

REVIEW ESSAY

Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I

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HISTORIANS of the Great War found themselves in high demand in 2014. The looming anniversary naturally prompted publishers to commission titles that were designed to make a splash, cause debate, and spark public interest. The market was consequently flooded with publications that attempted to explain why war had broken out in 1914. Few could have predicted, however, the full extent of public and media interest in World War I. Nor could one have expected that the question of the origins of the war, in particular, would once again be paramount and the subject of widespread, heated debate.

General and academic interest in the war peaked well before the actual centenary of its outbreak (the date of which differed, of course, depending on which country was commemorating it). Commemoration, as well as the way historians wrote about the war and the way their audiences received this new work differed, too, depending on the national context. In countries whose past has continued to be affected disproportionately by the events of 1914–1918, or where the war has featured largely in national memory (such as Germany and Serbia, for example), the nature of the debate showed clearly that World War I is not yet “history.”

The many publications reflected political, military, social, economic, and cultural approaches to studying the conduct and experience of World War I, and included new attempts to explain its origins. Among them were general, often voluminous, accounts of the war that adopted an international perspective or addressed the conflict’s global reach.¹ Others, by contrast, focused on only one country’s experience.² There were accounts that foregrounded the personal experience of soldiers or civilians.³ Others, in turn, offered new interpretations of the role played by important individuals.⁴ Finally, there were several impressive multi-authored attempts at capturing all of this

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¹For example, Oliver Janz, *14– Der große Krieg* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2013); Herfried Münkler, *Der grosse Krieg. Die Welt 1914–1918* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2013); Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Munich: Beck, 2014).

²See, e.g., the voluminous and impressive study of Austria-Hungary’s war experience by Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers. Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie*, 2nd rev. ed. (Vienna: Böhlau 2013); Gerhard Hirschfeld and Gerd Krumeich, *Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt/Main: S.Fischer, 2013); Wolfram Dornick, Julia Walleczek-Fritz, and Stefan Wedrac, eds., *Frontwechsel. Österreich-Ungarns “Großer Krieg” im Vergleich* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2014).

³Studies that examine the experience of German soldiers include Benjamin Ziemann, *Gewalt im Ersten Weltkrieg. Töten, Überleben, Verweigern* (Essen: Klartext, 2013); Jason Crouthamel, *An Intimate History of the Front—Masculinity, Sexuality and German Soldiers in the First World War* (London: Palgrave, 2014). A useful edited collection that focuses on gender and the war is Christa Hämmerle, Oswald Überegger, and Birgitta Bader Zaar, eds., *Gender and the First World War* (London: Palgrave, 2014).

⁴See, e.g., Jean-Paul Bled, *Franz Ferdinand. Der eigensinnige Thronfolger* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2013 (a translation of the French 2012 original); Alma Hanig, *Franz Ferdinand. Die Biographie* (Vienna: Almathea, 2013).

new research in large edited collections.⁵ Within these many thousands of pages, the question of the war's origins loomed large. The year 2014 alone saw the publication of several studies that examined either the July Crisis or the longer-term causes of the war.⁶ Furthermore, several document collections and edited diaries have enabled readers to reach their own conclusions about the origins and the nature of the war.⁷ These and similar documents brought the experience of war to life for general audiences.⁸

During the—often heated—public controversy sparked by a number of these publications, fascinating national differences in interpreting the outbreak of the war emerged, a result of differing experiences of World War I, which shaped both a country's subsequent history and its national memory of the war. Historians and the public argued about questions of “war guilt,” and even about whether one should think about the origins of the war in such terms at all: today, *responsibility* is a term with which most historians would feel more comfortable. In addition, there was a notable effort to internationalize our reading of the origins of the war, with a move away from explanations that foreground the actions of a single government in favor of ones that seek instead to explain the diplomatic crisis of 1914 as an international event. As part of this, Serbia and the Entente powers found themselves under scrutiny to an extent not seen since the immediate postwar years, whereas Germany in particular benefited from a propensity among some historians to deemphasize its role in the escalation of the July Crisis. Today, all the most recent contributions to the debate attempt to explain the July Crisis by considering the actions of the governments of all the great (and some of the smaller) powers; explanations that focus on the actions of one government above that of all others have consequently fallen out of favor.

This review essay analyzes the most recent instalment in this still contentious debate. The first section provides a brief summary of the controversy about the origins of the war before the centenary, and argues that a rough consensus had been reached after decades of debate. The second section examines the important interventions in the years 2012–2014, which rekindled debates among historians and formed the basis for extensive public discussion of the topic during the centenary year. Finally, areas of broad consensus, as well as topics that continue to be controversial, are highlighted in the final section.

The “War-Guilt” Debate Before The Centenary

The “war-guilt” debate is, without a doubt, one of the most protracted historical controversies of modern history. Why did Franz Ferdinand's violent death unleash a war of previously unprecedented horror and scale? This murderous act resulted in the July Crisis, “the most complex [event] of modern times, perhaps of any time so far,” and ended in “the most complicated of all wars,” leading to a hundred-year controversy and a heated quest to identify “guilt” among

⁵Jay Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); “1914–1918 Online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War” (<http://www.1914-1918-online.net/>).

⁶See, e.g., Thomas Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Gerd Krumeich, *Juli 1914. Eine Bilanz* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2014); Sean McMeekin, *July 1914. Countdown to War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013); Gordon Martel, *The Month that Changed the World: July 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Annika Mombauer, *Die Julikrise. Europas Weg in den Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich: Beck, 2014); Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, eds., *The Causes of the First World War: Analytic Perspectives and Historical Debates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁷See, e.g., Annika Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War: diplomatic and military documents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Krumeich, *Juli 1914*.

⁸See, e.g., Michael Brock and Eleanor Brock, *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary, 1914–1916: The View from Downing Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Tillmann Bendikowski, *Sommer 1914. Zwischen Begeisterung und Angst—wie Deutsche den Kriegsbeginn erlebten* (Munich: Bertelsmann, 2014).

some of the participants.⁹ That question seemed easy to settle when the war had just broken out: everyone was certain, of course, that their war was a defensive one. In the wake of the Allies' victory, it was also easy to attribute "war guilt" to the losers. But over the next hundred years, the term *guilt* would fall out of fashion; at the same time, the question of deciding who had been responsible would remain a topic of fraught debate. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the long debate about the war's origins had been entirely settled before the centenary, but there were nonetheless broad agreements that had been hard fought for during decades of debate.

Even a hundred years ago the Versailles verdict was not without its critics, of course, particularly in Weimar Germany, whose leaders and citizens saw themselves unfairly punished for a war they thought had been defensive in nature. There were also critical voices outside of Germany that assigned responsibility not to Berlin, but rather to Paris and St. Petersburg. But in the main, such revisionists were drowned out by those who blamed Germany until a more conciliatory consensus, reached by the 1930s, blamed impersonal forces, rather than German decision-makers, for the outbreak of the war.¹⁰ This was an acceptable position for most. Soon an even more terrible war shifted the focus away from 1914, and in the aftermath of World War II, explaining the inhuman horrors of an even more deadly conflict overshadowed the once so bitterly debated question of the origins of World War I.¹¹

The Fischer controversy of the 1960s rekindled this argument and destroyed the conciliatory consensus. Once again, historians focused attention on Germany's role, and the German historian Fritz Fischer detected what he considered to have been evidence of a premeditated war deliberately unleashed by the decision-makers in Berlin.¹² The debate that ensued was spirited and hostile and the tone, at times, defamatory—evidence of the fact that the question of "war guilt" was still of national importance in the 1960s. Many of those who argued against Fischer, like the eminent historian Gerhard Ritter, had themselves fought in the war. This was not an abstract allocation of blame for an event firmly located in the past, but rather an attack on one's personal as well as national history. In a country that was still struggling to come to terms with its recent Nazi past, Fischer was accused of being a *Nestbeschmutzer* ("soiling the German nest") and many of his conservative colleagues in the profession, as well as German politicians, united against him.

A new consensus had emerged by the 1980s, mainly as a result of Fischer's intervention. Few historians agreed wholly with his thesis of a premeditated war to achieve aggressive foreign policy aims, but it was generally accepted that Germany's share of responsibility was larger than that of the other great powers (crucially, not even Fischer attributed all responsibility to Germany, contrary to what some of his critics maintained). Such basic consensus notwithstanding, historians nevertheless increasingly turned their attention to the actions of other governments. Research focusing on Austria-Hungary's prewar foreign policy demonstrated that its leaders had welcomed a war against Serbia.¹³ They were no innocent victim of their stronger ally's desire for war, but rather

⁹Quotes from Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Penguin, 2012), xxix; John A. Vasquez, "The First World War and International Relations Theory: A Review of Books on the 100th Anniversary," *International Studies Review* 16, no.4 (2014): 623.

¹⁰This consensus was captured in the often-cited war memoirs of David Lloyd George: "Europe slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war." See David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 1 (London: Odhams, 1933), 32.

¹¹For a more detailed overview of the debate, see, e.g., John W. Langdon, *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918–1990* (New York: Berg, 1991); Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (London: Longman, 2002), 21–98; Samuel R. Williamson, Jr. and Ernest R. May, "An Identity of Opinions: Historians and July 1914," *Journal of Modern History* 79, no.2 (2007), 335–87.

¹²For a recent discussion of the Fischer controversy, see the special issue, "The Fischer Controversy 50 Years On," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (2013).

¹³Fritz Fellner and Doris A. Corradini, eds., *Schicksalsjahre Österreichs. Die Erinnerungen und Tagebücher Josef Redlichs, 1869–1936*, 3 vols. (Vienna: Böhlau, 2011); Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers. Österreich-Ungarn und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Graz: Styria, 1993), republished in an expanded and updated edition as *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das*

instrumental in using the assassination as a reason for starting a war in the Balkans. It became clear that in July 1914, some of the early decisions that made war probable had been taken in Vienna. Yet, it remained disputed whether Germany had put pressure on Austria-Hungary, and to what extent the so-called blank check had actually forced Vienna's hand. There were disagreements over degrees of responsibility, but in the wake of the Fischer controversy, it was commonplace to argue that the Central Powers were largely responsible for the escalation of the July Crisis and the outbreak of war.

