Introduction

The Fischer Controversy
50 years on

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In 1955, the German historian Walther Hubatsch concluded in a study on the First World War that the history of 1914–18 was 'as well-researched as scarcely another. In all areas the historian walks on safe ground.'\(^1\) A decade later, he would hardly have been able to make such a bold claim, as much of what was thought to have been known about the war and its origins had been called into question in an acrimonious historical debate which was unprecedented in German history.

In the autumn of 1961, a book was published in Germany which would spark one of the most heated historiographical debates of the twentieth century. In an exhaustive (some would say exhausting) 900-page study Griff nach der Weltmacht (in English less provocatively entitled Germany’s Aims in the First World War), the German historian Fritz Fischer argued that Germany’s decision-makers had aggressive war aims in 1914 which they pursued throughout the war, and that Germany bore the main share of responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War which it unleashed in order to achieve these aims.\(^2\) These audacious assertions turned on their head the comfortable consensus which had existed since the 1930s – that no one country had started the war. After much debate in the 1920s the Versailles war-guilt allegation had been revised and it had become widely accepted that the war had been an accident and that Europe had slithered into it. Instead, Fischer’s thesis was a powerful confirmation of the much-hated decision of the victorious allies in 1919 to make Germany responsible for the war.\(^3\) After the Second World War, for the outbreak of which Germany could not deny responsibility, revisiting the causes of the First seemed unnecessarily soul-searching; as a

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3 For details of the war-guilt debate, see for example A. Mombauer, The Origins of the First World War. Controversies and Consensus (London 2002).
consequence the reactions to Fischer’s theses among his German peers were hostile and outraged. In the 1960s, the First World War was not yet history, indeed, many of those involved in the debate had first-hand experience of it. Egmont Zechlin and Hans Herzfeld had volunteered in 1914, while Gerhard Ritter had been conscripted in 1915. All of them objected vociferously to Fischer’s claims that Germany’s had been the most significant share of responsibility for the outbreak of the war.

At the same time, increasing revelations about the horrific nature of the Second World War were almost too difficult to comprehend and even more difficult to explain. The assertion of responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War seemed to heap guilt upon guilt in a way that many found unforgivable. As a result, the controversy was much more than a mere spat between historians and involved the German Government and the general public in an unprecedented way. It was discussed widely in newspapers, magazines and on radio and TV – the Fischer controversy was unusual in the way it was conducted very much in the public eye and took the topic outside the realm of lecture theatres and the pages of historical journals. It was also a historical topic of contemporary relevance which resonated in the present and it has had a lasting legacy in setting the tone for how historians would discuss this controversial topic for the next decades.4

Fifty years on, in the autumn of 2011, historians gathered in London to take stock of this unusual debate.5 They considered the controversy in an international context and asked if Fischer’s thesis had stood the test of time. Is there any consensus after nearly 100 years of controversy and 50 years after the beginning of the Fischer debate? Did Germany start the First World War as well as the Second? And if so, why? What is the role played by the other great powers? By examining the available evidence through an international lens, the conference participants aimed to address some of these important questions.

In this special issue, which brings together some of the papers presented at the conference, the historiographical impact of the Fischer controversy is analysed within a comparative international framework. It begins with Jonathan Steinberg’s summary of the conference’s findings and his reappraisal of the importance of the Fischer controversy 50 years after it first began. He highlights three areas which warrant particular scholarly interest. The first is that we now know much about Fritz Fischer and his work habits, as seen by the group of Assistenten and doctoral students who worked under him and helped produce Fischer’s iconic publications. The books which were published in his name were, it seems, a collaborative effort in which many of his junior colleagues provided the evidence and sometimes even the arguments, checked the facts and wrote many of the chapters. The second concerns the wealth of detail and untapped originality of much of the actual text of Fischer’s publications. Perhaps at least partly as a result of the

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4 For a detailed discussion of this point, see Annika Mombauer’s contribution to this special issue.
5 The conference organizers, John Röhl, Annika Mombauer and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, would like to thank the sponsors of the conference for making it possible to hold this event. The conference was sponsored by The German Historical Institute, London, The Journal of Contemporary History, The Open University, the Töpfer Stiftung, and The German History Society.
collaborative effort that led to the weighty tomes, and because of the importance that the Fischer school attached to documentary evidence, an abundance of source material was collated and presented, so that even 50 years later scholars can still find much that is new and important in his work. Moreover, and this is the third area of interest identified by Steinberg, when considered in the light of the most recent research on the outbreak of war, standard accounts of the July Crisis – which arguably are often largely based on Fischer’s conclusions – need to be substantially revised. The next few years of research will doubtless be based on international comparison as the roles of the governments of all the Great Powers will come under increasing scrutiny. While Fischer was not wrong in pointing at Germany’s substantial share of responsibility, it is imperative that the roles of the other powers are also fully investigated. Jonathan Steinberg suggests that a new model of explanation of the war’s causes needs to include the five key powers (plus Serbia, one might add), whose decisions were concurrently influenced by deep pessimism and general fear as well as unfounded exuberance and optimism in equal measure.

