

Goodbye to all that (again)?

The Fischer thesis, the new revisionism and the meaning of the First World War

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One hundred years ago, on 4 August 1914 to be exact, my motherland Great Britain declared war on my fatherland Germany. The German army had invaded neutral Belgium with the intention of crushing first France and then Russia and eliminating both as Great Powers 'for all imaginable time', as the German Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg put it in his September Programme in 1914. Just 25 years later, on 3 September 1939, Britain declared war on Germany a second time when Hitler, hand in glove with Stalin, fell upon Poland, so in effect restoring Germany's 1914 common frontier with Russia in the east.

My Scottish grandfather served in the British Army in the First World War, surviving the sinking of his ship by a German U-boat off the Algerian coast to stand as a Labour candidate for parliament in three general elections in the 1920s. My father was in the Wehrmacht's counter-espionage service, the Abwehr, in Hungary and survived the advance of the Red Army to become the headmaster of a large grammar school in Frankfurt am Main in the American zone. And I did my National Service in the Royal Air Force and was stationed in occupied Germany before going up to Cambridge to read history at Corpus Christi College. Three generations, three survivors of the Anglo-German agony of the first half of the twentieth century. In 1964 I was appointed to the University of Sussex as lecturer in the School of European Studies, whose founding dean was none other than the Olympian figure of Martin Wight, whose distinguished contribution to the study of international relations we are commemorating in this series of lectures. It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that I should have the privilege of giving this talk in Martin Wight's honour on the centenary of the seminal catastrophe of the First World War, the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of war in 1939, and the 25th anniversary of the reunification of a democratic Germany within the framework of a peaceful Europe.

It does not take much imagination to see the First and Second World Wars as two acts in the same drama. The immediate cause of war in 1939 might have been different from that in 1914, but with the German attack on France in May 1940 followed by the invasion of Soviet Russia in June 1941 the similarities between the two conflicts became unmistakable. It was, as General de Gaulle remarked in

* This is a revised text of the 39th Martin Wight Lecture, given at the University of Sussex on 6 November 2014.

1940 in one of his first speeches from London, as if the Schlieffen Plan had been put into operation all over again. In both cases we see a German Reich bent on the conquest of Europe—and the determination of the other nations, led first by Britain, then by the peoples of the ‘bloodlands’ of Eastern Europe and finally by the United States, to resist such subjugation, however terrible the cost. These were no ordinary wars, but, as Winston Churchill observed at the beginning of what rapidly became known as the Great War, ‘a struggle between nations for life or death’.¹

Yet this interpretation has recently been challenged by a wave of revisionism, exemplified by the astronomical success—especially in Germany, where it has sold many hundreds of thousands of copies—of the book *The Sleepwalkers* by our colleague Christopher Clark.² He and the other revisionists largely exonerate the Kaiser’s Germany from responsibility for the First World War. While claiming to argue that war broke out by accident, with no one government more at fault than any other, in practice Clark places the blame to a large extent on little Serbia, followed by Russia, France and Britain in that order, presenting Austria-Hungary as doing its genuine best to avoid war and simply omitting altogether the evidence of any German intention to bring the war about.

This is a revival of an interpretation expressed in Lloyd George’s dictum of the interwar years that in 1914 ‘the nations of Europe slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war’. By the late 1920s, the Churchillian belief that Britain had been right to enter the war to defend its vital interests and those of the rest of Europe from German aggression had given way in Britain to a mood of disillusionment fuelled by the writings of John Maynard Keynes, the war poets and Robert Graves’s book *Goodbye to all that*. It had all been a pointless waste, and the carnage had only gone on for four and a half years because no one had known how to stop it. In a tragic twist, this British mood accorded perfectly with the insistence of the German right in the Weimar Republic on a revision of the punitive Treaty of Versailles on the grounds that its claim that Germany had deliberately brought about war in 1914 was nothing but a *Kriegsschuldlüge*, a war guilt lie. An uneasy consensus emerged; but the consensus of the interwar years was based not on any research but on wishful thinking—pacifist on one side, revanchist on the other. Serious research into the causes of the Great War then became impossible with Hitler’s rise to power when critical books were burned, democratic historians forced into exile (and worse), and British historians—the tiny handful with knowledge of the language and the ability to decipher the German *Schrift*—lost all hope of gaining access to the German archives.

As far as German intentions in and before 1914 are concerned, then, the *new* revisionism seems to me to be taking us back to the state of knowledge of the interwar period. Politically, of course, this is nowhere near as dangerous as was the campaign against the ‘war guilt lie’ which acted as a rallying cry of the nationalist right in

¹ Winston Churchill to Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg, 29 Oct. 1914, cited in *The Times*, 30 Oct. 2014.

