

# Did Germany deliberately cause the First World War?

Dr Paddy McNally, University of Worcester

24 November 2020



Fritz Fischer (1908-1999)

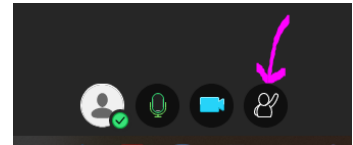
# History Virtual Taster Series

**Tuesdays, November 2020–January 2021, 5.00–5.30pm**

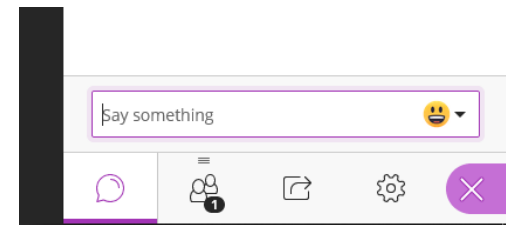
Dates	Title	Speaker
24 Nov. 2020	Did Germany deliberately cause the First World War?	Dr Paddy McNally
1 Dec. 2020	Why do we like the Devil?	Professor Darren Oldridge
8 Dec. 2020	Why did the British leave India?	Dr Neil Fleming
15 Dec. 2020	What is Propaganda?	Dr Wendy Toon
5 Jan. 2021	Were Germans afraid of the Gestapo?	Dr Paddy McNally
12 Jan. 2021	How extensive was Britain's role in the slave trade?	Professor Suzanne Schwarz

# Virtual Housekeeping

- Please mute your microphones and turn off your cameras whilst we are all in the 'main room'
- If your internet cuts out you will probably 'leave' the session so just go back to the link and join us again
- If you would like to ask a question please raise your hand!
- Or post a question in the 'Chat to Everyone' area:



- We will be recording the session



## **‘War Guilt’ and Treaty of Versailles.**

### **“Article 231.**

The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.”

Inter-War Revisionism:

Weimar Germany's foreign office established a 'war guilt' section. The *Centre for the Study of the Causes of the War* selectively published 40 volumes of pre-war diplomatic documents designed to prove collective responsibility for the war. Other governments followed, notably the Soviet Union.

Sidney B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (2 vols., New York, 1928) – argued that no single country was to blame.

Lloyd-George's *Memoirs* – 'all the nations slithered over the edge of the boiling cauldron of war in 1914'.

British historian G.P. Gooch – 'The belief that any nation or statesman was the arch criminal in 1914 is no longer held by serious students of history'.

Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1961) [English translation, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (1967)]  
– war was the result of Germany's bid for world power.

‘As Germany willed and coveted the Austro-Serbian war and, in her confidence in her military superiority, deliberately faced the risk of a conflict with Russia and France, her leaders must bear a substantial share of the historical responsibility for the outbreak of the general war in 1914.’

(Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, 1967, p.88)

In *War of Illusions* (1969, Engl. Transl. 1975) Fischer went further.

Germany embarked on a 'preventive war' - 'an attempt to defeat the enemy powers before they became too strong, and to realize Germany's political ambitions, which may be summed up as German hegemony over Europe' (Fischer, *War of Illusions*, 1975, p.470).

This had been planned since 1912.

Implications of Fischer's work: continuity in German foreign policy between the two World Wars.

Nazi Germany could not be dismissed as an 'aberration'.

**Admiral von Muller's (Chief of the Imperial Naval Cabinet)  
diary entry, 8 Dec. 1912.**

Sunday, Ordered to see His Maj. at the Schloss at 11 a.m. with Tirpitz, Heeringen (vice Admiral) and General von Moltke. H.M. speaks to a telegraphic report from the Ambassador in London, Prince Lichnowsky, concerning the political situation. Haldane, speaking for Grey, has told Lichnowsky that England, if we attacked France, would unconditionally spring to France's aid, for England could not allow the balance of power in Europe to be disturbed.

H.M. greeted this information as a desirable clarification of the situation ....

H.M. envisaged the following:

Austria must deal energetically with the foreign Slavs (the Serbs), otherwise she will lose control of the Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. If Russia supports the Serbs, which she evidently does ... then war would be unavoidable for us too.

