CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88633-8 - The Origins of the First World War
William Mulligan
Excerpt
More information

1 Introduction

The American political commentator and an adviser to President Woodrow Wilson, Walter Lippmann, introduced his book on public opinion with the following story: 'There is an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived. No cable reaches that island and the British mail steamer comes but once in sixty days. In September it had not yet come and the islanders were still talking about the latest newspaper which told about the approaching trial of Madame Caillaux for the shooting of Gaston Calmette. It was therefore with more than usual eagerness that the whole colony gathered at the quay on a day in mid-September to hear from the captain what the verdict had been. They learned that for over six weeks now those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting on behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those of them who were Germans. For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends, when in fact they were enemies.'[1] Lippmann used the story to illustrate the way in which public opinion was shaped by the flow and control of information. It also illustrates that war was not widely expected in the summer of 1914.

From the well-connected diplomat to the agricultural labourers in the field, many Europeans were confident that peace between the great powers, which had been tested by a series of severe crises between 1911 and 1913, would endure. At the beginning of 1914, Arthur Nicolson, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, suggested that the governments of the great powers would have their hands full with domestic affairs. The Home Rule crisis in Britain, the revolving door of government in the French Third Republic, the scandal over military abuse of civilians in Zabern in Germany, and the perennial concerns about the nationalities in the multi-ethnic Habsburg empire meant governments wanted international stability so that they could deal with domestic problems. Only Russia, he thought, had no such internal distractions, but he did

[1] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York, 1922), p. 8.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88633-8 - The Origins of the First World War
William Mulligan
Excerpt
More information

not consider the Tsarist regime a threat to international peace.[2] Whereas Nicolson was writing about the immediate prospects of the international system, others believed that they lived in 'the golden age of security', as Stefan Zweig put it in his memoirs. Peace and stability characterised the permanent condition of life in Europe before 1914, or so many contemporaries believed.

In the town of Mansle, half way between Limoges and La Rochelle in western France, a teacher, speaking on 1 August 1914, the day of mobilisation, following the German declaration of war the previous day, remained confident that war could still be avoided because nobody would be 'so insane and criminal as to inflict such a scourge'. But within days, even hours, perspectives changed. By August 1914, the stability of the pre-war years seemed superficial. War forced contemporaries to confront and stress the severe tensions in the international system before 1914 and the deep roots of the conflict. Frenchmen pointed to the aggression of German foreign policy in the decade before the First World War. The war was the responsibility of the German government and culture. It was no longer an act of lunacy, but the intended outcome of Germany's war party. 'You can feel how different the attitude would have been', noted one teacher, 'if France had initiated a war of provocation and conquest.' The widely accepted view was that France was fighting a war of national defence against German aggression, a view which, in turn, influenced the interpretations of international relations before 1914.[3]

This shift in perspective was repeated around Europe. The initial shock of war was replaced with attempts to understand how the conflict had come about. This change had important consequences for understanding the history of international relations before 1914. That history was recast by contemporaries as a prelude to the outbreak of war. Of course, there had been writers who predicted that war between the great powers was likely, even inevitable. It is striking, however, how dominant this interpretation of international relations before 1914 was to become once war broke out. The narrative stressing compromise, restraint, and cooperation between the great powers, was replaced with one stressing the causes of war and its inevitability. Indeed, this change of perspective was underpinned by a political imperative. Each side had to justify its entry into the war as a defensive act. To do so, they depicted their opponents as the aggressors. The politicisation of the history of pre-1914 international relations lasted until at least the 1960s. The early histories and accounts produced during and immediately after the war have shaped

[2] Nicolson to Bunsen, 19 January 1914, TNA, FO 800/372, fo. 83.
[3] Jean-Jacques Becker, 'That's the Death Knell of Our Boys', in Patrick Fridenson, ed., *The French Home Front, 1914–1918* (Providence and Oxford, 1992), pp. 17–34.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88633-8 - The Origins of the First World War
William Mulligan
Excerpt
More information

the questions that we ask of this period to the present day. It is important to understand the debates that have taken place over almost one hundred years, so that we can look afresh at the history of international relations after 1914. Nationality, political allegiance, and generational shifts are only a selection of factors that have shaped the writings of historians about the causes of the First World War. Even today, almost a century after the war, contemporary concerns shape some of the questions historians ask about the history of international relations in the early twentieth century. The question which has framed almost all research on the history of international relations before 1914 has been 'What caused the First World War?' By privileging the war as the logical culmination of international politics before 1914, the history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has become framed in a narrative that stresses the increased tensions, confrontations, and crises between the great powers. Until recently, characteristics of the international system that did not fit into this narrative scheme were marginal in historical accounts.

