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# The German Centenary of the First World War<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract

In the run-up to the 2014 centenary of the First World War the German public was gripped by a heated debate on the origins of the war. This article explores the nature of this controversy and its role in shaping national commemoration of the Great War. It also draws parallels between the commemorations of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the war in 1964 and those of 2014. Through a comparison of Germany's national memories of the war with those in Britain and France the article also reveals how different and sometimes conflicting national interpretations of the history of the First World War have affected centenary commemoration. Memories of the First World War are nation-specific, constructed and developed over time to suit a particular view of a country's past. Moreover, they can be instrumental in influencing that country's future development and relations with its neighbours.

## Introduction

In the run-up to the centenary year, the First World War enjoyed global public interest on an unprecedented scale. Thoughts in Germany were largely focused on the question of responsibility for the outbreak of the war. What role did Germany's government play in the events that led to the First World War, compared to those of the other great powers? All thoughts around how best to commemorate the war's outbreak and significant moments of the four year war at national or regional level paled into insignificance against the background of a revival of the long debate on the origins of the war which once again exercised German historians, journalists, politicians and the German public.

Historiographical debates do not rely on anniversaries. However, in the case of the debate on the origins of the war, key anniversaries provided the backdrop to particularly heated exchanges. This was the case on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war in 1964, and

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Dr Helen McCartney and Dr David Morgan-Owen for organising the symposium 'Commemorating the Centenary of the First World War at King's College, London, where the paper which forms the basis of this article was first delivered, and Dr Heather Jones for making available her conference paper 'The Centenary in France: International, European and Local' prior to publication.

again in 2014. This article explores, in Part 1, the parallels and differences in how Germans remembered the war in 2014 and in 1964. It then examines in more detail, in Part 2, the debates around the First World War on the occasion of the centenary, as well as the different ways in which the war was brought to new audiences. It reflects on how the latest instalment of the debate on the origins of the war in Germany affected the memory and commemoration of the conflict in the centenary year. Finally, in Part 3, Germany's national memories of the war will briefly be compared with those in Britain and France. Such a comparison reveals different and conflicting national interpretations of the history of the First World War which have affected how the war is remembered and how it was commemorated during the centenary. These differences show to what extent national memories of the First World War are nation-specific, constructed and developed over time to suit a particular view of a country's past as well as influencing that country's future development and relations with its neighbours.

### 1. Commemorating the war on the 50<sup>th</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary

The question of 'war guilt' or 'responsibility' has been central to how Germans have thought of the First World War ever since it began. After Germany's defeat in 1918, successive interwar governments made it their mission to prove the country had fallen victim to an attack by its neighbours. Following the Second World War, a more amicable consensus which blamed alliance systems rather than individual governments had all but settled the matter – until it became controversial once again in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup>

The last 'big anniversary', commemorating 50 years since the outbreak of the war, coincided with the Fischer controversy during which historians, foremost among them Fritz Fischer, questioned the consensus of the interwar and post-Second-World-War years. An uncomfortable anniversary, which also needed to commemorate the outbreak of the Second World War 25 years before, was made all the more troublesome by the fact that the old question of who had started the First World War was reopened by historians. Against the

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<sup>2</sup> For more details on this debate, see e.g. Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*, London 2003; Annika Mombauer (ed.), 'The Fischer Controversy 50 Years on', special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol.48, No. 2, April 2013.

background of bitter disputes among historians about who was responsible for the outbreak of the war (which pitted the Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer against most of his peers, foremost among them Gerhard Ritter, a veteran of the war), the German media covered the topic extensively and thus it was discussed well beyond the academy by the German public – an interesting parallel to the events of 2014 when once again a historiographical dispute became a publicly discussed topic which attracted extensive media interest. Of course, in 1964, members of the ‘Front Generation’, like Ritter himself, participated in the debate in which not just the country’s reputation but also the motives for their own participation in the war was at stake. By contrast, in 2014, the First World War was no longer part of anyone’s personal experience though, as we will see, that scarcely made it less emotive.