We could hope, however, to have Bulgaria and Rumania and also Albania, and perhaps also Turkey in our side. ... If these powers join Austria then we shall be free to fight the war with full fury against France. The fleet must naturally prepare itself for the war against England. ... Therefore immediate submarine warfare against English troop transports in the Scheldt or by Dunkirk, mine warfare in the Thames. To Tirpitz: speedy build-up of U-boats, etc.

General von Moltke: “I believe a war is unavoidable and the sooner the better. But we ought to do more through the press to prepare the popularity of a war against Russia, as suggested in the Kaiser's discussion.”

H.M. supported this and told the State Secretary [Tirpitz] to use his press contacts, too, to work in this direction. T[irpitz] made the observation that the navy would prefer to postpone the great fight for one and a half years. Moltke says the navy would not be ready even then and the army would get into an increasingly unfavourable position, for the enemies were arming more strongly than we, as we were very short of money.

(from J. C. G. Rohl, *The Kaiser and his Court: Wilhelm 11 and the Government of Germany*, Cambridge 1994, pp.162-3)

## The July Crisis

Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, 28 June 1914

Franz Ferdinand a force for restraint in Habsburg foreign policy. His death strengthened those in military and foreign office who demanded 'energetic action' against Serbia.

This would require German support in case of Russian intervention.

Initiative came from Vienna but Berlin promised support with Wilhelm II's 'Blank Cheque' of 5 July 1914.

**Count Szogyeny (Austrian Ambassador to Berlin) to Count Berchtold (Austro--Hungarian Foreign Minister), 5 July 1914.**

Berlin 5 July 1914

tel.237 Strictly Confidential

... The Kaiser authorised me to inform our Gracious Majesty that we might in this case, as in all others, rely upon Germany's full support .... He did not doubt in the least that Herr von Bethmann Hollweg would agree with him. Especially as far as our action against Serbia was concerned. But it was his [Kaiser Wilhelm's] opinion that this action must not be delayed. Russia's attitude will no doubt be hostile, but for this he had for years prepared, and should a war between Austria-Hungary and Russia be unavoidable, we might be convinced that Germany, our old faithful ally, would stand on our side. Russia at the present time was in no way prepared for war, and would think twice before it appealed to arms .... If we had really recognised the necessity of warlike action against Serbia, he [Kaiser Wilhelm] would regret if we did not make use of the present moment, which is all in our favour ... .

(From Imanuel Geiss (ed.) *July 1914. The Outbreak of the First World War: Selected Documents*, Batsford, 1967, p.77)

Next two weeks saw an apparent lull in diplomatic activity. Leading politicians and generals in Germany (eg. Kaiser Wilhelm) and Austria-Hungary went on holiday. But Austria-Hungary had already prepared a deliberately unacceptable ultimatum to be presented to Serbia.

French President Poincaré and Prime Minister Viviani on a state visit to Russia 20-23 July. Left Russia on 23<sup>rd</sup> and Austro-Hungarian ultimatum presented to Serbia the same day. Serbs given 48 hours to reply.

Serbs agreed to almost all demands and German government urged caution but Austro-Hungarian government was determined to act.

Partial Russian military mobilization ordered, 24-25 July. Clear warning to Austria-Hungary.

General von Moltke had been on holiday until July 25. Now he urged preparations for war to begin.

Wilhelm II refused to declare a “State of Impending War.”

Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and bombed Belgrade on 28 July 1914. Done to scupper any chance of a diplomatic resolution to the crisis.

General von Falkenhayn (Prussian Minister for War) now believed that war could not be localised.

Germans’ priority was to blame Russia for escalation of the crisis to portray the war as a ‘defensive’ one.

Russia ordered general mobilization 30 July 1914.

Kaiser declared a “State of Impending War” on 31 July and signed the order for general mobilization the next day.

Telegram 31 July 1914 from Wilhelm II to Emperor Franz Joseph:

“I am prepared, in fulfillment of my alliance obligations, to go to war against Russia and France immediately.

In this hard struggle it is of the greatest importance that Austria directs her chief force against Russia and does not split it up by a simultaneous offensive against Serbia. This is all the more important as a great part of my army will be tied down by France. In this gigantic struggle on which we are embarking shoulder to shoulder, Serbia plays a quite subordinate role, which demands only the most absolutely necessary defensive measures.”