By the 1990s, the post-Fischer consensus about Germany's role could be found in most of the magisterial large histories of Germany that were published by the country's leading and influential historians. As such, there was "a far-reaching consensus about the *special* responsibility of the German Reich" in the writings of leading historians, though they differed in how they weighted Germany's role.¹⁴ Heinrich August Winkler, for example, ruled out the idea of Germany's "sole guilt" (*Alleinschuld*) but conceded a "main guilt" (*Hauptschuld*), whereas Thomas Nipperdey distributed responsibility more widely and considered "the Russian mobilization [to be] as decisive as the blank check."¹⁵ Crucially, however, the topic had lost some of its previous emotive charge by the 1990s, and these "differences in the weighting" of responsibility were no longer "cause for new controversies that descended into the personal."¹⁶ It was finally possible to agree to disagree, perhaps because by the end of the twentieth century, the history of World War I was no longer anybody's "personal" history.

Historians have revisited this topic in different ways since the 1990s. They published primary sources and continued to argue over the importance, meaning, and authenticity of documents.¹⁷ They questioned the idea of an inevitable war, stressing the role of détente in prewar diplomacy and suggesting that war had not been unavoidable.¹⁸ They focused on the roles played by military and political decision-makers, and examined the importance of structures, alliances, and rivalries, e.g., with studies of the Anglo-German naval race and the importance of the rumored Anglo-Russian naval convention of 1914.¹⁹

Ende der Habsburger-Monarchie (Vienna: Böhlau, 2013); Günther Kronenbitter, "Krieg im Frieden". *Die Führung der k.u.k. Armee und die Großmachtpolitik Österreich-Ungarns 1906–1914* (Munich: Walter de Gruyter, 2003); Samuel R. Williamson, *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (London: MacMillan, 1991).

¹⁴On this point see Michael Epkenhans, "Der Erste Weltkrieg—Jahrestagsgedenken, neue Forschungen und Debatten einhundert Jahre nach seinem Beginn," *Vierteljahresshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 63, no. 2 (2015): 136 (emphasis in original). Epkenhans refers to the following tomes as "the big 'master-narratives' (*Meistererzählungen*) of the 1990s": Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3, *Von der "Deutschen Doppelrevolution" bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Munich: Beck, 1995); Heinrich August Winkler, *Der Lange Weg nach Westen. Deutsche Geschichte vom Ende des alten Reiches bis zum Untergang der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Beck 2000); Klaus Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich. Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler 1871–1945* (Stuttgart: Oldenbourg, 1995); Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918*, vol. 2, *Machtstaat vor der Demokratie* (Munich: Beck, 1992).

¹⁵All citations from Epkenhans, "Der Erste Weltkrieg," 136.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷See, e.g., Karl Dietrich Erdmann, ed., *Kurt Riezler. Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), republished with an introduction by Holger Afflerbach (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); Bernd Sösemann, ed., *Theodor Wolff. Tagebücher 1914–1918* (Boppard: H. Boldt, 1984); Michael Epkenhans, *Albert Hopman. Das ereignisreiche Leben eines "Wilhelminers". Tagebücher, Briefe, Aufzeichnungen 1901 bis 1920* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2004); Holger Afflerbach, ed., *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als oberster Kriegsherr im Ersten Weltkrieg. Quellen aus der Umgebung des Kaisers 1914–1918* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2005).

¹⁸Friedrich Kießling, *Gegen den "großen Krieg"? Entspannung in den internationalen Beziehungen* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2002); Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson, eds., *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2007).

¹⁹See, e.g., Matthew Seligmann, *The Royal Navy and the German Threat, 1901–1914: Admiralty Plans to Protect British Trade in a War against Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Nicholas A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Stephen Schroeder, *Die englisch-russische Marinekonvention. Das Deutsche Reich und die Flottenverhandlungen der Triple Entente am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).

The foreign policy decisions of the Entente governments increasingly came under scrutiny as well. In his 2011 study of German foreign policy before the war, Konrad Canis included Russia (together with Germany) among the culprits, attributing to it a “conquest aim” (*Eroberungsziel*) rather than a “security aim” (*Sicherheitsziel*) like that of Austria-Hungary and Germany. By supporting Serbia to protect its own interests in the Balkans, “Russia opened the way for the Great War.”²⁰ Sean McMeekin’s 2011 study of Russia’s prewar policy similarly put the desire for conquest at the heart of his explanation and concluded that Russia went to war in order to claim the Straits and Constantinople. The July Crisis, he argues, was a good opportunity to realize this foreign policy ambition, and he attributes primary responsibility for the war to the government in St. Petersburg, claiming that it acted both out of a sense of weakness and in order to make specific foreign policy gains.²¹ He has failed to convince most of his colleagues, but nonetheless, as we will see, his arguments have led some scholars to reevaluate Russia’s role.²²

The same is true, to some extent, of France’s role. The decision-makers in Paris, Stefan Schmidt argued in 2009 in an in-depth study of French foreign policy before the war, were intent on strengthening the Franco-Russian Alliance and thus prepared to support Russia’s policy in 1914, regardless of the consequences. He concludes that French President Raymond Poincaré did not, in his dealings with Russia, actively intend a military escalation of the July Crisis, but that his aim was to achieve a political victory for the Entente.²³ That said, Poincaré was prepared, in this pursuit, to risk war if Germany insisted on taking things further. On the eve of the centenary, it had thus become widely accepted that war had not been ruled out in principle by the governments in St. Petersburg and Paris, and that they were willing to seize a perceived golden opportunity to achieve, if possible, a diplomatic victory—while not ruling out going to war if the need arose.

By contrast, few historians argued, until recently, for British responsibility for the outbreak of war. Britain’s foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, has traditionally been seen as one of the few decision-makers who honestly worked toward keeping the peace in July 1914.²⁴ In fact, most historians agreed that London was the only capital where decision-makers were reluctant to contemplate war. Distracted until the very end of the crisis by the Irish Question, a war on the continent was, for Britain, only a golden opportunity because it could diffuse the domestic crisis: it is no exaggeration to say that a civil war loomed over the Irish Question in the summer of 1914. Margot Asquith’s recently published diary, for example, clearly shows the pre-occupation with Ireland during the fateful weeks of the summer of 1914, an impression confirmed by other contemporary accounts. “All happened in such a short time,” the Prime Minister’s wife recorded on August 4: “On 30th July everyone was talking of Ireland. The cry of ‘Civil war! Civil war!’ to which *The Times* and the Tories treated us every day has been stilled in five days.”²⁵

²⁰Konrad Canis, *Der Weg in den Abgrund. Deutsche Außenpolitik 1902-1914* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2011), 685.

²¹Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011). He adopts a more comparative approach in his later publication on the July Crisis. See McMeekin, *July 1914*.

²²“The vigor of McMeekin’s argument is marred by a lack of control.” See William Mulligan’s review article, “The Trial Continues: New Directions in the Study of the Origins of the First World War,” *English Historical Review* 129, no. 538 (June 2014): 658. For Thomas Otte, who detects “recklessness” in all of the capitals except London, there is no evidence for Russian “aggressive designs”: the “quart of Russian foreign policy on the eve of the war cannot be squeezed into the half-pint pot of Constantinople and the Straits,” he asserts. See Otte, *July Crisis*, 519. The late Keith Neilson not only bemoans McMeekin’s “belligerent and contentious tone,” but also concludes that “this interpretation is at best misleading and at worst wrong on many levels.” See his review in *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 49, nos. 2–3 (2015): 396.

²³Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Außenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Ausbruchs des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Munich: de Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2009).

²⁴The findings of a recent conference on Grey’s role before 1914 will be published in a forthcoming special issue of the *International Studies Review* in 2015.

²⁵Michael and Eleanor Brock, eds., *Margot Asquith’s Great War Diary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 13–14.

Until recently, most historians would have agreed that, in 1914, Britain had no foreign policy aims and ambitions on the continent, other than to preserve the balance of power, ensure the safety of the Empire, and remain on good terms with its Entente partners.²⁶ However, in his study of British foreign policy before the war, Andreas Rose casts doubt on Britain's alleged peaceful inclination and concludes that the German threat was largely an invention that suited Britain's decision-makers in their pursuit of a pro-Russian agenda.²⁷ While Germany was, "without question," observed with mistrust from London, Rose argues that it was "in the main the fear of the seemingly unassailable Tsarist Empire that made Great Britain shy away from a neutral and conciliatory attitude in 1914."²⁸

Thus, on the eve of the centenary debates, some long-held assumptions about the origins of the war were being revised. Nobody could have predicted that historians would rediscover the debate about the causes of the war with such new enthusiasm (and, in some cases, venom) and find entirely new angles to explore this old debate—or that, as the outbreak of the war neared its hundredth anniversary, historians and the public would once again find themselves embroiled in heated historical and historiographical arguments.

The Centenary Debate

If there was a consensus of sorts, then Christopher Clark's groundbreaking study *The Sleepwalkers* both reacted to and shattered it. Impressive in its scope and in its scholarly grasp of a vast quantity of sources in many languages, Clark's book offered an alternative interpretation that has had an extensive and unexpected impact within and beyond the academy. He divided historians with his revision of the established consensus and inspired a large public audience with his provocative thesis, which offered a new way to think of Germany's role during the prewar years in particular.

Within a few months of the publication of *The Sleepwalkers* in 2012, historians were once again engaged in heated discussions about Germany's role, and the role of other countries, in and before 1914. The new debate was reminiscent of the Fischer controversy of the 1960s because it forced historians, journalists, political commentators, and politicians to adopt and defend a position on this old question during widespread public debates in the media. This time the arguments were slightly less hostile in tone, but the impact of Clark's *Sleepwalkers* was still similar to that of Fischer's first publication, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1961). Both provided a new direction to the debate and a point of reference with which all future historians will have to engage. Just as it is impossible to consider the question of the origins of the war without acknowledging Fischer's contribution, it is now impossible to approach the topic—or to understand the complex historiography—without appreciating the significant intervention Clark has made in this crowded field.

The publication of *The Sleepwalkers* was fortuitously timed, for it subsequently set the tone for the debate in the run-up to the centenary, forcing others to engage with Clark's arguments in their own, later publications. It enjoyed a largely positive reception among English and U.S. reviewers, and, as we will see, a hostile reception in Serbia.²⁹ But it was the publication of a German

²⁶ See, e.g., Zara Steiner and Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2003). Historians who highlight the imperial dimension of British foreign policy concerns include Keith M. Wilson, *The Policy of the Entente: Essays on the Determinants of British Foreign Policy, 1904–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Keith Neilson, "My beloved Russians: Sir Arthur Nicolson and Russia, 1906–1916," *International History Review* 11, no. 4 (1987): 521–54; idem, *Britain and the last Tsar: British Policy and Russia, 1894–1917* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

²⁷ Andreas Rose, *Zwischen Empire und Kontinent. Britische Außenpolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011), 586.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 590.