The immediate impact of Fischer’s thesis in West Germany, an insecure and exposed divided country on the front line of the Cold War, is investigated by Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann. He highlights in particular the international and national crises which occurred concurrently with Fischer’s controversial publication. Focusing on this contemporary background helps explain the extreme reaction among some of Fischer’s contemporaries. The debate took place against the background of the building of the Berlin Wall, the Eichmann trial in Israel and the Auschwitz trials in Germany. The Fischer debate reached its peak in 1964, the year which saw both the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the First, and the 25th anniversary of the outbreak of the even more destructive Second World War. According to Fischer, Germany had pursued much the same aims in both World Wars. At a time when Germany felt insecure and on the front line of opposing Cold War alliances, it is indeed easy to see why Fischer was persona non grata in many establishment circles. In particular, Pogge von Strandmann highlights the important role played by the media in broadening the debate beyond the usual confines of academia. The role of Rudolf Augstein, the editor of Die Zeit, is particularly interesting in this regard. In him, Fischer had a champion who upheld his side against the vociferous objection from his peers and from members of the conservative government and who ensured that his views enjoyed wide public exposure.

Stephan Petzold examines why Fischer ended up challenging the German historical establishment and how he found himself at the centre of this historiographical controversy. His article focuses on Fischer’s development as a historian who had embraced Nazi ideology because it provided him with an opportunity to distance himself from bourgeois national-conservative historians who had dominated the historical profession in the 1930s. This opposition to the national-conservative mindset later motivated Fischer’s critical approach to German history.

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6 The most recent attempt to study the July Crisis in such a comparative way is C. Clark, The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914 (London 2012).
Taking recent revelations about Fischer’s Nazi past as the starting point of his discussion, and drawing on his recently completed PhD thesis\(^7\), Petzold analyses how we might explain Fischer’s conversion to a liberal-democratic scholar. He shows that Fischer had already begun to disassociate himself from the Nazis in 1943. After the war, the experience of being a prisoner of war (and there mixing with former Nazis who were still not willing to renounce their National Socialist views), as well as his travels to the USA and Britain in later years, brought about a serious questioning of his former beliefs. These, as well as his identification with the restoration critics in West Germany, mark the cornerstones of Fischer’s postwar political and intellectual trajectory. Petzold’s revealing analysis of this apotheosis sheds interesting new light on the controversy itself, but also on the development of Fischer as a historian. Fischer had already distanced himself from national-conservative historiography long before the 1960s – only now he did so openly by fronting a critical attack on established comfortable orthodoxies.

Fischer and his supporters based their assertions about German war aims on huge numbers of documents, many of them newly-discovered in previously inaccessible archives and among the files of the former German government which had been seized by the Allies in 1945 and only recently been returned to West Germany.\(^8\) Indeed, ever since the beginning of the war, documents have been regarded as the key to understanding why that war had broken out and they were published by postwar governments in an unprecedented manner. This was how ‘the truth’ about the origins of the war was to be demonstrated, most urgently following the Versailles war-guilt allegation, but also as early as July 1914 in order to convince Europeans to become willing soldiers for a just cause. Annika Mombauer’s article attempts to unravel the connection between truth and documents in the debate on the origins of the war and comments on the many potential pitfalls that are inherent in any primary-source-based analysis of the past. She argues that the Fischer controversy, with its focus on documentary proof, set the tone for all subsequent discussions on the origins of the war. Fischer defined the terms in which historians continue to debate this topic, not just because of what he said, but also in the ways in which he underpinned his argument. But despite the fact that much of the debate was conducted with the confidence that documents would provide a clear window into the past, at the same time emergent postmodern doubts were raised about the nature of evidence and the ability of historians to establish ‘the truth’ about the past. She contends that the debate on the origins of the war remained entirely unaffected by the postmodern turn. All sides were confident that it was possible to read documents in order to uncover the truth about the past, merely differing in the way they interrogated their sources, but not in the inherent belief that doing so would provide a definitive answer about the origins of


\(^8\) The fascinating background to this is explored in A.M. Eckert, \textit{Kampf um die Akten. Die Westalliierten und die Rückgabe von deutschem Archivgut nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg} (Stuttgart 2004).
the war. Fifty years on most historians still aim to provide a definitive version of
why war began. Our search for the truth has been motivated by the quest to find
the guilty party, by allocating blame, and Mombauer argues that it is this strong
moral charge which has defined the controversy for nearly 100 years.

