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# THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Volume I  
To Arms

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To Arms

HEW STRACHAN

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In memory of my grandfather, Captain F. W. Strachan, wounded, Givenchy, 14 January 1915; of his brother, Second-Lieutenant E. S. Strachan, missing presumed killed, Loos, 14 October 1915; and of Major R. B. Talbot Kelly, M C, wounded, Ypres, 5 August 1917

# CONTENTS

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## LIST OF MAPS

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. THE ORIGINS OF THE WAR

Germany as a World Power

Austria-Hungary and the Balkans

The July Crisis

### 2. WILLINGLY TO WAR

War Enthusiasm

Socialism and the International

The Imaginings of Intellectuals

Popular Responses

### 3. THE WESTERN FRONT IN 1914

War Plans

The Battle of the Frontiers

Problems, and Some Solutions

The Battle of the Marne

From the Aisne to the Yser

### 4. THE EASTERN FRONT IN 1914

War Plans

East Prussia

Serbia

Galicia

Poland

### 5. THE WAR IN NORTHERN WATERS, 1914–1915

The North Sea, 1914–1915

6. WAR IN THE PACIFIC, 1914–1917

Oceanic Security and the Cruiser Threat

Japan Enters the War

The Cruise of the German East Asiatic Squadron

Empire in the Pacific

7. THE DARK CONTINENT: COLONIAL CONFLICT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

War in Africa

Togoland

The Cameroons

South-West Africa

East Africa, 1914–1915

East Africa, 1916–1918

8. TURKEY'S ENTRY

The Escape of the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*

Turkey's Decision to Join the Central Powers

Turkey's Capacity for War

9. GERMANY'S GLOBAL STRATEGY

Holy War

The Caucasus, 1914–1915

Suez, Egypt, and Libya

French North Africa

Persia and Afghanistan

India



## 10. FINANCING THE WAR

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The Gold Standard

Financial Mobilization

The Loss of Budgetary Control

Taxation

Domestic Borrowing

Foreign Borrowing

## 11. INDUSTRIAL MOBILIZATION

Shell Shortage

The Short-War Illusion

Raw Materials, Munitions Production, and the Central Powers, 1914–1916

The Munitions Crisis and the Entente, 1914–1916

## 12. CONCLUSION: THE IDEAS OF 1914

BIBLIOGRAPHY

INDEX

---

# LIST OF MAPS

---

## 1. Europe in 1914

Based on Randal Gray, *Chronicle of the First World War 1914–1916* (Oxford, 1990), i.

## 2. The Balkan Peninsula in 1914

Based on *The Times War Atlas and Gazetteer* (London, n.d.)

## 3. The Western Front

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 4. Alsace and Lorraine

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 5. Brussels to the Rhine

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 6. The Vosges

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 7. Belgium and Northern France

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 8. Paris to Verdun

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 9. The Eastern Front

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 10. Russia and East Prussia

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 11. Serbia

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 12. Galicia

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 13. Poland

Based on *The Times War Atlas*

## 14. The North Sea and the Baltic

Based on Julian Corbett and Henry Newbolt, *History of the Great War: Naval Operations*, vols. (London, 1920–31), i.

#### 15. German Cable and Wireless Communications

Based on Marine-Archiv, *Der Krieg zur See 1914–1918: Der Kreuzerkrieg in den ausländischen Gewässern*, by E. Raeder and Eberhard von Mantey, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1922–37), i.

#### 16. China and the Far East

Based on *The Times War Atlas* and Corbett, *Naval Operations*, i.

#### 17. The Cruise of Von Spee's East Asiatic Squadron

Based on Corbett, *Naval Operations*, i.

#### 18. Togoland

Based on F. J. Moberly, *Military Operations: Togoland and the Cameroons 1914–1918* (London, 1931)

#### 19. The Cameroons

Based on Charles Lucas (ed.), *The Empire at War*, 5 vols. (London, 1921–6), iv.

#### 20. South-West Africa

Based on Lucas, *The Empire at War*, iv.

#### 21. East Africa

Based on Lucas, *The Empire at War*, iv.

#### 22. East Africa: North Eastern Region

Based on Lucas, *The Empire at War*, iv.

