

Controversy: to what extent was Germany responsible for the outbreak of the First World War in 1914?

What is this unit about?

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 was not unexpected. Diplomatic tension had been rising for a number of years between the Central powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) and the **Entente** powers of Russia, France and Britain. The first section of the unit is dedicated to explaining developments in German foreign policy between 1900 and 1914. The second section deals with the question of the extent to which Germany was guilty for bring about the war. This second section is different from rest of the book in that the focus is sharply on the controversy of the extent of Germany's involvement. In the Skills builder section at the end of the unit, you are invited to undertake research which will broaden your understanding. In this unit you will:

- examine the development of German foreign policy between 1900 and 1914;
- work with conflicting interpretations as to how and why Germany was involved in the outbreak of the war in 1914.

Key questions

- What were the most significant events in the run up to war in 1914?
- To what extent can Germany be blamed for the outbreak of war in 1914?
- Why has responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War generated so much controversy?

Timeline

1900	June Second German Naval Law passed providing for a fleet of 38 battleships to be built in 20 years
1904	April Anglo-French Entente
1905	March Kaiser's visit to Tangier in Morocco July Björkö Treaty signed by Kaiser Wilhelm and Tsar Nicholas of Russia to improve relations between the countries. It comes to nothing
1906	February Britain launches the <i>Dreadnought</i> April Act of Algeciras confirms Morocco's independence but France's influence over the country May Germany decides to increase size of its battleships and widen the Kiel Canal August Anglo-Russian Entente

Definitions

Entente

French for 'understanding'.

The term was used because the agreements between Britain, France and Russia were more understandings than formal alliances.

1908	October Proclamation of the annexation of Bosnia Herzegovina by Austria
1909	February Germany agrees to recognise French political influence in Morocco in return for recognition of Germany's economic interest
1911	July Gunboat <i>Panther</i> arrives off the Moroccan coast in the second Moroccan Crisis
	September Libyan war breaks out between Italy and the Ottoman Empire
1912	February British Minister of War, Lord Haldane, visits Berlin
	March German Naval Bill increases number of ships and personnel
	October First Balkans war breaks out
1913	May Treaty of London ends First Balkans war
	June Second Balkans War breaks out
1914	June Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand is assassinated in Sarajevo

SKILLS BUILDER

What is the impression of German foreign policy given in this source?

Source A

Economic expansion was the basis of Germany's political world diplomacy, which vacillated in its methods between rapprochement and conciliation at one moment, aggressive insistence on Germany's claims the next, but never wavered in its ultimate objective, the expansion of Germany's power.

From Fritz Fisher *Germany's Aims in the First World War* published in 1967

German foreign policy c. 1900–1914

Alliances and war plans

German victory in the Franco Prussian war in 1870 was followed up by the creation of a system of alliances to protect the new empire. The architect of this alliance system was the German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. At its heart was the isolation of France which sought *revanche* for the loss of Alsace Lorraine and the humiliation of defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The pillars of this policy were:

- The ***Dreikaiserbund*** of 1881, which was an understanding of how the peace could be kept between Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany
- The Triple Alliance of Austria-Hungary, Italy and Germany of 1882, which was a defensive alliance between the three countries.

Wilhelm II's accession to the throne in 1888 and Bismarck's departure from the post of Chancellor was to have a profound impact on German foreign policy. In March 1890, the Kaiser embarked on his 'new course' by refusing to renew the Reassurance Treaty between Germany and Russia which guaranteed that each country would not attack each other. Instead, the

Definitions

Revanche

The idea that one day France would be able to gain revenge on Germany for various humiliations. Although it did not remain the political priority for the next forty years, *revanche* still had the power to stir French emotions.

Kaiser signalled an even warmer relationship with Vienna, whilst the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Schlieffen began to work on a plan which would mean that Germany could fight a war on two fronts by knocking France out of the war before Russia could mobilise. Schlieffen was Chief of the General Staff from 1891 to 1905 and the plan was formulated over his period of time in post. At the heart of the plan was the idea of a lightning strike of German forces through the Low Countries and northern France before encircling Paris. In Alsace Lorraine, French armies would maintain a defensive stance. The French were expected to capitulate in six weeks. Once France had fallen, German forces would transfer to the eastern front to take on the Russians. The plan relied on slow French and even slower Russian mobilisation.

Definitions

Dreikaiserbund

An alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia with an aim to reduce rivalries between the three countries.



2.1 The Schlieffen Plan

Germany and Britain 1896–1907

The Kaiser's attitude towards Britain was complex. As a grandson of Queen Victoria, he both loved and loathed the country of his mother's birth in equal measure. In 1896, Wilhelm antagonised British public opinion by sending a telegram to President Kruger of the South African Republic congratulating him for the defeat of British raiders led by Dr Jameson. At this point there is a possibility that Germany may still have been trying to woo the British into the Triple Alliance. The following years saw a fundamental sea change in the relationship between Britain and Germany.

- Flottenpolitik and a series of Navy Laws (see pages 00–00) was a direct challenge to British naval supremacy and were viewed as such in Britain. Its impact was to spark a naval race between the two nations. The launch of the British battleship *Dreadnought* in 1906 with its ten 12 inch guns prompted Germany into massive naval expenditure to avoid falling further behind.
- German support for the Boers in the Boer War, 1899–1902, further antagonised relations.
- In 1901, the British made overtures towards the Germans for an alliance but these were spurned by the German foreign office who insisted that Britain would have to commit to the Triple Alliance. Bülow also calculated that the British would not find allies elsewhere given her colonial rivalries with France and Russia.
- However, over the coming years Britain ended its ‘splendid isolation’ and her subsequent alliance with Japan (1902) and Entente agreements with France (1904) and Russia (1907), left Germany over reliant on Austria-Hungary.

Limits to Weltpolitik

You have read about von Bülow’s policy of Weltpolitik in the last unit. The reality was that, despite considerable posturing and pressure from groups such as the Colonial Society, it did not achieve much in terms of new territory.