² Christopher Clark, *The sleepwalkers: how Europe went to war in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012); publ. in German as *Die Schlafwandler. Wie Europa in den Ersten Weltkrieg zog* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2013).

the Weimar Republic, for Germany is today a stable and peaceful democracy. But in terms of scholarship I find the new revisionism dismaying, as it involves the sidelining or suppression of so much of the knowledge we have gained through painstaking research over the past 50 years. That evidence, collected, sifted and argued over, had come to be accepted by the international community of historians as 'the German paradigm': that is to say, as the overarching interpretation placing the German problem at the centre of both world wars. So the *new* revisionism does more than simply challenge the view of the continuity between the two world wars; it raises fundamental questions about the nature of historical evidence itself. Once proof of German plans to unleash war in 1914 with the intention of dominating the Continent had been discovered, were historians still free to assert that no such intention existed and that war had broken out by accident after all? Is the question of Germany's responsibility for the First World War, once so toxic, simply a 'blame game', as Christopher Clark has called it? Is one interpretation as good as any other, the evidence to be used on a take it or leave it basis? Or is historical evidence more akin, say, to Galileo's observation of the circular motion of the moons of Jupiter, incontrovertible proof, however faint, of a henceforth irrepressible truth? With this rather bold cosmological analogy I am referring, as you will realize, to the discoveries made in the archives in the late 1950s by the Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer: discoveries that changed our perception of the First World War for ever—or so we thought.

Let me tell you the inside story of how the truth came to light in the aftermath of the Second World War, highlighting the contribution we at this university have played and continue to play. General Patton's army, sweeping through southern Germany (and, incidentally, liberating my family and me in Thuringia), came upon the records of the Auswärtiges Amt, the German foreign office, and took them across the Atlantic to Virginia. The British discovered the German naval records in the Harz Mountains and brought them over to London. The files of the German civilian government were discovered by the Red Army and transported to Moscow. The Americans and the British made copies and eventually returned the originals to the Federal Archive at Koblenz, the Military Archive in Freiburg and the Foreign Office, then in Bonn and now in Berlin.³ So these files were becoming available just when I was beginning my own research at Cambridge in 1961. Much more difficult was gaining access to the files that had finished up in Moscow and were returned not, of course, to the Federal Republic but to the communist German Democratic Republic, by that time behind the Berlin Wall. It was only after several failed attempts that I was given permission to work on those records located in Potsdam and Merseburg.

In the course of my three-month research visit to the GDR in the summer of 1963 I met several young scholars from the West who were to become lifelong friends and whose work profoundly influenced my own as, together, we explored the large white expanses on the map of imperial Germany. Among them were

³ This intriguing story is well told in Astrid M. Eckert, *The struggle for the files: the Western Allies and the return of the German archives after the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Volker Berghahn, now the doyen of German history in the United States, and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, Helmut Böhme and Imanuel Geiss, who were working closely with Fritz Fischer in Hamburg. Fischer's sensational book *Griff nach der Weltmacht* had just then revealed the extent of Germany's war aims throughout the First World War, strongly suggesting that it had sought war in 1914 in order to attain those aims.⁴ It was through Hartmut Pogge that I met Fritz Fischer in Oxford in 1963. At a reception that evening the impish, always mischievous historian A. J. P. Taylor asked me what I thought of Fischer's book and told me, before I could answer, that it reminded him of a Mahler symphony in the way it just went on and on repeating the same old thing. But then Taylor would say that, wouldn't he? There were not many laughs in *Griff nach der Weltmacht*.

Not long after my own appointment to Sussex, Hartmut Pogge came to join me here, and so for a number of years Sussex University was recognized as a centre of excellence for the study of imperial Germany and the First World War. In 1968, at the height of the controversy surrounding his book on German aims in the Great War, which had just been translated into English, we invited Fischer to give a lecture at Sussex. He arrived a little late and, to our dismay, announced that he would first need to have a sleep. When we protested that a packed auditorium was waiting to hear his talk, he reassured us that it would only be for five minutes—he had learnt to nap like this in the war, all he needed was for a couple of cushions to be laid on the floor of my office in the Arts Building and he'd be as right as rain. A few moments later the three of us were striding along the corridor to the lecture theatre, where he gave a magisterial survey of Germany's aims in the two world wars, stressing their similarities but also pointing to the differences.⁵ Our close relationship continued until Fischer's death in December 1999. I was proud to accept his offer to deputize for him at Hamburg University in the turbulent summer semester of 1973, and in the following year he was back at Sussex to receive an honorary doctorate of letters.

Fischer's revelation of the geographical similarities between Hitler's policies in Eastern Europe and the terms imposed on the Bolsheviks by Hindenburg and Ludendorff at the 'forgotten peace' of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 came as no great surprise. The shock came with his discovery in the Potsdam archive of Bethmann Hollweg's war aims programme of 9 September 1914.⁶ The 'general aim of the war', so this document began, was '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.' An indemnity was to be imposed on France so large as to prevent it from maintaining an army for 20 years. It was to cede the Vosges Mountains, the only coal and ore field it possessed, and a coastal strip from

⁴ Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1961).

⁵ An extract from the lecture is printed in John C. G. Röhl, ed., *From Bismarck to Hitler: the problem of continuity in German history* (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 146–9.

⁶ Fritz Fischer, *Germany's aims in the First World War* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), pp. 103–6.

Dunkirk to Boulogne. Taking up a pet idea of the Kaiser's, Bethmann suggested that that coastal strip should undergo what we would now call ethnic cleansing, with the French population being replaced by German veterans. Belgium would be partitioned, with some provinces incorporated into Germany, and Antwerp and the Channel ports given over to the imperial navy. In the east, Poland and several other huge areas of Russia were to be turned into German vassal states. Economically, the entire continent would come under German control.