#### 23. The Mediterranean

Based on P. Halpern, *Naval History of World War I* (London, 1994)

#### 24. The Ottoman Empire's Railway Communications

Based on Marian Kent (ed.), *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire* (London, 1984)

#### 25. The Caucasus

Based on Allen and Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields*

#### 26. The Sarikamish Region

Based on Allen and Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields*

#### 27. The Suez Region

Based on George Macmunn and Cyril Falls, *Military Operations: Egypt and Palestine*, 2 vols (London, 1928–30)

## 28. Egypt, Libya, and the Sudan

Based on Macmunn and Falls, *Military Operations: Egypt and Palestine* and *The Times Atlas of the World* (1980)

## 29. French North Africa

Based on *The Times Atlas of the World*

## 30. Persia and Afghanistan

Based on F. J. Moberly, *Military Operations: Persia*

## 31. India

Based on *The Times Atlas of the World*

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# INTRODUCTION

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This book was commissioned, far too long ago, by Oxford University Press, as a one-volume replacement for C. R. M. F. Cruttwell's *A history of the Great War*, first published in 1934 and regularly reprinted thereafter. One of its admirers, Tim Travers, has described his book and Liddell Hart's *The real war* (1930) as the founding volumes of what he calls the 'objective tradition' in British military history.<sup>1</sup> Cruttwell did indeed achieve a remarkable degree of detachment. Nonetheless, both Cruttwell and Liddell Hart were describing events in which they themselves had participated, albeit at a comparatively humble level, and whose consequences continued to affect them for the rest of their lives.

Having been born after the Second World War, I fancied that I belonged to an age-group that could at last claim some distance from the events of 1914–18. The films and fiction of my childhood drew their inspiration from the deeds of my father's generation, not of my grandfather's. As the twentieth century closed, few who fought on the Somme or at Ypres still survived. If part of a historian's function is to put the events of the past into perspective, the ability to do so should increase year on year.

And yet I am not so untouched by the First World War as I once imagined. One of the three men to whose memory this volume is dedicated is my grandfather. On the birthdays and Christmases of my early childhood the postman would bring a box of W. Britain's toy soldiers. These presents, ordered by my grandfather from Hamleys, were no doubt a formative influence. The army that I assembled as a result was not arrayed in khaki, steel helmets, and gas masks. These were not the soldiers of industrialized war but of Queen Victoria's empire, clad in scarlet tunics and spiked helmets. My grandfather's toy soldiers were the toys of his own childhood rather than a reflection of his experiences as an adult.

Herein lies a wholly understandable ambivalence. His London club was a military one and he used his army rank. His wife's brothers embraced military careers, and he had met her through one of them, a fellow officer. But he was not a professional soldier. He had joined up in 1914 as a private in the London Scottish, and had gone to France in November, as one of the draft sent to make up the battalion's losses at Messines. In the failing light of 21 December the London Scottish attacked Givenchy, and established a line on the edge of the village. They occupied it for four weeks, over Christmas and New Year, in rain and sleet, the overnight frosts followed in the morning by thaw and dampness. The routines of trench warfare

designed to manage a hostile environment, had not yet established themselves. The exchange of fire was continuous.<sup>2</sup> On 14 January 1915, three days before the London Scottish came out of the line, my grandfather was severely wounded in the lung. He was brought back to Britain, recovered, and, although deemed unfit for further active service, commissioned. While convalescing he heard the news of the death of his elder brother, a New Army subaltern aged 36, reported as missing at Loos on 14 October 1915. Although he never served with them again, he remained a devoted London Scot. Shortly before his death my mother (and his daughter-in-law) discovered his kilt, now moth-eaten but its hodden grey stained with blood. She suggested that I might like to have it. His response was to consign it to the fire.