- **1897** German involvement in China resulted in her gaining a lease on the port of Kiaochow.
- **1898** Germany bought the Pacific islands, the Carolines and Marianas, from Spain
- **1899** An agreement was made with Britain resulting in Germany taking some of the eastern Samoan Islands.

Despite involvement in the Constantinople to Baghdad railway, these gains did not constitute a great success and did not deliver Germany’s **‘place in the sun’**. However, Russia’s misfortune in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 and its subsequent weakening due to revolution in 1905, gave Germany a freer diplomatic hand in the Near East.

The First Moroccan Crisis, 1905–6

In March 1905, Kaiser Wilhelm made a visit to Tangier in Morocco which was, at least in theory, within the French **sphere of influence**, although Germany had a number of economic interests in Tangier. Plans by the French to increase influence in Morocco had been discussed with other European powers including Britain and Italy.

- The Germans demanded an international conference to discuss the future of Morocco, hoping to drive a wedge between Britain and France but the opposite was the case.

Definitions

‘Place in the sun’

A term used to describe the desire by Germany to have the same number of colonies as Britain and France in places like the Far East and Africa.

Sphere of influence

Where one nation has control over another or others.

- They also attempted to prise the Russians away from their friendship with the French by the Treaty of Björkö which was signed by the Kaiser and Tsar in July 1905. Aimed at creating closer bonds between Berlin and St Petersburg, this measure failed because of opposition in the Russian foreign office from those who did not want the close friendship with France to be damaged.
- At the Algeciras Conference and in the subsequent Algeciras Act, Morocco was confirmed to be in the French sphere and the Entente was strengthened.

The episode had been a humiliation for the Germans and the highly influential head of the political office at the Foreign Ministry, Friedrich von Holstein, was forced to resign. There was a fear emerging amongst many German military and political leaders that they were being encircled. At Algeciras, the only country to support them was Austria-Hungary and the launching of the *Dreadnought* by the British posed a real threat.

The Second Moroccan Crisis, 1911

In February 1909, the French and German governments signed an agreement to respect each other's interests in Morocco. However, disturbances in the town of Fez in April 1911 led to military intervention by the French. Germany complained that this action went against the Algeciras Act of 1907 and they backed their protest by sending the German gunboat *Panther* to moor off the Moroccan port of Agadir. The summer of 1911 was dominated by the talk of war, Germany attempting to bully France into giving her the French Congo in return for Germany giving up all interests in Morocco. Again the Germans attempted to prise the Entente apart and again they failed. In his 'Mansion House' speech in July 1911, the Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, warned Germany against further aggression. The Second Moroccan Crisis resulted in Germany gaining two strips of land in the Congo but with Germany having to promise to accept French control of Morocco.

Germany and Britain 1907–1912

German foreign policy was based on an understanding that the imperial rivalries of Britain and France in Africa and Britain and Russia in Asia would mean that Germany would be able to divide and dominate these three countries. Increasingly, this was clearly not the case. In 1907, Britain and Russia signed an Entente that put their differences over Empire in Asia behind them. The naval race between Britain and Germany persisted, despite Bülow and Bethmann Hollweg's attempts to persuade the Kaiser to come to some agreement. But he would not compromise and in March 1909 the British government set aside a budget to build nine *Dreadnought* class battle ships within the year. Indeed, the policies of Weltpolitik and Flottenpolitik failed to deliver Germany a 'place in the sun'. Indeed, whilst increasing frustration at home, they alienated potential friends abroad.

The failure of the Haldane Mission in February 1912 marked the last chance for the two countries to come to some agreement.

The Haldane Mission

- Lord Haldane travelled to Berlin with the hope of improving relations between Britain and Germany.
- The Germans would only agree to a limit on fleet expansion if the British agreed to neutrality in any future European land war.
- The Kaiser and Tirpitz were committed to increasing the size of the fleet. In March 1912 the Germans published a new naval bill proposing further expansion. The Haldane Mission was well and truly sunk.

SKILLS BUILDER

- Did the alliance system make war more or less likely?
- What factors turned Britain and Germany into rivals?
- How did Morocco and Weltpolitik affect international tensions?

SKILLS BUILDER

Look carefully at the map. What are the potential tensions in this region?

The Balkans

It was the Balkans that provided the spark for the outbreak of the war in 1914. They provided the theatre, the stage on which the imperial and racial rivalries were to be acted out. Germany was not a central player in the Balkans but her one close ally, Austria-Hungary, was. Therefore, through her alliance with the **Habsburgs**, Germany was drawn into the politics of Europe's most unstable region. Up until the end of nineteenth century, the Balkans had been dominated by the **Ottoman Empire**. However, the decline of the Ottoman Empire opened the way for both Russia and the Habsburg Empire to stake a claim for dominance of the region.

- It also paved the way for nationalities such as the Serbs to assert their national identity and independence. The Serbs were Slavs which meant that they were protected by and allied to fellow Slavs, the Russians. This was a problem for the Habsburgs.
- In Russia, the concept of protecting fellow Slavs, Pan-Slavism, was popular and strong.
- The Habsburg Empire contained many nationalities, including Serbs, and the Austrians feared that a strong Serbia would lead to unrest and the possible break up of her multi-ethnic Empire. In 1897, the Russians and Austria-Hungary had agreed to work together to resolve tensions in the Balkans and so preserve the status quo in the region, but this was not to last.

Bosnia Herzegovina

In 1903, a strongly pro-Russian dynasty came to power in Serbia. This signalled a more hostile relationship between the Serbs and Austrians. In 1906, a trade agreement between the two was not renewed which led to a trade war which became known as the Pig War (because the Austrians blocked the import of Serbian pigs). The real turning point was the appointment of Count Aehrenthal as Austria-Hungary's Foreign Minister in 1906.