²⁹ There were some notable exceptions: Nigel Jones, for example, considers Clark "such a Teutonophile that I am surprised that he doesn't deliver lectures to the Cambridge History Faculty wearing a *Pickelhaube*." See his piece, "Let's not be beastly to the Germans," *The Spectator*, Sept. 27, 2012.

translation in the autumn of 2013 that generated a public controversy similar to the Fischer controversy of the 1960s. *Die Schlafwandler* was an unprecedented publishing success for a book on World War I (selling hundreds of thousands of copies), topping German bestseller charts for months, and triggering extensive debate among historians, as well as in the media, where the starting point for heated discussions about the origins of the Great War was invariably Clark's new thesis. From late 2013 onward, all public debates on 1914 in Germany invariably made reference to, and often involved, Christopher Clark.

Clark's research makes several unique interventions. It crucially rejects the notion of "war guilt" and denies that historians should be engaged in finding a guilty party in the manner of a detective in a crime thriller. Moreover, it focuses on, and is more critical of, Serbia and the Entente Powers, while being more lenient on the actions of Germany and Austria-Hungary. In focusing on the role of Serbia, Clark elevates both Gavrilo Princip, the young Bosnian Serb who assassinated Franz Ferdinand, as well as the question of Serbia's role in the events that led to war, from being mere footnotes in some accounts of the origins of the war.³⁰ "Serbia is," Clark argues, "one of the blind spots in the historiography of the July Crisis."³¹ It is indeed surprising how little its decision-makers have previously featured in some of the best-known studies of the causes of the war. As Clark explains, he has addressed the "marginalization of the Serbian and thereby of the larger Balkan dimension of the story." This focus allows him to paint a much more sympathetic picture of Austria-Hungary's predicament, as it strove to uphold its empire against threats from Serbs within and without. That said, his critical view of Serbia arguably sits somewhat uneasily with his desire to stop playing the "blame game."³²

Clark's account starts with the lurid description of "an orgy of violence," namely the regicide of the unpopular Serbian King Alexandar Obrenović and Queen Draga in June 1903. Recounted in great and gory detail in a chapter fittingly titled "Serbian Ghosts," this violent act marked the end of the Obrenović dynasty and the instatement of a new King, Peter Karadjordjević, from a rival dynasty.³³ Among the chief conspirators in the 1903 murder was Dragutin Dimitrijević, better known as Apis, who would later play a significant role in the planning of another regicide—that of Franz Ferdinand in June 1914. He "only narrowly escaped bleeding to death" in 1903 after having been wounded during the coup—which surely begs the first of many counterfactual speculations about the origins of the war. A response to the question of whether the assassination of 1914 would have occurred had Apis died in 1903 depends largely on what role one assigns to him in the 1914 plot.

Clark has greatly advanced our understanding of these crucial events by shifting our focus away from Central Europe to the Balkans, as well as from the immediate causes of the war in 1914 to 1903, thus moving the debate in new directions and highlighting how crucial these "Serbian Ghosts" are for understanding the Balkan origins of the war. Based on Clark's new approach, International Relations theorists have come to understand this brutal act of 1903 as the start of territorial or spatial rivalries between Austria-Hungary and Serbia (the two had maintained better relations before 1903 than they ever would again): "If one could find an initial origin of the war, separate from long-term structural forces, the 1903 murder was it," political scientist John A. Vasquez argues.³⁴

³⁰Fritz Fischer, for example, does not even mention Franz Ferdinand in his controversial account *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961), while Barbara Tuchman's classic account, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), omits mention of the Balkans almost entirely.

³¹Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, xxviii.

³²This contradiction is also pointed out by Arndt Weinrich, "Grosser Krieg, grosse Ursachen? Aktuelle Forschungen zu den Ursachen des Ersten Weltkrieges," *Francia* 40 (2013): 243.

³³Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 4.

³⁴Vasquez, "The First World War and International Relations Theory," 627.

This reinterpretation of Serbia's role was not welcome in contemporary Serbia, where the national story told about the country's entry into the war has traditionally been one of victimhood. The Belgrade government, in this interpretation, had been unfairly targeted by the imperial power Austria-Hungary, which wrongly sought to punish it for having allegedly instigated the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. In present-day Serbia, i.e., in the aftermath of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the fighting of the 1990s, the history of the country's twentieth-century wars remains politically relevant and contested, and the suggestion that Serbia had played a decisive role in causing the outbreak of World War I was greeted with national outrage.³⁵ It should come as no surprise that Serbian nationalists considered unacceptable both Clark's comparison of the events of June 28, 1914 with September 11, 2001, as well as his discussion of Serbia's more recent Balkan Wars in the same breath as Serbia's alleged aggressive prewar foreign policy at the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, Clark's account paints a lurid picture of Serbia's violent past, and he argues that our "moral compass" has changed in recent years: "Since Srebrenica and the siege of Sarajevo, it has become harder to think of Serbia as the mere object or victim of great power politics and easier to conceive of Serbian nationalism as an historical force in its own right."³⁶

In Serbia, where such views met with widespread outrage, Gavrilo Princip has long been celebrated as a national hero, whose act of defiance is seen as the first step toward the foundation of Yugoslavia.³⁷ Unlike the Serbs, who have erected statues to their national hero, Clark argues that the crisis of 1914 began "with a squad of suicide bombers."³⁸ The heated debate around the meaning of the assassination and the role that Serbia's government played in these events clearly shows that, at least for Serbs, World War I is still of contemporary political relevance—not least because of their controversial role in the more recent Balkan Wars, whose causes can be traced back to the aftermath of World War I (if not earlier).

In Germany, by contrast, Clark's focus on the responsibility of other countries was a welcome relief for many who, it turns out, still resent the "war-guilt" verdict of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and who would prefer to see contemporary Germany be saddled with less historical baggage. One of the most surprising aspects about the debate as it unfolded during the centenary year was, in fact, the depth of feeling that still exists in today's Germany about the "war-guilt question."³⁹ Clark's attempt to dismiss the notion of guilt or the search for a culprit, and to focus instead on previously marginalized actors, was read in Germany as a reversal of the established interpretation assigning the main share of responsibility to Germany—which, it seemed, was now largely off the hook. By emphasizing, in particular, that France and Russia had colluded with one another, Clark suggests that Germany acted defensively. And by highlighting Serbian aggression in the Balkans,

³⁵For a detailed discussion of Serbian reactions to Clark's book, see, e.g., Florian Hassel, "Wie Clarks Geschichtsbuch Serbiens Elite umtreibt," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Jan. 23, 2014.

³⁶Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, xxviii.

³⁷On Princip, also see the account by Gregor Mayer, *Verschwörung in Sarajevo. Triumph und Tod des Attentäters Gavrilo Princip* (St. Pölten: Residenz Verlag, 2014).

³⁸Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, xxvii. In 2014, a statue of Princip was erected in eastern Sarajevo by Bosnia's Serb-led *Republika Srpska*. Sarajevo's mayor, Ljubisa Cosic, commented that there are "many different discussions about his role and his act. Our opinion is that he was not a terrorist. He had revolutionary ideas of liberty, not just for Serbs—he belonged to the Slavic movement." Yet, for many Bosnian Muslims, Princip was an ethnic Serb terrorist whose murderous act spelled disaster for all Bosnians. As Fedzad Forto, a journalist for a news agency run by the Bosniak-Croat ethnic minority, explains, "Bosnia ceased to exist in Yugoslavia" following World War I, and "Bosnian Muslims were not recognised until 1968." See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-28033613>.

³⁹The extent of these deep feelings, both for and against the traditional view of Germany's primary responsibility for the war, was forcefully expressed in countless online discussion forums; one can also get a sense of this by reading the many readers' comments left, for example, on Amazon.de, where not just Clark's but every book on the topic has been the subject of enthusiastic and spirited discussion, often by very well-informed general readers.

Austria-Hungary emerges in his interpretation as a declining imperial power under threat and in need of support from Germany. By bringing the actions of Serbia and its allies into sharper relief, this change of perspective enables a different reading of the decisions taken in Vienna and in Berlin in 1914.

More generally, Clark focuses attention away from the question of German guilt and away from attempts to rank states in order of their responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities. Building on the work of Schmitt and McMeekin on France and Russia, respectively, the Central Powers emerge as the victims of Franco-Russian scheming and of the Entente's willingness to risk a war in the summer of 1914. Even Britain, which, as we have seen, usually escapes harsh historical scrutiny in these matters, receives more critical treatment in *The Sleepwalkers*. The mediation proposals from London, for example—seen for the longest time in the historiography as missed opportunities and a rare attempt during the crisis to apply the brakes—appear “half-hearted” to Clark.⁴⁰

In short, the new focus on the Balkan background of the crisis allows for a more sympathetic view of the actions taken by Austria-Hungary, which clearly viewed its powerful and quarrelsome Serbian neighbor as a perilous threat—with some justification, as Clark shows. As for the Germans, they “were not the only imperialists, and not the only ones to succumb to paranoia.” The July Crisis was “the fruit of a shared political culture.”⁴¹ In other words, in Clark's interpretation, it was not just the Central Powers that were prepared to run the risk of a war and that welcomed the chance to fight while the time was right. Rather, everyone was, under the right circumstances, willing to seize on an opportunity for war. Clark has amassed an impressive amount of primary source evidence in support of his argument, and is able to show convincingly that there certainly were warmongers in every European capital. It is noticeable, however, that much of the evidence we have of Germany's prewar scheming (the cornerstone of many Fischerite interpretations) is not cited in *The Sleepwalkers*, a fact bemoaned by some of Clark's critics.⁴² It would, no doubt, have made for a more complete, if even longer, account if Germany's sleepwalkers had received the same attention as those of France, Russia, or Serbia. If that had been the case, the overall impression of Germany's role would have surely been less positive.

For many Germans, this radical new interpretation ended a century of blame for the outbreak of World War I. As Michael Epkenhans observes, Clark's apparent exoneration of Germany's role in the origins of the war had “a near-magical effect on a large public [audience] and many German historians.”⁴³ Clark's book “buried six-feet deep the thesis of Germany's main responsibility,” one journalist commented approvingly.⁴⁴ In an early review of Clark's book in *Der Spiegel*, historian Holger Afflerbach summed up the emerging new consensus that “the Germans are guilty of [causing] the World War I—but not more so than others.”⁴⁵ The German public eagerly accepted this new interpretation, and many historians agreed.⁴⁶ Summing up the most recent developments in the field, Samuel R. Williamson identified an “erosion of the German [guilt] paradigm” in the historical literature.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 559.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 561.

