

6 Conclusion: The Origins of the First World War

POINTS TO CONSIDER

After reading the previous chapter, you should have a good knowledge of what happened from June to August 1914. You should also have formed preliminary ideas about why certain key players acted in the way they did. This chapter builds upon this knowledge by introducing you to the 'historiographical' debate, i.e. the debate between historians, about what caused the war and who was responsible. It is important to realise that not all views are mutually exclusive: some simply look at what happened from different perspectives. But others are contradictory, and you have to choose between them.

1 Introduction

KEY ISSUE What are the difficulties associated with any explanation of the First World War?

The First World War was a cataclysm for Europe. So high was the total of deaths during the conflict that almost every European family suffered loss. No wonder that the causes of the war have been hotly debated from 1914 to the present day. Yet it would probably take a lifetime to read all the books and articles that have been written explaining why the war began, and several lifetimes to digest all the documentary sources hidden away in a dozen archives. In many ways the whole topic has become unmanageable. We have to deal with a large time-span, since no one knows when the origins of the war really began. We have to deal with a large geographical area, since we must study all the countries who entered the war. In addition, we cannot confine ourselves simply to diplomatic sources, since the 'real' causes of the war may lie in economic rivalries or the realm of ideas. What follows can therefore be no more than an introduction.

Here are some initial ideas that may prove useful:

- Historians' views on the causes of the war tend to vary between two poles. At one extreme is the notion that 'Germany willed the war'; at the other is the idea that 'The nations of Europe stumbled into war.' Between these two extremes is a broad central position that holds that while no one nation can be held entirely responsible for the war, some nations were more responsible than others.
- It is also useful to distinguish between the tensions that preceded the war and the actual outbreak of hostilities. The countries most responsible for the former may not be those most to blame for the latter.

- It is also useful to distinguish between 'man-made forces' (such as expansionist ambitions, war plans and so on) and 'impersonal forces' (such as capitalism or imperialism). The limitation of impersonal forces is that, though they may explain why a war was likely, they fail to explain why a particular war broke out at a precise time. They need therefore to be linked in some way with the man-made forces that do show how a diplomatic crisis became a European war.
- James Joll's uses the phrase 'patterns of concentric circles', by which he links the 'impersonal forces' to the July crisis (see the diagram on page 124). The causes of the war form a complex pattern, interacting with each other. We need to see the outbreak of war in terms of decisions taken by political leaders, set against the background of impersonal factors, which may well have limited the options open to them.

2 Germany and the Debate on War Origins

KEY ISSUES What are the main interpretations explaining why the war started? How important are the ideas of Fritz Fischer?

a) German War Guilt?

There has been little agreement as to who or what caused the First World War. Hence the student is confronted by a bewildering variety of interpretations. One reason for this is that each generation of historians looks at the problem from a different point in time; another is that they have different national perspectives; and a third reason is that they sometimes find new evidence. A fourth is that the facts do not 'speak for themselves': they have to be interpreted by human – often all too human – historians.

Over the years attention has tended to focus on Germany's responsibility, a highly controversial area. After the war, the victors had little doubt that Germany, and to some extent her allies, had been to blame. In article 231 (the famous 'war guilt clause') of the Treaty of Versailles, it was stated that Germany and her allies had deliberately started the war. (In the British general election at the end of the war, there were calls to 'Make Germany Pay' and 'Hang the Kaiser'. Articles in the press debated whether Wilhelm II should be boiled in oil or merely hanged, drawn and quartered.) For a time, this remained a 'consensus' view, at least outside Germany and Austria.

Yet the Germans did not believe that had been guilty of starting the war. German historians published large volumes of documents to show that they had not been at fault, and gradually most historians were won over. In the first volume of his war memoirs, published in 1923, Winston Churchill wrote that 'One rises from the study of the causes of the Great War with a prevailing sense of the defective control of individuals upon world fortunes.' A few years later Lloyd

George, who had helped to write the Treaty of Versailles, insisted that no one had been to blame: 'the nations slithered over the brink into the seething cauldron of war'. Events simply got out of hand. Bethmann Hollweg, Germany's Chancellor in 1914, was often quoted: 'Once the dice were set rolling, nothing could stop them'. The war had been an accident, and yet at the same time there was something inevitable about it. 'Great armament', said Grey, foreign secretary when war started, led 'inevitably to war'.

