[Historians] can never attain perfect or total knowledge of the whole truth. All they can do is establish probabilities – sometimes overwhelming, sometimes less so, sometimes hardly at all – about parts of the past: those parts that can be accessed by means of the remains it has handed down in one form or another from posterity. Richard J. Evans, 2003.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Why did the First World War happen? Who was responsible? How did the contemporaries of 1914 become involved in the bloodiest, most devastating conflict Europe had then ever seen? The ‘why’, the ‘who,’ and the ‘how’ are questions historians have grappled with since the guns fell silent, and in some cases even before that. It has proved arguably the most enduring historical question if not in history, then certainly in twentieth century history. And with that history comes the historiography – the record of historical debates and perspectives which were altered by new caches of evidence, explosive new interpretations, or a mixture of both in equal measure. Since 1914, this historiography has been on something of a journey, and it is a journey which is still underway. The sheer complexity of the period and the cast of characters that populated it did not deter historians from diving in, and where a new thesis was found or a new controversy exploded, counterarguments emerged to meet them, resulting in a historiography which boasts a record of official primary source documents equally as formidable and voluminous as that of the secondary material.[[2]](#footnote-2)

When John Keigen assessed this debate in 2014, he noted that the recorded number of works analysing the causes of the First World War by 1991 alone amounted to about 25,000 books and articles.[[3]](#footnote-3) And all this before the centenary in the year Keigen was writing provoked several other sources analysing that question! I am certainly not the only historian drawn to centenaries, and the July Crisis section of my bookshelf suggests that many rushed to get their new interpretations out in time for 2014. This obsession among historians to get to the bottom of what caused the war is not matched by the war which succeeded it. Perhaps because the role Nazi Germany played in instigating the Second World War is taken so much for granted, material published on that question, while darkly fascinating and chilling, tend to be less controversial. For the First World War, on the other hand, controversy was its ever-present bedfellow. The tone was set barely days after the powers were engaged in the war, when what one German military historian described as the ‘world war of documents’ began.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The contemporary governments did this by publishing their book of official diplomatic and state documents, which would support their public explanation for entering the war. Curiously, each of these books were given a different designation, and you may notice a certain pattern. Germany began the trend on the day Britain entered the war on 4 August, with its White Book. Britain followed a few weeks later with its Blue Book. Russia had by then already published its Orange Book, France published its Yellow Book by December, and Austria published its Red Book in February 1915. These ‘coloured books’ represent the earliest official engagement with the propaganda war between the different blocs, and their accuracy should as a result not be taken for granted. As Annika Mombauer writes, ‘Each was designed to blame the enemy for the outbreak of the war by publishing carefully selected official documents.’ Among those documents omitted by the Germans, for instance, was the pivotal meeting of Count Hoyos and Arthur Zimmerman in early July – later known as the infamous ‘blank cheque’ given by Berlin to support Vienna’s policy. ‘In addition to offering only a highly selective number of documents,’ Mombauer continues:

The volumes were also on occasion marred by omissions (not always marked) or additions to the text of the documents themselves, as well as careful re-arranging of the chronology in which they were despatched, designed to advance a particular point of view… For the purposes of historical research based on published documents it is important to realise that the coloured books were not edited by historians but by diplomats eager to advance a particular version of events.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The need for propaganda victories against the enemy, and the importance of convincing the public that their cause was the righteous one, provided strong incentives for publication of these coloured books. But in the post-1919 world, when the guilt for instigating the war had been laid firmly at Germany’s feet in the infamous clause, German historians had further incentives to interrogate the record.

If it could be proved that Germany was not responsible, and thus guilt free, she should surely be absolved of the payment of further reparations. These efforts began immediately after Versailles. Since Raymond Poincare still led France, and insisted on literal interpretations of German reparations, these were highly relevant debates. Revisionists hoped that if the silver bullet was found, an international arbitration could be held, and liberate Germany from her burden of guilt. Austrian historians adhered to a similar pipe dream, and published additional document collections which painted the Habsburgs in a more flattering light. British and French historians were slow to catch up with this new wave of legitimising history, but over the late 1920s and 1930s additional collections presented thousands of new documents for the aspiring student or scholar, provided they did not drown in their sheer vastness.[[6]](#footnote-6) Germany’s early decision to publish quickly and widely counted in its favour, and the ongoing debate contributed to the growing acceptance of the idea that the Treaty of Versailles had been overly punitive and harsh.

