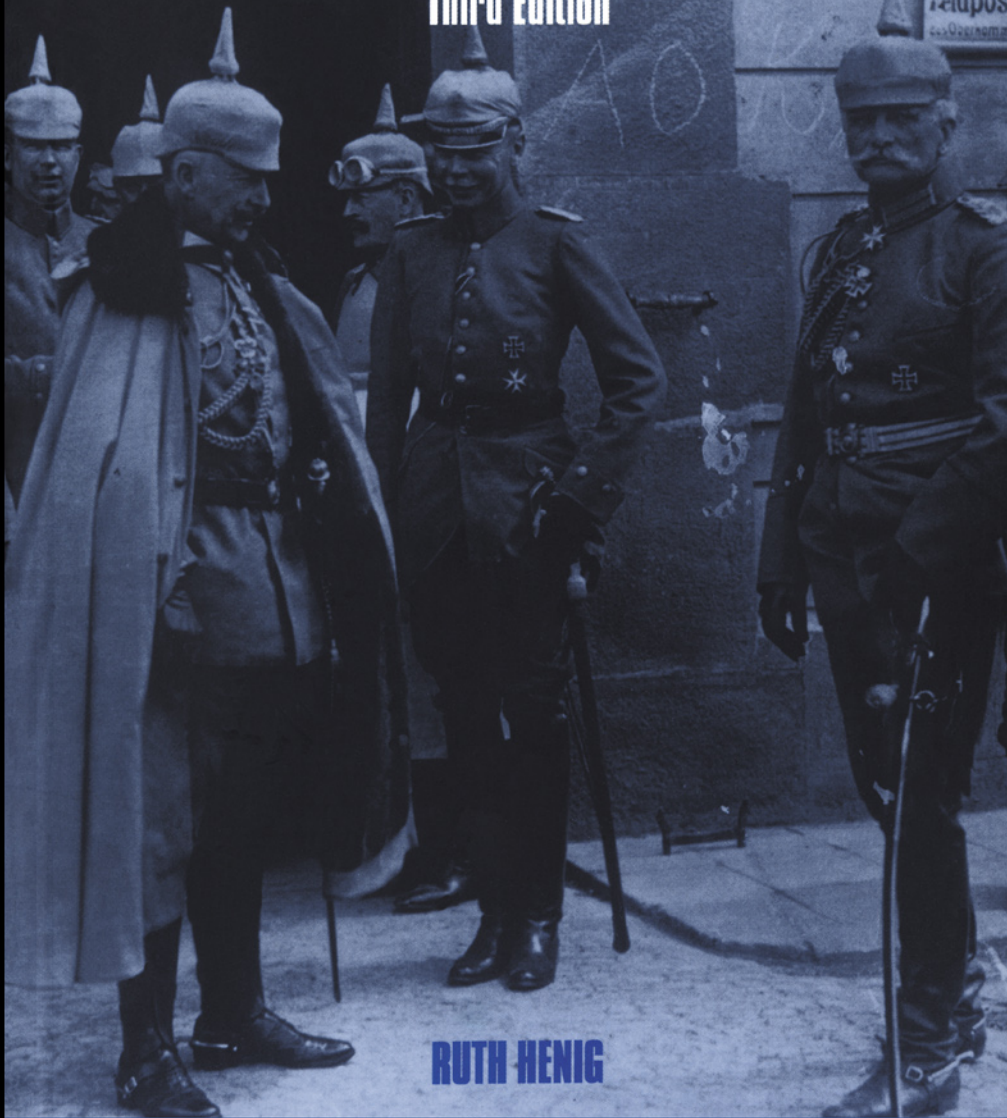


l a n c a s t e r

**The Origins of**  
**THE FIRST WORLD WAR**  
Third Edition



**RUTH HENIG**

p a m p h l e t s

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# The Origins of the First World War

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Third edition

*Ruth Henig*



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## Foreword

Lancaster Pamphlets offer concise and up-to-date accounts of major historical topics, primarily for the help of students preparing for Advanced Level examinations, though they should also be of value to those pursuing introductory courses in universities and other institutions of higher education. Without being all-embracing, their aims are to bring some of the central themes of problems confronting students and teachers into sharper focus than the textbook writer can hope to do; to provide the reader with some of the results of recent research which the textbook may not embody; and to stimulate thought about the whole interpretation of the topic under discussion.

At the end of this pamphlet is a list of works, most of them recent or fairly recent, which the writer considers most important for those who wish to study the subject further.