A brief comparison between the debates which occurred on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war and the centenary shows up some interesting parallels as well as differences. On both occasions the focus was on one ground-breaking and controversial thesis in particular (boiled down to the bare minimum and to some extent misrepresenting the historians who had advanced it) – in 1964 it was Fischer’s view in *Griff nach der Weltmacht* that Germany was more to blame for the outbreak of war than others.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, as we will explore in more detail, that role was taken by Christopher Clark’s equally ground-breaking and controversial book *The Sleepwalkers*.<sup>4</sup>

The role of the media is another obvious parallel. In the run up to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the magazine *Der Spiegel* in particular fuelled public discussion, and the media were a major contributing part in ensuring that this was not a debate confined to the pages of scholarly journals or lecture theatres. In 2014, print media, online publications, radio and TV coverage of the topic turned *The Sleepwalkers* into a publishing sensation and its author into a household name. At the same time, newspapers and magazines, TV and radio programmes foregrounded the First World War and created a genuine interest among the German public in a war that had not received this much attention in living memory.

However, perhaps the most important parallel between the two anniversaries was that in both cases the debate was arguably more about contemporary and future Germany than about its past. Of course, the international context to each anniversary was hugely different. In 1964, at the height of the Cold War, with Germany still only very recently divided and very much at

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<sup>3</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, Düsseldorf 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Clark, *Die Schlafwandler. Wie Europa in den ersten Weltkrieg zog*, Berlin 2013.

the mercy of its allies, drawing parallels between the origins of both wars put West-Germany's western integration potentially in jeopardy. Little wonder that the political establishment, and with it many of the leading historians, rallied to protect the country from this perceived slur of Germany's reputation. In 2014, many members of the intellectual elite in what was by then a much more self-assured united Germany confronted the history of the First World War in a much more unapologetic way. Unified Germany was firmly within a European alliance in which it had become used to playing a leading role – politically and economically at least - and some wanted to see an end to the perceived humiliation that the 'war guilt' allegation posed for Germans. On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war, Germany's future role in Europe appeared to depend on how its government's actions in 1914 were seen by its former enemies and its current and potential future partners in the present.

## 2. The centenary in Germany

In the run-up to the centenary, the German public became interested in the First World War on an unprecedented scale. Generations of Germans devoured documentaries, feature films, discussion shows and countless publications aimed at general audiences. This interest was fuelled by willing journalists, publishers and historians who were only too keen to encourage this newly-found enthusiasm for all things Great War. Indeed, even the name 'der grosse Krieg' was widely adopted in Germany during the centenary debates for the first time. Until then, arguably, it had been the war of 1939 that had deserved that name, a conflict that had overshadowed the memory of the First World War in Germany for decades.

While the German public was exercised by the most recent debates on the First World War's origins in the years immediately preceding the centenary, the German government seemed to find it difficult to come to terms with the impending anniversary and was unable or unwilling to conceive of national plans for commemoration. Certainly, there was a marked difference between the amount of effort (and money) that the German Government was prepared to put into acts of commemoration. Unlike in Britain, where a commission was put in charge of plans in 2012 and some 50 million pounds of public funds were allocated to various commemorative activities and programmes,<sup>5</sup> in Germany, only 3.5 million euros were set

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Jeffrey, 'Commemoration in the United Kingdom: A multitude of memories', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 3, 50, September 2015, pp.562-567, p.563

aside for remembrance events.<sup>6</sup> In Australia, which embraced the centenary with perhaps the most enthusiasm, the plan to task a national commission with preparing centenary commemorative events was announced as early as 2010. Commentators have spoken of a ‘memory orgy’, with staggering amounts of money (an estimated 552 million Australian Dollars) being made available for the centenary commemorations and projects.<sup>7</sup>

This lack of willingness to plan at the national level frustrated many German historians. Edgar Wolfrum, for example, complained that while other governments had put together commissions and put aside large amounts of funding to organise state-sponsored exhibitions and commemorative events, the German Federal Government had been remiss and had ‘for far too long simply done nothing’. Its statement that there was no ‘national policy on history’ he considered an ‘embarrassing excuse’ which highlighted the ‘helplessness and inactivity of the Government in this centenary year’.<sup>8</sup> Not all historians agreed, however, that it was necessary to commemorate the First World War at the national level. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, for example, felt that given that in Germany ‘everything is in the shadow of the Second World War and the Holocaust, we don’t need to add to this with a memorial event for the First World War.’ In his opinion, the subject should be left to historiographical controversies.<sup>9</sup> Of these, of course, there were plenty.