- Aehrenthal's view, which was supported by the Habsburg Chief of Staff General Conrad, was that the best way to deal with the Serbs was to annex the regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina which the Austro-Hungarian government did in October 1908.
- The Russian Foreign Minister Izvolski had attempted to trade off Russian approval for this action for Austrian recognition of Russian rights in the Dardanelles Straits.
- The deal fell through, the Serbs and Russian government were furious and the Austro-Hungarian understanding of 1897, which had kept the peace in the Balkans, was finished.
- When, in February 1909, Austria-Hungary forced Serbia and Russia to recognise the annexation of Bosnia Herzegovina, it did so by threatening war against Serbia. It did so with the full support of Bülow's government which, although it had not been consulted by the Habsburgs prior to the

Definitions

The Habsburgs

The royal family of Austria-Hungary, the Habsburgs were one of the most important royal families in Europe.

Ottoman Empire

The Turkish based empire which lasted from the thirteenth century to the twentieth century and, in its prime, controlled the Balkans region of Europe including Hungary and Romania, and the Middle East.

Discussion point

Russia had been humiliated in 1908–9 over Bosnia Herzegovina. What was the likely impact on such a humiliation for future relations with Austria-Hungary?

annexation, promised to mobilise the German armed forces in support. The upshot of the Bosnia Herzegovina crisis was that Russia had been damaged and Germany had become involved.

The First Balkans War 1912

The attack by Italy against the Ottoman Empire in Libya in 1911 further highlighted the growing decline of Ottoman influence. It encouraged the forming of the Balkan League of Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and Montenegro with the purpose of seizing territory from the collapsing Ottoman Empire. In October 1912, the Balkan League launched its attack on the Ottomans. The Austrians were horrified, especially when the Serbs invaded Albania. They were determined to prevent Serbia having access to the sea and the creation of a Greater Serbia. In November 1912, Austria demanded the creation of an independent Albania. The Serbs, supported by Russia, ignored the Austrians, and the Germans pressed the Habsburgs to make their point.

The international crisis was such that the Kaiser called a council of his military advisers to meet on 8 December to consider his options (see page xxx). Two days later, the Kaiser spoke to the Swiss Ambassador about how 'racial war, the war of Slavdom against Germandom' was now unavoidable. He was prepared to accept that diplomacy might win through this time and indeed it did, by the Treaty of London 1913 which ended the First Balkans War. However, the obsession in Berlin that Germany was being encircled and the ever-increasing Slav threat provided the context to Germany's policies over the coming months:

- The Army Bill of June 1913 increased the German army's size by 170,000 troops. The response from the French and Russians was to increase the length of service in their armies.
- A brief Second Balkans War between the countries of the Balkans League saw Serbia emerge strengthened. In the summer, Serbian troops again entered Albania and in October 1913, Germany supported the Austrian government in another ultimatum, warning Serbia.
- Whilst it was clear, for the next few months, that neither Germany, nor for that matter Austria-Hungary, were under any immediate threat, the issue was one of fear for the future. A memorandum by Count von Waldersee, Quartermaster-General in the German General Staff from 18 May 1914, reflects the general impression that, whilst the Army Bill of 1913 had increased the size of the army, the Entente powers were also increasing the size of their armies and were catching up. The best time for war was the present.

July Crisis, 1914

On 28 June 1914, the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was shot by Gavril Princip. Princip was a member of the Serbian terrorist organisation, the Black Hand. On 5 July, an Austrian

Discussion point

Why did the Germans persistently support Austria-Hungary in her arguments with Serbia despite the fact that Germany had no direct interest in the Balkans?

diplomat, Count Hoyos, travelled to Berlin seeking Germany's support for action against Serbia. The Kaiser and German government, including Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, were happy to offer their unconditional support in what became known as the 'Blank Cheque'. Germany had taken, what Bethmann Hollweg called on 14 July a 'leap into the dark'. From now on the series of events acquired a momentum of their own.

Timeline

- 1914**
- 23 July** Austria issued Serbia with an ultimatum. Serbia replied in conciliatory fashion but rejected the point which suggested that Austrian officials should be allowed to take part in the enquiry in Serbia about the assassination
 - 25 July** Russia came out in favour of Serbia, bolstered by French assurances of support
 - 26 July** The British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, proposed a conference to deal with the Austro-Serb issue. Austria refused to take part
 - 28 July** Austria declared war on Serbia
 - 29 July** Bethmann Hollweg urged the resumption of Austro Russian negotiations and failed to persuade the British into neutrality
- Kaiser Wilhelm contacted his cousin in Russia Tsar Nicholas II with the result that the Tsar downgraded an order of general mobilisation in support of the Serbs to partial mobilisation
- 30 July** The Tsar changed his mind after being advised that a partial mobilisation was not possible. Russia orders a general mobilisation despite numerous warnings from Germany
 - 31 July** Given the Russian mobilisation, events were now set by the Schlieffen Plan. Germany sent an ultimatum to Russia giving it 12 hours to cease war preparations on Germany's frontier. The same day Germany refused a request to respect Belgian neutrality
 - 1 August** France and Germany mobilised their troops for war and Germany declared war on Russia
 - 2 August** The German armies invaded Luxembourg and demanded of Belgium that it gave them access through their country. This demand was refused. The British gave France assurances of support
 - 3 August** Germany invaded Belgium and declared war on France claiming that her frontier had been violated
 - 4 August** Britain declared war on Germany in protection of Belgian neutrality, as had been agreed in 1839
 - 6 August** Austria declared war on Russia

Discussion points

Read the information in the timeline of events from July to August 1914 and consider the information in Sources B, C and D. Using all of the information at your disposal, discuss the following questions in groups.

- What was the point after which there was no turning back?
- Which country is to blame for war?
- What are the differences between sources B, C and D? In answering this question you may well consider difference in what the sources suggest, their tone and emphasis.