⁴² See, e.g., John Röhl, “Jetzt gilt es loszuschlagen!,” *Die Zeit*, May 22, 2014.

⁴³ Epkenhans, “Der Erste Weltkrieg,” 146.

⁴⁴ Cora Stephan, “Die Urkatastrophe,” *Die Welt*, Nov. 14, 2013.

⁴⁵ Holger Afflerbach, “Schlafwandelnd in die Schlacht,” *Der Spiegel*, Sept. 24, 2012.

⁴⁶ A public survey by the German magazine *Stern* in January 2014 found that only 19 percent of Germans believe that their country had the “main responsibility” for the outbreak of war; 58 percent blamed every participating nation; only 9 percent solely blamed the others. This undoubtedly marked a major shift from the post-Fischer consensus. Cited in Jeevan Vasagar, “Bestseller list reveals German desire to reassess Great War,” *Financial Times*, Jan. 17, 2014.

⁴⁷ Samuel R. Williamson Jr., “July 1914 Revisited and Revised: The Erosion of the German Paradigm,” in Levy and Vasquez, *Causes of the First World War*, 30–62. There were a few exceptions among the most recent publications, in particular Gerd Krumeich's *Juli 1914*; Christa Pöppelmann, *Juli 1914. Wie man einen Weltkrieg beginnt und die Saat für einen*

Arguments about Germany's relative innocence—or rather shared responsibility—found its way into other influential publications, such as Herfried Münkler's 2013 study, *Der grosse Krieg* (*The Great War*). This book also appeared for weeks on German bestseller lists.⁴⁸ Its focus is on the war itself, but Münkler also has views about the causes of the conflict: "Undoubtedly, Germany was one of the decisive actors in the summer of 1914 responsible for the outbreak of war—but by no means did it shoulder this responsibility alone," Münkler concludes, in line with the emerging new consensus.⁴⁹ Germany's military and political leaders "undoubtedly" made a number of errors resulting in "mistakes of leadership" that led first to war and then to defeat.⁵⁰ But Russia was the main culprit, in this view, and if St. Petersburg "had foregone the mobilization and the declaration of war, then only a Third Balkan War would have broken out, which Austria-Hungary would most likely have won."⁵¹ Like Clark, Münkler was frequently interviewed in the media as an expert and proponent of the new orthodoxy during the German debates that waged in 2014. He controversially spelled out the advantages for Germany of the newly emerging interpretation of its role in 1914: "It is hardly possible to assume a responsible policy in Europe if one has the impression: we were guilty of everything."⁵² Indeed, the debate centered around Germany's future role in Europe, with many conservative historians advocating once again a more self-assured foreign policy for an economically powerful Germany, now that "guilt"—for one world war, at least—has been removed.

Jörn Leonhard's impressive study of World War I, which appeared in 2014, also consciously referred back to *The Sleepwalkers*, arguing that the "European protagonists" were "certainly no sleepwalkers in the sense of acting unconsciously."⁵³ In assessing the responsibility of the primary actors, he emphasizes that "none of the European states planned an offensive war at the time of the shots in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914." However, there was certainly shared responsibility because all the military planners thought "in the categories of a preventive war"—in Berlin and Vienna as much as in St. Petersburg and Paris. In other words, in line with the new consensus, Leonhard argues that all governments contributed to the escalation of the crisis. He ultimately identifies, however, two main culprits that had held "the key for a de-escalation": Germany, which accepted an enormous risk by issuing the blank check to Austria, and Britain, which adopted an opaque position and thus fuelled hopes for British neutrality in Berlin—and for a British intervention in St. Petersburg and Paris.⁵⁴

zweiten legt (Berlin: Scheel, 2013); Mombauer, *Julikrise und Kriegsausbruch*. These publications offered a slightly different take on the now dominant Clark thesis: Pöppelmann and Mombauer were consequently referred to as "Fischer's granddaughters" in a review that appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; see Rainer Blasius, "Furcht und Selbstüberschätzung," *FAZ*, March 11, 2014.

⁴⁸Publications on World War I were in unusually high demand: Florian Illies's cultural history, *1913*, sold approximately 400,000 (sic) copies in 2013 and Münkler 30,000 by January 2014; at that point Clark had already sold 160,000 copies in Germany alone (*Schlafwandler* was published in Sept. 2013). Figures for January 2014 from Jeevan Vasagar, "Bestseller list." By April 2014, Clark had sold 200,000 German copies, Münkler 50,000, and Illies a staggering 460,000. As Alexander Cammann commented, "historical topics find numerous buyers and probably not quite as many readers." See his piece "Dick und teuer," *Die Zeit*, April 24, 2014.

⁴⁹Münkler, *Der grosse Krieg*, 10.

⁵⁰Ibid., 15.

⁵¹Ibid., 101.

⁵²Cited in Epkenhans, "Der Erste Weltkrieg," 148. Such public statements provoked strong reactions against Münkler, particularly among students at the Humboldt University in Berlin, where he teaches. A public campaign titled "Münkler-Watch" started in the summer of 2015 to protest against Münkler, who, according to the protesters, used his elevated position as a prominent professor with connections to the Bundeswehr and the Federal Government to promote a more self-assured German foreign policy. For details of the students' position and protests, see, e.g., <http://goo.gl/1BLz88>.

⁵³Leonhard, *Die Büchse*, 118.

⁵⁴Ibid., 119.

With Clark's book such a publishing success, and many journalists and large parts of the German public now convinced that Germany had been exonerated and the slate wiped clean, there was, at least initially, a noticeable silence from historians who disagreed with this new revisionism. In fact, those who did not share the new view found themselves the subject of—sometimes vicious—ridicule, accused of nursing a “‘negative nationalism’ that clings to German self-flagellation,” or of being suspicious of “everything that contradicts the ‘achievements’ of previously attained knowledge.”⁵⁵ Fifty years after the Fischer controversy, being a “Fischerite” was suddenly an insult again.

Among the first to take a stance in the media debate was the historian and head of the political book section of *Die Zeit*, Volker Ullrich, who expressed dismay at the tone of the public debate, particularly because it went “hand in hand with a denigration of Fritz Fischer that was, in part, reminiscent of the campaign against him in the 1960s.” If Fischer had been accused of “political masochism” back then, Clark's critics were now accused of “guilt pride” (*Schuldstolz*), as if “they were practically always compelled to confess to German guilt, even deriving satisfaction from it.” In January 2014, Ullrich worried how “limp” (*matt*) the objections to this new paradigm had been, as if Germany's historians had “grown tired of the argument.”⁵⁶ Ullrich got the ball rolling, and eventually other critics emerged and the debate began in earnest in the German press. Gerd Krumeich explained in an interview that, in his opinion, “Clark defended the Germans and the Austrians too much.” He concurred that it was necessary to stop focusing entirely on German guilt, but bemoaned the fact that Clark had turned “the Serbs into a kind of robber gang, similar to Wilhelm II at the time.”⁵⁷ For Krumeich, Germany had “the greatest responsibility for the way the war broke out in August 1914, because it [had] tried to turn the conflict into a ‘test’ of Russia's war preparedness.”⁵⁸

Michael Epkenhans commented, with some dismay, on the tone that the debate soon adopted: “Whoever looks back on some of these debates can only despair” (*die Hände über dem Kopf zusammenschlagen*) of the way in which colleagues attacked each other, or pedantically pointed out minor mistakes to discredit an opposing argument.⁵⁹ Whereas before the centenary debate, the differences in emphasis were minor enough not to give rise to personal recriminations, the new debate hearkened back in tone to Fischer's time. In 2012, it had still been possible to have an “unagitated” discussion regardless of “different approaches and interpretations.”⁶⁰ But by 2014, “accusations of being unable or unwilling to learn something new, on the one hand, and, on the other, of politically motivated revisionism,” abounded.⁶¹ According to Epkenhans, “the verve with which younger historians, half a century after the unfortunate Fischer controversy, publicly decry his

⁵⁵ Cora Stephan, “Die ewigen Schuldgefühle der Deutschen,” cited in Epkenhans, “Der Erste Weltkrieg,” 149.

⁵⁶ See Volker Ullrich, “Nun Schlittern sie Wieder,” *Die Zeit*, Jan. 24, 2014. This denigration of Fischer was an unintended consequence of Clark's work. The Australian academic, who teaches at Cambridge University, had not set out to prove Fischer wrong. As he points out, examining the July Crisis with the assumption that there was “a smoking gun... in the hands of every major character... does not mean that we should minimize the belligerence and imperialist paranoia of the Austrian and German policymakers that rightly absorbed the attention of Fritz Fischer and his historiographical allies.” See Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 561. But as Volker Ullrich's comments suggest, this is precisely how some have read and interpreted Clark's revisionism.”

⁵⁷ Gerd Krumeich, “Das Kaiserreich unterschätzte 1914 Englands Macht,” *Die Welt*, Sept. 11, 2013.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Krumeich further critiques the new interpretation in his study of the July Crisis. See Krumeich, *Juli 1914*.

⁵⁹ Epkenhans, “Der erste Weltkrieg,” 144. Dominik Geppert has also commented on the “venomousness” of the debate. See “Heutige Parallelen zu 1914,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Aug. 26, 1914.

⁶⁰ He was referring to an international conference commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Fischer controversy; proponents of different interpretations discussed this controversial topic there without recourse to unpleasantness. See Epkenhans, “Der erste Weltkrieg,” 137, 139.