With the Federal Government unwilling to plan national commemoration, it was up to regional governments, museums and universities to organise events to commemorate the centenary, and there was much appetite for exhibitions, public discussions and conferences up and down the country. In the meantime, thoughts of remembrance and commemoration were overshadowed by the newly-erupted controversy about Germany’s part in the events that had led to its outbreak.

A hundred years after its outbreak, the memory of the war was still, as it had been in previous decades, dominated by questions about its origins and about Germany’s role in the events that

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Bayer, ‘Commemoration in Germany: Rediscovering history’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 3, 50, September 2015, pp.553-561, p.556. See also Joan Beaumont, ‘Commemoration in Australia: a Memory Orgy?’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 3, 50, September 2015, pp.536-544.

<sup>7</sup> This equates to \$8,800 per Australian soldier killed in the war, compared to \$109 for a British soldier and \$2 for a German. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2015/nov/11/lavish-spending-first-world-war-commemorations-cloak-distasteful-reality>.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Hans Monath, ‘Die Ausrede der Regierung ist blamabel’, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 17 January 2014, p.19.

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Ulrich Wehler, cited in Hans Monath, ‘Historiker fordern historische Gedenkfeier’, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 27 January 2014, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/erster-weltkrieg-historiker-fordern-deutsche-gedenkfeier/9386860.html>.

led to war. Christopher Clark's ground-breaking study *The Sleepwalkers* ensured that a new debate, not dissimilar in focus and ferocity to that of the Fischer controversy, took place in Germany on the eve of the centenary. When published in German translation in the autumn of 2013, *Die Schlafwandler* was an unprecedented publishing success for a book on the First World War. It sold hundreds of thousands of copies, topped German bestseller charts for months, and triggered extensive debate among historians, as well as in the media, where the starting point for heated discussions about the impending centenary was invariably Clark's new thesis and the question of the origins of the war.

Just as the history of the long historiographical debate on the origins of the First World War cannot be told without mentioning Fritz Fischer, it now also can no longer be narrated without reference to Clark's equally path-breaking and controversial thesis. Clark makes several unique interventions. Crucially, he rejects the notion of 'war guilt' and denies that historians should be engaged in finding a guilty party in the manner of a detective in a crime thriller. Moreover, he criticises the role of the decision-makers in Serbia and in the Entente Powers, while being more lenient on the actions those of Germany and Austria-Hungary. While some historians have queried this stance – even considering it to amount to a double-standard - a large part of the German public and media latched onto this less judgemental interpretation of the role of the Central Powers and were only too willing to attribute more responsibility to the Central Powers.<sup>10</sup> For many Germans, this radical new interpretation effectively ended a century of blame for the outbreak of war in 1914. As Michael Epkenhans observes, Clark's apparent exoneration of Germany's role in the origins of the war had 'a near-magical effect on a large public [audience] and a section of [German] historians.'<sup>11</sup> It was surprising just how deeply feelings of resentment ran among Germans who were several generations removed for the events of 1914; these were members of the war generation debating what was to them a personal as well as a national story, but later generations of Germans who were only too keen to see Germany liberated from the charge of 'war guilt' became interested in this topic and keen to exonerate Germany for the perceived shackles of