Churchill (along with Lord Haldane, once its most pro-German member), Sir Edward Grey and others in the British cabinet were surely right to insist that Britain could not stand aside to allow France to be crushed. The seizure of Antwerp and the Channel ports, the settlement of German veterans as farmers along the coast facing Dover, the reduction of France to a dependent satrap without an army and without coal, the entire continent from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, from Finland to Malta, united in a German *Mitteleuropa*, a ring of German satellite states from Estonia to the Caucasus, a railway line that was to stretch via Baghdad to Egypt and the Persian Gulf, agents on their way to revolutionize the world of Islam and ensure, as the Kaiser put it on 30 July 1914, that 'England shall at least lose India', German warships and U-boats in Brest and Bordeaux, Madeira, the Azores and the Cape Verde islands, the Belgian Congo in German hands—in such a world, proud Great Britain would have become an insignificant and impoverished island in the Atlantic. Far from being a 'false war', as Niall Ferguson has claimed, the First World War was, just like the Second, for Britain too a fight for life or death.⁷

Bethmann Hollweg had begun to formulate his so-called September Programme in mid-August 1914, perhaps even earlier. The implication seemed to be that Germany had initiated the war in order to attain hegemony in Europe and super-power status on the world stage. In the wake of Fischer's revelations, the hundreds of diplomatic documents generated by the crisis of July 1914 were collated and scrutinized again for clues of German intentionality.⁸ What was striking was the casual manner in which Germany's momentous decision to support Austria-Hungary in a war against Serbia had been taken. The Kaiser was sailing at Kiel when he was told of Franz Ferdinand's assassination. He ordered the regatta to continue, spent the night on his yacht before returning to Potsdam, and then he allowed six days to elapse before scribbling the words 'now or never', 'the Serbs must be eliminated *and* that right *soon!*' on a report from Vienna.⁹ The Supreme War Lord's marginal note acted as a welcome signal to the army, the navy and the statesmen in the Wilhelmstrasse that 'this time' the monarch would not 'topple

⁷ Niall Ferguson's book *The pity of war* (London: Allen Lane, 1998) has been translated into German as *Der falsche Krieg. Der Erste Weltkrieg und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999).

⁸ The authoritative edition of the diplomatic documents in German was that by Imanuel Geiss, ed., *Julikerise und Kriegsausbruch 1914*, 2 vols (Hanover: Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschehen, 1963–4).

⁹ For an account of Kaiser Wilhelm II's role in the crisis of July 1914 see John C. G. Röhl, 'The curious case of the Kaiser's disappearing war guilt', in Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson, eds, *An improbable war? The outbreak of World War I and European political culture before 1914* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 75–92.

over'.¹⁰ When the Austrian envoy Count Hoyos arrived in Berlin with two letters asking for support should the planned attack on Serbia lead to war with Russia, Under-Secretary Arthur Zimmermann told him that in Berlin's estimation an escalation into a European war was a 90 per cent near-certainty if Austria 'did something' against Serbia.¹¹ Yet support for the invasion of Serbia was forthcoming without further discussion as if it had been a foregone conclusion.

On 5 July 1914 Kaiser Wilhelm assured the Austrian ambassador Count Szögyény that Germany would stand by Austria-Hungary if Russia declared war, which meant, since Germany's only extant war strategy was the Schlieffen Plan as modified by Moltke, war against France too. That afternoon Bethmann Hollweg, Zimmermann and the leaders of the army and navy were summoned one by one to the palace; all agreed and said they were ready. This is how the notorious 'blank cheque', handing over control of the crisis to Vienna, was issued. One can understand German historians even today wringing their hands at the obvious disconnect between the offhand manner in which the decision was made and the horrendous global consequences that followed. Pandora's box was burst well and truly open.¹² Or was this perhaps not the moment of decision at all, but rather the putting into effect of a plan agreed long before?

The diplomatic and military documents show that Bethmann Hollweg's concern in the July crisis was not to avoid war but to ensure that war, if it came, would be fought under the most favourable conditions.¹³ To that end he had to represent Germany as the victim of attack by Russia, much as Bismarck had painted France as the aggressor in the Ems Telegram in 1870. Bethmann hoped thereby to achieve three vital goals: the German people would be ready to fight a supposedly defensive war, Germany's ally Italy would join in the fray, and—the greatest prize of all—Britain would remain neutral. The first of these goals was attained beyond his wildest dreams; but it was the only one.

In his paradoxical effort to provoke a defensive war, Bethmann had to act as if Germany had no foreknowledge of the Austrian plan to attack Serbia—a barefaced lie. So early on 6 July, at the Chancellor's insistence, the Kaiser set off on his annual cruise up the coast of Norway. Other leaders went on holiday too—the Foreign Secretary on his honeymoon, the Chief of the General Staff to take the waters (the second time in as many months) at Karlsbad, Tirpitz to his place in the Black Forest, the Quartermaster-General Count Waldersee to a family funeral, the Kaiser's brother Prince Heinrich to St Moritz and two of his sisters to Eastbourne. Bethmann himself retired to his estate of Hohenfinow, though he made a few surreptitious trips to the office in Berlin.

¹⁰ Kaiser Wilhelm II to Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, 6 July 1914, cited in Fritz Fischer, *War of illusions: German policies from 1911 to 1914* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), p. 478.