The first histories were produced by the belligerent governments in an effort to justify their actions before the tribunal of domestic and world opinion. These histories were found in the famous coloured books, which were rushed into print in August 1914. In the nineteenth century, the British government had come under pressure to publish diplomatic correspondence and to present it to parliament. The result was the publication of what became known as the Blue Books. The Foreign Office made a careful selection, as keen not to embarrass another government as to protect the reputation of Her Majesty's government. Other countries followed suit in the decades before 1914, with each great power choosing its own particular colour – the German White Book, the Austro-Hungarian Red Book, the Russian Orange Book, and the French Yellow Book. There was little pretence that these books constituted a full record of diplomatic correspondence, but they provided the raw material from which the first histories of the July crisis were fashioned. The speed with which such collections were compiled led to mistakes, but there was also a political injunction. At the end of August, the German Foreign Secretary, Gottlieb von Jagow, instructed officials to prepare a publication presenting German policy in a favourable light, which could be issued in a few days, if necessary. James Wyclif Morley, later Sir James Headlam Morley, was told to 'ensure that the salient points were duly emphasised' in the British Blue Book published in late August.[4]

[4] Imanuel Geiss, *Studien über Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Frankfurt, 1972), pp. 113–14; Keith Hamilton, 'The Pursuit of "Enlightened Patriotism": The British Foreign Office and Historical Researchers During the Great War and its Aftermath', in Keith Wilson, ed., *Forging the Collective Memory: Government and International Historians through the Two World Wars* (Providence and Oxford, 1996), p. 195.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88633-8 - The Origins of the First World War
William Mulligan
Excerpt
More information

During the First World War, academics, journalists, and others were mobilised, indeed mobilised themselves, to support the war. They published articles, pamphlets, and books. Most intellectuals adopted a patriotic stance, portraying the war as a defensive one. Many moved away from the intricacies of diplomatic interchange to provide a broader perspective on the origins and meaning of the war. The war was no longer the outcome of the twists and turns of diplomacy of the early twentieth century; it was a world historical event, with deep roots in the conflicting cultural values of the great powers. As with government propaganda, the arguments of the intellectual classes ascribed blame to their opponents and portrayed the war as one of self-defence. For many German academics, the war was a defence of German, indeed European, culture against Russian barbarity and British materialism. In France, the war was depicted as 'the struggle of civilisation against barbarism', as Henri Bergson, perhaps the most influential philosopher in France, put it. A group of Oxford historians defended Britain's declaration of war, on the grounds that Germany was ruled by a militarist caste, which arrogated to itself the right to attack weaker states. British foreign policy was not simply determined by the ugly dictates of the balance of power, but by grander ideals of international law and humanity. War cultures placed great emphasis on the ideological dimension of foreign policy and war aims. This raised the deeper cultural causes of war – German militarism, French revanchism, Russian pan-Slavic ideology, British materialism and commercial interests, and nationalism to name but a few of the issues that remain the subject of historical research.

During and after the war, there was an element of 'patriotic self-censorship' amongst intellectuals. In 1915, Kurt Riezler asked the well-known Munich historian, Karl Alexander von Müller, to write a work, based on carefully selected documents, justifying the case of the German government. Müller, after reviewing the evidence, refused to participate in the project, but he never exposed the responsibility of the German government either during or after the First World War. He went on to become a major critic of the Weimar republic and a supporter of the Nazi party. John Holland Rose, a Cambridge historian working on nineteenth-century European history, was able to gain access to the Foreign Office archives, after Arthur Balfour, Conservative Prime Minister between 1902 and 1905, pointed out that 'a general conception of the German policy, which has led to the present catastrophe is of public importance and Rose would do it well'.[5] In fact, Rose had briefly opposed British intervention in the war, before writing a number of books on the

[5] Hamilton, 'The Pursuit of "Enlightened Patriotism"', p. 196.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88633-8 - The Origins of the First World War
William Mulligan
Excerpt
More information

origins of the war, justifying British policy, another personal example of the rapid shift in perspective in 1914.