⁶¹ Ibid., 144.

theses as mistaken—and, in so doing, could be certain of the approval of large segments of the [German] public, as well as the historians' *Zunft*—would have pleased [Gerhard] Ritter greatly.”⁶²

In the wake of Clark's intervention, then, we are as far removed as ever from a uniformity of opinion among historians. The author of *The Sleepwalkers* has questioned whether “we really need to make the case against a single guilty state, or to rank the states according to their respective share in responsibility for the outbreak of war...”⁶³ His first question qualifies as rhetorical, for, a hundred years on from 1914, hardly anybody still makes the case that there was a single guilty state.⁶⁴ However, the ranking of responsibility remains commonplace in the most recent publications (implicitly in Clark's as well). Sean McMeekin, for example, is clear in his attribution of responsibility: “The war of 1914 was Russia's war even more than it was Germany's.”⁶⁵ Elsewhere he defines the origins of the war as “the key moral question of 1914” and identifies “degrees of responsibility,” contending that “sins of omission are lesser ones than sins of commission; likewise, actions are not equivalent to the reactions they occasion.” In this reading, Gavrilo Princip and his fellow conspirators “bear ultimate responsibility for provoking the July Crisis... The Austrians must stand next in the dock of judgment.”⁶⁶ In a short volume that addresses what he believes are the 101 most important questions about World War I, Gerd Krumeich similarly reaches an unequivocal—but completely different—conclusion about the question of guilt:

In 1914, none of the great powers wanted to preserve peace at any price; war was still seen as the “continuation of politics by other means.” But the main responsibility for the escalation of the conflict falls to Kaiser Wilhelm II, his chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, and the military men around General Helmuth von Moltke, with their ambitious policy of threat, bluff, and blackmail.⁶⁷

Clark's views proved less compelling to historians outside of Germany. Among the publications marking the centenary, Max Hastings's *Catastrophe* is most outspoken about Germany's responsibility for the war; in fact, his unusual position is arguably the most Fischerite of all the most recent interpretations. Intent on showing that the war was not futile but rather necessary for Britain, he is unequivocal in his indictment of Germany. Dismissing Clark, he argues that “the case is still overwhelmingly strong that Germany bore principal blame. Even if it did not conspire to bring war about, it declined to exercise its power to prevent the outbreak by restraining Austria. Even if Berlin did not seek to contrive a general European conflagration, it was willing for one, because it believed it could win.”⁶⁸ In sharp contrast to Hastings, McMeekin claims that the Germans “went into the war expecting that they would lose.” This is an unsubstantiated allegation, for there is plenty of evidence showing that the German military leaders were confident in their military ability. As Wilhelm Groener, former head of the Operations Department of the General Staff, recalled after the war: “armed with the Schlieffen Plan [...] we believed that we could await the inevitable martial conflict with our neighbours in calmness.”⁶⁹ McMeekin's further contention that, “far from ‘willing the war,’ the Germans went into it kicking and screaming as the Austrian noose snapped shut around their necks,” seems equally untenable.⁷⁰ There is a

⁶²Ibid., 146.

⁶³Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 560.

⁶⁴Notable exceptions include Hastings, *Catastrophe*; Dieter Hoffmann, *Der Sprung ins Dunkle. Oder wie der 1. Weltkrieg entfesselt wurde* (Leipzig: Militzke, 2010); McMeekin, *Russian Origins*.

⁶⁵McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 5.

⁶⁶McMeekin, *July 1914*, 390–91.

⁶⁷Krumeich, *Die 101 wichtigsten Fragen*, 29.

⁶⁸Hastings, *Catastrophe*, 562.

⁶⁹Cited in MacMillan, *The War*, 525.

⁷⁰McMeekin, *July 1914*, 404–5.

great deal of contemporary evidence pointing to military confidence in 1914. For example, the Bavarian military plenipotentiary, Hugo von Lerchenfeld, reported on August 3 to his superior in Munich: “It seems to be settled that everyone will be going against us, but I share the confidence (*Zuversicht*) of the military that we will succeed.”⁷¹ Whereas Hastings argues that “the most important cause of the First World War was that Germany chose to support an Austrian invasion of Serbia, believing that the Central Powers could win any wider conflict such action might unleash,” McMeekin contends that “the idea that Berlin’s strategic position was uniquely favourable for war in 1914 is absurd.”⁷² Gerd Krumeich holds the exact opposite view:

The German Reich and Austria-Hungary decided on a *vabanque* game that did not shy away from a step into the Great War in order to turn the balance of power in European politics to their advantage. The assassination in Sarajevo was used determinedly to free Austria-Hungary from the pressure of Serbia and to find out whether and to what extent Russia was ready for and willing to countenance war.⁷³

Yet, Krumeich rejects the idea that ambitions of world power or imperial predominance were behind German decision-making, instead identifying “a distinctive fear of the future” as the motivating force for the behavior of the authorities in Berlin.⁷⁴

Both Krumeich and McMeekin thus identify fear as a motivation, but come to different conclusions about its consequences for assigning guilt. According to Krumeich, the Central Powers carry the burden of “main responsibility because they lit the powder keg,” but it was not solely their fault that such a great “amount of fuel had been able to be amassed.”⁷⁵ By contrast, Thomas Otte’s measured and magisterial account of the July Crisis concludes that “all the Powers, with the exception of Britain, were driven by a sense of weakness, which made it difficult for them to pull back from the brink even when they were already staring into the abyss of war.”⁷⁶ It was fatal for all concerned that they combined this with a “recklessness beyond belief.” In Otte’s assessment, the causes of the war are ultimately to be found “in the near-collective failure of statecraft by the rulers of Europe.”⁷⁷

Since Clark’s intervention, there has been general agreement that *guilt* is not a helpful concept to apply to the origins of the war. Michael Epkenhans suggests that historians should “finally” purge the emotionally charged term *war guilt* from their vocabulary—and the term *sleepwalkers* as well, for “Bethmann Hollweg and Leopold Berchtold, Poincaré, [Sergey] Sasonov and Grey knew exactly what they were doing or not doing in July 1914.” Based on much of the recent research on the subject, he concludes that “many of the old interpretations no longer hold” true today. And yet, in his opinion, “the key to explaining the catastrophe of the year 1914” remains the “risk strategy of the *Reich* leadership and the Austrian government”—something for which, he points out, there is much convincing evidence.⁷⁸ In her substantial contribution

⁷¹Letter from Lerchenfeld to Hertling, Aug. 3, 1914, cited in Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 211.

⁷²Hastings, *Catastrophe*, 561; McMeekin, *July 1914*, 404.

⁷³Krumeich, *Juli 1914*, 183.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 184.

⁷⁶Otte, *July Crisis*, 508. Otte’s measured and knowledgeable study of the July Crisis was among the last to be published in the centenary year. It benefits in particular from the author’s extensive knowledge of British foreign policy and offers much valuable insight into Grey’s role in the events that led to war.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 516, 507. This position is not dissimilar to the views expressed in Luigi Albertini’s 1942–43 account of the origins of the war, which sought a truly international explanation of its origins (but whose author was not averse to prosecutorial pronouncements when he thought he could detect fault). See Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, trans. and ed. Isabella M. Massey, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952–57).

⁷⁸Epkenhans, “Der erste Weltkrieg,” 165.

to the literature on the origins of the war, Margaret MacMillan similarly argues “that some powers and their leaders were more culpable than others. Austria-Hungary’s mad determination to destroy Serbia in 1914, Germany’s decision to back it to the hilt, Russia’s impatience to mobilise, these all seem to me to bear the greatest responsibility for the outbreak of the war.” As for France and Britain, neither country wanted war—“although it might be argued that they could have done more to stop it.”⁷⁹

According to Gerhard Hirschfeld and Gerd Krumeich, the German Reich had “maneuvered itself into a cul-de-sac from which it could not find a way out, but it certainly was not solely responsible for the escalation of the crisis.”⁸⁰ Whether or not Germany acted out of a sense of strength or weakness hardly mattered, in the end, for the outcome of the crisis. Its potential enemies were strengthening their military might, and there is certainly a good deal of evidence suggesting that Germany’s leaders feared a time in the not-too-distant future when Russia would be too strong to defeat. Because of its geographic position (i.e., flanked by two hostile powers) and with no alternative to the only plan for deployment in the event of a two-front war, fear of an uncertain future outweighed the fear of a war that one believed one could somehow envision (leaving aside the fact that such visions ultimately fell far short of reality). In the summer of 1914, Germany’s leaders were still confident in their momentary advantage over their adversaries: it is thus possible that they combined feelings of superiority with fear of their potential enemies, and that they were motivated by both in equal measure.

Clark’s forceful intervention has made others question the validity of the century-long quest to find “the culprit” and pin blame primarily on one country—Germany. His resolutely international approach confirms the idea that the origins of the war can only be effectively studied by adopting a comparative international approach. The same is true of the war itself, of course. Jay Winter’s ambitious *Cambridge History of the First World War*, as well as Oliver Janz’s online project, “1914–1918 online,” are both exemplary specimens of this: both of these multi-authored publications approach the history of the war from an international viewpoint, focusing on both great and small powers, in Europe and around the world. They take care to give a voice to the histories (and the historians) of countries that may seem peripheral from a European perspective. The war thus emerges as a truly global phenomenon.⁸¹

Yet, even such an international focus has not convinced all historians to change their minds about the question of who started the war. In a chapter in the *Cambridge History* addressing the recent debates around the origins of the war, Volker Berghahn rejects the latest revisionism and is unequivocal in his assessment of responsibility, concluding that

there is no need for scholars to go on a roundtrip through the capitals of Europe with the aim of finding out that other decision-makers were more responsible for the First World War than the two emperors and their advisers. Berlin and Vienna continue to be the best places for historians to look closely for clues as to why war broke out in 1914.⁸²

Notwithstanding continuing disagreements about where to assign blame, the importance of such international and comparative approaches for addressing the question of the origins of the war—and indeed for studying the war itself—cannot be overstated. For too long, explanations of its causes and inquiries into the way the war was experienced have focused on just one or two

⁷⁹MacMillan, *The War*, xxxi.

⁸⁰Hirschfeld and Krumeich, *Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 47. This useful volume, which is aimed at a general readership, also includes interesting primary sources.

⁸¹Winter, *Cambridge History*; “1914–1918 Online” includes contributors from fifty countries (<http://www.1914-1918-online.net/>).

⁸²Volker Berghahn, “Origins,” in Winter, *Cambridge History*, vol. 1, 37.

countries. As Gerd Krumeich rightly points out, studies of a single nation are good at giving detailed and lively accounts of national actors, but are often poor at giving others the same treatment. He notes “how lively Bethmann Hollweg, the Kaiser, Moltke, but also [Erich von] Falkenhayn” are in studies that focus on Germany, “and how stereotyped Poincaré or Sazonov, for example, are portrayed” in such accounts.⁸³ This is certainly the case in McMeekin’s account of Russia’s prewar foreign policy, which is unconvincing because of its focus on Russia to the exclusion of other actors—not unlike the way Fritz Fischer focused solely on Germany. In both cases, the approach is too one-dimensional to explain fully the origins of the war.

After a hundred years, at least one definite conclusion can now be reached: the international crisis of 1914, just as the war itself, can only be unravelled by taking an international approach, and recent scholarship has, in the words of one reviewer, opened “the black box for all states.”⁸⁴ The latest publications about the July Crisis impressively attempt to untangle the complex web of decision-making that characterized the last weeks of peace. Yet, despite widespread agreement about the need to take a truly international and comparative approach, we still remain far removed from any sort of consensus about why war broke out in 1914.