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## Introduction to the third edition

Students and general readers alike remain strongly interested in the causes, events and consequences of the First World War. The conflict is rightly seen as one of the major events—if not THE major event—which shaped the subsequent course of the 20th century not just in Europe but also in the wider world. Because its consequences were so profound, there is an enduring interest in how the conflict started and whether it could have been avoided.

The aim of this revised edition, therefore, is to guide students and general readers through the daunting collections of books and documents which continue to pour out in ever greater quantities on this topic. It is written in particular for those who have only a basic general knowledge of the diplomacy and crises of the early 20th century and who want to acquire a clearer overview of the major conflicts and sources of tension dividing Europe after 1900 and of why they resulted in the outbreak of war in August 1914.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first chapter examines the consequences of German unification after 1871 and the challenges which growing German economic and military power posed to the other great powers of Europe by 1900. It looks in particular at the diplomatic and military responses of France, Russia and Britain and at the formation of the Triple Entente which had emerged amongst these three powers by 1907 to counter-balance the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy which had been concluded in 1882.

The chapter also traces the growing problems in eastern and south-eastern Europe resulting from the decline in power of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, and the rise of serious tensions in the Balkan region which culminated in two Balkan wars in 1912–13. The chapter concludes by focusing on the chain of events triggered off by the assassination of Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914 which resulted in the outbreak of a major war in Europe some six weeks later.

All historical events have complex and multiple causes, and this is especially true of the outbreak of the First World War. Whilst the first chapter seeks to identify the main issues which interacted so potently to bring about war, the second chapter looks at the ways in which successive generations of historians and commentators from different countries have interpreted the events and prioritised the factors which they argue were the main causes of war.

As we shall see, a fascinating historical debate has unfolded since the end of the First World War, with a great range of divergent views and perspectives emerging and being challenged in their turn by new interpretations. Thus the war has been depicted as the result of a chain of events spiralling out of control, as the inevitable consequence of the growth of new 'economic imperialism', as a result of competing alliance systems, as the outcome of incompatible nationalist ambitions and, more recently, as the result of

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planned and pre-emptive military aggression on the part of Austria-Hungary and of Germany. The aim of this second chapter is to consider these different interpretations, and to show how they have changed over time, influenced by subsequent events such as the outbreak of a second European conflict in 1939, and also by the emergence of new or hitherto unavailable documentary evidence.

Whilst in recent years the historical debate has focused heavily on German and Austro-Hungarian responsibility for precipitating war in 1914, prompted by the detailed research and writing of the German historian Professor Fritz Fischer and his research students in the 1960s and 1970s, new works continue to reveal fresh insights and different perspectives. I have taken the opportunity of this new edition to examine some of the most recent publications on the origins of the First World War, and to explain the approach and main conclusions of their authors. It is important for students to be aware of the ways in which the historical debate has unfolded since the Second World War, and the directions in which it is moving at the beginning of a new century. This will hopefully make it easier to assess the evidence available in the light of the ongoing debate and help students to formulate valid arguments and draw sound and informed conclusions, based on up-to-date information.

Of course there can never be a 'right' or 'wrong' answer to the question of why the Great War broke out when it did. But what we can all do is to contribute to the discussions and debates, try to understand the challenges and problems the main decision makers believed that they were facing in the years before 1914, and hope to learn some lessons from history which might be of benefit to us and to our successors. Thus a general aim of this book is to celebrate the rich diversity and endless fascination of history, and to stimulate a new generation of young people to study past events and think about the ways in which they have shaped the present and may guide the future. The aim of the annotated bibliography at the end of the book is to generate further discussion and to recommend a range of more detailed works which will supplement and expand upon the general account offered in this introductory work.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my colleagues, Professor Evans, Dr King and Professor Gooch for their valuable suggestions and help at crucial stages in the writing of this pamphlet. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank members of the Rendsburg and district SPD for their hospitality over the past fifteen years to their 'twin-town' Lancaster comrades, and for their willingness to discuss freely and frankly with me many contentious aspects of German and international history. I dedicate it to Jutta and to Ian in particular, and to international friendship in general.

Ruth Henig



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The Balkans and the effects of the Balkan Wars