¹¹ Alexander Hoyos, 'Meine Mission nach Berlin', appendix to Fritz Fellner, 'Die "Mission Hoyos"', in Wilhelm Alf, ed., *Deutschlands Sonderung von Europa 1862–1945* (Frankfurt am Main, Bern and New York: Verlag Peter Lang, 1984), p. 311. An English translation of the key passages is included in Annika Mombauer, ed., *The origins of the First World War: diplomatic and military documents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 190–1.

¹² See Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2014).

¹³ For the collection of the 428 most pertinent international documents brought together in English translation, see Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War*.

Apart from living the lie that no one in Berlin had any inkling of the conflict about to unfold, Bethmann's motive in sending the Kaiser packing was to prevent him from 'toppling over' when things got critical, as he had done on previous occasions, most recently in 1912. True, he would have to be back in Berlin to sign the mobilization order and the declaration of war, but until then it was best to have him out of the way. As that moment approached, he cynically suggested, the imperial yacht could perhaps circle around in the Baltic Sea to be closer to home? In fact, and very tellingly, the *Hohenzollern*, instead of sailing to the North Cape as usual, dropped anchor at Balholm just north of Bergen, from where it could be back in Kiel within two days.¹⁴

Kaiser Wilhelm had on several occasions over the previous year urged the Austrians to attack Serbia without delay.¹⁵ In July 1914 he may well have hoped that the Serbian crisis would end without general war, while securing Austria's preponderance in the Balkans and thereby a massive shift in the balance of power in favour of the Central Powers. But he was just as happy to see the escalation of the crisis into a European war, for which the army, after the increase in its strength in 1913, was now fully prepared. However, he was more afraid than any of his advisers of Britain's involvement, and it is interesting to speculate whether he would have tried to prevent all-out war had he remained in Berlin throughout July. We do know that Bethmann and Jagow, the Foreign Secretary, initially withheld from the Kaiser the dispatches from Prince Lichnowsky in London warning that Britain would never countenance the 'crushing' of France, and when he became aware of the danger on his return to Berlin, Wilhelm did indeed propose that Austria should 'halt in Belgrade' in the hope of preventing a further escalation.¹⁶ But Bethmann saw to it that the proposal was delayed until the Austrian bombardment of Belgrade had begun, and the Prussian War Minister von Falkenhayn told the Supreme War Lord to his face that the ball was now rolling and not even he could stop it.¹⁷

Wilhelm was in any case reassured on receiving a message from his brother Prince Heinrich, who had left his family on holiday in Switzerland and turned up in London on 25 July 1914.¹⁸ From there he sent a note to his cousin George V asking for a meeting, and on Sunday morning, 26 July, the two cousins spoke briefly at Buckingham Palace. As Heinrich reported to his brother, the King, in a hurry to get to church, had said: 'We shall try & keep out of it, we shall probably remain neutral.' Wilhelm's relief was palpable. 'I have the word of a king, and that

¹⁴ The thinking behind curtailing the imperial cruise at Balholm in the Sognefjord was made clear by Freiherr Moriz von Lyncker, head of the Kaiser's military cabinet, in letters from the *Hohenzollern* to his wife. See Holger Afflerbach, ed., *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr im Ersten Weltkrieg. Quellen aus der militärischen Umgebung des Kaisers 1914–1914* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2005), pp. 125–31.

¹⁵ See esp. the Kaiser's conversations with the Austrian Chief of the General Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf and the Austrian Foreign Minister Count Leopold Berchtold in September and October 1913, in John C. G. Röhl, *Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1859–1941: a concise life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 145–6.

¹⁶ Röhl, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, pp. 156–7.

¹⁷ Falkenhayn, diary for 28 July 1914, cited in Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn. Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994), p. 154.

¹⁸ For details of Prince Heinrich of Prussia's fateful mission to London on 25–27 July 1914, see John C. G. Röhl, *Wilhelm II: into the abyss of war and exile, 1900–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 1058–62.

is enough for me,' Grand Admiral von Tirpitz disdainfully records him as saying.¹⁹ After his fateful encounter with the King, Heinrich came down to Sussex where two of his sisters, Queen Sophie of Greece and Princess Margarethe of Hesse, were on holiday with their children. He urged them to leave for home immediately as war was coming.²⁰

Once more confident that Germany could fall upon France and Russia without fear of British involvement, the Kaiser, egged on by the Kaiserin and her six sons, looked forward eagerly to war. 'Beaming faces everywhere,' reported a Bavarian general from the Prussian war ministry when news of Russia's mobilization arrived. Lichnowsky sent agitated telegrams from London in a last-ditch attempt to halt the disaster, but when one such dispatch arrived holding out the hope of British neutrality the Kaiser called for champagne. 'His bearing and language are worthy of a German Emperor! Worthy of a King of Prussia!' Falkenhayn noted with tears of pride in his eyes. Admiral von Müller also congratulated Wilhelm and the Chancellor on rallying the nation behind the war. 'The mood is brilliant,' he wrote in his diary. 'The government has succeeded very well in making us appear as the attacked.'²¹ In no other capital would such triumphalist language be heard.

But if the evidence of German responsibility for the immediate outbreak of war is so compelling, we must ask: when was the decision for war arrived at, and why have we still not been able to reach agreement on a question of such crucial importance? The answer lies partly in 100 years of cover-up and obfuscation, but partly also in the genuinely sorry state of the archival record after two world wars.