After a century of research and argument, there is, as Gerd Krumeich observes, still no “actual agreement on the question of war guilt.” He draws an interesting comparison with the question of the causes of the war of 1870, which were still contested in the 1970s but are no longer contentious today.⁸⁵ That once heated question has lost its political relevance and been firmly consigned to history, thus no longer eliciting an emotional response. It seems inconceivable that such unity of opinion about the origins of the war that began in 1914 will be achieved in the foreseeable future. Indeed, according to Gordon Martel, “there is not, and there never will be, a neat explanation that ties up all of the loose ends, that satisfactorily answers everyone’s questions concerning the outbreak of the First World War.”⁸⁶

Consensus and Controversy

The big debates about “war guilt” discussed in the previous sections are based on disputes about detail that involve different, often conflicting readings of evidence and interpretations of events and actions.⁸⁷ It is not possible to understand the “war-guilt” controversy without looking at the fine grain of the arguments, for the debates often do indeed hinge on detail. Research has nevertheless coalesced around certain areas of agreement that are generally accepted today. In particular, historians no longer subscribe to the view that the war of 1914 was inevitable and that Europe somehow inexorably drifted into a conflict that was unavoidable.⁸⁸ From this belief stems the realization that the war was not the product of underlying structures and impersonal forces beyond

⁸³ Krumeich, *Juli 1914*, 11.

⁸⁴ Vasquez, “The First World War and International Relations Theory,” 624.

⁸⁵ Krumeich, *Juli 1914*, 8.

⁸⁶ Martel, *The Month*, 430.

⁸⁷ On the reading of primary evidence and the search for “the truth” in documents, see Annika Mombauer, “The Fischer Controversy, Documents, and the ‘Truth’ About the Origins of the First World War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (2013): 290–314.

⁸⁸ This “improbability thesis,” first advanced by Holger Afflerbach, stresses the fact that the period 1871–1914 can be seen as a period of conflict avoidance, rather than one of recurring crises that somehow inevitably led to war. The ability to avoid war had led to growing confidence that future crises could also be resolved peacefully. In this interpretation, the war was “a consequence of carelessness caused by overconfidence”—“the result of a series of professional mistakes by a comparatively small group of diplomats, politicians and military leaders.” See Afflerbach and Stevenson, *An Improbable War?*, 6. For similar arguments, see Friedrich Kießling’s work on the importance of détente in the prewar years (see note 18) and William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

the control of individuals (such as alliance systems, imperialism, or arms races) but rather the result of agency and of the particular military and political cultures within which individuals operated.

Given that other outcomes were possible, historians frequently indulge in counterfactual speculations and often stress contingency in their explanation of the war. What if Gavrilo Princip had only assassinated Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, and not her husband, the Archduke? What if their trip to Sarajevo had been cancelled altogether? What if Germany had not supported its ally, Austria-Hungary, with the blank check, or if Russia had not stood by Serbia? There are countless such counterfactuals, some more plausible than others, which, while beyond the remit of the historian, nonetheless show the importance of contingency and underline the argument that this war was not inevitable, even after the assassination had occurred. This view is echoed in all of the recent literature and most historians now subscribe to the view that war did not result from long-term causes, but was instead a direct consequence of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and the resulting “short-term shocks to the international system.”⁸⁹ In Thomas Otte’s memorable phrase, the assassination had “engendered an audacity of despair” in Vienna.⁹⁰ However, this did not mean, in Margaret MacMillan’s assessment, that there was an inevitable path from Sarajevo to the outbreak of the war less than six weeks later: “Very little in history is inevitable. Europe did not have to go to war in 1914; a general war could have been avoided up to the last moment on 4 August when the British finally decided to come in.” Or, as she succinctly puts it: “There are always choices.”⁹¹

Common to all recent publications is the stress on the agency of key individuals as a determining factor. Underlying structural factors, such as the alliance system—once the usual explanation for the war’s origin—are no longer seen as causes of the war.⁹² Domestic causes of the war, which were a popular explanation in the 1960s and beyond, are also no longer regarded as the reason why war broke out. As Gerd Krumeich concludes: “It is simply not possible to prove that Bethmann, the Tsar or Poincaré acted as they did for fear of revolution, a putsch, or for domestic policy advantages.” While their decisions were not made “in a vacuum... it has, up to now, not been possible to prove” that their decisions were taken to achieve “domestic or societal goals.”⁹³

There is agreement on another crucial point: a number of decision-makers brought Europe to the brink of war and did not shy away from it when they could have acted differently. But who they were exactly, and how to weigh their responsibility and the importance of the decisions they took, are much more contentious questions. McMeekin, for example, rejects the view put forward in “standard textbooks” that

a number of long-term structural factors made the catastrophe of 1914 possible. None of this structural background... is sufficient to explain what happened in 1914. Mass conscription and the arms race were not less advanced during the First Bosnian Crisis of 1908–1909 and the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. France and Russia were just as free to determine

⁸⁹Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, xxxi. The Sarajevo incident is crucial for McMeekin: without it, “France would have remained consumed by the Caillaux affair in July 1914.” In March 1914 the French newspaper *Le Figaro* published a series of explicit love letters from French Finance Minister Joseph Caillaux to his former mistress, now wife. Seeking revenge, Henriette Caillaux shot and killed the *Figaro* editor, Gaston Calmette. Caillaux resigned from his post, and the trial of Madame Caillaux took place in July 1914, amid much public interest. With regard to Britain, McMeekin contends that “the Home Rule crisis over Ireland was building towards a climax in summer 1914” and that “without Sarajevo and the war it sparked, Irish affairs would have preoccupied British statesmen for years.” Moreover, without Sarajevo, Franz Ferdinand would have been around to block the bellicose Chief of Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, as he had on countless previous occasions. See McMeekin, *July 1914*, 385–86.

⁹⁰Otte, *July Crisis*, 508.

⁹¹MacMillan, *The War*, xxv, 605.

⁹²A case in point is David Lloyd George’s “conciliatory accident” theory, which stressed alliance entanglements. See David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, 2 vols. (London: Odhams Press, 1934).

⁹³Krumeich, *Juli 14*, 14.

whether or not to go to war in 1914 as in all previous years of their military alliance dating back to 1894. Austria had just as much interest in cutting Serbia down to size in 1912 and 1913 as she did in 1914; the Germans had no particular interest in the Balkans in any of these years.⁹⁴

Gordon Martel agrees both that “war was not inevitable” and that structures were not to blame, and he is emphatic in attributing blame to the decision-makers of July 1914:

It was the choices that men made during those fateful days that plunged the world into war. They did not walk in their sleep. They knew what they were doing. They were not stupid. They were not ignorant. The choices they made were rational, carefully calculated, premised on the assumptions and attitudes, ideas and experiences that they had accumulated over the years. Real people, actual flesh-and-blood human beings, were responsible for the tragedy of 1914—not unseen, barely understood forces beyond their control.⁹⁵

Agreeing on which decision-makers to blame remains more difficult, but there is agreement that none of them intended to unleash a global conflict lasting several years. And although we have long revised the idea that everyone thought in terms of a short war, it is now generally accepted that nobody in positions of power wanted a world war that would claim casualties on such an unimaginable scale. “Without wanting to excuse failure, ambition, and [the act of] playing with fire,” Krumeich writes,

the dimensions of the possible catastrophe did not yet play a part. The mixture of excitement and wantonness that characterized so many of the actions during the July Crisis would doubtless have been different had the decision-makers known that the planned “great war” would not remain within the anticipated confines but instead develop in the shortest time into battlefields like those of Verdun and the Somme.⁹⁶

Clearly, then, some important areas of consensus do exist. But disagreements on nuance and detail continue unabated, and here the devil is in the detail. Historians reading the same evidence come to opposing conclusions or evaluate the importance of specific events in an entirely different way. For example, they continue to argue over the significance of Austria-Hungary’s declaration of war on Serbia, the importance of the Russian mobilization, as well as about the nature of, and intention behind, the British mediation proposals. In fact, the most recent publications spend a great deal of time considering these controversial aspects in particular.

Austria-Hungary’s early declaration of war on Serbia was, without doubt, a crucial moment in the July Crisis. World War I began on August 4, from an Anglocentric perspective, but it really started with that declaration of war on June 28, which was followed by almost immediate shelling of Belgrade, the Serbian capital. Contemporaries in Britain clearly thought that “the declaration of war by Austria against Serbia has made the situation very critical.”⁹⁷ These were the first acts of war and they were deliberately designed to make a peaceful outcome of the crisis unlikely.⁹⁸ Yet, not everyone is convinced of the importance of Austria’s declaration of war on Serbia. While acknowledging that the Austrian Foreign Minister Count Leopold von Berchtold “wanted to cut off further outside mediation efforts,” McMeekin believes that this act only proved what was already known: that Austria-Hungary wanted a war with Serbia. This is a somewhat spurious argument, however, for there is a difference between *wanting* a war and *declaring* one, and the

⁹⁴ McMeekin, *July 14*, 384–85.

⁹⁵ Martel, *The Month*, 421, 431.

⁹⁶ Krumeich, *Juli 14*, 186.

⁹⁷ See the letter Haldane wrote to his mother on July 29, 1914, cited in Mombauer, *Documents*, 398.