At school I was taught to draw by R. B. Talbot Kelly. 'T.K.' was famous as a bird painter; his watercolours and washes capturing geese in flight or waders picking their way along the shore. He offered to teach me to draw birds, but I wanted to paint soldiers. Much to my surprise, he acquiesced. T.K. had been commissioned from Woolwich into the Royal Artillery in 1915; his first career was that of a soldier rather than of an artist, though no doubt his experiences as a forward observation officer in 1915–16 honed his eye for landscape. Although I tended to depict the same sorts of soldiers as those toys my grandfather had given me, T.K. showed me his own watercolours of the First World War. The sketches which he made at the front were worked up into larger pictures later. At the time the BBC had begun its pioneering documentary series *The Great War*, broadcast in 1964 for the fiftieth anniversary of its outbreak.<sup>3</sup> T.K. appeared in it, stressing, on the screen as he did in private life, the intensity of the experience and his gratitude for having undergone it. Later I came to interpret these responses as those of an old man, remembering his youth and endowing it with a romance that it may never have possessed in reality. But I was wrong. In 1980 T.K.'s memoir of the war, illustrated with some of his own pictures, was published posthumously as *A subaltern's odyssey*. The book revealed that his enthusiasm for war expressed itself as forcefully in letters to his family in 1916 as it had been to me fifty years later.<sup>4</sup>

Thus my first impressions of the western front were not derived from the war memoirs of Siegfried Sassoon or the poetry of Wilfred Owen. They came later. Indeed, it required the combination of Benjamin Britten's *War requiem* (1961) and student outrage at American involvement in Vietnam to elevate Owen to canonical status. Today in Britain most schoolchildren learn about the war through its literary legacy. The differences in approach

are profound. The war's association with adventure, excitement, courage, and even purpose has been replaced by its connotations of suffering, waste, and tragedy. In truth, as my grandfather recognized—at least implicitly—neither is exclusive of the other.

Moreover, these themes are, by virtue of their metaphysical nature, universal and timeless. The emphasis on the experience of the war has made it more immediate than could a discussion of grand strategy or industrial mobilization. Or at least, that was the case in the 1970s and 1980s. But the end of the Cold War gave even the political events of 1914–18 relevance. The First World War broke the Austro-Hungarian empire, and so unleashed the nationalisms of south-eastern Europe, creating volatility in the inter-war period and chronic instability at the century's end. The result has been to clothe the Habsburgs not only with nostalgia but even with far-sightedness. From the collapse of another empire, that of Russia, emerged the Soviet Union, a child not just of revolution but of the war itself. The end of communism in 1989–90 gave birth to the notion of the 'short' twentieth century, an idea which brings the war closer, at times making it seem even more relevant to our lives today than the events of 1939–45.

Thus, the fact that my approach to the war has changed is in part a reflection of the length of time it has taken me to write this volume. It is now much longer than Cruttwell's. Some explanations, if not excuses, are required.

The major general histories of the war in English available in the 1980s were, above all, military histories, narrowly defined. Even Cruttwell, by training a historian of international relations, devoted, according to Liddell Hart's calculations, only 16 per cent of his book to non-military aspects.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, when I began my own work I assumed that I could take a good read of the military history of the war. My task was to graft on to it the historiographical developments of the 1960s and 1970s—the war's social history, the debate on causes and aims, the mobilization of the economies. That agenda remains. But I also soon discovered the omissions in the English-language military histories of the war.

Liddell Hart's is more important than Cruttwell's in understanding the background. 'For most of the world', according to H. G. Wells in his novel of 1916, *Mr Britling sees it through*, the war 'came as an illimitable multitude of incoherent, loud, and confusing expressions'. However, Mr Britling, Wells's semi-autobiographical hero, spent its early weeks 'doing his utmost to see the war, to simplify it and extract the essence of it until it could be apprehended as something epic and explicable, as a stateable issue'.<sup>6</sup> Of course, he failed. B

in 1930 Liddell Hart succeeded. Much of his agenda still preoccupies English-language historians. *The real war* posed as an objective analysis of military operations. In truth it is a sustained critique of the British high command, and its purpose is more didactic than historical. Recent scholars have done much to answer Liddell Hart, using primary sources to confirm him when he was right, to correct him when he was wrong, and above all to write analyses that are more dispassionate without being apologetic. The result is that today our understanding of Britain's conduct of the war on land is probably more profound than it is for that of any other belligerent.

But in pursuing this story British military historians have corrected only one of Liddell Hart's failings, and in doing so have still marched to the beat of his drum. They have not broken the bounds of his own Anglocentricism. A major premiss of this volume is that the First World War was global from its outset, and its treatment aims to reflect that. Those geared to the biases of the anglophone tradition will find the western front less dominant than they have come to expect, and the British army's role within it (especially for this early stage of the war) correspondingly reduced.