Remarkably, by the 1930s, the view that through a series of blunders, accidents and misunderstandings, the powers of 1914 had ‘slithered into war’ – to take David Lloyd George’s phrase – had acquired considerable currency. No single party was wholly responsible, and it was pointless to suggest otherwise, as the heated debates of the last few years had shown.[[7]](#footnote-7) Even in the post-war years into the 1940s and 1950s, the view that the powers had blundered into war rather than actively provoked it became increasingly accepted. Some outliers did exist. It is still possible to find Luigi Albertini’s three volume account of the war’s outbreak, published through the 1950s, which heaped a greater proportion of the responsibility for war at Germany’s feet.[[8]](#footnote-8) A. J. P. Taylor was also not convinced, and his 1945 work *The Course of German History* both established his reputation and posed a stiff challenge to those that wished to paint the war as a mutually caused catastrophe.[[9]](#footnote-9) We see other themes emerge at the same time; was it that individuals had made the wrong choices, or that the international system in which they operated exacerbated the problems that existed, and limited the options available? Was it a case of miscalculation among those responsible, or were those horrors launched by design? Was foreign policy to blame, or was domestic policy considered when the contemporaries of 1914 made their choices? Was it caused by political and diplomatic decisions, or was it really down to the economy and financial motives after all?

These emerging ideas notwithstanding, the debate on the origins of the First World War seemed sufficiently resolved that by 1955, the German historian Walther Hubatsch concluded that the history of 1914-18 was ‘as well-researched as scarcely another. In all areas the historian walks on safe ground.’ This was certainly debateable at the time, but we should reiterate that the likes of Taylor or Albertini were arguing against the grain when they tried to highlight German culpability. But what if a German historian was to make similar assertions, challenging the consensus and pulling the spotlight back to Germany and Germany alone? This question was soon to confront scholars, as barely a decade after making the above claim, Hubatsch and his peers would find this comforting consensus shaken to its very core, thanks to the efforts of Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In 1961, Fischer’s study *World Power or Decline* was released to German readers. It has since been given many other names across numerous translations, and several editions were released in the years that followed, some of which include Fischer’s efforts to answer criticism from his peers in the profession. And how much criticism was there? In the 1960s, Germans were consumed with a very different kind of guilt than that ushered in by the Treaty of Versailles. This was the more horrifying species of guilt – a sense of shame at having enabled and followed Adolf Hitler to the darkest recesses of human history. Fischer’s work was so explosively controversial because it identified an element of continuity in German policy; like in 1939, Fischer asserted that Germany instigated the war in 1914 because of its grand ambitions to become a world power, a position he based on sources which underlined belligerent policies and expansionist war aims. Fischer’s experience as first a supporter and then a detractor of Nazi Germany moved him to adopt this critical view of his own fatherland.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, as Mombauer explained, Fischer’s peers in West German historical study were neither prepared for nor welcoming towards this approach:

The assertion of responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War seemed to heap guilt upon guilt in a way that many found unforgivable. As a result, the controversy was much more than a mere spat between historians and involved the German Government and the general public in an unprecedented way. It was discussed widely in newspapers, magazines and on radio and TV – the Fischer controversy was unusual in the way it was conducted very much in the public eye and took the topic outside the realm of lecture theatres and the pages of historical journals. It was also a historical topic of contemporary relevance which resonated in the present and it has had a lasting legacy in setting the tone for how historians would discuss this controversial topic for the next decades.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Even if you’ve never heard of Fritz Fischer, you will have been influenced by his thesis in some way. Contemporary textbooks and even public opinion bear the influence of Fischer’s long shadow over the historiography, and as it fit snugly into the interests of allied explanations for the war, it quickly overtook the old debates to become the default position, or orthodoxy, of the origins of the war. It should go without saying that this thesis poisoned Fischer’s relationship with his peers. He was vilified by a profession reeling under the memory of Nazi Germany, and which contained members that could still recall serving in the German army’s bloody campaigns of 1914-1918. Among his West German colleagues, Fischer was persona non grata, but East German scholars were more receptive, and Fischer cultivated a much better relationship with them.[[13]](#footnote-13) Fischer’s thesis also enjoyed a warmer reception in Britain and especially France, where the claim that French bitterness and revanchism after the First World War had caused the Second could now be met with Fischer’s work. A. J. P. Taylor identified with Fischer’s thesis, seeing in its assertion of German culpability a version of his own. Russia, despite adhering rigorously to Marxist interpretations of the war’s origins, largely accepted the Fischer position without much fuss.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Critically, in the British, French, and Russian cases, the Fischer controversy did not move those historians to interrogate the role their own country had played – certainly not to the extent Fischer had done. Austrians were also pleased; Fischer’s work permitted a convenient ignorance of what Habsburg statesmen had done in 1914, and it is fair to say the mainstream impression to this day paints Austria as dragged along by its belligerent ally – a view only forcefully challenged within the last few decades. It is little wonder that when Guenther Kronenbitter surveyed the historiography of Austria’s role in the war, his article was entitled ‘Keeping a Low Profile.’[[15]](#footnote-15) As John Langdon wrote of Fischer’s impact on the Austrian story:

His copious denunciations of German intentions bleached Austrian actions into a colourless record of unswerving submission to the wishes of Berlin. Far from denying Austrian complicity, he simply understated it to such an extent that it no longer attracted the attention of most historians.[[16]](#footnote-16)

One consequence of the Fischer thesis was thus the reduction in importance and interest of the Austrian contribution, which as we know was significant, perhaps more significant than any other actor, since it was from Vienna that the first declaration of war came. Fischer’s work had major staying power in other respects. His emphasis on acquiring documentary evidence to support his position set the tone, and meant that any malcontents would have to find their own materials to back up their positions. It is also true that Fischer shattered the old consensus, resurrecting the immediate post-war mission to find the truth and ascribe guilt to the party most responsible. This quest is what arguably separates the debate on the war’s origins from other twentieth century controversies, as Mombauer observed:

The topic is tied up with war guilt and with our own moral engagement with the horrors unleashed by the decisions made in 1914. The passing of time has not reduced our emotional involvement and our need to get to the heart of this question for the sake of the millions who died.[[17]](#footnote-17)

It is this driving force which may well have motivated you to click on this episode in the first place, to see how and why the war broke out in 1914. And it ensured that even after so much debate had taken place, historians still moved into the spotlight as the Fischer controversy died down. From the 1980s through to the present day, and no doubt encouraged by the looming centenary, historians presented new, occasionally radical explanations for why and how the great powers had joined the war. This was characterised by an emphasis on transnationalism and the collective actions of all the powers together, rather than the actions of a single power. It may seem obvious that 1914 requires us to contextualise each of the powers, but Fischer’s emphasis on Germany arguably obscured the need for this exercise. Was Britain more animated by its competition with Germany, or by a desire to maintain its Empire and placate Russia? Were the British, French and Russians as a whole not more inherently expansionist and aggressive in their imperial policies than their counterparts in the Central Powers? Seen in the light of allied imperial expansion after 1919, even under the new cloak of mandates, the very fact that these European empires reached their greatest extent in the interwar years should certainly give us food for thought.

And then there came greater appreciation of the structures that underpinned 1914 itself. Did alliance blocs make war more or less likely? Was WW1 an improbable war, or an inevitable conflagration? If it was inevitable, then why did it not erupt sooner, such as during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, when both Austria and Russia mobilised against one another, and similar sentiments of decline and distrust animated the major actors? One is often told of the tidal wave of stoic patriotism which greeted the eruption in late summer 1914, but was the general public truly more desirous of such a catastrophic experience than of the continuation of peace? Was public opinion firmly in favour of the governments as they forged their war policy, and if these civilian governments were independent from the direct commands of the military – as was the case even in Germany – then how relevant was it to underline the penchant for pre-emptive war and fears of lost status which those generals held? These questions lead us to an important distinction within the historiography: you have the intentionalists, who emphasised individual decision making among politicians and institutions, and you have the structuralists or constructivists, who emphasised the trappings of alliances and other collective attributes of the 1914 system which reduced freedom of action and facilitated the disaster. More specifically in this latter camp is a systemic approach, which focuses on the relations between the powers as the source of the conflict.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Within these two very broad categories, a myriad of studies on culture, tradition, expectations, armaments, the media, the military, and so on proliferate. It would be literally impossible to acquire and read them all, but even beyond this, newer works try to hone in on those powers Fischer omitted. The key point emerges that to understand what happened in 1914, we must understand what the five key powers were doing, and why. It is not enough to take the Fischer approach, being laser focused on one participant to the detriment of others. The wider focus on a legion of actors rather than a small coterie of guilty men characterised the more recent shift, popularised by Christopher Clark in 2012’s *The Sleepwalkers*. This brought the debate on the war’s origins back almost to its revisionist roots, which in the 1930s affirmed mutual responsibility, and mutual guilt. Mombauer highlights this curious return to form when she wrote:

A hundred years after the outbreak of the war, the new direction in the historiography of the war’s origins appears on the face of it to harken back to some extent to the comfortable consensus of the interwar years which emphasised shared war guilt. However, whereas in the 1930s the alliance system was blamed and the outbreak of the war was considered an accident, today human agency is foregrounded – this suggests that there was no inevitability about the war’s outbreak, but that it resulted from either mistakes, deliberate decisions, or both.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Twinned with this more even-handed approach to the question, historians published new studies which brought greater attention to underserved powers and the actors behind them. This helped to complete the picture; we should know who was involved, how they acted, and why, but even the most comprehensive study of a given issue should not be considered as the final word. It must be inserted into the ocean of other perspectives, so that it can be appropriately compared and contextualised. On the positive side, this furore of controversy and debate has produced an unequalled trove of primary source material; we should note that Fischer’s student, Immanuel Geiss, made perhaps the most significant contribution to his teacher’s thesis by synthesising forty individual volumes of German documents on the outbreak of the war. And even here, there was room for comment and controversy. How do we gauge the value of official state documents from 1914? How accurate was the correspondence between the major actors, when they may have expected their telegrams to be later poured over by forensically minded scholars? Are some sources more accurate than others, or more valuable than others, or more damning than others? Should we challenge the authenticity of some sources, particularly when they directly contradict an established position?[[20]](#footnote-20)

This brings us to the centenary and the publication of two important books. The first, *The Sleepwalkers*, has already been encountered many times, which may have something to do with the sheer impact this book had on me when I first read it. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Clark’s seminal work fundamentally changed how 2014 Zack viewed the outbreak of the First World War. The original JCAP is laced with his views and conclusions, perhaps to too great an extent. We will certainly be making use of Clark’s book in this newer series, and if you somehow have not read it yet, it comes highly recommended. The second book is less famous, and intended perhaps for a more academic audience, while still being highly accessible. Thomas Otte’s 2014 tome *July Crisis: The World’s Descent into War, Summer 1914* came out too late for either the earlier podcast project, or much of my MA. But it stands today as the definitive account of July 1914, as the name implies.

Each of these two books are representative of this new trend in the historiography in that neither attempt to assign blame to a single party, though both Clarke and Otte are critical of individual decision makers and the systems they operated within. The differences that the two accounts have exist mostly in points of detail and emphasis; Otte warns against condemning the international system at the expense of letting the likes of the Austrian Chancellor off the hook; Clark is more charitable towards the Germans, highlighting the Russian mobilisation, and Sir Edward Grey’s prioritisation of the Triple Entente above peace, as major contributing factors. The fact that both Otte and Clark reject wholly blaming a single party for the catastrophe suggests that the historiography is in a new phase, or perhaps, as Mombauer discerned, it has returned to a version of the comfortable consensus of the 1930s. There are no political reasons for trying to absolve one country of fault any more, but there is a recognition, as there was in the interwar years, that honing in on one guilty party at the expense of the broader story does a disservice to the facts of 1914. It might be best to see this trend as a blend of both worlds; an emphasis on the system in which these actors made decisions, accompanied by a dispassionate assessment of those decisions themselves. This combination serves to remind us that we should consider not merely the consequences of decisions made – Germany’s blank cheque for instance – but also the reasons why contemporaries made these decision in the first place.[[21]](#footnote-21)

When I began my MA, I knew I wanted to look more closely at 1914, and delve deeper into the reasons for the war. Armed with little more than Clark’s revisionist positions, and my own enthusiasm, I was eventually led by my thesis supervisor William Mulligan to look at an understated cultural element of Britain’s experience. This was the system of beliefs and values which all contemporary powers bought into, and was referred to at the time as the code of honour or, when among nations, national honour. This began an interest in an aspect of the pre-1914 world which I went on to expand upon in my PhD, identifying this code of honour as present in Victorian diplomacy, where it culminated on the bloody battlefields of the Western Front. The decline in importance of the code of honour after the war suggested that contemporaries had come to terms with the real cost of it, and were no longer willing to be led into conflict on the basis of occasionally intangible ideas.