⁹⁸ On this argument, see also *ibid.*

seriousness of that decision should not be downplayed. It is important to remember that this first act of war did indeed disable diplomacy and that, for some Europeans, World War I began with the bombardment of Belgrade from warships on the Danube in the early hours of July 29. For McMeekin, this bellicose act “gave Russia a pretext to escalate her war preparations.”⁹⁹ But one might argue instead that this act of aggression was not so much a pretext as a *reason* for Russia to take action, given its role as Serbia’s protector. One should not forget that the government in Vienna launched an attack on Serbia while there were still mediation proposals on the table. As Manfred Rauchensteiner shows, orders to prepare the river monitors (a type of warship) on the Danube were issued as early as July 21, and were to come into effect on the very day that the ultimatum was to be delivered in Belgrade. In fact, the entire Danube fleet was to be mobilized by July 23, in anticipation of a negative reply from Belgrade to Austria-Hungary’s deliberately harsh ultimatum.¹⁰⁰

Russia therefore had no need for a pretext. As Hasting notes, “hopes for peace crumbled in St. Petersburg on the 29th, when word came that the Austrians had begun to bombard Belgrade.”¹⁰¹ For McMeekin, by contrast, Berchtold’s declaration of war on Serbia gave Russia a “public *casus belli* for war preparations she was undertaking anyway.”¹⁰² But at a time of positioning oneself vis-à-vis one’s alliance and entente partners, such legitimization of one’s actions was of extreme importance: it made it easier for the Russians to convince the French—and, more crucially, the British—of their need to act. Without this declaration of war, it would have been much more difficult for Russia to gain British support and involvement. Nor could the Austro-Hungarian government have been in any doubt about the effect its action would have on Russia. As Rauchensteiner asserts, “from July 28 onwards, nobody who was halfway informed [about the unfolding events] could doubt that Russia would intervene in the war.”¹⁰³

Russia’s early decision to begin partial mobilization is another area of significant contention. The arguments center on the timing of this decision, on what kind of mobilization the Russian government had decided on, and on whether a partial mobilization was at all possible. During and after the war, the issue of Russia’s mobilization was, in fact, a key propaganda tool for the German government: as Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller’s recorded in his diary on August 1, by waiting for Russia to mobilize first, the German government had “succeeded very well in making us appear as the attacked.”¹⁰⁴ Pointing a finger at Russian culpability, McMeekin has argued that the “long-running argument about Russia’s partial versus general mobilisation rests, ultimately, on a fiction.”¹⁰⁵ Because there was no actual partial-mobilization option, this was a mere smokescreen to convince France and, in particular, Britain that Russia was not giving Germany a pretext for war. Others disagree. Gerd Krumeich, for example, concurs with David Stevenson’s much earlier interpretation of Russia’s policy in July 1914. According to this view, the decision for partial mobilization, taken on July 24 and 25, amounted to “armed diplomacy”—along the same lines as those pursued earlier in the Balkan Wars.¹⁰⁶ Military measures were authorized in the event circumstances demanded them; this included the decree of the “period preparatory to war,” a step that preceded mobilization. It was crucial

⁹⁹ McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 397.

¹⁰⁰ Rauchensteiner, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, 145.

¹⁰¹ Hastings, *Catastrophe*, 73.

¹⁰² McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 397.

¹⁰³ Rauchensteiner, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, 178.

¹⁰⁴ For Müller’s diary, see Mombauer, *Documents* (no. 367), 509.

¹⁰⁵ McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 397.

¹⁰⁶ Krumeich, *Juli 1914*, 139, quoting David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of the War: Europe, 1900–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1996), 379.

that the decision for partial mobilization did not preclude a continuation of diplomatic talks; this was Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov's conviction at least until Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.¹⁰⁷ Keith Neilson has also argued forcefully that "the Russian mobilisation (of whatever extent) did not cause the war—that required the Germans to decide to support Austria-Hungary at whatever cost and to attack France. To prepare to defend oneself is not the same as throwing the first punch."¹⁰⁸

From the German perspective, it hardly mattered if Russia was preparing merely a partial or an actual mobilization, because "every day that Russia concentrated her troops was indeed a lost day for the German deployment plan..."¹⁰⁹ Yet, as Krumeich rightly notes as well, one should "not overlook the fact that it was precisely the strict timetable of the Schlieffen Plan that allowed the political leadership so little leeway for negotiations or even for "militarily secured diplomacy."¹¹⁰ In that sense Britain's hand had not been forced by the fact that Russia had mobilized early, but rather because Germany could not have allowed Russia to have this head start. In emotionally charged scenes, and in the knowledge that Russia was gaining ground, military leaders pleaded with civilian authorities to be allowed to declare Germany's "period preparatory to war." But it was only when full mobilization was confirmed on July 31 that the German military was allowed to proceed with its own military measures.¹¹¹ The fact that Russia decided on July 24 to prepare to mobilize had nothing to do with this German decision.

A final key area for continued debate concerns Britain's attitude toward the crisis on the continent in July 1914 and its decision to enter the war. Germany's act of aggression against Belgium presented the government in London with the reason to go to war that they needed to convince the many domestic skeptics. Sir Edward Grey's foreign policy has nevertheless come under increased scrutiny, with some historians revisiting the argument (first put forward by Niall Ferguson in 1999) that Britain should have stayed out of the war altogether.¹¹² As we have seen, Clark has also put Britain and Edward Grey center stage, attributing some degree of responsibility to the foreign secretary. By contrast, Thomas Otte believes that "there is no reason to doubt [Grey's] genuine intentions" of wanting to diffuse the July Crisis: "Asquith and Grey remained committed to exploring all remaining diplomatic options"—including, "perhaps a sign of desperation," the use of monarchical diplomacy as a last resort.¹¹³

In the wake of the Clark controversy, historians in Germany have pointed out that Britain was the only major power that *could* have stayed out of the war because it had had no firm alliance obligations. Such views revisit some of the arguments first made by German apologists once war had broken out and then again during the revisionist campaigns of the postwar years. In January 2014, for example, three German academics came to the following conclusion:

The German Reich was not "guilty" of World War I. Such a category did not exist then, for, according to the code of European state wars, sovereign states had the "*ius ad bellum*" as long as they could claim a violation of their interests. In 1914, this right to war applied least to

¹⁰⁷ Krumeich, *Juli 1914*, 142. On that day, the Russian Ambassador in London, Count Benckendorff, believed that war was inevitable. As William Mulligan points out, "it is surely significant that, in political and diplomatic terms, Benckendorff viewed partial mobilisation as making war inevitable." See Mulligan, "The Trial Continues," 655. On Benckendorff and Russian prewar diplomacy, see Marina Sokora, *Britain, Russia, and the Road to the First World War: The Fateful Embassy of Count Aleksandr Benckendorff* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

¹⁰⁸ See Neilson's review of McMeekin (cited in note 22).

¹⁰⁹ Krumeich, *Juli 1914*, 145.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ For details of these events, see Mombauer, *Moltke*, 186–216.

¹¹² On the counterfactual speculation that Britain could—and should—have kept out of the war, see Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Penguin, 1999); John Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).

¹¹³ Otte, *July Crisis*, 456, 462.

Great Britain because the United Kingdom could not claim an immediate interest of coalition obligation for an intervention in a local war (between Austria–Hungary and Serbia). Only the British entry into the war turned the original conflict into a global disaster.¹¹⁴

Does this argument stand up to scrutiny? To begin with, Britain did not intervene, of course, in the war between Austria–Hungary and Serbia. It intervened in the war between Germany, on the one hand, and Belgium, France, and Russia, on the other. The argument denies that Britain fought “a justified war.”¹¹⁵ But quite why Germany’s interest in a local war between Austria–Hungary and Serbia should have weighed more heavily than Britain’s interest in the fate of France and Belgium is not made clear. Germany’s actions are portrayed as a just act of defence—an echo of the revisionist arguments of the interwar years, when German historians and politicians argued that Britain had been the real culprit of 1914. And yet, it was Germany that launched an attack in the West (partly to prevent further diplomatic discussions), just as it had been Austria that had declared war on and attacked Serbia. Without these acts, Britain might not have become involved. Throughout July, Grey had refused to encourage France and Russia by withholding firm offers of support, and it was only these acts of violence by the Germans and Austrians that changed that attitude.

Such arguments cast doubt on the reasons behind Britain’s involvement in the war. In January 2014, British Prime Minister David Cameron reassured Britons “that World War I was fought in a just cause, that our ancestors thought it would be bad to have a Prussian-dominated Europe, and that is why they fought.”¹¹⁶ Such British understatement notwithstanding, Sir Edward Grey and his colleagues certainly did not think that a Europe dominated by Prussia/Germany would be merely “bad.” As far as the British were concerned, it would have been disastrous, for it certainly would have spelled the end of their Empire. Staying out of the war risked either a German victory, which would have left Britain exposed to the possibility of having to fight against Germany on its own at a future date, or to a victory for the Entente—and thus the future enmity of France and Russia because of Britain’s failure to support their war effort. In either case, the balance of power on the continent was wrecked. There really was no way Britain could afford to remain neutral in 1914: either way the outlook was bleak, but abandoning its Entente partners risked an even greater future threat to the Empire.¹¹⁷ The decision to intervene may have been taken for reasons of self-preservation, but the crisis that forced Grey’s hand was arguably not of Britain’s making.

As I have argued elsewhere, it appears that the anti-German stance of Grey and the Foreign Office contributed to the international tensions that culminated in the war of 1914, but there is still no denying that a real threat to British security emanated from Germany. Grey played an important role as one of the “men of 1914,” and he was sincere in trying to prevent the outbreak of war. Regardless of how heartfelt or half-hearted his mediation proposals may have been, there was,

¹¹⁴Dominick Geppert et al., “Warum Deutschland nicht allein schuld ist,” *Die Welt*, Jan. 4, 2014. The argument that Britain was the new culprit—without whose intervention the war on the continent could have remained a local war—added a different twist to this old debate. The idea that the war had been futile and unnecessary for Britain was a difficult concept at a time when the commemoration of the forthcoming centenary was being planned by the British government: for obvious reasons, it was exceedingly uncomfortable to contemplate the idea that its predecessors had been in some way culpable. The war has always been regarded as a tragedy in British public memory, but the significant losses were seen as a necessary evil, and the sacrifices well worth making, to resist an aggressor on the continent, namely Germany.

¹¹⁵Cora Stephan, “Die Urkatastrophe,” *Die Welt*, Nov. 14, 2013.

¹¹⁶Simon Walters, “I wanted to thump anyone who said my son’s death might have a silver lining,” *The Daily Mail*, Jan. 18, 2014.

¹¹⁷By this stage, it no longer mattered whether the German threat was real or invented. The reality of early August 1914 was that a war would commence with or without Britain—and that the consequences would be grave whether it stayed out of the conflict or joined in.

in any event, no appetite for mediation in Vienna or in Berlin. There were limits to what the British foreign secretary could actually have achieved, given the reckless manner in which some of his continental colleagues were prepared to use the crisis to their own ends.¹¹⁸ In July 1914, Britain found itself in an impossible situation and ultimately had no real choice but to enter the war on the side of her Entente partners—or to risk having hostile German troops on the opposite side of the Channel *and* be without friends in the future.

In the end, almost all the governments and leaders found themselves in a similar cul-de-sac. The decision-makers of 1914 would no doubt have been astonished to know that 100 years on, we are still debating their motivations. For all of them, it seemed as if there was, in the end, only one way they could act. What else could they do but stand up to their enemies? To lose face, to lose great power status, to allow the opponent a time advantage—none of these was a realistic or honorable option in 1914. As King George V put it to the American ambassador during the crisis: “My God, Mr Page, what else could we do?”¹¹⁹

Conclusion

The centenary year has seen an unusual, if not entirely unexpected, increase in public interest in the history of World War I. At the height of the controversy around *The Sleepwalkers*, some 69 percent of respondents to a German opinion poll expressed an interest in World War I, rising to as high as 77 percent in the fourteen- to twenty-nine-year-old demographic.¹²⁰ At the same time, historians (once again) engaged in an unexpectedly ferocious debate about the causes of the war. It is unfortunate that, at times, this debate stooped to a low level—with accusations of ill intentions being made on all sides. In the widespread media debates, being a *Fischerite* became a term of abuse for “old lefties” stuck in the old conviction that Germany had the lion’s share of responsibility. By contrast, those who embrace the newer interpretation of shared blame were accused of wanting to whitewash German history to enable Germany to play once more a more prominent international role in the twenty-first century.