*The real war* concludes with a long and comprehensive bibliography in a range of languages. It conveys the impression that it is an authoritative synthesis of the literature on the war then available. In reality Liddell Hart could not read German, and there is little evidence that he used what had been published in French. Moreover, by 1930 the main official histories of the war had got no further than the year 1914; neither the British nor German histories of large operations were completed until after 1939. One of the delights of my own research has been discovering the variety and richness of the publications of the inter-war period. The Carnegie series on the war's social and economic history remains unsurpassed. No subsequent French publications on the military history of the war begin to overtake in importance the series in the ranks of *Les Armées françaises dans la grande guerre*, with its supplementary volumes of documents. And the availability, since the end of the Cold War, of the working papers of the *Reichsarchiv*, the body responsible for the German official history, has done much to confirm the value of its published work. The reluctance to use the inter-war German histories on the grounds that they are tainted by Nazism is not only chronological nonsense in some cases (much was in print before 1933) but also an absurd self-denying ordinance, given the destruction of the bulk of the German military archives in 1945. The *Reichsarchiv* historians saw material we can never see; not to refer to their output is a cloak for little more than



laziness or monolingualism.

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Thus, military history has assumed a priority in writing this book as insistent as every other historical sub-discipline. The project has consequently grown to embrace three volumes. They are to be divided as follows. This, the first, focuses on 1914 itself. The second, to be called *No quarter*, will cover 1915 and 1916. It will embrace the crisis for liberalism with which the war confronted the belligerent powers by summer of the latter year, and it will conclude with the failure of the peace moves (and the war aims associated with them) at the year's end. The third volume, *Fall out*, will begin with the economic and strategic strains of the winter of 1916–17, which formed the background to revolution and pacifism in 1917. It will review the collapse of Russia and the entry of the United States, and the consequences of both for the events of 1918. The volume, and the trilogy, will close not just with the peace settlement but also with an assessment of the war's cultural and social legacy.

The chronological structure is provided by a military historical narrative for the major theatres of war, including the Balkans, Italy, and the Ottoman empire. The western and eastern fronts are considered in turn and year by year. But connected to this spine are a series of themes, developed as independent chapters at the point where chronology makes their consideration most pressing, but analysed for a longer period and in some cases for the entire war. This first volume, for example, contains in [Chapter 10](#) a discussion of war finance throughout the war. It is treated here because it was a pressing issue in August 1914 itself. It is treated as a whole for the sake of coherence. By contrast, the story of industrial mobilization is only taken to 1916, on the grounds that in that year a second 're-mobilization' took place which must be set in the context of the battles of Verdun and the Somme. The Blockade, although instituted by the British in 1914, will not be discussed in its own right until the third volume, the point at which it could be deemed significant to the war's outcome and at which comparisons with U-boat war are instructive.

Of course such a structure imposes penalties. The decision to delay consideration of propaganda until later means that the issue of German atrocities in Belgium, a key feature of the 1914 debate, is only mentioned indirectly in this first volume. The soldiers' experience of the war and the maintenance of morale feed into the mutinies of 1917; they will therefore be discussed at that point, although clearly they are crucial to any understanding of the fighting from the war's outbreak.

The purpose of the thematic chapters is above all comparative. This, I would claim, is why

is 'new' about 'yet another history of the war' (to answer the inevitable questions of friends and colleagues). The effect of such comparisons is to put what have been seen as peculiar national events in context; for example, the shells crisis which brought down Britain's last Liberal government was reflected in every other belligerent. Comparative history both highlights gaps in the state of our knowledge and helps to cover them. This is not just a plea for a new generation to maximize the opportunities presented by the opening of archives in Russia and the former German Democratic Republic, but also a recognition of how little has been done with some of the archives which have been open much longer. Shell production in Britain *after* the establishment of the Ministry of Munitions is a case in point; so too is the manufacture of arms in France. When I wrote the first version of this volume's [Chapter](#) on war enthusiasm, the only careful and archivally based study of the subject was Jean Jacques Becker's for France; in the last decade we have found out much more about Germany, but we still know far too little about most of the other belligerents, including Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Britain.