Research into the origins of the Great War suffered a severe blow when the German army records were destroyed in a massive Allied bombing raid on Potsdam in April 1945, just days before Hitler killed himself. That it was nevertheless possible to reconstruct the intentions of the general staff from the scattered evidence available was demonstrated by the dissertation written at this university by Annika Mombauer, which shows that Moltke was demanding 'war the sooner the better' for some two years prior to 1914.²² In a letter that came to light only after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Moltke wrote after his dismissal as Chief of the General Staff: 'It is dreadful to be condemned to inactivity in this war which I prepared and initiated.'²³ But where are Moltke's papers that would put his role in starting the war beyond all doubt? The answer is that they are in the hands of an

¹⁹ Röhl, *Wilhelm II*, p. 1064.

²⁰ The Hessian family returned to Germany accompanied by Queen Sophie, but she left the Greek children in Sussex, where they were stranded at the outbreak of war until a Royal Navy frigate was able to take them to Athens.

²¹ In the published version of Müller's diary this entry for 1 August 1914 has been falsified to read: 'In both speeches the completely justified claim is made that we are the attacked'. See Walter Görnitz, ed., *Regierte der Kaiser? Kriegstagebücher, Aufzeichnungen und Briefe des Chefs des Marine-Kabinetts Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller 1914–1918* (Göttingen, Berlin and Frankfurt: Musterschmidt-Verlag, 1959), p. 38.

²² Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also Annika Mombauer, 'A reluctant military leader? Helmuth von Moltke and the July Crisis of 1914', *War in History* 6: 4, 1999, pp. 417–46.

²³ Moltke to Field Marshal Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, 14 June 1915, cited in John C. G. Röhl, 'Germany', in Keith Wilson, ed., *Decisions for war 1914* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 27.

anthroposophic cult in Basel dedicated to the belief that Moltke was the reincarnation of the ninth-century pope Nicholas I and would himself be reborn one day (under another name, of course) to lead Europe along the true path. Incredible as it may seem, the sect has actually published the post-mortem letters the Chief of the General Staff 'dictated' from beyond the grave to Rudolf Steiner, who passed them on to Moltke's widow.²⁴

More frustrating still is the loss of the papers of Bethmann Hollweg himself. If only we knew what was on his mind in July 1914, the debate on the causes of the First World War would be settled overnight. Whether his papers were deliberately destroyed in some Nazi rearguard action to keep them from the advancing enemy, or were used as winter fuel or toilet paper by Red Army soldiers, is unclear. Both explanations are plausible in the *Götterdämmerung* of the Third Reich's collapse, which saw the remains of Frederick the Great disinterred in Potsdam, first transported to Hermann Göring's cellar and then dumped in a mine shaft in Thuringia (not far from where my family and I were liberated by the American Army on our flight from Hungary) in 1945. Frederick's bones were eventually reburied in Potsdam in 1991 after Germany's reunification. However it happened, the loss of Bethmann Hollweg's papers is irreparable.

All the greater the excitement, then, when word spread that the Chancellor's close assistant Kurt Riezler had kept a diary which was safely in the hands of his daughter in New York. Surely now we would learn the truth, one way or the other! Riezler's diaries were eventually published in 1972—but our hopes were dashed, and the controversy surrounding what should have been vital evidence splutters on to this day.²⁵ For not only had the first volumes of the diary covering the pre-1914 years been destroyed—possibly in the 1960s at the height of the Fischer controversy—but the published entries for July 1914 had obviously been rewritten by Riezler after Germany's defeat in 1918 to provide an apologetic gloss on Bethmann's policy.²⁶

However, there was one ray of sunshine in all this archival mist and murk. Of the 20 or so men in Berlin actively involved in the conspiracy to bring about war in 1914, one had indeed kept a diary which has survived intact. The journal of Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller, who as head of the Kaiser's naval cabinet was the most influential naval officer after Tirpitz himself, was published in a bowdlerized form in 1965.²⁷ It contained one entry, dated 8 December 1912, which

²⁴ Thomas Meyer, ed., *Helmuth von Moltke 1848–1916. Dokumente zu seinem Leben und Wirken*, vol. 2: *Durch Rudolf Steiner vermittelte Post-mortem-Mitteilungen Helmuth von Moltkes für Eliza von Moltke 1916–1924* (Basel: Perseus Verlag, 1993).

²⁵ Karl Dietrich Erdmann, ed., *Kurt Riezler. Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972).

²⁶ See Bernd Sösemann, 'Die Tagebücher Kurt Riezlers. Untersuchungen zu ihrer Echtheit und Edition', *Historische Zeitschrift*, no. 236, 1983, pp. 327–69, and Erdmann's reply in the same issue, pp. 371–402. See further Bernd Sösemann, 'Die "Juli-Krise" im Riezler-Tagebuch', *Historische Zeitschrift*, no. 298, 2014, pp. 686–707; Fritz Fischer, *Juli 1914: Wir sind nicht hineingeschlittert. Das Staatsgeheimnis um die Riezler-Tagebücher* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1983); Bernd F. Schulte, *Die Verfälschung der Riezler Tagebücher. Ein Beitrag zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte der 50er und 60er Jahre* (Frankfurt, Bern and New York: Verlag Peter Lang, 1985).

