevitability of conflict when he makes reference to the British policy of the two-power standard, which stated that Britain's navy must

equal the total of the next two largest powers' navies combined. The inclusion of this information demonstrates how Britain was preparing for conflict based on this fear of losing their naval domination. However, when reading this, it is important to remember the purpose of Allison's book as a whole is to prevent conflict arising from the current "Thucydides' Trap" between America and China. Therefore, it is likely that Allison will stress the link between excessive and competitive military spending and a catastrophic conflict in order to prevent a similar race (but this time focused on nuclear rather than naval power) ensuing between America and China today. Also, Allison has no real way of quantifying Winston Churchill's fear of growing German naval power and we are thus reliant on Allison's interpretation of his speeches. We see only small quotes from the speeches, which are successfully used to support Allison's argument of a sense of "urgency" (Allison and Hastie 2017) in British war preparations caused by increasing levels of fear which led to the outbreak of war, however it is possible that—when read in full—these speeches present an entirely different picture. Despite this, I find Allison's point very convincing, as he successfully links the Anglo-German naval race to Thucydides Trap through his use of Churchill's speeches. He later presents graphical data which details the increasing warship tonnage of both the German and British navy between 1880 and 1914 (ibid.), which serves to support his claims of heightening tension in the naval race. Overall, Allison is very convincing in his presentation of the naval race and its link to both the existence of a "Thucydides' Trap" and the outbreak of war in 1914.

Another major point of Allison's work is in forging a link between the decline of the British Empire and the outbreak of the First World War. He describes how "Britain had indisputably owned the nineteenth century" (ibid.), highlighting Britain's status as the ruling power in the "Thucydides' Trap" set-up. He then continues to explain how the Boer War symbolised the decline of the empire, which had previously allowed them to dominate other powers throughout the previous century, when he states how "Britain eventually won the war, but at immense cost, shaking its imperial reputation" (ibid.). It is also emphasised how reliant Britain was on its empire for wealth. When this picture of reliance and declining control is presented alongside the graphical representation of the huge increases in German GDP from 1860 to 1913 (ibid.) Allison makes a convincing argument as to how a "Thucydides' Trap" was present in the lead up to the First World War, as he clearly states why Britain would have felt threatened by German economic growth. In presenting the economic side to the Thucydides' Trap, Allison is effective in presenting the causes of the First World War as systemic and multi-faceted, rather than blaming a specific country or event.

Finally, Allison also describes how the alliance system—which was why the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 sparked a global conflict—was a symptom of "Thucydides' Trap."

Allison states how "deteriorating Anglo-German relations coincided with rapidly shifting power dynamics in and beyond Europe" (Allison and Hastie 2017) referring to the formation of the two gang-like alliances: The Triple Alliance in 1882 (between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy) and The Triple Entente in 1907 (between Britain, France and Russia). Allison is particularly convincing in presenting the defensive nature of Britain's alliances, behaviour that is characteristic of a ruling power in a "Thucydides' Trap" situation. He does this through describing The Entente Cordiale between Britain and France in 1904 as Britain realising the likelihood of a struggle with Germany for power in Europe and "taking steps to make the outcome of such a struggle more favorable" (ibid.). The extent of this fear is clear when one considers the long history of conflict between France and Britain which had to be overcome in order to face the German threat together. Allison does not, however, focus on relating the German alliances to the "Thucydides' Trap." It could be said that, if Germany was a true rising power, it would have made alliances for ambitious reasons to increase growth. Instead, Allison describes how Germany made an alliance with Austria-Hungary, an empire made up of many nationalities "increasingly at odds with one another" (ibid.) and exemplifies the issues this caused for Germany through his mention of the Bosnian Crisis in 1908. In making it clear that Austria-Hungary "needed strong German support," he fails to present Germany's allies as typical of a rising power in "Thucydides' Trap". Despite this, I still find Allison's portrayal of Britain's defensive alliances and the fear that motivated them very convincing.

Overall, the "Thucydides' Trap" can be described as a systemic cause for conflict, as it centres around a particular situation which causes deteriorating relations and increasing tensions and war preparation, leading to the outbreak of war. This theory of a systemic cause for the outbreak of World War One is echoed by Hobsbawm (1987) in his discussion of the lead-up to conflict. Hobsbawm was a Marxist historian, arguing that the start of the First World War signalled not a struggle between rising and ruling powers in Europe, but between rising and ruling classes. His focus on large patterns, spanning long periods of history, is similar to Allison's and—although their opinions differ on what exactly constituted the ideal breeding ground for conflict, they both recognise how conflict is not necessarily caused by a single event or country, but by a combination of factors. He was writing at the height of the Cold War, so this would definitely have influenced Hobsbawm's arguments on the causes of the First World War, as he wanted to prevent a "third, nuclear, world conflict" (ibid.) just as Allison aimed to prevent conflict between America and China.

Hobsbawm is particularly supportive of a systemic cause for the outbreak of World War One when he describes the "symbiosis of war and war production" (ibid.), referring to how industry and economic growth benefited massively from the increasing preparation for war. This created a

situation in which the government was dependent on and invested in the increasing growth of the armament industry, and the armament industry found their main customers in governments. This military-industrial complex bred "never-ending competition of governments to secure for themselves a satisfactory supply of the most advanced, and hence the most effective arms" (Hobsbawm 1987) as the development of a codependent relationship between the state and the weapons industry occurred at a time in which Europe was "deeply troubled but still convinced that a general war was impossible" (ibid.). In his description of the situation in which factors such as the growth of the armament industry and its increasing symbiosis with the governments of Europe, alongside deteriorating relations between these European powers, Hobsbawm is convincing in presenting the outbreak of the First World War as a catastrophe caused by a combination of factors which shaped Europe as a whole, not by a specific country or event. This, in turn, provides support for Allison's argument that the development of a "Thucydides' Trap" between Britain and Germany led to conflict, as both historians reject the possibility of a single cause, instead focusing on how the conditions in Europe engendered a situation in which war was inevitable.

To conclude, whilst both the arguments of Fischer and Tuchman, and of Strachan, are strong as to why either the actions and aims of Germany, or Austria-Hungary and Serbia, were to blame for the outbreak of the First World War, I believe it is impossible to isolate a single country or event as the single most significant factor in the origins of such a complex conflict. Thus, I find the holistic approaches of both Allison and Hobsbawm, who consider patterns and scenarios that created an ideal breeding ground for war in Europe, the most convincing. Their interpretations take into account the web of causality that resulted in the First World War by assessing the relationships between all the major powers, and the internal state of affairs in each country involved. Most importantly, the two historians find compelling explanations for both the role of the naval race and the development of the alliance systems, which do not just centre around one country but consider the motivations of all powers involved. On top of this, the research of Allison in particular is information-driven, therefore I feel confident that it is reliable, as he has applied a pattern to factual information, rather than carefully selecting and manipulating information to support his own ideas.

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