For a long time this was easily the most popular explanation. The war had been caused by misunderstandings and miscalculations. This view was flourishing in the 1950s, when a Franco-German conference of historians concluded that 'the documents do not allow one to ascribe to any one government or people in 1914 the conscious desire for a European war'. It was a very desirable verdict at a time when France and Germany were, in 1957, signing the Treaty of Rome, which started the European Community. Clearly the origins of the war were not of solely academic interest: they had a political dimension. This was live, not dead, history.

Fritz Fischer found this in the 1960s. With Fischer we come full circle, returning to notions of German war guilt. His writings aroused enormous emotional hostility in Germany. He was called 'a national masochist' and 'intellectual flagellant'. There were calls for him to resign his university professorship, and the West German government attempted to stop him giving a lecture tour in the United States.

b) The Fischer Thesis

Fischer's starting point was a document he discovered, the September Memorandum, a statement of war aims written by Bethmann Hollweg and dated 9 September 1914 and calling for a German-dominated *Mitteleuropa* (Middle Europe), as well as colonial acquisitions in Africa. This statement was so detailed that Fischer thought it could not have been merely improvised at the start of the war. These ideas must, he suspected, have been formulated earlier, during the July Crisis itself. Perhaps indeed the German government had gone to war to achieve these aims?

Subsequent research confirmed his suspicions. There was no drift to war – there was a 'drive to war' and Germany was 'grasping at world power'. The army bills of 1912 and 1913 were, he decided, designed to equip Germany for a major war. Even more important to Fischer was a record he discovered of a top-level meeting at the Royal Palace in Berlin on Sunday 8 December 1912. At this meeting the Kaiser looked to the future: he said that Austria would at some point have to 'deal energetically' with Serbia, and that if Russia supported Serbia, 'which she evidently would', Germany would have to get involved. A large-scale war would take place, in which France would be bound to support Russia. Tirpitz then said that the navy would not be ready for

another 18 months, while Moltke judged that, if war were delayed for longer than 18 months, the balance of military power would shift in favour of Russia.

Add on 18 months to December 1912, and of course you get the summer of 1914. This was no coincidence, according to Fischer. The German government wanted a war, planned for war and got the war it wanted. The 'blank cheque' of 5 July was the Kaiser's way of ensuring that the crisis escalated. Admittedly the Kaiser got cold feet when he saw Serbia's response to the ultimatum, and Moltke had to step in to ensure that war did take place; but this last-minute failure of nerve should not disguise Germany's war guilt. Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August on hearing of her mobilisation, but this was merely an excuse to start a war. She desired war to achieve territorial gains and also to solve the constitutional deadlock whereby the German government could not achieve a majority in the Reichstag.

c) Fischer and his Critics

Fischer's interpretation has several virtues. It is based on solid evidence and it is clear-cut and simple. It makes sense of pre-war tensions and of the outbreak of war, seeing them as part of a single process. But to his critics, Fischer's views do not take account of all the evidence and are far too simple.

Several historians have attacked the centrepiece of Fischer's thesis, the weight he gives to the September Memorandum. It has been said that it was a response to the series of early German victories at the start of the war: Germany's war aims in September had escalated since the declarations of war the previous month. The Memorandum has also been seen as an attempt by Bethmann Hollweg to secure his own position as Chancellor: many critics thought him weak, and so he tried to steal their thunder by calling for extensive annexations. Either way, the document sheds no light whatsoever on why Germany went to war. Many have also found Fischer's depiction of Bethmann Hollweg as a ruthless expansionist quite unconvincing. Nor do critics believe that the erratic Kaiser was capable of sticking to a plan for 18 months. And if he did expect a major war to erupt, why did he go off on a three-week cruise after issuing the 'blank cheque'? Bethmann Hollweg said on 7 July that 'our support for Austria can lead to world war' – *can not will or must*. Hence many historians believe that Germany's war guilt lay in risking a major war not in deliberately starting one.