Europe in 1914

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## Timeline of key events

- 1871** unification of Germany and establishment of the German empire
- 1879** defensive alliance drawn up between Germany and Austria-Hungary
- 1882** Triple Alliance agreed between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy
- 1887** Triple Alliance renewed; Mediterranean agreements concluded between Britain, Austria-Hungary and Italy to maintain peace and the *status quo* in the Mediterranean region and the Near East
- Reinsurance Treaty signed between Germany and Russia
- 1890** Bismark departs from office, having been Chancellor in the new empire since 1871
- 1894** France and Russia sign a defensive alliance
- 1898,** German Navy Laws establish basis for a powerful German
- 1900** battle fleet
- 1902** Anglo-Japanese alliance concluded
- 1904** France and Britain sign agreement relating to colonial matters, which becomes known as the *Entente Cordiale*
- 1905** First Moroccan crisis. Wilhelm II intervenes in Moroccan affairs hoping to drive Britain and France apart, but fails
- 1906 January** Algeiras conference settles Moroccan crisis. Britain and France hold military talks, including possibility of a British expeditionary force being sent to France in the event of a military conflict
- February** Britain launches the *Dreadnought*, a big gun battleship which makes existing naval vessels obsolete. Naval rivalry intensifies between Britain and Germany
- 1907** Britain and Russia sign a convention; France and Russia now referred to as the Triple Entente powers
- 1908** Austria-Hungary annexes the former Turkish provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina
- 1911** Second Moroccan crisis when German gunboat *Panther* arrives at Agadir. Crisis is resolved by the autumn in talks between Germany and France Italy declares war on Turkey and annexes Tripoli in Libya
- 1912** First Balkan War breaks out with Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro fighting against Turkey; Turkey is defeated
- 1913** Second Balkan War breaks out when Greece and Serbia fight against their former ally Bulgaria

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- 1914 28 June** Archduke Franz Ferdinand assassinated at Sarajevo in Bosnia, by a Bosnian extremist trained and equipped in Serbia
- 5 July** Austria-Hungary assured of full German support for military action against Serbia
- 23 July** Austria-Hungary sends Serbia a ten-point ultimatum
- 24 July** Russia declares support for Serbia in the event of attack by Austria-Hungary
- 25 July** Serbia accepts most, but not all, points of the ultimatum. Austria-Hungary begins mobilisation
- 28 July** Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia
- 30 July** Russia declares general mobilisation
- 1 August** Germany declares war on Russia; France mobilises
- 3 August** Germany declares war on France and invades Belgium
- 4 August** Germany declares war on Belgium; Britain declares war on Germany
- 5 August** Austria-Hungary declares war on Russia
- 10 August** France declares war on Austria-Hungary
- 12 August** Britain declares war on Austria-Hungary

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# 1

## The origins of war

### Introduction

Europe, in the early months of 1914, seemed to be at peace. Sir Winston Churchill, writing in the 1920s, recalled that ‘the spring and summer of 1914 were marked in Europe by an exceptional tranquility’. Anglo-German relations, after years of tense naval rivalry, seemed to be improving as the two powers negotiated amicably about the possible future disposition of the Portuguese colonial empire in Africa. French bitterness towards Germany, centred on the lost provinces’ of Alsace and Lorraine, appeared to be abating. Austria-Hungary and Russia had refused to allow their Balkan ‘clients’ to draw them into war in 1912 and 1913.

But this picture of reduced tensions and of increasing stability amongst Europe’s great powers was illusory. It masked great underlying problems and increasing pessimism on the part of many European leaders about developments which they believed were undermining their countries’ position and great power status. Since 1900, Europe had been wracked by a series of crises, each of which had brought her great powers closer to war. These crises were provoked by a number of serious issues which were causing mounting friction amongst the powers and which, by 1914, in the opinion of many European statesmen, were becoming insoluble by means other than resort to war.

A number of historians have traced the roots of the conflicts and antagonisms of this period back through the previous forty years. The titles of recent books on the origins of the First World War, such as *The Long Fuse* by Lafore and *The Collapse of the Concert of Europe* by Langhorne emphasize the long-term factors which were slowly but inexorably undermining the foundations of European stability.

The outcome of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1 and the establishment of a new German Empire which included the two former French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine decisively altered the distribution of power in Europe. The enormous expansion of the German economy after unification and the accompanying growth of German political ambitions—particularly after the period of Bismarck’s chancellorship—caused considerable alarm to the other European powers. At the same time, rapid industrialization and urbanization were generating social and economic conflicts in most European countries and were widening the arena of political debate and participation. The spread of strong nationalist feelings, which had helped to bring about Italian and German unification and were now at work in eastern Europe and in the Balkans, made it more difficult for governments to compromise on their stated national objectives and to pursue flexible strategies of diplomacy. This was increasingly evident in the Near East and in the Balkans where the decline of the Ottoman Empire triggered off amongst the

great powers a scramble for concessions and for influence made more dangerous and potentially explosive by the accompanying release of Balkan nationalism. While Russia sought to profit from Turkey's weakness, Austria-Hungary tried to prevent the expansion of Russian power, and Germany, France and Britain attempted with varying degrees of success to bolster up Turkey, the 'sick man of Europe', and to contain Austro-Russian hostility.