Before 1914 though, national honour was fused with national interests, patriotism, prestige, influence, security, and military power. To uphold the nation’s honour was to uphold its reputation, whether that meant repelling the most minor of insults, beefing up one’s navy and army, or adhering rigorously to obligations found in alliances. There were several layers to this code of honour, and it affected the powers of 1914 in a variety of striking ways. Historians since 2014 have begun to consider ideas like honour with greater scrutiny, and this led them to reassess important assumptions we now hold about the war. Foremost among these is the idea – now widely accepted – that the First World War was itself a mistake. We can see this theme even in *The Sleepwalkers*; as the name implies, contemporary powers went unknowingly and unwillingly into the war, kicking and screaming.

Though we might welcome the idea that these powers were not so bloodthirsty that they sought out conflict and swatted aside any reasons for peace, it should be possible to find a middle ground: that the war was not sleepwalked into, or launched in a fit of imperialist ignorance and aggression, but for reasons which the contemporaries held to be more important than peace. Furthermore, because we see what followed 1914 as a horrendous tragedy, it is tempting to interpret the contemporaries seeking to avoid this tragedy wherever they could. Surely, they cannot have willingly marched into the cataclysm, so it must have been an error of unprecedented proportions. As James Bowman reflected:

Yet surely it is not an irrelevant consideration that this settled history, as we might call it, is all retrospective, and not at all how people saw things at the time. Indeed, it is striking how few of today's histories of the period even make reference to, let alone attempt to explain, the reasons offered by the people who went to war in 1914 themselves for why they did what they did. Prominent among those reasons was honor, something with which we are now so unfamiliar that we feel safe in assuming it was no reason at all.[[22]](#footnote-22)

This serves as something of a caution not to apply our own modern values and beliefs to those men of 1914. If we can take ourselves out of the equation, it becomes easier to gauge the personal choices of key figures who moved the needle towards war. Accepting that for us, the war seems like a mistake, but that in 1914, the war seemed like the only option, is not an easy exercise, but as Bowman continues, it is an important part of getting to the root of the question:

Honour…seems to have been as likely the motivation for America's going to war as for Britain's – or Germany's for that matter. But the fact that all were fighting for honor does not mean that they were fighting for nothing, or even the same thing, since honor is by its nature socially contingent and stubbornly resists any attempt to press it into service for universal purposes. It may have been, for some of those who appealed to it, a foolish reason for embarking on a course that led to so much sacrifice, but that is not what our new historians seem to be saying. Rather, there appears to be a general assumption that honor is not a bad reason for fighting but no reason at all, something that must either disguise the "real," which is to say the presumably discreditable reason, or to be discrediting itself. To say that it was a war for honor is for these historians the same as saying it was a war for nothing.[[23]](#footnote-23)

We might feel somewhat irritated by these efforts to make so much of contemporary belief systems which do not gel with our own. But part of the historical process is identifying systems like these, and part of the challenge is unpacking, understanding, and appreciating their very real impact on contemporary beliefs and expectations. It is not enough to say that national honour is now dead, or that contemporary calls to patriotism are mere window dressing, so this must have been the case in 1914. This effort to drill deeper into the beliefs contemporaries held dear, and measuring their role in the outbreak of the war was actually a process first identified by James Joll, the British historian who suggested that the ‘unspoken assumptions’ of 1914 played a pivotal role in bringing the war to life. ‘In order to understand the men of 1914,’ Joll argued, ‘we must understand the values of 1914, and it is against these values that their actions can be measured.’[[24]](#footnote-24)