It has been said that Fischer, having misunderstood the September Memorandum, then interpreted events to fit in with his preconceived view of German war guilt. In short, he misused hindsight. This led him to focus only on those elements of the complex story which suited him. He also failed to see Germany's actions in a proper international context. For instance, Fischer insisted that the army bills of

1912 and 1913 were the start of a 'drive to war' – but he failed to see increases in the Germany army alongside those of other Powers.

In 1912 the German army increased by 29,000 men to a total of 650,000. Her ally, Austria-Hungary, had 450,000 troops. Yet Russia had an army of 1,300,000 and France of 600,000 men. Germany was still relatively vulnerable. The following year, 1913, Germany decided to increase her army by well over 100,000 men so that, by 1914, German forces would total almost 800,000 men. Yet this was not necessarily an aggressive move, since in July 1913 the French decided to increase their period of military service from two to three years. The French army would soon be equal with, if not superior to, the German.

The 'Fischer thesis' – that Germany willed the war in 1914 – has had an enormous impact on historical opinion. It reopened an issue which had fallen into a stale consensus. Yet many historians do not accept its exclusive emphasis on Germany's responsibility or the motives alleged for it. The real issue in 1914, they believe, was not a bid for world domination or an attempt to solve domestic political problems but the desperate need to preserve Austria-Hungary's position as a Great Power and ally. Their charge against Germany is that she pursued in an aggressive way what was an essentially defensive aim. In particular, she did not make a single constructive move in July to defuse the crisis; instead she took a number of calculated risks, 'a series of gambles that did not work out'.

The Fischer 'school' have created a distorted picture of the diplomatic situation in July 1914 which needs to be corrected by a proper Europe-wide perspective – in short, by examining policy-making in other European capitals during the crisis.

3 The Responsibility of Other Powers

KEY ISSUE What degree of responsibility for the war should be assigned to Russia, Austria-Hungary, France and Britain?

No longer do historians look almost exclusively at Germany's responsibility for the war. Many recent books have focused on why the other Powers entered the war.

a) Austria-Hungary

Although there is no doubt that Austria-Hungary was under pressure from Germany to retaliate against Serbia in July 1914, there is much evidence to suggest that she needed no prompting from Berlin to respond to the Sarajevo incident.

The assassination of 28 June 1914 presented Austria-Hungary with a basic dilemma. Inaction meant 'the renunciation of our Great

Power position', as the foreign minister put it. Action against Serbia, however, would might well result in war with Russia. The stark choice seemed to be between the decline and disintegration of the empire and the risk of defeat in war. With German support, however, the chances of defeat would be greatly reduced. Yet some historians have argued that even without the 'blank cheque', Austria might have gone to war, risking the dangers of Russian retaliation, so great was the threat from Serbia perceived to be.

Austrian responsibility for the outbreak of war may be all the greater because of her delay in responding to Franz Ferdinand's death. Had the Austrians delivered a rapid punitive strike against the Serbian capital, Belgrade, the outcome could well have been quite different. But, as the German Chancellor complained, 'They seem to need an eternity to mobilise'. The German government constantly pressed their ally to act quickly, largely in the hope that prompt action would permit the conflict to be kept localised. But the ultimatum to Serbia was not delivered until almost a month after Sarajevo. On the other hand, she then may have acted too quickly. The ultimatum had a time limit of only 48 hours, and within three days of the response Austria had declared war on Serbia. Hence there was no time for mediation. Furthermore, the Austrian government ignored the Kaiser's suggestion on 28 July to halt military operations.

On a number of counts, therefore, Austria-Hungary contributed to the escalation of a major diplomatic crisis into a European war. This conclusion is only of significance, of course, if we reject Fischer's view that Germany was intent on a general war from the outset. If he is right, then what the Austrians did in the course of the crisis is obviously of much less importance.

b) Russia

Russia's responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914 stems from her policy in the Balkans before 1914 and the decisions she took during the July Crisis itself. Several historians regard Russian policy as quite provocative. In the first place, it seems clear that Russia, not Austria-Hungary, was the expansionist force in the Balkans. The Balkan Wars can even be regarded as Russia's wars fought 'by proxy' (through the Balkan League). Secondly, she was unable – or perhaps unwilling – to restrain or control the explosive force of Slav nationalism. Russia's promise of support to Serbia must have influenced her decision not to accept the ultimatum; and, in late July 1914, Russia was the first of the Great Powers to mobilise. Admittedly Russia's prestige as a Balkan Power and as a protector of the Slavs was at stake – but her survival was not, unlike the case of Austria-Hungary.