²⁷ Walter Görlitz, ed., *Der Kaiser ... Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Marinekabinetts Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller* (Göttingen, Berlin, Frankfurt and Zürich: Musterschmidt-Verlag, 1965).

suggested that the decision to back Austria in its conflict with Serbia had been taken not in 1914 but some 18 months earlier, at the end of 1912. In a eureka moment on discovering this passage, I saw the intriguing possibility that the First World War had broken out not by accident over a Balkan imbroglio but intentionally as the result of a deliberate (though disastrous) long-term policy.

What did Müller's diary for that Sunday morning in December 1912 say that suggested such a dramatic explanation? It recorded that at a hastily summoned 'war council' (the sarcastic term for the meeting used by Bethmann Hollweg) of his top generals and admirals, Kaiser Wilhelm II began by declaring that Austria would have to deal forcefully with the Serbs if it was not to lose control over the Slavs throughout its empire. If Russia then supported the Serbs, which it evidently would, war would be unavoidable for Germany too. So far Germany had assumed that it would be free to 'fight the war with full fury against France'. But now, that very morning, news had arrived from Lichnowsky in London 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'. In the light of this development, the Kaiser stated, the fleet must prepare itself for war against England, with submarines ready to sink English troop transports off Dunkirk and conduct mine warfare in the Thames. Müller's diary goes on to hint at the heated debate that ensued between the generals and the admirals. Moltke declared: 'I believe a war is unavoidable' and 'the sooner the better'; Grand Admiral Tirpitz, on the other hand, pressed for a 'postponement of the great fight for one-and-a-half years', until 1914, when the Kiel Canal would have been widened to take dreadnought-class ships.²⁸

Suspecting that the published text had been tampered with, I wrote to the Military Archive in Freiburg to ask for a microfilm copy of the original—this was in the days before xerox machines—and when the film arrived I went cap in hand to see my dean, Martin Wight, to ask for funds to have a photographic print-out made in the university library. And sure enough, the handwritten version revealed that, like the generals and unlike Tirpitz, Admiral von Müller himself was a staunch proponent of immediate war. His diary entry did not end, as claimed in the published version, with the dismissive words: 'This was the end of the conference. The result amounted to almost nothing.' It ended, rather, with the comment that revealed Müller's own bitter disappointment that Germany had again backed away from immediate war. 'The Chief of the Great General Staff says: War the sooner the better, but he does not draw the logical conclusion from this which is: To present Russia or France or both with an ultimatum which would unleash the war with right on our side.'²⁹ I sent the authentic text to Fritz Fischer in Hamburg, who was himself coming to the conclusion that the imperial

²⁸ Müller, diary entry for 8 Dec. 1912, first published in a falsified form in Görllitz, ed., *Der Kaiser*, pp. 124–5. See John C. G. Röhl, 'Admiral von Müller and the approach of war, 1911–1914', *Historical Journal* 12: 4, 1969, pp. 651–73.

²⁹ The truncated ending of Müller's diary entry has led to endless confusion and has been used by generations of historians to question the significance of the 'war council'. See e.g. Christopher Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II: a life in power* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 269–71.

German government had, and I quote, 'wanted this great war and prepared for and provoked it accordingly'.³⁰ The so-called 'war council' of 8 December 1912 became the keystone of Fischer's second book, *War of illusions*, in much the same way that Bethmann's September Programme had provided the central evidence of his book on war aims.³¹

For the past 50 years, Müller's diary has been at the centre of an international controversy and there is still no agreement as to its significance: Christopher Clark, for example, judges the 'war council' to have been a mere 'episode' without consequence.³² How can this be? Why is this undoubtedly authentic evidence being ignored or discounted by so many historians?

The most common argument is that, since neither the Chancellor nor the Foreign Secretary was present at the 'war council', the meeting must have lacked decision-making status. The excitable Kaiser was simply shooting his mouth off, as was his wont when surrounded by his military and naval entourage; the Chancellor was soon able to 'nullify' its effects and 'put the Kaiser in his place'.³³ Thus there was no connection between the 'war council' of 1912 and the decision for war in 1914.³⁴

But this is a travesty of what actually happened, and in particular of Bethmann Hollweg's role. In late 1912, Serbia's victories in the Balkan war and its drive to the Adriatic had led to a determination in Vienna to eliminate the resurgent Slav state, and that in turn raised the acute issue of how Berlin should react if Russia, to preserve the military balance and under pressure from public opinion, then intervened to support Serbia. By early November 1912, Moltke, Bethmann Hollweg and Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, Jagow's predecessor as foreign secretary, had all decided to support Austria come what may, and it was *the Kaiser* who pursued a 'policy of non-intervention at any price', insisting as late as 9 November 1912 that '*under no circumstances will I march against Paris and Moscow*' to halt a Serbian advance to the Adriatic. It was *Bethmann* who managed to bring the reluctant monarch round, who then, on 22 November 1912, together with Moltke, duly promised both Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the Austrian Chief of the General Staff Germany's wholehearted support.³⁵ Not until he received Lichnowsky's warning on 8 December 1912 that Britain would not stay neutral did the Kaiser change his mind and 'topple over'. So the famous 'war council' was not the point at which war in 18 months was decided on, as Fischer had assumed, but rather the point at which an earlier decision for an immediate war was put on hold at least

³⁰ Fritz Fischer, 'Vom Zaun gebrochen—nicht hineingeschlittert', *Die Zeit*, no. 36, 3 Sept. 1965, and *Weltmacht oder Niedergang* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1965).