Although we are far removed today from the events of 1914, this has not diminished the perceived national importance of arriving at a palatable interpretation of the causes of the war. Certainly the passage of time has not yet relegated the topic to the dustbin of history. Gerd Krumeich was perhaps overly optimistic when he suggested that German historians no longer feel the need to defend their nation’s honor and can therefore now approach this contentious topic in a different manner: “One is no longer enmeshed in cultural and social surroundings that demand that the historian not only explain how the catastrophe could happen, but also defend the nation from the accusation that its “aggression” had caused the death of 10 million, as the Treaty of Versailles wanted to decree.”¹²¹ And yet, the way the debate unfolded in Germany in the centenary year showed that questions of national honor were still of considerable importance when it came to how Germans discussed the origins of the war. When Clark was read by the German public, as well as by many historians, as absolving Germany for the responsibility that it had shouldered for a hundred years, there was thus a palpable sense of relief in many quarters. His revision of the old consensus was “balm for the soul of more self-confident, educated citizens (*Bildungsbürger*)” at a time when Germany was once again a leading power on the

¹¹⁸ Annika Mombauer, “Sir Edward Grey and Germany,” *International History Review* (forthcoming 2016).

¹¹⁹ Cited in Brock and Brock, *Margot Asquith’s Great War Diary*, lxxxii.

¹²⁰ Figures from the Forsa poll cited in Jeevan Vasagar, “Bestseller list.”

¹²¹ Krumeich, *Juli 1914*, 10. This author similarly claimed that the topic no longer “hit a raw nerve” in Germany. It became clear a few months later just how wrong that statement had been.

continent.¹²² At the same time, Clark was read in Serbia in the exact opposite way: his focus on the role of Serbia in bringing about the tensions in the Balkans that ultimately led to the outbreak of the war made him a *persona non grata* for those Serbs who subscribe to a different reading of their past.

The alleged futility of the sacrifices, and the question of whether Britain could have stayed out of the war, excited public debate and led to arguments among historians in the UK.¹²³ In Germany, by contrast, the question of whether the war was worth fighting never arose, not least because the memory of World War I was soon overshadowed by the even more traumatic experience of World War II. The idea that the war of 1914–1918 was futile is also not part of the national consciousness in countries like France and Belgium, which had no choice but to join the fighting. But for Britain, the origins of the iconic war are of national significance: to negate the responsibility of the Central Powers is to call into question the legitimacy of British suffering. Who caused the war matters in all these countries—but for many different reasons.

As we enter a second century of debate, we are left with nationally distinct interpretations that speak to particular national agendas. During and after the centenary, explanations of the origins of the war developed along national fault lines, much like they had during and immediately after the war itself. Back then, as Gordon Martel explains:

The debate over war origins ushered in the golden age of diplomatic history. Never before—or since—was there such widespread interest among the general public in what historians of diplomacy had to say. Not only did these massive studies sell in unprecedented numbers for serious works of scholarship, but they made their authors famous.¹²⁴

As it turned out, the same was true in 2014, when the German general public was again interested in this old-fashioned topic *and* in old-fashioned diplomatic history. By telling this intricate and complicated story so well, and by saying what many wanted to hear, Clark became (even more) famous and was able to sell his serious work of scholarship in truly staggering numbers.¹²⁵

Where is the debate headed? All too often historians have attempted to predict the future of this century-long controversy—and they have nearly always got it wrong, thus making it presumptuous to make confident predictions.¹²⁶ In a summary of the debate as it had developed up to the end of 2012, Gerhard Groß was confident that the topic would continue to exercise public opinion in the run-up to the centenary and provide for “an exciting discussion,” but he did not expect “a new Fischer–controversy with a great deal of public attention like the one in the 1960s.” As we have seen, that turned out to be far from the mark.¹²⁷

What, then, has the debate achieved? The publication of Christopher Clark’s book, in particular, has moved the debate in new directions, and many historians, including the present author, have had to think carefully about how to position themselves vis-à-vis the new paradigm of shared

¹²²Stig Förster, “Balsam auf die Seele selbstbewusster gewordener Bildungsbürger,” L.I.S.A. Wissenschaftsportal, Dec. 12, 2013 (<http://goo.gl/cqiKe2>).

¹²³Max Hastings argued against claims of futility in a BBC TV program, “The necessary war,” which aired on February 25, 2014. It was up against another BBC program by Niall Ferguson, scheduled for screening a week later, titled “The wrong war,” in which he advanced his argument that war was unnecessary for Britain and that the sacrifices its citizens made were pointless.

¹²⁴Martel, *The Month*, 414.

¹²⁵Clark was already a household name in Germany because of the German publication of his hugely successful history of Prussia: *Preussen. Aufstieg und Niedergang, 1600–1947* (Munich: Pantheon, 2007).

¹²⁶See also note 120.

¹²⁷Gerhard P. Groß, “Annäherung an die Urkatastrophe. Das Bild des Kriegsausbruchs 1914 von Fritz Fischer bis heute,” in Dornick, *Frontwechsel*, 35.

responsibility.¹²⁸ The field has moved from a post-Fischer consensus to a more fragmented view, but, as we have seen, some common ground still exists. Clark's focus on the Entente has allowed, for the first time in fifty years, a revised understanding of Germany's role in the events of 1914. Moreover, *war guilt* is no longer a term that we would carelessly use as we strive to be less prosecutorial in our approach to the topic. Along with this new semantic sensibility, many historians are now less interested in *why* the war broke out—with the implicit associations of guilt this question raises—but in explaining *how* it broke out. This allows for a more neutral approach: "The question of *how* invites us to look closely at the sequences of interactions that produced certain outcomes," Clark argues, "By contrast, the question of *why* invites us to go in search of remote and categorical causes..."¹²⁹

Given the current consensus about the importance of agency, historians will want to continue asking *who* made the decisions in 1914, and under what circumstances. Understanding the strictures within which individuals made these fateful decisions will make historians less "prosecutorial." That is not to say that they should excuse such decisions, given their terrible outcome, but rather that they would seek to explain and understand them within the context and constraints of the time and without the benefit of hindsight. For example, Germans felt, rightly or wrongly, that they were encircled and that they had lost out on the carving-up of the rest of the world. It has recently been questioned why Germany should have had to put up with this unfavorable situation. And, given that Austria-Hungary saw itself as similarly threatened by Serbian antics in the Balkans, why should it have tolerated repeated acts of aggression from this troublesome neighbor? For their part, Serbs within the Dual Monarchy felt oppressed and ill-treated by the Austrian imperial power: why should they have remained a subjugated minority within a state that imposed its will on them? France needed Russia to protect it against a potential German threat: why should it not have offered support to its ally in case of a German attack? Finally, Britain would have been isolated without its Entente Partners, so why should it have stayed out of a war if the outcome would have spelled disaster for it regardless of the victor?

However, even if one adopts a less judgmental stance about contemporary predicaments, historians still need to account for the differences in the reactions to them. For example, military planners in France and Germany felt that the only way to a quick military victory was to march through Belgium. But in France, political and diplomatic concerns outweighed this military reasoning, and the generals were ordered to abandon such an odious plan. In Germany, by contrast, the plan to invade Belgium was developed without any objection by the political leadership. That was why Germany implemented the so-called Schlieffen Plan in 1914, while France held back its troops until it could be certain that Germany had revealed itself as the aggressor.¹³⁰ The explanation for this can be found in the political and military cultures of these states, which—in the case of Germany—allowed for little political control over military matters.

For a hundred years the question of the origins of World War I has been of contemporary political relevance, particularly in Germany, where "war guilt" was the heavy burden the country had to shoulder as a result of losing the war. In the 1920s, the debate was motivated by the desire to free Germany of this alleged guilt—and thus of the need to pay reparations. The motivation had changed by the 1960s, when the new debate was fuelled by a feeling of insecurity on

¹²⁸ Epkenhans points out that historians who continue to consider Germany's responsibility to be greater than that of the other great powers do not argue that the others did not also have a share of responsibility, i.e., they do not argue for sole German responsibility. These historians include Krumeich, Hirschfeld, Mombauer, Janz, and Epkenhans himself. See Epkenhans, "Der Erste Weltkrieg," 159.

¹²⁹ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, xxix.

¹³⁰ For details, see, e.g., Mombauer, *Documents*, 469–70.

the part of the West German state, which was exposed at the forefront of the Cold War and thus reliant on its Western allies.

During the Fischer controversy, the Cuban Missile Crisis prompted a search for parallels with not just the Munich Crisis of 1938 but also the July Crisis of 1914, and it is often claimed that John F. Kennedy found Barbara Tuchman's account of the origins of the war instructive. More recently, contemporary crises have also been analyzed with an eye to the events of 1914, with historians trying to apply lessons from the past to present challenges. When studying the July Crisis, comparisons to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and even to the European financial crisis of the last few years, have been made. The situation in the Balkans still invites comparisons with the volatile situation of 1914, and, in some circles, today's economically powerful China is compared to Wilhelmine Germany (e.g., both as "late-comer" economic giants). The 2014 crisis in Ukraine reminded some of the July Crisis as well—not least because it occurred during the centenary year, when there was much talk of the events of 1914.

While history may not yield easy answers to today's problems, it can be instructive to apply some of today's lessons to explaining the past. Clark points out, for example, that while writing *The Sleepwalkers*, Europe was gripped by a financial crisis that threatened the collapse of the Euro as a common currency:

All the key protagonists hoped that this would not happen, but in addition to this shared interest, they also had special—and conflicting—interests of their own. Given the inter-relationships across the system, the consequences of any one action depended on the responsive actions of others, which were hard to calculate in advance, because of the opacity of decision-making processes. And all the while, political actors in the Eurozone crisis exploited the *possibility* of the general catastrophe as leverage in securing their own specific advantages.¹³¹

This insightful analysis of conflicting hopes, interests, and fears during an international crisis at the beginning of the twenty-first century describes just as accurately the predicaments faced by the "men of 1914." Without the benefit of hindsight, they deliberately decided to risk everything in the mistaken belief that they could imagine a future war—but not a future without wars.

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¹³¹Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 555.