Source B

Given these indications that the war would not be localised, there were ample opportunities for Germany to back down. Yet the initial British peace keeping initiatives were given only the most insincere support by Germany. The Germans pressed on, urging the Austrians to make haste, and after 26 July openly rejecting diplomatic alternatives. Only at the eleventh hour did they begin to lose their nerve; the Kaiser first, on 28 July, and then Bethmann Hollweg who, after hearing of Grey's warning of the 29th to the Germany ambassador [in London] frantically sought the Austrians to apply the brakes. Berchtold tried to respond; but it was the German military which ultimately secured, by a combination of persuasion and defiance, the mobilisation orders, the ultimate and declarations of war which unleashed the conflict.

From Niall Ferguson *The Pity of War* published in 1998

Source C

Thus to the general necessity inherent in the Schlieffen Plan for the violation of Belgian neutrality and offensive action as soon as possible after mobilisation, the attack on Liege required even more immediate action, since it was scheduled to take place on the third day of mobilisation with such troops as were immediately available. It was, therefore, as Moltke was to argue in a long meeting with Bethmann Hollweg on the evening of 31 July 1914, essential to launch the attack in the west the moment Russia proclaimed mobilisation, so as to carry out the onslaught on France before Russian mobilisation was complete and before fighting began on the eastern front. And to launch the attack in the west, it was equally essential to capture Liege within three days. The attack on Belgium had therefore to be launched almost immediately after the proclamation of mobilisation and there was no margin for any delay between mobilisation and the start of hostilities. The Liege operation had been kept a deep secret, and it looks as though the Kaiser himself had not been told about it and that Bethmann Hollweg only grasped its implications on 31 July. While the other powers could order mobilisation and wait what to do next, in the case of Germany mobilisation inevitably meant war.

From James Joll *The Origins of the First World War* published in 1984

Source D

Above all, it is time once and for all to discard Lloyd George's worn out phrase that Europe 'slithered' into war in 1914. Great powers throughout history have rarely, if ever, 'slithered' into major wars; rather, they undertake this most difficult of human endeavours only after carefully weighing the advantages and disadvantages. In this sense and only in this sense can one speak of a 'calculated risk' in 1914.

From Holder H. Herwig *Industry, Empire and the First World War* in ed. Gordon Martel *Modern Germany Reconsidered, 1870–1945* published in 1992

To what extent was Germany responsible?

The debate as to responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War started almost immediately after the war had ended. The Treaty of Versailles of 1919 placed the blame for the outbreak of the First World War squarely on the shoulders of the Germans (see Unit 00). Thereafter, the German authorities published documents selectively to shift the blame for the war onto the shoulders of others because clause 231 of the Versailles Treaty explicitly blamed Germany. By the late 1930s, a gentle and rather cosy consensus was shared that, in David Lloyd George's words, all of the great powers had 'slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of fire'.

That consensus survived the Second World War and in 1951 a group of French and German historians met in a Franco-German Historians' Commission. One of the subjects which they discussed was the causes of the outbreak of the First World War. The conclusions drawn by the Commission (see Source E) and accepted by most historians for the period of the next ten years, both fitted in with the general opinion of historians before 1939 and the desire to build peaceful and lasting relations between France and Germany.

Source E

The documents do not permit attributing a conscious desire for a European War to any one government or people. Mutual distrust had hit a peak, and in leading circles it was believed that war was inevitable. Each one accused the other of aggressive intentions, and only saw a guarantee for security in an alliance system and continual armament increases.

From the Franco-German Historians' Commission 1951

The Fischer Controversy

In 1961, a German historian, Fritz Fischer, launched a **historiographical revolution**. In his book, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, which became abridged into the English version *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (1967), Fischer came to some sensational conclusions:

- That Germany had gone to war to achieve European and world-wide domination,
- very similar to the aims of Hitler and the Nazis in the Second World War; it was a bid for world power
- That Germany had hoped that the 'Blank Cheque' given to Austria in July 1914 would result in war.
- That the root causes of German expansionism were to be found as much in the social, economic and political tension in Germany in the period pre 1914 as in its foreign policy.

Discussion point

France and Germany history books in the 1950s and 1960s expressed the opinions of the Franco-German Historians' Commission. In your opinion, was that line accurate?

Definitions

Historiographical revolution

Turning points in the writing of history when new ideas are put forward which change how people think.

Discussion point

From what you know, how far do you agree with Fischer's conclusions?

Fischer's evidence

Fischer based his evidence partly on a document found in the German archives written by Bethmann Hollweg's private secretary, Kurt Riezler, on 9 September 1914, in which he outlines the Chancellor's plans for the peace negotiations which he expected to take place in the near future. Fischer argued that these plans were the continuation of policy made by politicians, military leaders and industrialists before the outbreak of war in 1914. The plans were not just the ideas of Bethmann Hollweg or even the leading political, military and industrial figures of the day. To Fischer, these plans had the support of the wider political nation. To Fischer the plans as in the 9 September programme, represented 'a complete revolution in European political and power relations'. The logic was clear, plans for annexation which were being written down in September 1914, did not come from nowhere, they must have been already considered in July 1914. Therefore Germany was not the victim but the perpetrator of war. Fischer's thesis broke new ground in other ways:

- It placed Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg at the centre of the drive for expansion.
- It removed the distinction between the expansionist military and the supposedly more moderate politicians.
- It linked foreign and domestic policy by suggesting that the proposed annexations were seen as a means of maintaining domestic dominance.

2.3 Map of German war aims [from Richard Evans *The Coming of War* pages 52 and 53]

Source F

Expecting as he did that peace negotiations would be opening shortly, Bethmann Hollweg describes his programme of 9 September as ‘provisional notes on the direction of our policy on the conclusion of peace’. The ‘general aim of the war’ was, for him, ‘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 frontiers and her domination over the non-Russian peoples broken.’