National honour was itself an unspoken assumption, though an assessment of the language in the final days of peace reveal that contemporaries did speak of it with more urgency and angst than we might expect. It was taken for granted that national honour was an interest worth fighting for; it was taken for granted that a state which failed to meet threats to its power would suffer a decline in reputation, followed by impressions of weakness, and then revolution at home. In my MA thesis assessing Britain’s entry into the First World War, I discovered that national honour was deployed and leveraged by those who both wanted war and wished for peace. Through my analysis of newspapers, public speeches, and parliamentary debates, I learned that national honour – a way of thinking which seems anathema to us – was a major contributing factor to the apocalypse which followed.[[25]](#footnote-25) Everyone, from the officer classes, to the gentlemanly elite in office, to the factory labourer embraced some form of the idea. Ute Frevert explained how its inflexibility, notwithstanding its occasional vagueness, contributed to 1914:

The language spoken and the metaphors used made it extremely difficult to find a compromise in the diplomatic exchanges preceding declarations of war. Honour, as it stands, is a matter of all or nothing. Unlike a more sophisticated morality, which shows many shades of grey, is ambiguous and open to different outcomes, an honour-based ethics only offers two ways out of a conflict. Either the offender steps back and apologises, or he has to be challenged and called out. Given the gendered nature of honour, stepping back is extremely difficult and generally associated with weakness and lack of courage. It means ‘losing face’… which, in societal terms, is tantamount to social death. Somebody who has lost face has also lost credit, confidence, and respect among his peers. His position in the world is severely shattered and not easily, if at all, repaired… The message was unequivocal: I am not a weakling, I will defend my place as a great power, I will not let others doubt my standing, and I command respect. If offended, I will demand satisfaction and, if it is not given voluntarily, I will compel the offender to face my arms.[[26]](#footnote-26)

That said, honour’s prevalence does not mean contemporary statesmen were unaware of its power or connection with the masses. It is possible that they leveraged honour and its associated language for their own ends, but it stands to reason that such behaviour would never have been possible in the first place if national honour had not been so popular and popularly bought into. Contemporaries could dispute what national honour required of them, but they never discounted its importance, and certainly did not try to claim that it did not exist. After the war, some figures would recognise its role in fanning the flames of war. Norman Angell, a British journalist renowned for his pre-war works, thus reflected that statesmen ‘have only to pronounce certain words, “Fatherland above all”, “national honour”, and that this had caused ‘the millions to lose all self-control, to become completely blind as to where they are going, what they are doing, to lose all sense of the ultimate consequences of their acts.’[[27]](#footnote-27)

What can this logic tell us about how powers acted as they did, and how does it challenge our preconceived notions of mistaken war, or decisions made in ignorance of what was to come? It surely highlights the fact that the men of 1914 were men of their era, and although they made choices which horrify and fascinate us, these choices were made in the context of a world very unlike our own, possessing different assumptions, values and beliefs than what we might necessarily hold dear. It suggests that a balance is needed between an assessment of the context of 1914, with its many cultural, diplomatic, political and ideological flavours, and the men who operated within it. Frevert did not claim – and I would not do so either – that national honour made war inevitable, and we should not view the ideology as a straitjacket, which prevented any efforts at mediation or moderation. Just like the duel could be avoided by the actions of the seconds, war could be avoided if allies to the offended party stepped up in the name of peace, yet in 1914 many did not do so, and instead urged the duellists on for various reasons.[[28]](#footnote-28) These men should not be caricatured as helpless, dragged along by the weight of the deteriorating international system and the demands of their alliances; they made choices because they believed they were the correct ones, but I would argue that a major ideological force underpinning these beliefs was national honour – a code legitimised by decades of triumph, shame, and reflection.