A number of articles in this special issue focus on the reception of the Fischer
thesis outside West Germany. In East Germany, the developing debate was
watched with much interest. With varying degrees of scepticism and enthusiasm,
East German historians sought both to maintain links with, and to distance them-
selves ideologically from, the ‘Fischer school’ in Hamburg. Matthew Stibbe’s art-
icle embeds the debate in the context of the Cold War and points to the fact that the
Fischer controversy was ‘inter-meshed with developments in the Cold War itself.’
He argues that the largely positive reception that Fischer enjoyed in the GDR was
not just motivated by politicized efforts to denigrate Fischer’s critics and as such
the rest of West German historical tradition. Rather, Fischer also had a significant
impact on the methodological approach and style of argumentation adopted by
some leading East German historians of the First World War. Stibbe also asks to
what extent Fischer was influenced by his (sometimes close) contacts with GDR
historians, and by the findings of East German research, but suggests that there is
less evidence for such an exchange having taken place, and that the process of
‘intertwining and differentiation’ which existed between East and West-German
historians was somewhat asymmetrical. Finally, he offers a discussion of
Fischer’s personal views of the German division and the Berlin wall.

In other European countries, it was much easier to accept Fischer’s views than it
had been in West Germany, not least because in many ways he reiterated what
Germany’s former enemies already felt they knew – that Germany had deliberately
causé the First World War. Russia, Britain and France had little to lose by agreeing
with Fischer’s interpretation. In fact, as John Keiger’s contribution shows, France
had rather a lot to gain from this new interpretation, not least because so much
revisionist attention in the interwar years had focused on trying to prove that France
had been to blame for the outbreak of war to a greater or lesser extent. This, and the
recent experience of the Second World War, had led in France to a historical sen-
sitivity (rivalled only by that of Germany herself), which was not matched by the
other former Great Powers: Austria-Hungary had ceased to exist, as had Imperial
Russia, Britain had never felt the need to defend itself from any substantial war-guilt
allegation and had furthermore not been sensitized by a humiliating wartime role in
the way that France had. As a result, the impact of the Fischer controversy was
acutely observed in France. It was also in France that the consequences of Fischer’s
allegations might have had the most important impact on current political concerns,
given that at the time the governments of the Fifth Republic and of West Germany
were attempting to carve out closer formal relations. This culminated in the Franco–
German Friendship Treaty of 1963. As Keiger shows, Fischer’s controversial theses
and ensuing public debate (the prominent French historian, Jacques Droz, called it
‘a German Dreyfus Affair’), published just around this critical juncture, had the
potential to undermine this new détente.
And yet, there is an inherent paradox, in that whatever public interest there might have been in Fischer’s findings, this was not matched by attempts by French historians to investigate French policy in 1914. Keiger highlights the almost complete lack of interest in the causes of the war in general, and the Fischer controversy in particular, among French historians. Part of the reason for this apathy lies in the dominant position occupied by Pierre Renouvin, who had pioneered the study of the causes of the war from the 1930s to the 1950s. Having developed his own thesis of limited German responsibility for the outbreak of the war, he was unconvinced of Fischer’s more pointed allegation of German war guilt. Moreover, what limited work was carried out on the First World War occurred against the background of the Annales School’s focus on underlying economic and social forces, rather than foregrounding political and diplomatic history. More recently, the renewed and extensive focus on the Great War in French studies has been on cultural history and on the experience of the war, rather than on its diplomatic origins. Recent studies on French decision-making in and before 1914 stem from British and German historians. In the run up to the centenary of the outbreak of war, the most significant revisionist account has been published by the German historian Stefan Schmidt.9 Interest in the First World War is significant in France, but concern with explaining its outbreak remains limited.

Joshua Sanborn’s account of the changing reception of Fischer’s thesis in Russia from the 1960s to the present demonstrates that reactions to the renewed interest in the topic of the origins of the war elsewhere was limited in the Soviet Union, for a number of reasons. First, since Fischer’s major conclusions about German responsibility and the role of imperialism seemed to confirm Leninist views on the war, there was really not that much to argue about – Russians were, in that sense, already Fischerites. Fischer’s arguments were not particularly controversial as they highlighted the war guilt of German imperialism and thus echoed Soviet convictions that imperialism had been the cause of the war. Thus the crux of Fischer’s arguments did not go against the Soviet historiographical grain.