The objectives in the east were not yet set out in detail in the programme itself, since peace with Russia was not yet regarded as imminent, but this does not mean that they had not yet assumed concrete form. The detailed explanation of ‘individual war aims’ was confined to the continental west, where the conclusion of peace seemed within grasp. They ran as follows:

1. *France* The military to decide whether we should demand cession of Belfort and western slopes of the Vosges, razing fortresses and cession of coastal strip from Dunkirk to Boulogne.

The ore field of Briey, which is necessary for the supply of ore for our industry, to be ceded in any case.

Further, a war indemnity, to be paid in instalments; it must be high enough to prevent France from spending any considerable sums on armaments in the next fifteen–twenty years.

Furthermore a commercial treaty, which makes France economically dependent on Germany, secures the French market for our exports and makes it possible to exclude British commerce from France. This treaty must secure for us financial and industrial freedom of movement in France in such fashion that German enterprises can no longer receive different treatment from the French.

And so the document goes on for other countries...

From Fritz Fischer *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* published in 1967

Source G

There is a fundamental flaw in Fischer’s reasoning which too many historians have let pass. It is the assumption that Germany’s war aims as stated after the war had started were the same as German aims beforehand. Thus Bethmann Hollweg’s ‘September Programme’ for a separate peace with France, drafted on the assumption of a quick German victory in the West – is sometimes portrayed as if it were the first open statement of aims which had existed before the war. If this were true, then the argument that war was avoidable would collapse; for it is clear that not British government would have accepted the territorial and political terms which the September programme proposed for France and Belgium, as these would have realised the Napoleonic nightmare by giving Germany control of the Belgian coast. But the inescapable fact is that no evidence has been found by Fischer and his pupils that these objectives existed before Britain’s entry into the war.

From Niall Ferguson *The Pity of War* published in 1998

Source H

Three points deserve emphasis. Firstly German war aims not only exceeded those of any other combatant; they were aspirations to world power. Secondly, there was a greater consensus over those aims that pre-Fischer historians like to admit. Annexationist ambitions were not confined to soldiers like Hindenburg or Ludendorff, or to Pan-Germans and other super-patriots. They were shared by civilian ministers, civil servants, Catholic and liberal politicians, liberal intellectuals such as Max Weber, even by some Social Democrats.

From David Blackbourn *History of Germany 1780–1918* published in 1997

Source I

It is now apparent that the ‘men of 1914’ in Berlin were working to an elaborate and cunning scenario, a secret plot designed either to split the Triple Entente wide open in order to effect a massive diplomatic revolution, which would have given Germany control of the European continent and much of the world beyond, or – a better methods in the eyes of many to achieve the same goal – to provoke a continental war against France and Russia in what appeared to be exceptionally favourable circumstances. If that war could be brought about through a Balkan crisis rather than through some incident in western Europe, they calculated, three highly desirable advantages would accrue to the Reich: Austria-Hungary would be on the front line and would not be able to wriggle out of its alliance commitments to Germany; the German population could be manipulated into believing that Germany was being attacked by ‘barbarous’ Russia and so would rally to the defence of the Fatherland; and Britain might be persuaded to stay out of the war, at least for the first six crucial weeks during which France would be defeated by means of a lightning attack through Belgium.

From John Röhl *Germany* in ed. Keith Wilson *Decisions for War* published in 1995

SKILLS BUILDER

Read Sources F and G and refer to Figure 2.3.

- 1 What is the significance of The September Programme for Fischer and what are Ferguson’s criticisms?
- 2 Who is right?

Use Sources F, G, H and I and refer to Figure 2.3.

- 3 Summarise the arguments from all four sources about the extent of German blame for the outbreak of war.
- 4 To what extent do Sources H and I agree with Sources F and G? Explain your answer fully with reference to the sources and your own knowledge.

Fischer challenged

Fischer’s analysis brought a storm of protest. Historians such as Gerhard Ritter and Egmont Zechlin attacked his thesis. One objection that they had was Fischer’s portrayal of Bethmann Hollweg as being central to the push for war. The diaries of Kurt Riezler were published in the 1980s by Karl Dietrich Erdmann. He was of the opinion that Germany had slipped into war in 1914. What the diaries suggested to Erdmann was that Germany had

been part of the push for war but that she had not been planning for war since 1912, nor did she have grand plans for annexation. Whilst the Riezler diaries have proved useful, there are suggestions by some historians that they were tampered with.

Another challenge made to Fischer's thesis was that there was very little evidence that the outbreak of war constituted as a grasp for world power. Instead, a group of historians including Klaus Hildebrand, Andreas Hillgruber and Gregor Schöllgen maintained that war started because of a sense of encirclement in Germany, especially after failure in the first Morocco crisis and the Anglo Russian Entente of 1907. They argue that German foreign policy almost obsessively focussed between 1909 and 1914 on this need to break this encirclement. Partly this mentality was born from the manner in which Germany was born out of war, partly from geography and partly from events as they unfolded. However, it stresses that the reasons for going to war were defensive, rather than aggressive.

Source I

The picture of Bethmann Hollweg's policy in the July crisis, such as it emerges from the Riezler diaries, fits neither into the pattern of a Germany pushed into a war against her will, nor of a Germany wilfully pushing into war. Egmont Zechlin found a very adequate term for this attitude. He called it preventive *Abwehr* (preventive defence). This seems to me to be more to the point than 'preventive war', although Bethmann Hollweg himself, sometime later, called the First World War 'in a certain sense' a preventive war. Fischer shares the opinion that preventive war is not the right term, because on the side of the Entente there was objectively no intention of attacking Germany. In my view, the term preventive *Abwehr* fits better than preventive war, because Germany, though taking the risk of war, had hope of disrupting the Entente without war.