c) France and Britain

Most historians do not regard these two Powers as playing a crucial role in the outbreak of war (see page 105). In 1912, France appears to have given a sort of 'blank cheque' to Russia by promising French support under any circumstances. This pledge was renewed in 1914, but this time it seems to have been the work of her ambassador in St Petersburg rather than official policy from Paris. The British government had no positive desire for war in 1914, though perhaps she might have done more to try to restrain Russia. The responsibility of France and Britain lies not so much in the July Crisis itself as in the preceding years, when tensions were building up. Might they have done more to promote better relations between the Great Powers, especially between themselves and Germany?

4 The Balkans

KEY ISSUE How important were Balkan issues in producing war?

Balkan problems have naturally long been regarded as a major factor in the origins of the First World War. But did the situation in the Balkans cause, or merely occasion, the war in 1914?

If Fischer is correct in asserting that Germany wanted to launch a war around the summer of 1914, then the Sarajevo murder simply provided her with the excuse that she wanted. On the other hand, those historians who do not accept Fischer's thesis regard Balkan problems as playing a more important part in the origins of the war.

In the early 20th century, the crucial issue in the Balkans was the conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. Serbian nationalism, an expansive force seeking to unite all Serbs into a Greater Serbia, was a deadly threat to the multinational Habsburg empire. Serbia's sense of grievance at the Austrian annexation of Bosnia, which had a large Serb population, was matched by Austrian alarm at Serbia's territorial expansion as a result of the Balkan Wars. Added to this dangerous brew was Russian support for the Serbs. Two of the Great Powers were now involved with the fate of one of the Balkan states. To make matters worse, Russia was unable to control Serbia, and the Serbian government was unable fully to control nationalistic secret societies and the army. These were the ingredients which produced a 'Third Balkan War' in 1914.

5 Ideas, Domestic Politics and Military Plans

KEY ISSUE How important in causing the war were these three factors?

One fruitful way of considering the origins of the war is to focus not on particular countries but on issues which affected several countries. One of these is the climate of opinion – the idea that war was natural or even inevitable and moreover a glorious adventure, and that one's enemies were members of lesser nations and therefore likely to be all the more easily defeated (see pages 70–74). Such assumptions did not, of course, automatically translate themselves into deeds. Yet we might expect politicians to be influenced by public opinion to some extent and also themselves to share popular assumptions. There is certainly evidence that many decision-makers accepted war, or at least were prepared to risk war, without any moral qualms. The Hungarian premier Tisza was aware of the horrors of war and so was Britain's Sir Edward Grey – who commented at the start of war that 'The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime' – but these were exceptions. Surely the unrealistic image of war that had been propagated in the previous generation must have made politicians the more willing to indulge in it.

There is also plentiful evidence that large sections of European society welcomed war in 1914. According to Adolf Hitler, 'The struggle of the year 1914 was not forced on the masses – no, by the living God – it was desired by the whole people.' This may be an unbalanced generalisation; but while not everyone desired war, many people did.

Public opinion may provide another clue. Politicians may have provoked war knowing that it would be popular and that this popularity would solve their domestic problems. In Britain, for instance, war had a unifying effect. The suffragettes suddenly became loyal supporters of the Liberal government, which they had previously attacked; and the warring factions in Ireland vied with each other in their patriotism. French society was also unified, and so was that in Germany, where the constitutional deadlock was immediately overcome. These were the effects of joining the war – may they have been the *intended* effects? Did governments go to war to solve their domestic problems? It would be surprising if politicians had not given at least some consideration to the likely domestic effects of going to war.

Or perhaps the real causes of war are located in the military plans of the generals? Certainly the Schlieffen plan was remarkably important in 1914. It specified that Germany had to fight France before Russia, and this meant that France had to enter the war whether she wanted to or not. Similarly the Russians had planned for general mobilisation, and when the Tsar wanted partial mobilisation he was told that it was 'technically impossible'. Several historians believe that

there came a stage when the general took over from the politicians – on 28 July in Germany, when Moltke brushed aside the Kaiser's doubts and urged Vienna to declare war on Serbia – and then the inflexible military plans took over from the generals.