Some may certainly have sleepwalked; the war was not over by Christmas, and it proved more devastating than any contemporary could have imagined, but this does not mean all were bystanders, devoid of agency. If we are to judge these men for what they did, or even to understand why they acted, we must bear in mind that concepts like national honour both legitimised their actions, and limited their freedom of action at the same. This challenge was discerned by the historian L. L. Farrar when he wrote about the limits of choice in 1914, without mentioning honour by name:

When confronted with the choice between a peace which seemed detrimental to their state's interests and a less disadvantageous or even advantageous war, they regarded it as their duty to opt for war. Thus the central problem in understanding the 1914 crisis becomes one of analysing the choices with which the statesmen of 1914 were confronted and of deciding whether or not they could reasonably be expected to have made fundamentally different decisions within the existing conditions.[[29]](#footnote-29)

These ‘existing conditions’ included the culture, ideology, and beliefs of 1914’s statesmen – including nationalism, Social Darwinism, racism, imperialism – as well as the international system in which they worked. We must examine their behaviour – challenging though it sounds – from the perspective of 1914, and not from 1919, or 1945, or 2024, when the extent of the tragedy is clear. If we are to judge these men, we must see them not as they ought to have been or how we want them to be, but as they were. I highlighted this challenge in the original version of this series, when I challenged listeners to imagine if they could do better or acquire a different result if they were in the shoes of 1914’s statesmen. This is not a criticism of the counterfactual, ‘what if’ approaches to 1914 that I do find fascinating, but it is a call for us to be realistic and considered when analysing the period, and not to see options where none existed, or argue that the impossible policy of abandoning one’s ally, for instance, was preferable to the great risk represented by the war. This is the approach I intend to follow in this project, as it allows us not only to analyse the occasionally obscene decisions contemporaries made, it also enables us to place them in context, by balancing them off other decisions made under equally challenging circumstances. It is helpful to view the decades preceding 1914 in a similar light, as Otte explained in the Preface of his *July Crisis* study:

How and why the civilised world, seemingly so secure in its material and intellectual achievements, could have descended into a global conflict has continued to intrigue not just historians, but also the general public. It has certainly puzzled me ever since I first developed an interest in the past. And the more I studied the period of the long nineteenth century, the more it became clear to me that the answer, in so far as there can be one, is not to be found in the…vast impersonal forces, that some think shape historical processes, but, rather, that the reasons, in so far as they can ever be fathomed, may be glimpsed in the doings of men (and they were all men in 1914), their flaws and failings, their calculations and miscalculations.[[30]](#footnote-30)

There is thus something to be said for the years immediately preceding the July Crisis. This brings us back to the question of probability or improbability, and whether the First World War was simply a terrible tragedy bound to happen owing to the years of tensions and advancement which placed such explosive technological powers in the hands of doomed men. Yet, the years before 1914 point to a reduction in great power wars; is it not significant in itself that Europe experienced no cataclysmic, worldwide war between 1815 to 1914? This period of peace, more concrete since 1871, has only been surpassed by the modern post-1945 period, and it presents some fascinating questions. If the powers were so belligerent, so expansionist, and existed in such a restrictive, competitive world, then why was peace preserved for so long? When my MA supervisor William Mulligan attempted to grapple with these ideas, in his own *Origins of the First World War*, updated for its second edition in 2017, he advised us to see 1914 as the unlikely result of years of flawed peace-making, and not to view the July Crisis as the natural culmination of great power rivalry:

If one starts at 1914 and asks what the origins of the war were, there are many answers. But this frames the history of international relations before 1914 in a teleology that robs the period of its contingency. Of course, there is a risk that contingency, if pursued to a radical conclusion, simply dashes historical narratives into tiny shards, making it impossible to understand the history of international relations in this period. This is why it is worth bearing in mind a longer chronological frame. From the eighteenth century to the present, the declining frequency of great power wars has been the most striking development in the history of international relations.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Teleology – or the practice of seeing one point lead naturally and inevitably to another – may be considered an enemy of fair historical assessment. If the doom of war was guaranteed, what difference could the key figures of 1914 actually have made? You surely see the problem. When it comes to assessing these powers and their statesmen, we will try to give the best of both worlds; a contextualisation of the international system in which the major powers operated, and how they interacted with one another, and a deeper analysis of the decisions made, for better and for worse. Of course, there is not time in this series to provide a blow-by-blow account of the world before 1914. By now you will hopefully have listened to the previous episodes, which presented this international system and contextualised the world as it was as the July Crisis approached, in as concise a manner as is possible for this series.