From Karl Dietrich Erdmann *A judgement on Bethmann Hollweg* published in 1964

Source J

The incident that promoted the Kaiser to take further action was the assassination of his close associate, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by a Bosnian terrorist supported by Serbia on 28 June 1914. With emotions running high, William favoured an immediate Austrian action against Serbia. On 5 July, the Kaiser met with the Austro-Hungarian ambassador to Berlin. William II informed the ambassador that 'he expected some serious step... towards Serbia' and without consulting with Bethmann Hollweg, to the ambassador that Austria could 'rely upon Germany's full support'. The Kaiser was under the assumption that any Austrian action could be localised in the Balkans since 'Russia at the present time was in no way prepared for war, and would think twice before it appealed to arms.'

Later that same day, on 5 July, the Kaiser summoned those of his highest military and political advisers who were available at a moment's notice to a meeting in Potsdam. The German Army was represented by General Eric von Falkenhayn, the Prussian Minister of War and the Chief of the Kaiser's military Cabinet. Bethmann Hollweg and Zimmermann, both with little knowledge of foreign relations, represented the diplomats at the meeting since Jagow was on leave away from Berlin. At the Potsdam Conference the Kaiser insisted upon Germany supporting Austria Hungary because its preservation was vital to German security.

From William Young *German Diplomatic Relations 1871-1945* published in 2006

Source K

Asquith did not know how little control the Kaiser and Bethmann Hollweg exercised. A country where the Chancellor hardly dared to ask the General Staff what they were doing was outside his comprehension. He assumed that, when it came to the moment of the decision, the German government would be likely to choose an invasion route which would not force Belgium to call for British military help.

We do not know everything about what happened during the last days of July in Berlin and Potsdam: but we can be sure that events there belied Asquith's assumptions. The General Staff had concealed from the political leaders the worst political horror in their war plans, namely that their first objective was the capture of Liege and its forts. They needed a head start in the war in order to mount a surprise attack there; and they might decide to follow that with a massive bombardment. Bethmann Hollweg does not seem to have been told this until 31 July. The General Staff were in charge.

From Michael Brock *The Coming of the First World War* ed by R. J. Evans and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, published in 1990

SKILLS BUILDER

- 1 To what extent do Sources I, J and K give the impression that Bethmann Hollweg drove the agenda for war?
- 2 What other issues are picked up by these sources?

War of Illusions

In *War of Illusions* (1969), Fischer made even greater play of the relationship between German domestic tensions and foreign policy. He argued that:

- the German government used war as a solution to difficult internal problems and the idea that there was a strong 'will to war'
- war in 1914 was a bold leap forward, *Flucht nach vorn* (flight or push forward), to establish German dominance and to keep domestic peace
- the whole decision making elite had to take responsibility for war. Germany's leaders were culturally pessimistic and needed to break encirclement.

Fischer was able to use the diaries of Admiral Müller, which had been published in 1965 and in which there was reference to a meeting on 8 December of the Kaiser and his top military advisers. In *War of Illusions* Fischer argued that the 'war council' of 1912 was evidence that the path to war had already been decided upon. It was, according to Fischer, only postponed because, subsequent to the meeting, Bethmann Hollweg insisted that Germany had to prepare herself diplomatically and Tirpitz insisted on the military planners waiting for the opening of the Kiel Canal.

How significant was the 1912 'war council'?

The tensions in European capitals at the end of December 1912 were all too apparent. Serbian expansion to the sea had alarmed Austria to the point that, in November 1912, the Austrian government announced their opposition to such expansion. In response, the Russian government began to mobilise and Austria sought support from Germany and Italy in the case of a general European war. On 5 December the Triple Alliance was renewed but two days before, the British Minister of War, Lord Haldane, warned the German ambassador in London that Britain would not tolerate the defeat of France if a war between Russia and Austria led to a German attack on her French neighbours. In this context the Kaiser called a meeting of his top military staff including Moltke, Tirpitz and Admiral Georg von Müller whose diaries have given historians such an insight into what Fischer called a 'war council'. At the meeting the following points were made:

- The Kaiser insisted that Austria-Hungary should be supported in her actions against Serbia.
- If Russia decided to fight then so be it, Austria would be supported by Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania, which would leave Germany free to deal with France on land and Britain at sea.
- Moltke thought that war against Russia was inevitable and the sooner the better.
- Tirpitz suggested that the navy needed another twelve to eighteen months to prepare the fleet and for the Kiel Canal to have opened to allow large German naval vessels passage from the Baltic into the North Sea.

But whilst many historians praised much of what Fischer had to say in *War of Illusions*, there has subsequently been considerable debate about the importance of the so-called 'war council' of 8 December 1912.

Source L

The evidence on the secret 'military-political conference' of 8 December 1912 must be described as unusually abundant. If historians nevertheless encounter difficulties in interpreting this meeting, that is primarily because the 'war council' – as Bethmann Hollweg angrily described it on 20 December 1912 – cannot be separated from the emotive controversy on the immediate causes of the First World War. With few exceptions, even those historians who see German policy in the July crisis of 1914 as the main cause of the outbreak or the world war are reluctant to accept that this policy was formulated a year and a half earlier by the Kaiser and his faithful followers in the army and navy meeting in a hastily convened 'war council'.

From John Röhl *The Kaiser and his Court* published in 1987

Discussion point

Using the information in Sources L, M and N, as historians what weight should we give to the 'war council' of 1912? Does it show that Germany was ready to go to war or was it just a meeting at a time of diplomatic excitement?

Source M

The meeting [of 8 December] ended with only one resolution, that a press campaign should prepare for war with Russia. There is no evidence that the press chief of the Foreign Ministry attempted to orchestrate such a campaign, or that the newspapers could have been so manipulated if he had... Bethmann Hollweg was not present at the meeting and did not endorse its conclusions. The close relationship between the Kaiser and his service chiefs would probably permit a gathering that excluded the political leadership nonetheless being called a 'war council'. But Bethmann Hollweg, not the service chiefs, took centre stage in the crisis that did lead to war. The policy which he – and Germany – followed between December 1912 and July 1914 is not marked by the consistency which would endorse Fischer's argument.