Critical voices were rare, but important. In Germany, Prince Lichnowsky, the German ambassador to London between 1912 and 1914, grew increasingly resentful of criticism that he had been duped by Grey and had failed in his mission to keep Britain out of the war. In 1916, he prepared a memorandum, defending his actions during the July crisis and pointing out that he had warned the German government on several occasions that Britain would join in a general European war. He argued that the leaders in Berlin had wilfully disregarded his warnings and ignored the desperate attempts of the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, to resolve the crisis. Lichnowsky was concerned at rehabilitating his reputation amongst a small elite, but, as luck would have it, his memorandum was leaked to a Swedish newspaper. It was seized upon with delight by the press in Allied countries as proof from within the inner circle of German diplomacy of the Reich's guilt for the war. The argument that the French President, Raymond Poincaré, bore considerable responsibility was first articulated within France by pacifists, such as Mathias Morhardt, the Secretary General of the Ligue des droits de l'homme. He argued that Poincaré had progressively surrendered French freedom of manoeuvre to Russia after becoming Premier in early 1912. By 1917, the epithet 'Poincaré-la-guerre' was used by critics of the president. His background – he had left his native Lorraine in 1870 following the Prussian invasion – also made it easy for opponents to suggest that his foreign policy was motivated by a personal commitment to revenge for defeat in the Franco-Prussian war.

While most commentators assigned responsibility to one of the belligerent states, other perspectives emerged during the war, which sought to explain the war in terms of the structures of the pre-war international system. These arguments were no less influenced by political interests. In Britain, E. D. Morel, who had campaigned against the atrocities of the Belgian regime in the Congo in the early twentieth century, turned his outrage on the secret diplomacy of the great powers. Morel set up the Union for Democratic Control. He argued that war was the result of a closed system of diplomacy. The mass of the people, he contended, had not wanted war and the answer to preventing future conflicts between the great powers lay in democratising governments and popular control of democracy. 'A secret and autocratic diplomacy . . . is the greatest obstacle to the emancipation of the peoples from the shackles of militarism and war', argued Morel.[6] The failings of secret

[6] E. D. Morel, *Truth and the War* (London, 1916), pp. 112–13.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88633-8 - The Origins of the First World War
William Mulligan
Excerpt
More information



1. *Blood and Iron*, by Charles Ernest Butler, 1916 (IWM ART 6492).
This painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1917. It offered a clear explanation of the origins of the war, drawing on Bismarck's famous 'blood and iron' speech, to suggest that German military aggression was the cause of the war. The burning of Louvain, which is partly depicted in this painting, reflected the idea that Britain had gone to war to defend international law and morality, against which German militarism had offended.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88633-8 - The Origins of the First World War
William Mulligan
Excerpt
More information

diplomacy, which culminated in the war, were used by President Wilson, to whom Morel had issued an appeal in his book, to advance his case for open diplomacy.

The Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Lenin, also weighed into the debate. He located the origins of the war in the crisis of capitalism and the imperial rivalries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. According to Lenin, the struggle between capitalist groups for control of the world's resources intensified after the economic depression of the 1870s. The free competition, which was the essence of capitalism, had been corrupted by the establishment of monopolies. 'Imperialism', argued Lenin, 'is the monopoly stage of capitalism.' Capitalists, dominating the great powers, partitioned the world, until there was no territory left to divide. 'In the future only redivision is possible', declared Lenin.[7] In this capitalist competition for resources lay the roots of the war. By its nature expansionist, capitalism was incompatible with peace by 1914. Moreover, expansion had only warded off the fundamental crisis of an intrinsically unstable capitalist system.