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<sup>10</sup> In Christoph Cornelißen's assessment, Clark's strong 'analytical passages rather contrast with a peculiarly vague assessment of German and Austrian politics during the July Crisis'. Cornelißen, "'Wege ins Unbekannte". 1914 und die Rückkehr des Ersten Weltkriegs 2014', in Nils Löffelbein, Silke Fehlemann and Christoph Cornelißen (eds), *Europa 1914. Wege ins Unbekannte*, Schöningh, Paderborn 2016, pp.270-283, p.275. See also Arndt Weinrich, '„Grosser Krieg, grosse Ursachen? Aktuelle Forschungen zu den Ursachen des Ersten Weltkrieges," *Francia* 40 (2013), pp.233-252, p. 243. For a rebuttal of Clark's view of Serbia's role see Marie-Janine Calic, 'Kriegstreiber Serbien? Die Südslawen und der Erste Weltkrieg: eine Richtigstellung', *Osteuropa*, 2, 64, 2014, pp.43-58.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Epkenhans, 'Der Erste Weltkrieg – Jahrestagsgedenken, neue Forschungen und Debatten einhundert Jahre nach seinem Beginn', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 63, 2, 2015, pp.135-165, p.146.

blame. Astonishingly, the centenary debates revealed that many Germans seemingly cared so deeply about absolving Germany from war-guilt accusations, while many others reacted equally as indignantly to the fact that the old post-Fischer orthodoxy was being questioned by Clark's revisionism.<sup>12</sup>

With Clark's book such a publishing success, and many now convinced that the slate had been wiped clean, historians who did not share the new view found themselves accused of nursing a "negative nationalism" that clings to German self-flagellation', or of being suspicious of 'everything that contradicts the 'achievements' of previously attained knowledge.'<sup>13</sup> Among the first to take a stance in the media debate was the historian and head of the political section of *Die Zeit*, Volker Ullrich. If Fischer had been accused of 'political masochism' back in the 1960s, Clark's critics were now accused of 'guilt pride' (*Schuldstolz*), as if 'they were practically always compelled to confess to German guilt, even deriving satisfaction from it.'<sup>14</sup> Others agree that the return to a hostile tone in the debate was regrettable and even surprising, given that the topic had seen much nuanced revision over the last few decades and that historians seemed to have been able to agree to disagree on matters of re-interpretation. Even Clark's focus on the Entente Powers was hardly unprecedented.<sup>15</sup> To give just one example, in his 2011 study *Der Weg in den Abgrund*, Konrad Canis attributes a war aim of conquest [*Eroberungsziel*] to Russia which he considers to have been a less legitimate reason for entering into the war than Germany's aim of securing its safety. This, as Michael Epkenhans explains, 'did not excite anyone', even though this interpretation departed significantly from the current accepted views of many

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<sup>12</sup> The most recent example of this is Klaus Gietinger and Winfried Wolf who, in their own words, have attempted to put forward 'good arguments against this dangerous historical revisionism.' With this they want 'at the same time to make a contribution against the general militarisation and the newly emerging danger of a great war.' *Der Seelentröster. Wie Christopher Clark die Deutschen von der Schuld am I. Weltkrieg erlöst*, Stuttgart 2017, p.2.

<sup>13</sup> Cora Stephan, "Die ewigen Schuldgefühle der Deutschen," cited in Epkenhans, 'Der Erste Weltkrieg', p.149.

<sup>14</sup> See Volker Ullrich, "Nun schlittern sie wieder," *Die Zeit*, 24 January 2014. It is important to note that Clark makes it explicit he had not set out to prove Fischer wrong. As he points out, examining the July Crisis with the assumption that there was "a smoking gun... in the hands of every major character... does not mean that we should minimize the belligerence and imperialist paranoia of the Austrian and German policymakers that rightly absorbed the attention of Fritz Fischer and his historiographical allies.' See Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe went to War in 1914*, New York 2012, p.561. However, as Volker Ullrich's comments suggest, this is precisely how some have interpreted Clark's thesis.