Second, in comparison with works on the wars of 1812 and 1941–5, the First World War was (and continues to be) a rather neglected area of study among Russian historians and the topic simply did not hit a raw nerve in the way that it did in Germany. And third, the constricted nature of any historiographical debate within the Soviet Union meant that any responses to Fischer would always have had to fit into the prescribed framework of the official Soviet view of the origins of the war. In some ways, this lack of open historiographical discussion made it harder for Soviet historians to know how to respond to a ‘bourgeois’ historian who wrote, against expectations, in an ‘anti-imperialist’ direction and therefore potentially upset Marxist–Leninist assumptions about where West German historiography was headed.

It is perhaps surprising to note that Soviet historians were less critical of Russia’s role in the outbreak of the war than one might have expected, given that the war was categorized as a capitalist, imperialist war and that blaming the Tsarist regime for its outbreak would have provided additional justification for the postwar government. As Sanborn argues, it will be interesting to see if there is an increase of interest in the war in Russia as the centennial anniversary approaches. And it remains to be seen how the recent study of Russia’s alleged war-guilt by Sean McMeekin\textsuperscript{10} will be received by Russian historians.

British historians were slow to react to the controversy that was developing in Germany, as T. G. Otte shows. They did not really see what all the fuss was about. The topic was simply not as controversial as others of more immediate British interest. Among them was the publication, also in 1961, of A.J.P. Taylor’s controversial book, \textit{The Origins of the Second World War}, which caused its own historiographical debate. Taylor saw similarities in the way he and Fischer were treated by their colleagues and would later refer to Fischer as a ‘fellow outcast from history’. But there were crucial differences in the ways the two concurrent debates were conducted. In Britain, historians worked as lone scholars and disputes were at worst ‘clashes between inflated egos’. The idea of having schools around certain influential professors, such as the Fischer school, was inconceivable in the British context.

Otte highlights the reception of the debate about Fischer and his detractors, while at the same time commenting on the changing nature of British perceptions of West Germany from the 1960s onwards. Fischer (as Petzold’s article in this volume shows) was much influenced by Britain and the English-speaking world more generally. Particularly at the height of the controversy when he was all but isolated in Germany, the support he received in the USA and Britain was of immense value. Otte’s contribution shows that in addition Fischer also had much to offer to the British historical establishment and that they, too, benefited from their interaction with him. He sheds light on the state of the historical profession in the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s and at the same time highlights contemporary perceptions of West Germany which could not help but be shaped by the Fischer controversy.

In Austria after 1945, Christian-conservative historians in particular favoured a nostalgic view of the Habsburg Monarchy. As a consequence, as Guenther Kronenbitter argues, they avoided the question of Austria-Hungary’s responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914. Austrian historians tended to ignore Fischer’s theses and the Fischer controversy did not lead to any major soul-searching among them. His emphasis on the responsibility of the German Empire was largely accepted. For Austrians this was of course extremely convenient. In Austria, the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the war commemorated the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, not the Austro-Hungarian declaration.

of war on Serbia, as the start of the war. There was little soul-searching as the royal couple were celebrated as the first victims of the war.

Only one prominent historian, Fritz Fellner, attempted to widen the debate by directing the focus on Vienna’s decision-making during the July Crisis, but for some time Fischer’s emphasis on Germany’s policy obscured the significant role its ally had played in 1914. Of course, in recent years historians have focused extensively on Austria-Hungary’s role and the work of Fellner, Samuel R. Williamson and Kronenbitter in particular has shown that Fischer would have done well to focus some of his attention on Germany’s alliance partner. Austria-Hungary was more than an innocent ally, dragged into the war by a bellicose Germany. Fischer’s focus on German war guilt does not live up to scrutiny when viewed through the prism of Austro-Hungarian decision-making. Vienna was certainly not led astray by Berlin, but had its own agenda, its own expansionist war aims and its own war-mongers, some of whom were desperate for a war against Serbia.