By the end of the war, therefore, governments and intellectuals had set out numerous interpretations of the origins of the war, including the responsibility of individual states, economic rivalries between the powers, the rise of militarism in Europe before 1914, the tensions generated by popular nationalist movements, and the consequences of secret diplomacy and alliances. These issues continue to generate debate amongst historians to the present day.

The politicisation of the debate on the origins of the war was fuelled by the war guilt clause of the treaty of Versailles, which attributed sole responsibility for the war to the German government. In 1918, even before the ceasefire, it had become clear that responsibility for the outbreak of the war would become a significant political, legal, and moral issue in the peace negotiations. There were voices that warned against raising the issue. 'We must look to the future', Robert Lansing, the American Secretary of State told Edward Smith on 14 November 1918, three days after the armistice, 'even though we forget the immediate demands of justice. Reprisals and reparations are all very well, but will they preserve society from anarchy and give the world an enduring peace? Don't be carried away . . . either by victory or by the natural desire for justice and punishment to be meted out to the criminals. The question is much greater than that.'[8] For a variety of reasons, sometimes contradictory,

[7] V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism: Collected Works*, vol. XXII (Moscow, 1964), pp. 187–304.

[8] Cited in Walter Schwengler, *Völkerrecht, Versailler Vertrag und Auslieferungsfrage. Die Strafverfolgung wegen Kriegsverbrechen als Problem des Friedensschlusses 1919/20* (Stuttgart, 1982), p. 85.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88633-8 - The Origins of the First World War
William Mulligan
Excerpt
More information

article 231 was inserted into the treaty of Versailles, stating that the war had been 'imposed . . . by the aggression of Germany and her allies'. The need to secure reparations, the hopes for a new world order based on international law, and the pressures of public opinion in the Allied countries informed the war guilt clause. While it was simply a statement of what the Allies and Americans believed about the origins of the war, it provided a starting point for a new round of publications and debates on the origins of the war.

The German government had already been busy since the armistice, preparing publications on the July crisis. The situation was complicated by the abdication of the Kaiser and the establishment of a republic in November 1918. There was a temptation for the new republic to distance itself from Imperial Germany and to blame the emperor, his generals, and diplomats for the war. Germany's later defence against the charge of war guilt was almost sunk below the waterline when the new government appointed Karl Kautsky on 18 November to prepare an official selection of documents for publication. Kautsky was a member of the Independent Social Democratic Party and had opposed the war from the outset. Before the war he had condemned the German military and industrialists for promoting the arms race. Kautsky had been appointed to give as full a record as possible of German diplomacy in the July crisis, but the German government thought better of its folly in early 1919. Thereafter, Kautsky's work was hindered. He was denied access to important files, two extra editors were added to his team – Walther Schücking and Maximilian Montgelas, the former a pacifist, the latter a career diplomat – and the publication of the documents was delayed until December 1919. However, damaging extracts of Kautsky's work had already found their way into the public sphere, serving to confirm the Allies' view of German war guilt.

The publication of these documents opened an important new front in the debate about the origins of the war. Governments began to use their archival collections to defend their own pre-war diplomacy and blacken that of their former enemies. The German Foreign Office took the lead, publishing over forty volumes of documents in a series entitled *Die Grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette*. This forced others to follow suit. In 1926, Pierre de Margerie, ambassador to Berlin, told Aristide Briand, the Premier, that France would have to respond to the *Grosse Politik* to win the contest for world opinion. The French and German collections started in 1870, the British in 1898, and the Austrian in 1908, the dates suggesting official understandings of the origins of the war. In Russia, the Soviet government published documents that discredited the Tsarist regime. Not surprisingly, these were translated into German, but not

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88633-8 - The Origins of the First World War
William Mulligan
Excerpt
More information

into English or French. These documents provided a huge amount of material for contemporary diplomatic historians and they continue to be used to the present day.

