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On that War

*Reflections on a Century of Historiography
on the Origins of the Great War*



Aspekt Publishers

*'Only in the defence of justice
is extremism not a vice.*

*Only in promoting honesty is
moderation not a virtue.'* (Marc Eyskens)

1.

Introduction

‘The time of the great debates about the origins of the Great War is over,’ German historian Oliver Janz wrote in *Der Große Krieg*, a book published in 2013, on the eve of the centenary commemorations of the Great War. But Australian historian Christopher Clark invigorated those debates with his book *The Sleepwalkers*. He attributed most of the responsibility for the outbreak of the war not to the German Empire (Germany for short) and Austria-Hungary, but to France, Russia and Serbia.

In Western Europe, especially in English, and to a lesser degree in German, books are still being published on that subject. This is made clear in reviews in magazines, such as *Journal of Modern History* or *Historische Zeitschrift*, which from time to time present a critical synthesis of recent publications.¹ Hardly anything of that kind is to be found in history magazines in French or Dutch.

1 Samuel Williamson Jr. and Ernest R. May, *An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914*, in *Journal of Modern History*, 79, 2007, pp. 335-387; Sönke Neitzel, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und kein Ende*, in *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd. 301, 2015, pp. 121-148.

Clark, in his turn, encountered contrary arguments from German historians such as Gerd Krumeich, Anika Mombauer and Volker Berghahn. The latter concluded his contribution, *Origins*, in *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (2014), as follows:

There can be little doubt that the debate is likely to continue on what share of the responsibility not only Russia, but also other powers have to bear in the origins of the First World War. However, as this chapter has been arguing, these shares will be secondary in comparison to the aggressive diplomacy and armament policies that the German monarchy, with Vienna increasingly in its wake, pursued from the turn of the century, and that for the reasons examined here, culminated in the idea of the Central Powers launching a preventive war in 1914.²

Sönke Neitzel described the work of Krumeich and Mombauer, in the already mentioned review, as ‘classical’; because ‘Germany is in the centre of their analysis and the actions of the other powers are interpreted as reactions on those actions.’ The same can be said of Berghahn.

Those three historians walk in the footsteps of compatriot Fritz Fischer. In two books in the 1960’s, he put an end to ‘the lie that Germany was innocent as to the outbreak of the war.’³ From the first book, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1961), is the quotation:

2 Volker Berghahn, *Origins*, in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, 1, Cambridge UP, 2014, p. 38.

3 Heinrich August Winkler, in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 1980, p. 732.

It must be repeated: given the tenseness of the world situation in 1914 – a condition for which Germany's world policy, which had already led to three dangerous crises (those of 1905, 1908 and 1911), was in no small measure responsible – any limited or local war in Europe directly involving one great power must inevitably carry with it the imminent danger of a general war. As Germany willed and coveted the Austrian-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 (einen erheblichen Teil) of the historical responsibility for the outbreak of general war in 1914. This responsibility is not diminished by the fact that at the last moment Germany tried to arrest the march of destiny, for her efforts to influence Vienna were due exclusively to the threat of British intervention and, even so, they were half-hearted, belated and immediately revoked.⁴

A few of Fischer's assertions in that book have since been met. Volker Berghahn in 1973 demonstrated that Germany did not actually 'plan' a war from 1912 onwards. The first Austrian historian who seriously studied the July Crisis, Manfred Rauchensteiner, wrote that Germany did not push Austria-Hungary towards war; the Dual Monarchy decided separately to go to war.⁵

4 Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18*, Droste Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1964 (3rd edition), p. 104.

5 Volker Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914*, 1973. Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Toppeladlers*, 1993. Both discussed in S. Williamson Jr., o.c., pp. 355, 359.

Marc Trachtenberg, in his turn, established that Fritz Fischer paraphrased accounts of discussions in a harder way, ‘making’ Germany warlike by the way.⁶

Already in the 1960’s there were critiques of Fischer; and in reaction he changed the words ‘substantial share’ in the above quotation into ‘decisive’ share (*entscheidenden Teil*), in reprints of *Griff nach der Weltmacht* from 1967 on.

In his second work, *Krieg der Illusionen. Die Deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (1969), he even went a step further by ‘representing the whole preceding history of the Great War as planned action.’ In doing so, according to Sönke Neitzel, Fischer ‘presupposes in July 1914 criminal intention and decisions by the leaders of Germany, as part of a unique path (*Sonderweg*) from Frederick the Great to Hitler’.⁷

Heinrich Winkler, whose history of modern Germany was well received, thought that ‘Germany did not, according to the now prevailing opinion, differ from the great European nations to an extent that would justify speaking of a “unique German path”’.⁸

In the 1967 English translation of Fischer’s first book, one can read ‘a substantial share’. The French translation of 1970 chose the latter version: ‘la part décisive’.

Fischer realised that he only told the story from a German point of view. He therefore wrote in the introduction of *Griff nach der Weltmacht*:

6 Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History. A Guide to Method*, Princeton UP, 2006, p. 69.