I began the actual writing of this volume in 1988–9, when given a year's sabbatical leave by Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and I had virtually completed a first draft in 1993 when, as a consequence of my appointment to the chair of modern history at Glasgow in 1992, I became head of department. Since then I have been rewriting and incorporating fresh material, a process completed thanks to the generosity of the British Academy, which elected me its Thank Offering to Britain Fellow for 1998–9. In general I have taken the eightieth anniversary of the armistice, November 1998, as the cut-off point for bibliographic purposes.

Most of the research and writing for this book was therefore completed while I was at Cambridge, serving for over a decade first as Admissions Tutor and then as Senior Tutor of my college. I could not have sustained serious scholarship against the demands of teaching but above all administration, without the support of Sally Braithwaite, a secretary without peer. Her ability to head off callers, deal with crises, and yet determine what was urgent and what not, was matched by her cheerfulness and her capacity to read not only my writing but also my mind. Most of the college came to realize what I knew from the outset: that tutoring business would function just the same whether I was there or not.

Cambridge was then a centre of First World War scholarship. But I developed a particular debt to two Fellows of Pembroke. Clive Trebilcock taught me about the relationship between

economic history and military history: [Chapter 11](#) is its reflection. Jay Winter, in getting me to take part in the teaching of 'European society and the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914–1920', widened my horizons immeasurably, as did many of the undergraduates whom I taught as a result.

In Glasgow, those who have taken my special subject 'Strategy and Society: Britain and Germany in the First World War' have performed a similar function. Unfortunately secretarial support has been replaced by computers, an inadequate substitute in my case. Before the process got fully under way Patricia Ferguson typed Chapters 10 and 11, a penance which no doubt gave her retirement an even greater aura of relief. The in-built obsolescence of computers and their software has considerably increased the obstacles in completing a long running project such as this. In under a decade Word Star, Word Perfect, Word, and Word for Windows have succeeded each other without being fully compatible. Patrik Andell put the entire book into a single system, an achievement which eluded the university's computing system, but even he could not rescue much of the formatting.

All my debts to others cannot be fully conveyed here. Those who have suggested books, sent me material, exchanged ideas, or provided other support include: Holger Afflerbach, Ross Anderson, Christopher Andrew, Annette Becker, Geoffrey Best, Matthew Buck, Deborah Cohen, Wilhelm Deist, Simon Dixon, Michael Epkenhans, Martin Farr, Niall Ferguson, Robert Foley, Stig Förster, David French, Peter Gatrell, John Gooch, Dominick Graham, Keith Grieves, David Hermann, Holger Herwig, Gerhard Hirschfeld, Nicholas Hope, Sir Michael Howard, Gregory Martin, Evan Mawdsley, Michael Moss, Harold Nelson, Avner Offer, Maurice Pearton, Daniel Segesser, Dennis Showalter, David Stevenson, Norman Stone, and Tim Travers. I have benefited from the stimulus of several conferences, but should mention in particular the series of seminars organized by Brian Bond, which resulted in the volume which he edited, *The First World War and British military history* (1991). Alan and Sue Warner have put me up, and put up with me, on countless occasions in London, and Peter and Angelina Jenkins were as welcoming in Paris. To those I have failed to mention I apologize.

My family has of course had to bear the lot of all authors' families—physical absence when away writing or researching, and mental absence when physically present. I am conscious of the opportunities lost, and even now cannot claim it is over. Claire Blunden said in 1981 of her husband, Edmund, author of *Undertones of war*, that until he died in 1976 no day passed in which he did not refer to the war.<sup>7</sup> When I repeated that story in my own wife's hearing

she remarked that she knew how Claire Blunden felt. Another writer of one of the best war memoirs, albeit one whose marital life was not quite as complex as that of Blunden, Guinevere Chapman, author of *A passionate prodigality*, likened the war to a mistress; I hope that my wife, however demanding she may feel the writing of this book to have been, will not see its history in the same light.