## **Letter presented by the German Ambassador in St Petersburg to the Russian Government, 1 August 1914**

The Imperial German Government have used every effort since the beginning of the crisis to bring about a peaceful settlement. ... but Russia, without waiting for any result, proceeded to a general mobilisation of her forces both on land and sea.

In consequence of this threatening step, ... the German Empire was faced by a grave and imminent danger. ...

The German Government were, therefore, obliged ... to insist upon a cessation of the aforesaid military acts. Russia having refused to comply with this demand, and having shown by this refusal that her action was directed against Germany, I have the honour, on the instructions of my Government, to inform your Excellency as follows:

His Majesty the Emperor, my august Sovereign, in the name of the German Empire, accepts the challenge, and considers himself at war with Russia.

Germany invaded Luxemburg 2 August;  
declared war on France and invaded Belgium  
on 3 August.

Britain declared war 4 August.

**From Bethmann's Memorandum: 'Provisional notes on the direction of our policy on the conclusion of peace', 9 Sept. 1914.**

The 'general aim of the war' was, for him, 'security for the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time. For this purpose France must be so weakened as to make her revival as a great power impossible for all time. Russia must be thrust back as far as possible from Germany's eastern frontier and her domination over the non-Russian vassal peoples broken.'

4. We must create a *central European economic association* through common customs treaties, to include France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Austria-Hungary, Poland, and perhaps Italy, Sweden and Norway. This association will not have any common constitutional supreme authority and all its members will be formally equal, but in practice will be under German leadership and must stabilise Germany's economic dominance over *Mitteleuropa*.

5. *The question of colonial acquisitions*, where the first aim is the creation of a continuous Central African colonial empire, will be considered later, as will that of the aims to be realised *vis-a-vis* Russia.

(Reprinted from *Germany's Aims in the First World War* by Fritz Fischer, by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1967)

## **Memorandum of Prince Karl Max Lichnowsky (German Ambassador to UK, 1912-14), Jan. 1915.**

... I arrived in London in November 1912 .... A few days after my arrival, Lord Haldane, a close friend of Sir E. Grey's, visited me to tell me roughly the following: England desired peace and friendship with us, and hoped with my help to strengthen our relations and to remove all misunderstandings. But he drew my attention to one important point from the first: *England could never permit the destruction or weakening of France.*

On our side *nothing*, absolutely *nothing*, was done to preserve peace, and when we *at last* decided to do what I had advocated from the first, it was too late.... Such a policy is comprehensible only if war was our aim, not otherwise. The influential people at the [Foreign] Office repeatedly told me that Russia would be 'ready' in 1916, and that we should not wait for that.... Who can prove that we would really have had to fight in 1916? To what end would Russia have attacked us? *England and France were absolutely peaceable and would have remained so*; they would never have supported a Russian attack.

Serbian military intelligence had indeed facilitated the assassination.

Fay: “Austria was more responsible for the immediate origin of the war than any other Power.”

Luigi Albertini: Berlin pushed Vienna to take action but “it was Austria who asked Germany for support in the aggression planned against Serbia in full awareness of the repercussions that this might cause.”

Fritz Fellner: “Though Germany showed no hesitation in offering the Habsburg leaders support for a local war, even if it risked a larger war, Berlin did not push Vienna into war in 1914.”

Samuel R. Williamson Jr. and Ernest R. May ‘An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914’, *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (June 2007), pp. 335-387

“The frivolity and arrogance with which Austro-Hungarian statesmen, politicians, military men, publicists and diplomats wished for and decided on war against their small neighbour made them guilty of providing the opportunity that the German military were seeking to wage the preventive war they had been recommending for years. Austria-Hungary bears the responsibility for planning a local third Balkan War against Serbia – the responsibility for the escalation of the conflict into a European war does not lie with Austria-Hungary, it lies in Berlin.”

Fritz Fellner, ‘Austria-Hungary’ in Keith M. Wilson (ed.) *Decisions for War, 1914*, London, UCL Press (1995)

## FURTHER READING:

Annika Mombauer, 'Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I', *Central European History*, 48 (2015), 541–564. [Review of historiography]

Samuel R. Williamson Jr. and Ernest R. May 'An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (June 2007), pp. 335-387

Website: *1914–1918 Online*  
[www.1914-1918-online.net](http://www.1914-1918-online.net)