7 S. Neitzel, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 131.

8 Heinrich August Winkler, *Germany. The Long Road West. Vol. 1: 1789-1933*, Oxford UP, 2000, p. 1.

*It will be for scholars of the future, when the archives of these powers [of the Entente] are opened, to trace the origin and development of their war aims. Viewed in this light, the present book is simply a contribution towards a general appreciation of the war aims policies of all belligerents.*⁹

In the English translation (1967) Fischer's foreword is present; and James Joll even repeats Fischer's appeal in his 'Introduction to the English edition'. The French translation (1970), however, does not include the author's foreword, nor does the introduction's author mention Fischer's appeal.

Fischer himself – and this speaks in his favour – repeated that appeal in *Krieg der Illusionen* (1969):

*Once must be made clear whether France and Russia had objectively traceable plans for a war of aggression against the Dreibund [Triple Alliance].*¹⁰

Also, in a later work, Fischer made clear that he 'only dealt with the German share' (*nur den Deutschen Anteil*)¹¹ of the story. So, respecting the restrictions Fischer put on his own work, one cannot rely on his work to support 'sole responsibility' or even 'main responsibility' of Germany, as long as the war aims of all the main belligerents are not known.

9 Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, p. 14

10 Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen, Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914*, Droste Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1969, p. 680.

11 Fischer, *Der Stellenwert der Ersten Weltkriegs in der Kontinuitätsproblematik der deutschen Geschichte*, in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 1979, p. 25.

It was a long time before an academic Russian or French answer was given to Fischer's appeal. In 2011, twelve years after Fischer's death, Sean McMeekin published his study on *The Russian Origins of the First World War*; and only in 2015 appeared *La Grande Illusion* by Georges-Henri Soutou. Both books were given little attention in history magazines. I'll come back to that. For the moment, I translate one sentence from *La Grande Illusion*: 'the Russian and French chiefs of staff agreed upon a very aggressive strategy against Germany in case of war.'¹²

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At the centenary commemoration of the Armistice on 11 November 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron addressed 72 world leaders, at the grave of the Unknown Soldier in Paris, with the following words: 'Patriotism is precisely the opposite of nationalism. Nationalism is its betrayal.' He probably thought that everyone understood the difference in meaning between 'defensive patriotism' and 'aggressive nationalism'. The question remains, however. Is it always that easy to make the difference?

Many media (For instance, Belgian VRT and German ZDF) focused on that statement, although Macron not only warned about 'the resurrection of the old demons', but also against 'new ideologies that manipulate religions'.

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12 Georges-Henri Soutou, *La Grande Illusion. Quand la France perdait la paix 1914-1920*, Tallandier, Paris, 2015, p. 28.

I move from the international to the national scene. The centenary commemorations in Belgium did not pass unnoticed. There were, for instance, national commemorations in Liège; but because Belgium is a federal state, there were also separate regional commemorations in the Dutch speaking and French speaking communities. I remember a good documentary series, *Brave Little Belgium*, on Flemish television and a fictional series *In Vlaamse Velden* (*In Flanders' Fields*). Most prominent was probably the province of *West-Vlaanderen* (West Flanders), which was the only Belgian province to be divided for four years into an occupied and a free zone. The provincial ad hoc commission *Gone West* organised exhibitions, spectacles and concerts, which I followed somewhat from a distance. I did not disagree with it; but I thought that the focus was too much on commemoration, and did not stimulate historical research.

At the start of the centenary commemorations in 2014, a lot of books were published about the 'July Crisis of 1914', the month between the outrage at Sarajevo on 28 June and the declaration of war by Austria-Hungary upon Serbia, precisely a month later. Not so in Belgium. A few books were reprinted; but none of them paid any notice to the responsibility issue, except for *De Grootte Klassenoorlog 1914-1918* (*The Great Class War 1914-1918*) by Jacques R. Pauwels. The author saw the war as 'a vertical war between countries and a horizontal one between classes.' This book offers us a good frame of reference; but it does not explain why one capitalist nation started the war and the other did not.

In the *In Flanders' Fields Museum* at Ieper (Ypres) the question is only briefly mentioned on a board dealing with the existence of the Entente and the Triple Alliance. When I asked the coordinator of the museum, Piet Chielens, about this, he told me that 'this was not important. It's about preventing war in the future.' I understand this a little, from an artistic point of view: Make clear, by all means possible, how terrible it was and the lust to start anew will vanish by itself. But, from a historical point of view, I consider the answer to that question extremely important; because our perception of the past determines our future decisions. If that perception is based on incomplete or even wrong conclusions, we are likely to continue making wrong decisions in the future.

Belgium was the only neutral country that was drawn into this 'boiling cauldron' against its will. As such, it is well placed to help find an answer to this question. But as the authorities don't seem to realise the necessity of this, we depend on individual researchers – for instance, a retired history teacher - to shed some light on the enormous amount of publications concerning this subject. The present paper is not based on archival research; the field to explore is too vast. It is based on a critical analysis of secondary sources, of which the authors have already made that necessary research. There are still a few jigsaw pieces waiting to be put together.