In all countries there was a glorious and unrealistic image of war, in all countries there were domestic problems which war might overcome, and in all countries there were inflexible military plans. These constitute important elements of the origins of the First World War. But they do not 'solve' the issue of responsibility for the war. We still have the problem of examining how far these factors influenced the actions of particular countries.

6 Alliances, International Anarchy and Armaments

KEY ISSUE How important was the division of Europe into two 'armed camps'?

The alliance system is often seen as an important factor in the breakdown of peace, part of the 'pattern of concentric circles' of causal factors that limited the options available to statesmen in the July Crisis. But how important was it?

At first sight the alliances seem of fundamental importance in 1914. They may not explain the causes of antagonism, but they surely show why the crisis that erupted in the Balkans in June 1914 was not isolated. Was it not the alliance system that dictated that Germany should support Austria-Hungary and France support Russia? A note of caution must be introduced, however. First, we should note that the alliance system had kept the peace for a long time. The linking of two Powers had often meant that one of them restrained the other, as Bismarck had intended when, for instance, he signed the Austro-German Alliance in 1879. Hence what counted was not so much the alliance system as the spirit with which it was operated. Germany's 'blank cheque' to Austria was not dictated by any alliance. After all, Germany had not always provided support when Austria asked for it. Second, the alliances were not actually operated in 1914. A member of the Triple Alliance, Italy, decided to remain neutral (and then joined the *Entente* Powers in 1915). Germany was supposed to aid Austria if Austria were attacked by Russia, but Germany declared war on Russia without this happening. As for Britain, no agreement obliged her to support France.

The alliances can be seen as both a reflection of insecurity and a contribution towards it. French fears of Germany led her to seek an alliance with Russia. The conclusion of the Franco-Russian Alliance, however, increased Germany's sense of insecurity. This was intensified by Britain's agreements with France and Russia in 1904 and 1907,

creating what the Germans called 'encirclement' but which Britain and her partners regarded as 'containment' of an unpredictable Germany. Perhaps the alliances were more important for the escalation of tension that preceded the war than for the actual outbreak of war in 1914. In the July Crisis Powers consulted their interests, not their alliances.

The alliance system represented an aspect of what was often called 'international anarchy' which, it was said, turned Europe into a powder magazine needing only a spark to ignite it. The existence of sovereign states pursuing their own national interests in a highly competitive situation was bound, it was argued, to lead to war sooner or later. Yet it is clear that the explanatory power of such observations is rather limited. Why, for example, did the war come later rather than sooner? Critics of the concept also point out that this so-called 'international anarchy' had been a fact of life in European affairs since at least 1870, during which time Europe had enjoyed over 40 years of peace.

Some historians see the outbreak of war as stemming from the collapse of the 'Concert of Europe', whereby the Great Powers would discuss their problems together and settle them by agreement. Certainly in 1914 some Powers were no longer willing to exercise restraint in the interests of 'Europe' as a whole. Yet the Concert had operated successfully in dealing with crises in the Near East in the 1870s and 1880s and had played a crucial role in preventing war amongst the Powers during the Balkan Wars. Why then did it fail to operate a short while later in July 1914? There was certainly no shortage of mediation proposals in 1914. Perhaps the answer is that Germany did not want a diplomatic solution, perhaps because she positively wanted war, perhaps to protect her ally.

How important was the arms race that preceded the war? It was certainly a sign of international tension, but it was also a cause of further tensions. The Anglo-German naval race had poisoned relations between those two countries. After 1912 the emphasis switched to armies. Germany, Austria-Hungary and France all increased the size of their peacetime armies between 1912 and 1914, so creating an arms race atmosphere, though the main increase in strength took place in Russia. Her defeat in the Russo-Japanese war underlined the need for reform and expansion, a process that greatly alarmed Germany.

It is hard to accept the proposition that the arms race led inevitably to war. The escalation of armaments may have made war more likely by breeding fear and suspicion – though even this is not certain, since great arms sometimes act as a deterrent. But it certainly did not make a particular war at a particular time certain.