³¹ Fischer, *War of illusions*, pp. 160–4.

³² Clark, *The sleepwalkers*, pp. 329ff. and 333, with notes 53–5 on pp. 626ff.

³³ Clark, *The sleepwalkers*, quoting Erwin Hölzle, *Die Selbstentmachtung Europas. Das Experiment des Friedens vor und im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt-Verlag, 1975), pp. 180–3.

³⁴ While rightly recognizing that no firm decision for 'war in 18 months' had been reached, other historians, notably Klaus Hildebrand and Jörn Leonhard, have pointed to the growing readiness for war revealed by the 'war council', which was especially alarming given the powerful influence wielded by the military within the Berlin ruling elite. See Klaus Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich. Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1995), p. 289; Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora*, pp. 65ff.

³⁵ See Röhl, *Wilhelm II: into the abyss of war ad exile*, pp. 694–8.

until the army had been enlarged and the Kiel Canal widened, work which was scheduled for completion in summer 1914.

Bethmann Hollweg and Kiderlen-Wächter were anything but doves in the winter crisis of 1912. Earlier this year, in the archive in Karlsruhe, I discovered the record of a meeting of the foreign affairs committee of the Bundesrat, the Federal Council of the German states, held on 28 November 1912, that is to say ten days before the ‘war council’ summoned by the Kaiser. This meeting was attended by Bethmann Hollweg and the Foreign Secretary, the Deputy Chancellor Clemens von Delbrück, the head of the Reich Chancellery Arnold Wahnschaffe and the Prime Ministers of Bavaria, Saxony, Württemberg, Baden and Mecklenburg, together with their permanent envoys in Berlin—a meeting, that is, of 14 of the most influential civilian statesmen of the German Reich. In this august gathering the Reich Chancellor himself made a speech culminating in the dire warning that:

If Austria has to fight for its position as a Great Power, regardless of the cause, then we must stand at her side so as not to have to fight alone at a later stage with a weakened Austria beside us ... We cannot permit our ally to suffer any humiliation. We wish to avoid war for as long as that is possible with honour; if that should prove impossible, we shall face it with ... firm resolve.³⁶

Not one of the statesmen present raised the slightest objection. Clearly, the decision to support Austria-Hungary in its impending conflict with Serbia had the approval not just of the Kaiser but of all of Germany’s leaders, civilian and military alike. This explains why, 18 months later, on 5 July 1914, the blank cheque could be handed to Austria without further ado.

Nor could those leaders have been unaware of the likely consequences of their complaisance. On 2 December 1912, Bethmann, speaking in the Reichstag, repeated his pledge to support Austria and triggered exactly the same chain reaction as was to occur in July 1914.³⁷ The French cabinet under Raymond Poincaré ordered the ambassador in London, Paul Cambon, to pose the question to Sir Edward Grey: what would the British government do if Austria attacked Serbia, if Russia was drawn into the conflict, if Germany intervened against Russia in support of Austria and, finally, if France was forced to support Russia? On 4 December 1912 the British cabinet met and, as Prime Minister Asquith informed the King, authorized Grey to question the German ambassador ‘as to the meaning of some of the Chancellor’s expressions’.³⁸ Grey left Lichnowsky in no doubt that:

If a European war were to arise through Austria’s attacking Serbia, and Russia, compelled by public opinion, were to march into Galicia rather than again put up with a humiliation

³⁶ Bethmann Hollweg, speech in the Bundesratsausschuss für die Auswärtigen Angelegenheiten, 28 Nov. 1912, Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe, 233/34815. The final version of the speech, distributed on the following day to the governments of the participating states, was redacted and typed out in the Auswärtiges Amt, but it accurately reflected the Chancellor’s words spoken at the foreign affairs committee. The Austrian military attaché, Freiherr von Bienenrth, reported that the bellicose final paragraph had been virtually dictated to the Chancellor by Moltke. See Röhl, *Wilhelm II: into the abyss of war and exile*, p. 901.

³⁷ Bethmann’s speech of 2 Dec. 1912 in the Reichstag is cited in Clark, *The sleepwalkers*, pp. 328ff.

³⁸ H. H. Asquith to King George V, 5 Dec. 1912, cited in Keith Wilson, ‘The British *démarche* of 3 and 4 December 1912’, in Keith Wilson, *Empire and continent: studies in British foreign policy from the 1880s to the First World War* (London: Mansell, 1987), p. 143.

like that [in the Bosnia annexation crisis] of 1909, thus forcing Germany to come to the aid of Austria, France would inevitably be drawn in and no one could foretell what further developments might follow.