<sup>15</sup> Among the recent publications which focused our attention on the roles of France and Russia in particular, see Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Außenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Ausbruchs des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Munich 2009 and Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge MA, 2012.

historians.<sup>16</sup> Canis's assertion was seen as 'neither a reason to languish in deep national self-doubt not to confront the other [nations] with their sins with a wagging moral finger'. Indeed, it had appeared as if, in the early part of the twenty-first century, questions of war-guilt had been put aside and no longer caused much controversy among historians. After the arguments of the Fischer controversy, an uneasy calm had descended and the hostility of those years had been overcome, making way to a more conciliatory tone. It seemed as if it was no longer necessary to argue about the causes of the First World War. It had become possible to agree to disagree on matters of interpretation. In the aftermath of the meeting of François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl at Verdun in 1984, remembering the First World War was no longer about attributing blame, but about a warning to work together to avoid another such war.<sup>17</sup>

And yet, 30 years after this celebrated scene at Verdun, 50 years after the Fischer controversy, the question of 'war guilt' was once again passionately discussed in Germany. The tone turned defamatory and hostile; being a 'Fischerite' was once more an insult. In the latest debates, the revisionists of the 1960s, and those who fifty years later share their views of the Central Power's larger share of responsibility, have been portrayed as the old-fashioned traditionalists who are unable to concede that new research has overtaken them, that their revisionism has in turn been revised. As Christoph Cornelißen observes, in the new and continuing debate which was kick-started by the publication of *The Sleepwalkers* in Germany 'all critics of the "new" insights are simply portrayed as unteachable'; a development that reminds Cornelißen of a time – which lasted into the 1960s – in which historians flew the flags of their nations without question.<sup>18</sup> If a moment of conciliation had indeed been reached by the end of the century, it was swept away on the eve of the centenary as the old fault-lines of the debate re-opened and historians once again sought to revise the current orthodox view of Germany's role in the origins of the war.

Arguments about Germany's relative innocence — or rather shared responsibility of the great powers — found its way into other widely-discussed publications, among them Herfried Münkler's 2013 study *Der grosse Krieg (The Great War)*. This book also appeared for weeks on German bestseller lists.<sup>19</sup> Like Clark, Münkler, a prominent political scientist, was

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<sup>16</sup> Epkenhans, 'Der Erste Weltkrieg', p.140; Konrad Canis, *Der Weg in den Abgrund*, Paderborn 2001, p.684.

<sup>17</sup> Epkenhans, 'Der Erste Weltkrieg', p.140.

<sup>18</sup> Cornelißen, "'Wege ins Unbekannte'", p.276.

<sup>19</sup> Publications on the First World War found astonishingly large audiences: Florian Illies's *1913* sold approximately 400,000 copies in 2013 and Münkler had sold 30,000 by January 2014; at that point Clark had

frequently interviewed in the media as an expert and proponent of the new orthodoxy during the centenary debates. He spelt out why some believed that the new interpretation of the origins of the war would be advantageous for Germany: 'It is hardly possible to assume a responsible policy in Europe if one has the impression: we were guilty of everything.'<sup>20</sup> Indeed, much of the public debate centred on Germany's current and future role in Europe, with many conservative historians advocating once again a more self-assured foreign policy for an economically powerful Germany. If 'war guilt' for one world war could finally be laid to rest, then it might become more conceivable for Germany to play a more prominent international role.

While it might be tempting to speculate that without Clark's publication and the spirited discussion his intervention evoked there would have been nothing for Germans to talk about on the occasion of the centenary, in fact there were other ways in which the war of 1914 featured prominently in public discourse a hundred years on. As international crises in the early part of the twenty-first century seemed to mirror, sometimes with uncanny resemblance, the events which a hundred years ago pitted the Great Powers of Europe against each other, questions were asked about lessons that could be learnt from past mistakes. Most striking of those, not least because it involved some of the same former great powers in the very summer of the centenary, was the Ukraine Crisis and the annexation of the Crimea by Russia, which reminded many of the political constellations of 1914.<sup>21</sup> There seemed to be uncomfortable parallels to the crisis which led to war a hundred years previously, with the media referring frequently to the July Crisis of 1914 in the context of the charged situation in the Crimea. The tabloid *Bild-Zeitung* took a typically sensationalist approach, asking in March 2014 in an attention-grabbing headline 'Is the Crisis as explosive as that of 1914?'<sup>22</sup>, while more moderate papers advanced similar speculations, albeit in a more restraint way. Others sought to explain the events in the Ukraine in 2014 as a result of the outcome of the First World