Most historians accept that the arms race increased international tension and heightened chauvinistic feelings amongst the public in general before 1914. It is also agreed that in some states the General Staff exercised so much pressure for mobilisation that diplomats

found they had little freedom of manoeuvre as the crisis deepened in late July. The fact remains, however, that some governments were more willing than others to start a war in 1914 and the reasons were political, not military.

7 Capitalism, Imperialism and Nationalism

KEY ISSUE To what extent did these 'impersonal forces' lead to war?

The role of impersonal forces in the origins of the war has long been controversial. It is clear that such forces cannot explain why a specific war broke out, but they may constitute important underlying causes for war.

Some historians accept Marx's view that 'Wars are inherent in the nature of capitalism; they will only cease when the capitalist economy is abolished'. Capitalism was said to make war inevitable on two grounds. First, industrialists, especially armaments manufacturers, had a vested interest in provoking war to increase their profits or to ruin their competitors. Second, capitalist economic pressure was the driving force behind the imperialist rivalries, which in turn led to war in 1914.

Arguments such as these have the merit of simplicity but they do not take into account some of the complexities of the world of international trade and finance. It is all too easy to make generalisations about the 'wicked capitalists' who were 'warmongers' and to ignore the fact that armaments manufacturers had markets overseas which might be lost in wartime. Certainly the best interests of international bankers were served by political stability not by warfare. In July 1914, there were fears in London of a complete financial collapse if Britain became involved in war.

Anglo-German trade rivalry has been cited as an example of capitalist competition leading to war. There were certainly complaints of unfair competition and loss of markets but these were mostly in the 1890s or stemmed from trades which were particularly badly hit by German competition. In general, Britain's commercial links with Germany were growing closer from 1904 to 1914, with both sides establishing valuable markets in the other country and creating greater interdependence in manufacturing processes. Economic considerations were not the main determinant of Anglo-German relations; nor were they at the forefront of decision-making in July 1914.

A connection between imperialism and war may seem more plausible than the link with capitalism. Lenin, in particular, made a direct causal link between imperialism and war, arguing in 1916 that the war being fought amongst the Great Powers was an 'imperialist war', to

effect a re-division of colonial territories. Since Germany had a prime interest in acquiring the colonies of other states, this could explain her decision for war in 1914.

Admittedly imperial rivalries had caused friction between the European Powers, as we saw with Franco-German clashes over Morocco in 1905 and 1911. But these issues had not led to war, and the problems seemed to be largely over before 1914. On the other hand, the psychological consequences of imperial rivalry, especially in terms of deepening mutual suspicion and hostility, contributed to the 'mood' of 1914. Imperialism had undoubtedly aroused nationalistic feelings.

Nationalism itself had become a more aggressive force in many of the major states by the turn of the century. This trend was fostered by the popular press and by right-wing pressure groups inspired by Social Darwinism, such as the Pan-German League, which aimed to include all Germans within Germany. The theme 'expand or decline' provided Pan-Germans with an expansionist programme at the expense of other states that was seemingly justified by the laws of nature. Also significant was Pan-Slavism, which provided justification for Russian expansion in the Balkans. Nor were only the Great Powers affected. Pan-Serbism was only one form of Balkan nationalism. Many historians have judged that a primary cause of the war in 1914 was the fact so many nationalisms were unsatisfied, so that political frontiers did not correspond to national groupings.

8 Conclusion

KEY ISSUE What combination of causes best explains the outbreak of war in 1914?

The immediate causes of war are to be found in the July Crisis. This was when the crucial decisions were taken. These decisions were themselves influenced by the rise in international tension from about 1905, which was generated partly by German *Weltpolitik*, partly by the revival of Balkan crises. Further complexity inevitably arises from an examination of the broader political and economic context in which Great Power diplomacy operated. This involves consideration of the more 'impersonal forces': alliances, international anarchy, nationalism, imperialism and capitalism.