Jennifer Jenkins’ contribution to this special issue examines an aspect of Fischer’s thesis which, as a consequence of the controversy’s focus on the war guilt question, has been all but overlooked by historiography. Fritz Fischer called it Germany’s ‘far reaching programme of revolution which was directed equally against the British Empire and Imperial Russia’ – a planned programme of propaganda and disruptive activity which the German Auswärtiges Amt (Foreign Office) launched immediately upon the outbreak of the war in an effort to incite global insurrections. And yet, as Jenkins shows, much of this topic, first highlighted by Fischer in a 1959 article and then expanded upon in Griff nach der Weltmacht, remains unknown. Despite its centrality to Fischer’s analysis, 50 years following the publication of his controversial book, this aspect has not been fully explored. The topic was overshadowed by the debates on the origins of the war itself (the contents of the first two chapters of the book) and, as Jenkins argues, has not received the interest among historians that it deserves. Today, there is renewed interest in the global aspects of Germany’s ‘grab for world power’ and the strategies the German government employed for recruiting local nationalist groups as agents of empire. The author points to the centrality of the topic as it takes Fischer’s work in a transnational direction. Recent scholarship has gone beyond what Fischer first offered, by addressing the encounters and ongoing relationships between local insurrectionary groups and the German state and by broaching the question of how these connections played forward into the post-1918 world.

Fifty years on from Fischer’s first foray into untangling the war-guilt question, it is no longer possible to write the history of the July Crisis, or of the preceding years, without giving due consideration to the actions and motives of all the great powers. In July 1914, France was driven by the wish to remain a Great Power and by its fear of eventually being abandoned by an increasingly strong Russia (recently Stefan Schmidt has aptly talked about French ‘Angst und Arroganz’ – fear and
arrogance in equal measure\textsuperscript{11}); Serbia was in part motivated by the support it had been promised by Russia\textsuperscript{12} and had a definite agenda which aimed at undermining the Austro-Hungarian Empire; Russia’s resolve was strengthened by encouraging noises from the French leadership and this only served to firm up its intransigence, while some would argue that it had aggressive war aims of its own which centred around Constantinople\textsuperscript{13}; and Britain was caught in an impossible bind where not supporting the Entente would potentially threaten the security of its own Empire in the long run and where joining in the war was fraught with as many dangers as not. These motivations need to be considered when we focus in detail on the crisis management of July 1914 when all these constraints dictated to a greater or lesser extent how Vienna and Berlin reacted to the threat emanating from Belgrade and how Paris, London, St Petersburg and Belgrade reacted to the provoking ultimatum which Vienna, backed by Germany, presented in order to unleash a war against Serbia with the moral right on its side. 

\textit{Angst und Arroganz}, it would seem, characterized the actions of all key players in 1914.

Only a truly comparative approach can hope to provide a satisfactory explanation of how Europe went to war in 1914. Armed with overwhelming amounts of primary source evidence and a never-ending stream of secondary publications, we know much about the ‘how’, but still relatively little about the ‘why’; agreeing on this question after 100 years of debate will almost certainly continue to be difficult.

Reassessing the debate after 50 years has highlighted that the controversy itself is a subject worthy of study. It is an excellent example of how historical research is always inevitably tied to the contemporary political context within which it is conducted. The Fischer controversy cannot be understood without an awareness of the political and cultural background in which Fischer and his critics operated; subsequent historiographical developments and interpretations similarly reflect the time and place in which they were advanced. Moreover, it is a perfect case study for the possibilities and limits of empirical historical analysis and as such requires some reflection on history and ‘the truth’.

It is unlikely that, on the eve of the war’s centenary, Walther Hubatsch would have repeated his confident assertion that he was walking on firm ground regarding what we know about the First World War. We have moved beyond the intense heat of the debate which characterized the 1960s and 1970s. But after 100 years historians researching this controversial topic still care deeply enough to want to understand and explain how war broke out in 1914. They have foregrounded domestic causes, mobilization orders and railway timetables, decision-makers and impersonal forces. They have argued for and against German war-guilt and they variously blame Austria-Hungary, Russia, France, Serbia and even Britain, or all of them, or none of them. They argue that the war was inevitable, improbable, avoidable, long-anticipated or a surprise when it finally came. All agree, however, on one thing: the war was a tragedy whose repercussions far surpassed anything its

\textsuperscript{11} S. Schmidt, \textit{Frankreichs Außenpolitik}.
\textsuperscript{12} A point forcefully made by Clark, \textit{The Sleepwalkers}, 462ff.
\textsuperscript{13} This is the central tenet of McMeekin’s argument in \textit{The Russian Origins of the First World War}. 
instigators could have imagined. And it is the tragedy of the First World War and its poisonous legacy that ultimately motivates historians to continue in their search for an explanation of its causes.

**Biographical Note**

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