*Hew Strachan*

# THE ORIGINS OF THE WAR

## GERMANY AS A WORLD POWER

To begin at the end.<sup>1</sup> At Versailles, on 28 June 1919, the Germans, albeit reluctantly, acceded to the peace terms imposed upon them by the victorious powers. Although Britain, France and the United States had made most of the running, twenty-five other states were signatories to the treaty. By it, in article 231, they asserted not only the responsibility of the defeated for the loss and damage incurred as a result of the war, but also that the war had been ‘imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies’.

The Germans had already made clear their rejection of the charge. On 27 May, in a fruitless endeavour to overcome the intransigence of the victors, four distinguished professors—two of them of seminal importance in the world of scholarship: Hans Delbrück, the effective founder of academic military history, and Max Weber, the political theorist—signed a memorandum claiming that Germany had fought a defensive war against Russian tsarism. Although beaten in the short-term debate, the German government fought back. A long-term project examining not merely the immediate causes of the war but the entire range of international relations since 1871, was put in train. The Foreign Office assumed responsibility for the volumes, and ensured that the activities which it sponsored and the publications which it produced became the basis for all serious research working on the war’s causes. Access to the documents once they had been published was denied to subsequent and possibly more independent scholars; a separate Reichstag inquiry—designed originally by the left to put the blame on the right, and then by the right to blame the left—dragged on and was overtaken and the tactic of placing the events of July 1914 in the context of the previous decade successfully muddied the precise issue of war guilt.<sup>2</sup> Gradually the Germans’ rejection of article 231 gained ground, although more conspicuously in Britain and America than in France. The Versailles Treaty itself was not ratified by the United States Senate and it became abundantly clear that the peace settlement had not resolved the frontier problems of eastern and central Europe in a convincing manner. In particular, the injustices done to German-speaking peoples residing in the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian empire came to be widely recognized.

In Britain in 1933 Lloyd George, who in July 1911—three years before the outbreak of the

war—had as chancellor of the exchequer delivered a clear warning to Germany, and who December 1918 had been returned to power as prime minister on a wave of anti-German sentiment, began his war memoirs by stating that nobody in July 1914 had wanted European war, that nobody had expected it, and that ‘the nations slithered over the brink’.<sup>3</sup> In the United States Sidney B. Fay, professor of history at Harvard, wrote in *The origins of the world war*, first published in 1928, that ‘all the powers were more or less responsible’, and that ‘the War was caused by the system of international anarchy involved in alliances, armaments and secret diplomacy’.<sup>4</sup> By shifting the blame to ‘-isms’ rather than individuals, to militarism, nationalism, and economic imperialism, Fay exculpated Germany. Only by re-emphasizing the immediate causes of the war, by stating that it was the resolve of Germany and Austria-Hungary during the crisis of July 1914 that enabled the war to occur, could the doyen of France’s war historians, Pierre Renouvin, put across a Germanophobe perspective.<sup>5</sup> In the 1930s, for most of the English-speaking world, as indeed for Germany, the arguments of Fay and Lloyd George were the current orthodoxy.

The Second World War changed this perspective, albeit gradually rather than immediately. From the vantage-point of the second half of the century the two world wars could be seen as part of a whole, the years 1918 to 1939 representing a truce rather than a definitive break. Furthermore, given the relative lack of controversy about the origins of the second war, that it was caused by German aggression, and that Hitler—whether as leader of an enraptured German people or as embodiment of a deeply-rooted national will—was the prime culprit, became possible to project back onto Germany before 1933 the insights and continuities derived from a study of Nazi Germany.

In particular, the causes of the First World War could be re-examined in the light of those of the Second. The debate was also set in a general context, that of the peculiarities of Germany history, of Germany’s *Sonderweg* (special path). Simply put, Germany was portrayed as a state where militarism and authoritarianism—partly owing to its Prussian origins, partly to its strategically vulnerable position—had been more easily exploited by leaders of conservative and expansionist bent. The political thought of the Enlightenment and the bourgeois legacy of industrialization, which in west European states left a grounding of constitutionalism, in Germany was suborned by nationalism. The right used nationalism for its own conservative ends, and liberalism—in 1813, 1848, and 1919—did not take strong root. Hitler was presented as the climax of what went before.