From Huw Stachan *The First World War* published in 2001

Source N

What still needs to be investigated is the crucial question of when war was decided upon. The exciting hypothesis is gaining ground, as previously hidden sources come to light, that the decision was not taken in response to the Sarajevo assassination but some time before that event took place, as a result of a long process which began with Germany's perceived humiliation in the Second Morocco crisis [which was in 1911].

In a top secret memorandum of 1 April 1912, Admiral von Tirpitz formulated the question which seems to have informed all military-political thinking in Germany from Agadir to Sarajevo. Under the heading 'Bringing about the War' – Tirpitz asked: should we speed up [the outbreak of war] or attempt to delay it?

From John Röhl *Germany* in ed. Keith Wilson *Decisions for War* published in 1995

Primat der Innen politik

One of the great traditions of German history was that foreign policy was dictated by events outside Germany. This is known as the Primat der Aussenpolitik, the dominance of foreign policy. Fischer turned this idea on its head and stressed the importance of internal pressures having an impact on foreign policy; this idea being known as the Primat der Innen politik (the dominance of internal policy). The concept has been developed by a number of historians including Hans Ulrich Wehler. He argued that the disruptive impact of industrialisation caused tensions in Germany's social and economic structure. The Junkers, financiers and industrialists resisted attempts by the middle classes to gain greater political power through the Reichstag. The growth of the SPD presented a real challenge, especially when they won 110 seats in the 1912 election. These tensions were diverted outwards, into foreign and diplomatic policy, in order to preserve the status quo.

Source O

It would be wrong to analyse foreign policy solely in terms of a theory of the Primat der Innenpolitik or to attribute the decision for war to domestic pressures alone. At the same time there is much evidence to suggest that German politicians, generals and admirals were very conscious of the connection between domestic and foreign policy, not only because at certain moments they believed that foreign ventures might contribute to a mood of national solidarity at home, but also because they feared the strength of socialist opposition to warlike policies. The balance between the awareness of internal problems and dreams of world power was always a delicate one; and if recent historical writing had stressed the importance of the internal contradictions of German society in determining German foreign policy and the decision for war and has thus drawn attention to factors which had been largely overlooked by an older generation of historians, we must not forget that for many leading Germans the positive pursuit of world power or the negative securing of Germany's position in what was regarded as a hostile world was something to be undertaken for its own sake regardless of the domestic profit and loss.

From James Joll *Origins of the First World War* published in 1984

Source P

The more direct and immediate consolidation of the Navy Bill was to come from the unifying effects of the naval armaments programme at home. More indirect and more long-range were the stabilising benefits which the government hoped to derive from the navy as an instrument of foreign policy and German imperialism in the twentieth century. But it is not difficult to see that, in the final analysis the result would be the same. It is in this sense that the decision to build a large battle fleet represented an 'inner-political crisis strategy' designed to contribute to the survival of the Prusso-German political system; with the help of the Navy the monarchy wanted to overthrow the status quo internationally in order to preserve it at home... The trouble is, no complex modern society can be ruled like this [as Germany was on the eve of war] for too long. The political system was no longer capable of overcoming internal divisions. The elites were more and more tempted to use war as the catalyst for the renewed attempts to stabilise the monarchy.

From Volker Berghahn *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* published in 1973

Source Q

Not many historians nowadays dissent from the proposition that the German government, egged on by its generals, deliberately provoked the war of 1914... In the two years before the July Crisis, Germany's leaders appear to have been gripped by a mood of desperation. In December 1912, for instance, a Crown Council quite seriously suggested that there should be war within a year and a half, that the press should be prepared, that military increases should be undertaken, and that the *Reichsbank* should build up a larger War Chest. The Reichstag could not control the government; at the same time, the Kaiser, surrounded, often enough by hysterical generals and noblemen lost any sense of cool *raison d'état*... War squared the circles of German politics. Bismarck had to conquer Germany in order to rule Prussia. Would Bethmann Hollweg have to conquer Europe in order to rule Germany?

From Norman Stone *Europe Transformed 1878–1919* published in 1983

SKILLS BUILDER

According to Sources O, P and Q, how significant an impact were domestic politics on foreign affairs in Germany in the run up to the war?

Discussion point

Is there a relationship between domestic policy and foreign policy? Do you know of any other examples from history of rulers using domestic policy as a means of deflecting from foreign policy?

What about Austria-Hungary?

Was Germany dragged into war by her closest ally Austria-Hungary?

Source R

In Austria Hungary there was clearly a sense of desperation at the intractable internal and external problems facing the Habsburg dynasty, and military action, rather than diplomacy, seemed to be the best way to deal with them. By the end of 1913, the majority of ministers wanted to solve the Serbian problem by force [it has been] shown that the policy-makers in Vienna pursued a consistently belligerent policy in 1914 and that there was a fateful meshing of 'aggressive German *Weltpolitik*' with an even more aggressive, irresponsible 'Habsburg *Balkanpolitik*'.

From Ruth Henig *The Origins of the First World War* published in 1993

Source S

In Vienna in July 1914 a set of leaders experienced in statecraft, power and crisis management consciously risked a general war to fight a local war. Battered during the Balkans Wars by Serbian expansion, Russian activism and now by the loss of Franz Ferdinand, the Habsburg leaders desperately desired to shape their future, rather than let events destroy them. The fear of domestic disintegration made war an acceptable policy option. The Habsburg decision, backed by the Germans, gave the July crisis a momentum that rendered peace an early casualty.