However, governments were not throwing away control of their historical records. Governments normally chose professional academics to put together the collection of documents, but they relied on the patriotism of the chosen, as well as some limits on access, to present a suitable case. Harold Temperley, a British historian who worked on the *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, noted that 'We cannot, of course, tell the whole truth.'[9] In the German Foreign Office, the War Guilt Section, staffed by diplomats, retained control over the flow of documents to the editors. In any case, the editors were committed to defending the record of German diplomacy before 1914. They shortened certain documents and omitted some damaging material, including the crucial meeting with the Austrian diplomat, Alexander von Hoyos, on 5 July 1914.

The 'war of documents' had at least three significant consequences for the study of the origins of the war. First, it pushed the chronology of the origins of the war back to 1870/1. This raised questions which continue to intrigue historians. The continuities between the wars of German unification and the First World War, the consequences of Bismarck's management of the international system, and the enduring tensions between France and Germany were debates stimulated by a study of the German and French documents. Similarly, Britain's decision to start in 1898 highlighted Anglo-German antagonism as a central theme in the origins of the war. The encirclement of Germany, a common argument during and after the First World War, and the threat from Russia were emphasised in Russian and German documents. Second, the welter of documents from foreign ministries pushed other factors into the background, such as the role of the military, the influence of commercial elites on foreign policy, and the impact of public opinion on the international system. The origins of the First World War, therefore, became inextricably linked with diplomatic history. American historians, such as William Langer, Sidney Bradshaw Fay, and Harry Elmer Barnes, became leading practitioners of diplomatic history and their questioning of the war guilt thesis did much to undermine its credibility. Third, Germany's decision to publish and publish quickly meant that the sole war guilt interpretation came under severe pressure. By the end of the 1920s, academic historians had largely discarded the argument that Germany was solely responsible for the outbreak of the war. This revision of historical interpretations was

[9] Cited in Keith Wilson, 'Introduction: Governments, Historians, and "Historical Engineering"', in Wilson, ed., *Forging the Collective Memory*, p. 17.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88633-8 - The Origins of the First World War
William Mulligan
Excerpt
More information

also part of a wider political process, in which the treaty of Versailles was unravelled, while the former belligerents, Germany, France, and Britain sought to demobilise war cultures in the late 1920s. Jules Isaac, the general-inspector of public education in France, spoke of the need for a 'moral Locarno', and he organised international conferences on the origins of the war.

By the eve of the Second World War, there was, as Mombauer has put it, a 'comfortable consensus'. Within this consensus, there was room for disagreement, but it was generally accepted that all great powers had had some share in the origins of the war, that the forces at work – the alliance system, the arms race, nationalism – were beyond the control of the statesmen of 1914, and that war had not been planned by any one person, institution, or state. David Lloyd George, British Chancellor in 1914 and later Prime Minister between 1916 and 1922, famously declared in his memoirs that Europe had 'slithered into war'. As one Habsburg critic of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, Prince Lajos Windischgraetz noted, politicians had come to see the war 'as a tragic event'.[10] It was an event that lay beyond personal responsibility.

The Second World War both marginalised interest in the First World War and also shaped new perspectives on the previous global conflict. On the Allied side, two distinctive narratives of German history emerged, which stressed its militaristic culture as the root of European upheaval for almost a century. This militaristic culture was embodied in the Prussian state, which was abolished by Allied decree in 1947. In the Soviet interpretation, militarism was associated with capitalism, so that the two world wars were the product of a capitalist class system, which, in Germany, was underpinned by military power. As a latecomer to the capitalist struggle for empire, Germany had adopted very aggressive methods in its conduct of foreign policy, leading to the two world wars. In the liberal interpretation, favoured in Britain and the United States, Prussian militarism and foreign policy aggression was the product of a flawed historical development, during which constitutional liberties and parliamentary democracy had been fatally compromised by an elite military and agrarian class, whose power was rooted in Prussia. Academic works, including Luigi Albertini's three-volume history of the origins of the war and the incisive history of Germany by A. J. P. Taylor, pointed to the continuities in German history between the nineteenth century and the Second World War. The Second World War seemed to confirm German responsibility for the First World War.

[10] Gergely Romsics, *Myth and Remembrance: The Dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in the Memoir Literature of the Austro-Hungarian Political Elite* (New York, 2006), pp. 30–1.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org