It was against this background that the more specific controversy over the origins of the First World War was renewed. The key works, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (*Germany's aims in the First World War*) and *Krieg der Illusionen* (*The war of illusions*), both by Fritz Fischer and published in 1961 and 1969 respectively, placed the burden of war guilt once again at the feet of Germany. Much of the detail of Fischer's case will be considered later in this book. Despite their opaque and dense presentation and despite the lack of a succinct argument, Fischer's books rent German historians into deeply entrenched camps. For them, more than for historians of other nationalities, the issue was fraught, since the overall thesis—the arguments about *Sonderweg* and the ongoing preoccupation with the effect of Hitler—concerned continuity in German history, and therefore was as much about Germany's current identity as about its past. The subtleties and differences of the interpretations put forward within the two camps were subsumed by the fundamental divide. Fischer's opponents, who constituted the majority, had to accept combat on Fischer's terms: in other words, they had to address the question of German expansionism before 1914, to ask whether Germany was prepared to go to war in fulfilment of its aims, to decide whether all the dominant groups in pre-war German society could be found culpable, and to consider whether their motivation was to use foreign policy to avert an internal social and political crisis. Fischer himself, in the foreword to *Krieg der Illusionen*, spelled out the primacy of domestic policy:

the aim was to consolidate the position of the ruling classes with a successful imperialist foreign policy, indeed it was hoped a war would resolve the growing social tensions. By 1914, at any rate the domestic crisis was apparent. The decision to go to war in 1914 was, in addition to the domestic considerations, based above all on military reflections which in turn depended on economic and political objectives. All these factors—and as regards both the masses and the Emperor there were also the psychological elements—the Government was forced to consider. If one looks at all these forces it is possible to see a clear continuity of aim before and during the war.<sup>6</sup>

In 1967 Immanuel Geiss, a pupil of Fischer, put it more pithily:

The determination of the German Empire—the most powerful conservative force in the world after Tsarist Russia—to uphold the conservative and monarchic principles by any means against the rising flood of democracy, plus its *Weltpolitik*, made war inevitable.<sup>7</sup>

In practice, this sort of argument is very hard to substantiate in precise terms from the evidence now available. But the challenge that Fischer, Geiss, and others issued compe

historians—in addition to undertaking a fundamental reconsideration of the role of Germany—to make two connections not so readily made in the 1930s. Both are connections which come more easily to a generation to whom nuclear weapons—by finding their role as deterrents rather than as weapons of war—link more closely the issues of war and peace, and at the same time obscure the divisions between purely military functions and those of civilian society. First, the Fischer controversy forces historians to dispense with their traditional division between the causes of a war, a long-standing interest of academics and exhaustively worked over in undergraduate essays, and its course, the task of military historians and a too often neglected by those same undergraduates. Fischer's revisionism began with the development of German war aims during the war itself, and worked backwards to the war's origins, finding continuity between the two and using one to illuminate the other. In 1934, by contrast, C. R. M. F. Cruttwell's history of the war, reprinted as recently as 1991, felt unnecessary to discuss the war's origins. Secondly, Fischer restated the interconnection between domestic policy and foreign policy. The point was well taken: recent studies of other nations and the origins of the war, and of their subsequent aims, have not been able to treat foreign policy as a discrete entity. Even more must this apply to the conduct of the war itself, frequently described as the first total war and entailing the mobilization of all the belligerents' industrial and economic resources.

Therefore, the initial task must be—as it was for the peacemakers of 1919—to consider Germany and its role in the origins of the war.

On 18 January 1871, at Versailles, in the same hall where, almost five decades later, the leaders of the new republic would have to accept defeat and humiliation, the king of Prussia was declared emperor of a united Germany. Technically the new nation was a federation: the independent German states retained their own monarchs, assemblies, taxation, and—in the cases of Saxony, Württemberg, and Bavaria (as well as Prussia)—their own armed forces. To balance the national parliament, the Reichstag, which was elected by universal manhood suffrage and by a secret ballot, there was an upper chamber, the Bundesrat, made up of representatives of the individual federal states. But in practice the achievement of unification, although long sought by liberal nationalists, was not a triumph for constitutionalism but for the monarchical-aristocratic principle on the one hand and for Prussia on the other. In ousting Austria from Germany, and in effecting unification, Bismarck and Prussian junkerdom had made fellow-travellers of the national liberals, had usurped nationalism for conservatism.



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