

Chunyang Ding #108

Discuss the role of Germany and one other state in the outbreak of the First World War.

The First World War was the most devastating armed conflict humanity had faced at that point. At its conclusion, blame and responsibility was delegated to Germany, the loser of the conflict, through Article 231 in the Treaty of Versailles in order to justify high reparations. However, later historians reconsidered this attribution of blame in the orthodox interpretation, while others have proposed their own theories. Understanding the outbreak of the Great War is immensely beneficial for historians to understanding that time period, and to prevent future conflicts. Careful observations of the role that Germany and France took in the period of time leading up to the First World War reveals a “war of circumstance” as evaluated by the domestic issues of each nation, empire and territory claims, and the role of individuals. The word “outbreak” is challenging, as it could imply either the immediate triggers or the long term alliances in Europe. For this paper, the outbreak of war will have the scope of domestic and foreign policies of either country that prepares the nation for war.

Germany and France were countries that have struggled in the past, most recently in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. During the conflict, Germany won the rights to Alsace-Lorraine, and from that point, France’s primary foreign policy goal was to win back the land. On the other side of the border, Germany was determined to keep France isolated diplomatically and militarily. Because of the struggle for land, Germany and France engaged in separate competing alliances: Germany in the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy and France in the Triple Entente with Britain and Russia to balance power in Europe. These alliances were formed for self-defense, but became a major role in the outbreak of World War I. To assert that either Germany or France engaged in the alliance system for aggressive purposes is misleading, as the original

intentions of the alliance system does not support this hypothesis. However, the alliance systems did lead to the belief that war was a necessity. As the culture grew had increased jingoism and nationalism, the alliance system provided a reason to fight on an international level. Therefore, the self-preservation instincts of both Germany and France catalyzed the Great War, as preserving the integrity of their own states inadvertently played a major role in the outbreak of war.

However, World War I was not driven by domestic issues alone. The empires of Europe had major overseas and colonial territories, which led to foreign policy conflicts for Germany. Because Germany was not united until 1871, they did not have any large collections of territories. This led to the development of the Weltpolitik plan, which had three goals: Develop the German navy, create colonies with imperial power, and use foreign policy to strengthen authoritative rule. In essence, the Weltpolitik plan was a combination of the jingoism that existed at the time and to also satisfy domestic issues. Germany was emboldened and took stronger stances at key confrontations in Eastern Europe, including at the Agadir crisis and in the Bosnian crisis. All of these events heightened European tensions, placing Germany at a more at blame position for World War I. However, France is not blameless in this respect. In order to protect colonial territories, France decided to engage in the entente agreement, posing a threat to the central powers. Rather than choosing to diplomatically relieve tensions, they were already committed to fight, which can be seen as a rash decision. Colonial motivations therefore played a larger role for both France and Germany when determining foreign policies for the rest of Europe, leading to both nations contributing to tensions that caused World War II.

No discussion of the role of France and Germany is complete without analysis of the “blank cheques” issued by France to Russia and by Germany to Austria. During the July Crisis, it

is often argued that France's blank cheque to Russia was to deter continental fighting, while Germany's blank cheques to Austria was to provoke warfare. However, this is an unfair analysis. Germany was not intending to provoke all of Europe when it issued the blank cheque. Instead, they were taking a calculated gamble on creating a defensive war to alleviate tensions in Europe. Recalling that jingoism and the glorification of war were in full swing at the time, this blank cheques should not be seen as intentionally provoking the international conflict that soon follows. On the other hand, France's blank cheque to Russia is more conflicting. France clearly has an interested in keeping the "Eastern Question" out of German hands, so their gamble in issuing the blank cheque was for the overwhelming power of the Russian military to prevent continued German troop movements. However, their promise also introduced the entire entente alliance into the previously localized conflict. Therefore, both France and Germany took calculated gambles in issuing blank cheques. Both countries did not intend for the blank cheques to cause continental war, but miscalculations led to these actions playing a very large role in the outbreak of World War I.

Vital to all of the foreign policy decisions stated above are the people behind the decisions. For Germany, early foreign policy decisions were dominated by Otto von Bismark, a German chancellor who ruled the country with an iron fist. His policies dealt primarily with maintaining the peace for German borders, creating policies that reassured Europe that Germany was satisfied with its borders. However, he fell out of favor in 1890 and was replaced by the much more imperial Kaiser Wilhelm II, implementing the larger policy of Weltpolitik as discussed above. He also appointed Chancellor Bethmann Holweg, who has been revealed to have had a negative view of the Balkans due to diplomatic encirclement. These major figures are the key focus of the Fischer thesis, published in "Germany's Aims in the First World War",

which attributes Germany with the chief responsibility for the outbreak of World War I. His analysis focused on the role that these “architects” of war played rather than of the role of the entire nation. His thesis does not have enough nuance, and it can be argued that a single person is not sufficient to attribute a nation’s role. Fischer reads parts of history backwards, attempting to find an origin for Hitler’s rise in World War II, resulting in an incorrect analysis of Germany’s role in the First World War. On the other hand, French diplomats also took a rather aggressive stance. Delcasse, the French foreign affairs minister, misinterpreted British talks and claimed an Anglo-Franco military alliance against Germany. However, the National Assembly for France quickly rejected Delcasse’s opinion, replacing him with a more peaceful man. This was the trend for French diplomacy: Although there were talks of war, most decisions were led by the National Assembly, resulting in less rash statements and more stable foreign policy. Therefore, individual statesman cannot determine a country’s role in World War II.

Through this paper, we have investigated how the role of France and Germany have shifted and changed over the course of events leading up to the First World War. These two countries were among the most devastated by the fighting, but both countries have roughly equal roles in causing the outbreak of war. Over time, France and Germany play increasingly risky gambles diplomatically and militarily, causing increased tensions in the European stage. Analysis of these countries follows the orthodox interpretation, as complex and unpredictable factors led to the outbreak of the war, causing every nation to have played a moderate role in the event. No country intentionally pursued war much more than another country.

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