The complexity of the debate on war origins indicates that a single-cause explanation is unconvincing. It is possible, however, to identify a number of key factors. There are, perhaps, four that can be regarded as central to an explanation of the 1914 war. They are: the legacy of *Weltpolitik*; the growth of Russian power; the disruptive effect of nationalism in the Balkans; and German policy during the July Crisis. Together, these go a long way towards explaining why the First World War came about.

i) *The legacy of Weltpolitik*

German 'world policy' had failed by 1914 and had harmed Germany's relations with other Powers. Its failure led to a sense of frustration amongst the country's leaders and public opinion at their meagre achievements, especially when contrasted with their high expectations. Germany's overseas empire, for example, was not much bigger in 1914 than it had been in 1896. Hence Germans felt that they had not attained that position in world affairs that their economic strength seemed to warrant. They also felt insecure and indeed 'encircled' by hostile Powers, after the formation of the Triple Entente in 1907. Yet it was German foreign policy after 1905 – for example, the naval race, the crises over Morocco and Bosnia and German expansion into the Near East – that had produced this situation. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Germany's insecurity was largely of her own making.

ii) *The growth of Russian power*

In the decade before 1914 Germans were alarmed not only by Russian population growth but by her army reforms and railway development. By 1916–17, the Germans believed, the Russian army would be a very formidable opponent. As A.J.P. Taylor has pointed out: 'Where most of Europe felt overshadowed by Germany, she saw the more distant Russian shadow.' Hence war in August 1914 may have been Germany's 'last chance'.

iii) *Balkan Nationalism*

Sarajevo was perceived as the 'last straw' as far as Austria-Hungary was concerned. The disruptive force of nationalism in south east Europe now had to be dealt with. Conflicts between the nationalities within Austria-Hungary threatened the state with dislocation, and the appeal of a Great Serbia to Serbs and Croats inside the state threatened total disintegration. Serbia's assertive nationalism was a challenge that Austria-Hungary could not ignore if she was to survive as a Great Power.

iv) *German Policy in July 1914*

Finally, it can be argued that German policy after the murder at Sarajevo was the last ingredient needed to produce war. Either the Germans deliberately started war, as Fischer argued, or Germany took a 'calculated risk' in encouraging the Austrians to retaliate against Serbia. This risk was not guaranteed to produce war. After all, immediate action against Serbia in retaliation for the death of the heir to the Habsburg throne might not have produced Russian retaliation. German leaders should be blamed, however, for their failure to devise 'contingency plans', or diplomatic alternatives, in case

Russia was prepared to fight. By sticking to the Schlieffen plan, a war with Russia inevitably meant a war with France (and probably with Britain) too. In view of the impact of *Weltpolitik* on international relations and of Germany's role in the July Crisis, it seems fairly clear that Germany's responsibility for causing the war was greater than that of any other Power.

v) *Minor factors*

A number of other factors can be considered to have played a subsidiary role in the origins of the war. Four such factors might be: the decline of the 'Concert'; the armaments race; the legacy of imperial rivalries; and the influence of domestic tensions on foreign policy decisions.

It is clear that in 1914 the destructive capacity of modern European states greatly exceeded their ability to adopt a constructive approach towards solving a serious crisis. Hence some mechanism was needed to moderate the pursuit of national self-interest. But the Great Powers failed to act in concert. Secondly, the arms race not only increased expectations of war but also led Germany to believe that she had a better chance of winning a land war in 1914 than in a few years' time. Thirdly, the imperialist rivalries of previous decades had increased animosities, affecting the attitudes not just of governments but also of public opinion and the press, contributing to the warlike mood of July 1914. Finally, the existence of domestic tensions in countries such as Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia in the years prior to 1914 encouraged some sections of opinion, including elements in the ruling circles, to contemplate war as a relief from such tensions and a possible means of avoiding social upheaval. For a time this strategy seemed to work, as patriotism united nations as never before. It proved a delusion all the same, for the Great War led to the collapse of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia.

Working on Chapter 6

Your notes from this chapter should provide you with a clear summary of the main interpretations put forward to explain the First World War. Try to decide which explanations may be combined together and which are incompatible. In the final section we outlined a broad explanation which you may find acceptable – but do not feel that you have to agree with it. Try to come to at least a preliminary decision about what *you* think, and be sure you have good reasons for your view. Do you think that the events are just too complex to support any simple explanation? If so, this idea could form the basis for a very effective critique of some of the major interpretations.