

THE CAUSES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

- Chairman So – why DID the First World War break out in 1914? When I was at school, everybody blamed Germany. You know the stuff – Kaiser Wilhelm had a withered arm and felt a psychological need to have a navy as big as Queen Victoria’s. Didn’t the German General Moltke say: ‘War – and the sooner the better’? And the Treaty of Versailles blamed Germany.
- German Historian An interesting point over this is that – when they read Clause 231, the Germans were outraged. They KNEW they were not the ones to blame! So we published each foreign policy document we had ... to prove that we *had not* begotten the war. So all the other countries did the same thing – to prove that THEY didn’t beget it either. The *Resultat* is that we know more about the Causes of the WorldWar One, and there have been more books written over it, than any other historical subject.
- American historian The other result, of course, was that in 1928, Sydney Bradshaw Fay argued that the First World War wasn’t caused by any COUNTRY at all. Instead, he blamed powerful *underlying* forces – the system of alliances, militarism, nationalism, imperialism .
- British Historian (interrupting) ... he thought alliances were the most important ...
- American historian ... well there are all kinds of arguments nowadays that one was more important than the other – but I think Fay’s general idea was that all these things meshed TOGETHER to create a collective impetus to war. The world was sort-of swept into war, as if on a tsunami of mass-panic.
- British Historian That is so much bunkum! War isn’t a natural disaster. SomeONE has to go to war. SomeBODY has to declare war. What you have to realise is that the countries of Europe were mostly dictatorships, and run by incompetents and madmen like Tsar Nicholas and Kaiser Wilhelm. I’m with the writer Emil Ludwig on this: ‘A peaceable, sensible mass of 500 million people was hounded into war by a few dozen incapable leaders’.
- American historian But that is SO not true!
First of all that ‘mass of 500 million people’ was not peaceable or sensible in the slightest. They were nationalistic and bellicose. Think of all those British people chanting in 1909 for more Dreadnoughts: ‘we want eight and we won’t wait’.
And secondly, those supposedly war-crazed politicians in fact worked desperately hard to STOP war – Lord Grey, the British Foreign Secretary ...
- British Historian (interrupting) ... Lloyd George thought Grey was pathetic ...
- American historian ... Lloyd George thought everybody was pathetic but Lloyd George. No – everybody tried to stop the war. Tsar Nicholas appealed to the Kaiser as a cousin. Wilhelm actually tried to order the German army to stop. They were still swept into war. They were powerless before the run of events.
- Chairman Actually, looking *at* ‘the run of events’ – the Boer War (1900), the Tangiers Crisis (1905), the Bosnian Crisis (1908), the Agadir Crisis (1911) – it strikes me

that IMPERIALISM was a key factor in increasing tension Wasn't Imperialism a key cause of the war?

- German historian Well must you be careful with that idea. Some historians say that imperialism actually HINDERED war – they say it was a sort of ‘safety valve’ for nationalist war. They say that it was when the colonies ran out – when there was no more land to steal in Africa – that Europe *imploded* into war...
- American historian [interrupting] ... When Franz Ferdinand was murdered at Sarajevo, all the underlying forces came into play at the same time – yes, Austrian imperialism in the Balkans, but also the web of alliances, the individual leaders’ weaknesses, the desire to right past humiliations...
...and railway timetables! AJP Taylor said that, because every nation’s military plan used trains, once things had been set rolling they had to run according to the railway schedules. So there’s your tsunami – your unstoppable, non-human force literally railroading everybody into war ...
- British historian ... but the ‘slide to war’ was still about people making DECISIONS ... DOING things.
Austria *declared* war on Serbia.
Russia *mobilized* to support Serbia,
This terrified Germany because the Schlieffen Plan had envisaged going to war with France first. ‘Is the Fatherland in danger?’ asked Wilhelm – well, of course it was, so he *ordered* the German Army into France, and Britain *decided* to enter the war to defend Belgium.
- Chairman Hmm. I wonder. I suppose I need to go back to look at the facts and the events and the dates ... and decide for myself what I think.