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already sold 160,000 copies in Germany alone (*Schlafwandler* was published in Sept. 2013), with sales figures much larger by the time of the centenary (and in excess of 300,000 by March 2015). Figures for January 2014 taken from Jeevan Vasagar, 'Bestseller list reveals desire to reassess Great War', *Financial Times*, 17 January 2014 <https://www.ft.com/content/5fdf9fba-7f57-11e3-b6a7-00144feabdc0>. Figure for March 2015 from Martin Bayer, 'Commemoration in Germany', p.554.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Epkenhans, 'Der Erste Weltkrieg', p.148.

<sup>21</sup> On this point, also Christoph Cornelißen, "'Oh! What a Lovely War!'" Zum Forschungsertrag und zu den Tendenzen ausgewählter Neuerscheinungen über den Ersten Weltkrieg', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 5/6, 65, 2014, pp.269-283, p.271.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/krim/ukraine-und-die-krim-ist-die-krise-genauso-brisant-wie-1914-34971036.bild.html> (accessed 30 March 2017)

War.<sup>23</sup> Whether they saw parallels or not, in the centenary year politicians and historians frequently found themselves forced to comment on current affairs in relation to the outbreak of the war of 1914.

The Ukraine crisis was not the only contemporary point of comparison in the centenary year. Other parallels, too, reminded historians of events of 1914. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand had provided the infamous spark that led to the July Crisis, and it has been tempting to search for parallels here, too, particularly given that present-day concerns with suicide bombers and terrorists have seemingly made the events of 28 June 1914 more relatable.<sup>24</sup> Certainly, Christopher Clark alludes in his best-selling study to a ‘squad of suicide bombers’ in Sarajevo in June 1914, a description with distinctly contemporary connotations, and refers to the Black Hand organisation which was behind the assassination as ‘an avowedly terrorist organization’.<sup>25</sup>

However, for all the heated discussions that took place about the war’s origins in 2013 and 2014, public commemoration of the war did not focus solely on the causes of the war. Rather, there was an unparalleled emergence of interest in the war at a local and regional level. While the nation disagreed about great power politics and who had caused the war, at a more relatable and personal level, the work of historians who had studied the experience and the culture of war came to the fore in countless local exhibitions and conferences. In tandem with the best-selling tomes of Clark, Münkler and others there was a wave of publications which explored the war experience at a local level.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Jörg Friedrich’s interview of 30 August 2014 <http://www.salzburg.com/nachrichten/spezial/1914/sn/artikel/historiker-folgen-des-ersten-weltkriegs-sind-noch-spuerbar-119156/> (accessed 30 March 2017)

<sup>24</sup> The fact that many historians refer to Gavrilo Princip and his associates as ‘terrorists’ has itself caused controversy, particularly among Serbian commentators who consider Princip a ‘freedom fighter’ and object to the negative connotations associated with labelling their national hero a terrorist. Despite his international largely negative press, in the centenary year a memorial was erected in Belgrad celebrating Princip. For more detail on this see e.g. Annika Mombauer, ‘Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I’, *Central European History*, 4, 48, December 2015, pp.541-564, pp.548f.

<sup>25</sup> Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p.xxvii.