From Samuel Williamson *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* published in 1988

Source T

The frivolity and arrogance with which Austro-Hungarian statesmen, politicians, military men, publicists and diplomats wished for and decided on war against their small neighbour made them guilty of providing the opportunity that the German military were seeking to wage the preventative war they had been recommending for years. Austria-Hungary bears the responsibility for planning a local third Balkan War against Serbia – the responsibility for the escalation of the conflict into a European war does not lie with Austria – Hungary, it lies in Berlin

From Fritz Fellner *Austria* in ed. Keith Wilson *Decisions for War* published in 1995

SKILLS BUILDER

Reading sources R, S and T, what are the different judgements made by the authors of these sources with reference to the role of Austria-Hungary in the causation of war?

Unit summary

What have you learned in this unit?

Germany must carry a fair proportion of the blame for the outbreak of the First World War. The main argument of Fritz Fischer has been accepted by most historians, i.e. that Germany bears some responsibility. However, the reasons why German leaders pushed for war is still a source of some controversy. Whilst Fischer argued that they launched a war of aggression and conquest, many have now suggested that it was more of a defensive war launched to break encirclement. In the 1930s, an argument was presented that Europe 'slipped into war'. Although that is perhaps now discredited as an argument, you have learned that there is an argument to suggest that war started because of the escalation of events.

What skills have you used in this section?

Your understanding of the sources has been enhanced by an exploration of German foreign policy from 1900 to 1914. You have analysed interpretations in the sources and you have commented on the arguments made.

SKILLS BUILDER**1 Making a judgement**

With a work partner and identify five lines of argument brought up by Fritz Fischer. Give a score for each point

Agree	4
Slightly agree	3
Slightly disagree	2
Disagree	1

Now share the lines of argument and scores with another pair.

2 Hypothesis testing

In a group discuss the following hypothesis.

Before 1912 Germany was committed to diplomacy to resolving her foreign policy problems. After 1912, she was committed to using war.

To what extent do you agree with this judgement? This is quite a complex question to answer and revolves around whether you feel that 1912 constitutes a significant turning point.

3 Debate time

What is your opinion of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg?

- Was he guilty of starting the war?
- Was he an innocent bystander?

Exam style question

This is the sort of question you will find appearing on the examination paper as a (b) question. Before you start, read the Exam tips.

'The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 was due to an aggressive German foreign policy which had been waged since c.1900.'

How far do you agree with this opinion? Explain your answer using the evidence of Sources U, V and W and your own knowledge of the issues relating to the controversy.

Source U

By 1913 the question of civil war and foreign war had indeed become two sides of the same coin in the minds of the Kaiser and his advisers, and it is virtually impossible to decide which issue obsessed them more. They felt encircled not merely by the Triple Entente, but also by the forces of change. Germany's internal and external enemies, they believed, wanted to destroy them and the monarchical order. While the news was bad on the domestic front, it was arguably worse on the international one. The diplomatic isolation of Germany which started in 1904 had worsened and while Bethmann Hollweg was making efforts to ease some of the pressure, the generals could only think of further rearmaments expenditure as a remedy. The 1913 Army Bill, which had now unleashed yet another major conflict over the distribution of tax burdens, had in part been a response to growing tensions in the Balkans and the weakening of the position of the Dual Alliance in that part of the world. In view of these developments, it seemed even more urgent to Helmuth von Moltke, the Chief of the General Staff, to fill the gaps which the 1912 Army Bill had left. Yet, rearm as strenuously as they might, the Germany military were unable to check the deterioration of the Reich's international predicament by trying to shift the balance of power in their favour.

From Volker Berghahn *Modern Germany*
published in 1987

Source V

German responsibility for war should not be restricted to the issue of whether Bethmann Hollweg, or the German government, or the Kaiser, desired peace in 1912–14 – or, for that matter, earlier. Of course they would have preferred to get what they wanted without war. But German actions going back to the 1890s had done much to create international tension. Bethmann Hollweg personally was a sensitive, passive, fatalistic man, but he was faced with reaping the whirlwind sown by his successors. Others bore more responsibility, like Tirpitz, who built a battle fleet aimed at the British and professed his peaceful intentions.

From David Blackbourn *History of Germany*
1780–1918 published in 1997

Source W

So there emerged right at the beginning of the war the question of who bore the chief responsibility! It was latent controversy between the two allies (Germany and Austria Hungary) which persisted during the entire war and flared up every time there was a military crisis. However, despite this friction and the English declaration [of war], the German plan to unleash a continental war which had crystallised a month previously during the Sarajevo murder, was fully realised. Only the constellation of forces against the Central powers was unexpected.

From John Moses *The Politics of Illusion*
published in 1975

Exam tips

- **Plan** your answer before you start. You can use the advice about planning and structure which is given at the end of Unit 1 on pages 00–00.
- You will need to **analyse** throughout the response, supporting your arguments with well chosen own knowledge.
- Be very sure you know what '**view**' is being expressed in all three sources.
- You should show that you understand the nature of the **debate** which lies at the heart of the question.
- **Cross-reference** between the sources by focusing on support and challenge.
- Use your **wider knowledge** both to reinforce and to challenge the points derived from the sources
- **Synthesise** the arguments and points presented in the sources into your analysis.
- Present a **substantiated judgement** as to the validity of the stated view and/or any alternatives in the light of your understanding of the issues of interpretation and controversy.

RESEARCH TOPIC

The roles played by other countries

The focus of this unit has been on the debate surrounding the role played by Germany in the run up to war and the extent of German war guilt. However, for you to have a full understanding of the reasons for the outbreak of the First World War you will need to undertake some individual research. There are many excellent books on the subject and some informative websites.

You should undertake the research task in groups with an individual or pair choosing one country. This is often best done by drawing lots out of a hat. Here are the countries to be researched:

- Austria-Hungary
- France
- Britain
- Russia
- Serbia

For each country you should aim to write up:

- a timeline of events of how your chosen country was involved in the build up to war up to August 1914
- bullet points of analysis explaining how far your chosen country should be blamed for the outbreak of war.

This information can be circulated to other groups and each group can give a short presentation.

SAMPLE MATERIAL NOT YET ENDORSED BY EDUCEL