So, considering all this historiographical detail, from the rush of wartime governments to make their case, all the way up to Clark’s challenge to what we think we know about 1914, you may be wondering – what exactly can Dr Zack Twamley tell me that hasn’t been said before? It should go without saying that legions of historians have tackled this question in far greater detail and with far greater ability than I ever could – both Otte and Clark’s books run over 500 pages, and Fritz Fischer’s original volume spanned over 900 pages – but I have always believed that this intimidating fact should not deter anyone, from the amateur to the scholar, from digging into the evidence and seeing what they can uncover. History is not a cult, closed to the access of a privileged few. Nor are qualifications or mountains of books a requirement for anyone to dip their toe into the debate, and think about where they stand. After all, any historian worth their salt would tell you that they stand firmly on the shoulders of giants – giants in scholarship, in narrative, in research, and in formulating their interpretations of how such a tragically transformative event could have happened.

Those historians may have secured their status in the pantheon of the historiography, but in one major way I am different to them: none of them enjoy the fortunate position I now have as a history podcaster – to bring history to people who would probably never download the catalogue of academic articles or weigh down their shelves with so many tomes on the same subject. I have a real chance to bring this period and this debate forward to people outside the world of historical study, and that is motivating enough for me to feel compelled to proceed – notwithstanding the occasionally intimidating scholarly shadows I work under. I have already made clear in the introduction episode that my defining goal of this series is not to present groundbreaking new evidence or overturn the applecart of the various camps. What I want above all is for this series to be the place where those curious in the question of the how and why can go, and access an account which has done the hardest of the work for them. I will provide the evidence, I will present the historians, and I will set the scene. All you have to do, dear history friend, is listen, so I hope you do, and that you'll come back in the next episode where we’ll be officially kicking the narrative off. Until then, I have been Dr Zack, and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Richard J. Evans, 2003, quoted in Annika Mombauer, ‘Introduction: The Fischer Controversy 50 years on,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48, 2, (April 2013), 313-314. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Annika Mombauer, ‘Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I,’ Central European History, 48, No. 4 (December 2015), 541-564. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Keiger, ‘Thinking the Causes of World War I,’ *Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, No. 1 (Autumn 2014), 52-63; 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bernhard Schwertferger quoted in Laurence D. Freedman, ‘Review: The War That Didn't End All Wars: What Started in 1914—and Why It Lasted So Long,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 93; 6 (November/December 2014), 148-154; 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mombauer (ed.), *The Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 3-4. Henceforth *Documents*. See also by Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War. Controversies and Consensus* (London 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, pp. 10-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols. (New York: 1952-57). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London, 1945), and *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe* (London, 1954). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mombauer, ‘Introduction: The Fischer Controversy 50 years on,’ 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (2nd edition: Cambridge, 2017), pp. 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mombauer, ‘Introduction: The Fischer Controversy 50 years on,’232. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Matthew Stibbe, ‘The Fischer Controversy over German War Aims in the First World War and Its Reception by East German Historians, 1961-1989,’ *Historical Journal*, 46, 3 (Sep., 2003), 649-668. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mombauer, ‘Introduction: The Fischer Controversy 50 years on,’ 235-237. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Guenther Kronenbitter, ‘Keeping a Low Profile — Austrian Historiography and the Fischer Controversy,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48, 2 (April 2013), 333-349. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. John W. Langdon, ‘Emerging from Fischer's Shadow: Recent Examinations of the Crisis of July 1914,’ *History Teacher*, 20, 1 (Nov., 1986), pp. 63-86; 66-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Mombauer, ‘The Fischer Controversy, Documents and the 'Truth' About the Origins of the First World War,’ Journal of Contemporary History, 48, 2, (April 2013), 290-314; 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Mulligan, *Origins*, pp. 17-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid*, pp. 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mulligan, *Origins*, pp. 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. James Bowman, ‘The Forgotten Honor of World War I,’ *New Atlantis*, No. 42 (Spring 2014), pp. 25-33; 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (London, 1984), p. 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Zachary Twamley, *A Matter of Honour: Great Britain in the First World War* (Wicklow, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Frevert, ‘Honour, Gender, and Power: The Politics of Satisfaction in Pre-War Europe’, in *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War 1 and European Political Culture Before 1914* eds. Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (London, 2012), pp. 248-249. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Frevert, ‘Honour, Gender, Power,’ p. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. L. L. Farrar Jr., ‘The Limits of Choice: July 1914 Reconsidered,’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 16, 1 (Mar., 1972), 1-23; 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Otte, *July Crisis*, xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid*, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)