It was Lichnowsky's dispatch stressing that, 'despite the fact that there were no secret agreements with France, it was for England of vital necessity to prevent that country from being crushed by Germany', that panicked the Kaiser into 'toppling over', that is to say backing down for now.³⁹ Taken together, the Kaiser's 'war council' and Bethmann's meeting with the civilian leaders of the German states on 28 November 1912 demonstrate that the Reich's determination to support Austria in whatever action it decided to undertake to eliminate the perceived threat from Serbia was, from November 1912 onward, an agreed determinant of German foreign policy.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the dynamic German Reich on its fateful trajectory from Bismarck to Hitler had become too powerful for the existing European states system to accommodate. Between 1904 and 1907 the great peripheral empires of Britain, France and Russia drew together in an effort to contain the rising power at the centre of the Continent, but no one in the German ruling elite, neither civilian nor military, considered the country's current status 'as a European continental power of second rank', as Tirpitz phrased it in October 1913, to be acceptable in the long term. 'World power' was what it deserved and was determined to attain, even if the attempt led to its 'downfall'.⁴⁰ We must ask: if Germany was so successful and getting stronger every year, why not simply wait and let time do its work? Why the mad gamble of world war? The answer is that Germany's steady advance towards hegemony was threatened both by the rising tide of democracy at home and (as we have seen) by the decline of its ally the multi-national Habsburg empire, especially after the resurgence of Serbia in the Balkan wars. Berlin's decision of November 1912 to shore up Austria-Hungary even if this was to lead to general war was rescinded in the 'war council' of 8 December, to be sure, but that decision was only put on hold; the thinking behind it did not change. By 1914, the conviction was widespread in German political circles that the country's chances of a rapid victory were now better than they would ever be. The looming civil war in Ulster would prevent Britain from coming to the aid of France, France itself was mired in financial and military crisis, and Russia would not be ready to fight a war for many a year. Germany's own army had been enlarged and honed to perfection, the Kiel Canal had been widened and deepened to take dreadnoughts, and a press campaign was under way to build up Russia as the enemy. The German general staff may or may not have had prior knowledge

³⁹ Lichnowsky, report of 4 Dec. 1912, *Die Große Politik der europäischen Kabinette*, XXXIII, no. 12481, cited here from Prince Karl Max von Lichnowsky, *Heading for the abyss* (London: Constable, 1928), pp. 167ff. For Grey's own account, see *British documents on the origins of the war, 1898-1914*, vol. 9, part II, no. 327. The importance Grey attached to the conversation can be judged from the fact that he sent a copy of his account to the King and the cabinet as well as to the ambassadors in Berlin, St Petersburg, Paris and Vienna. See Wilson, 'The British *démarche*', pp. 141-8.

⁴⁰ Tirpitz, speech of 9 Oct. 1913 to senior officers of the Reichs-Marine-Amt, printed in Michael Epkenhans, ed., *Albert Hopman. Das ereignisreiche Leben eines 'Wilhelminers'*. *Tagebücher, Briefe, Aufzeichnungen 1901 bis 1920* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2004), p. 343 n. 261.

of the plan to assassinate Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo.⁴¹ What is clear is that they had already decided to act, and could not have wished for a more welcome pretext.

The Fischer controversy of the 1960s was always more than just an academic dispute about scraps of paper in the archives.⁴² It marked the point at which civil society in the Federal Republic admirably turned its back on a difficult past to embrace western values and share its destiny with that of its neighbours. The transformation was profound and lasting, making Germany a model democracy and its people the most peace-loving in Europe. The reunification of the country 25 years ago would hardly have been acceptable to its neighbours without such a transformation. This is why, at the political level, I find the current wave of revisionism sweeping through the German media so disappointing. A farcical looking-glass war is being fought out in which the Fischer thesis is being branded a uniquely British ‘blame game’, and the—brilliant but (in respect of German intentions) flawed—work of an Australian-born historian at Cambridge is being celebrated by German nationalists as providing absolution from the supposedly unjust ‘war guilt lie’ of Versailles. In this context it is a relief to see Germany’s leaders, notably President Joachim Gauck in his moving speeches at Liège, Louvain and Mons on 4 August 2014, showing genuine remorse for the outrage of 1914. In my darker moments it feels as if the arcane detective work we few truth-seekers are undertaking in the archives is no match for the overriding (and perfectly understandable) popular longing in Germany for a guilt-free national myth similar to the proud histories the British and French people can construct for themselves. But, as an Arabic proverb has it, even God cannot change the past, and the past has an awkward habit of leaving an indelible record on scraps of paper.

When Hitler launched his attack on France in May 1940, driving the British Army into the sea at Dunkirk, it was not only Charles de Gaulle and Winston Churchill who thought they had seen it all before. In exile in Holland, Kaiser Wilhelm wrote in jubilation to an American admirer: ‘The brilliant leading generals in this war came from my school, they fought under my command in the [First] World War as lieutenants, captains and young majors. Educated by Schlieffen they put the plans he had worked out under me into practice along the same lines as we did in 1914.’⁴³

⁴¹ See the mysterious instruction issued by the Quartermaster-General of the German General Staff, Count Georg von Waldersee, to the military plenipotentiaries of Bavaria, Saxony and Württemberg on 16 June 1914, not to send any further written reports to their respective war ministries: Röhl, *Wilhelm II: into the abyss of war and exile*, p. 1015.

⁴² For the best account in English of the Fischer controversy, see Annika Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War: controversies and consensus* (Harlow: Longman, 2002); also Annika Mombauer, ed., *The Fischer controversy after 50 years*, special issue, *Journal of Contemporary History* 48: 2, April 2013.

⁴³ Kaiser Wilhelm II to Poultney Bigelow, 14 Sept. 1940, cited in Röhl, *Kaiser Wilhelm II: a concise life*, p. 192.