The rise of German power after 1870, the corresponding relative decline of France particularly in terms of economic strength and size of population, the increasing weakness of the Ottoman Empire and the unending conflicts between the two ramshackle empires of eastern Europe, Austria-Hungary and Russia, all contributed to a lengthy period of unsettled and at times stormy international diplomacy. Many European statesmen of the 1870s and 1880s expected a major war to break out in the near future; indeed, so concerned was Bismarck about this possibility that he concentrated a large part of his considerable abilities after 1871 on the establishment of a complicated diplomatic network of understandings which would secure European peace and stability. In the short term he was successful, but as we shall see, his policies had long-term repercussions which helped to undermine the post-1871 European settlement he had done so much to establish.

### **Bismarck's legacy**

The unification of Germany and establishment of the German Empire in 1871 clearly altered the distribution of power within Europe and ushered in a new international order. But what was most significant about the new German Empire was its internal power structure and the circumstances in which it was established. The federation of German states which made up the new united Germany was dominated by Prussia. The constitution was carefully drawn up to maximize Prussian power and Prussian interests. And within Prussia social control and political power had traditionally been exercised, and continued to be exercised, by the *Junkers*, a class of nobility who owned large landed estates and operated within a neo-feudal social structure. They owed military and political allegiance to the Prussian king—who became after 1871 the German Kaiser—and ruled autocratically over the classes beneath them. Bismarck himself came from a prominent *Junker* family, and according to A.J.P. Taylor his foreign policy was 'always shaped by "Junker" needs'. One could indeed argue that Bismarck's *Junker* background influenced all his policies, especially after he became Chancellor in the new united Germany in 1871. Bismarck sought to preserve the traditional Prussian social and political order and to enshrine it in the new German Empire. The forces released by industrialization and urbanization could not be allowed to undermine *Junker* power, and for nearly twenty years Bismarck struggled to keep liberalism, socialism and democracy at bay. Abroad Bismarck's concern was also the preservation of order, but in this case a newly-established European order created after Prussia's defeat of France.

Bismarck's objective after 1871 was to stabilize Europe around the new German Empire. France's inevitable desire for revenge and for the return of Alsace and Lorraine

was to be countered by depriving her of European allies through skilful diplomacy, and by encouraging her to embark on colonial expansion in Africa and Asia which could have the added advantage of embroiling her in conflict with Great Britain. Meanwhile, Austria-Hungary and Russia had to be brought together with Germany in some diplomatic alignment to preserve order in eastern Europe. Bismarck achieved this in 1872 through a meeting in Berlin of the emperors of the three monarchies, but it was in practice very difficult for the three rulers to reach agreement on anything very concrete. All the 'League of the Three Emperors' actually achieved was a ringing declaration against revolution in general and against the Marxist International in particular—an international movement of workers' associations and socialist revolutionaries which was at the time more concerned with its own internal squabbles over ideological purity than with thrusting forward a significant revolutionary challenge. Through the isolation of France and the League of the Three Emperors, Bismarck hoped to be able to contain the new currents of nationalism and industrialism which were flowing so strongly through Europe from west to east. His chief difficulty, however, lay in keeping Russia and Austria-Hungary in harness, pulling alongside Germany. The two great east European empires had conflicting interests, particularly in the Balkans area where, as Turkey continued to decline in power, former Turkish provinces in south-east Europe struggled for national identity and for independence.

### **The problems in south-east Europe in the late 19th century**

Some of these provinces contained sizeable communities of Slav people who appealed to the Russian Emperor on grounds of race and religion to assist them in their historic struggle against the Turks. Panlslavism, a crusading movement of support for Slav ambitions in the Balkans and Near East, swept through Russia in the midnineteenth century and aroused such strong sentiments amongst the Orthodox Russian parts of the population that even in autocratic Russia no ruler could ignore their force. But while Russia was being pulled into the Balkans, the Austrians were determined to try to minimize Russian involvement, dampen down national and independence movements and shore up the Turkish Empire as far as possible. As the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, Andrassy, presented the situation to the Habsburg Crown council in 1875.

Turkey possesses a utility almost providential for Austria-Hungary For Turkey maintains the status quo of the small Balkan states and impedes their aspirations. If it were not for Turkey, all these aspirations would fall down on our heads...if Bosnia-Hercegovina should go to Serbia or Montenegro, or if a new state should be formed there which we cannot prevent then we should be ruined and should ourselves assume the role of the 'Sick Man'.

Russia and Austria-Hungary were therefore in headlong conflict over their policy in south-east Europe and this was clearly revealed in the period between 1875 and 1878, when a series of anti-Turkish revolts swept through the Balkans and threatened the



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