<sup>26</sup> For example: Maren Ballerstedt et al (eds), *Magdeburg im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914-1918. Eine Großstadt an der Heimatfront*, Halle 2014; Karl Boland et al (eds), *Der Erste Weltkrieg und Mönchengladbach*, Mönchengladbach 2014; Martin Krauß et al (eds), *“Heimatfront” – Der Erste Weltkrieg und seine Folgen im Rhein-Neckar-Raum (1914-1924)*, Ubstadt-Weiher 2014; Daniel Kuhn (ed.), *Als der Krieg vor der Haustür stand. Der Erste Weltkrieg in Baden und Württemberg*, Tübingen 2014; Daniel Schmidt (ed.), *“Bin noch gesund und munter”. Gelsenkirchener Feldpost aus dem Großen Krieg 1914-1918*, Essen 2014; Lars U. Scholl (ed.), *Bremen und der Erste Weltkrieg. Kriegsalltag in der Hansestadt*, Bremen 2014; Thomas Schwark, *Heimatfront Hannover. Kriegsalltag 1914-1918*, Hannover 2014; Volker Standt, *Köln im Ersten Weltkrieg. Veränderungen*

Hand in hand with this local and regional interest was a kindling of the memory of a war that had long been overshadowed by the Second World War, as the German public engaged, for example, with the European project Europeana and dug deep in cellars and attics to reveal diaries, letters and artefacts from their great-grandparents' generation.<sup>27</sup> This allowed a personal memory of the war much more akin to that in Britain or France, where the 'pity of war' and personal war experiences had long dominated the way the war was remembered.

Other online projects sought to bring the war to larger audiences or to collate the latest research in accessible places, among them the 'Erster Weltkrieg' portal of the Max Weber Stiftung<sup>28</sup>; the 1914-1918 online encyclopedia of the First World War<sup>29</sup>, or the collaborative bibliography on the First World War collated by the German Historical Institute in Paris.<sup>30</sup> The *Bundesarchiv*, digitized large numbers of documents (700,000 pages are now available online), as well as releasing many thousands of photographs and moving image.<sup>31</sup> The *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, a federal body responsible for public education in Germany, also made the war one of its focal points during the centenary,<sup>32</sup> while the *Auswärtiges Amt* made documents on the July Crisis available online.<sup>33</sup>

A plethora of exhibitions highlighted the role of towns, cities or particular regions in the war as the German *Bundesländer* sought to commemorate their own, local war.<sup>34</sup> These, it seems to Martin Bayer who visited many of them, did not question the orthodox view of the origins of the war. 'The general tone ranged from an outright accusation of German responsibility to

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*in der Stadt und des Lebens der Bürger 1914-1918*, Göttingen 2014; Michael Hermann und Paul Weßels (eds), *Ostfriesland im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Aurich 2014.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en>. On the emergence of public history see also Cornelißen, "'Wege ins Unbekannte". 1914 und die Rückkehr des Ersten Weltkriegs 2014', in Nils Löffelbein, Silke Fehlemann and Christoph Cornelißen (eds), *Europa 1914. Wege ins Unbekannte*, Schöningh, Paderborn 2016, pp. 270-283, p.270.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.maxweberstiftung.de/themen/erster-weltkrieg.html>.

<sup>29</sup> For details on this project see e.g. Oliver Janz, '1914-1918 online. Ein globales Projekt zu einem globalen Krieg', in *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 5/6, 2014, pp.369-379.

<sup>30</sup> For further details on digital projects for the centenary and beyond, see Alessandra Sorbello Staub, 'Der Große Krieg. Netzangebote zum Gedenkjahr 2014', in *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 5/6, 2014, pp.380-381.

<sup>31</sup> 100 Jahre Erster Weltkrieg – Portal des Bundesarchivs, <https://ersterweltkrieg.bundesarchiv.de/>. For a detailed discussion of some of the media offerings on the First World War see e.g. Christoph Cornelißen, 'Oh! What a Lovely War!', pp.270-1 and Staub, 'Der Große Krieg', passim.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.bpb.de/geschichte/deutsche-geschichte/ersterweltkrieg/>.

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/AAmt/PolitischesArchiv/Dokument\\_des\\_Monats/140613\\_Pol.Archiv.html](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/AAmt/PolitischesArchiv/Dokument_des_Monats/140613_Pol.Archiv.html).

<sup>34</sup> For details on exhibitions at federal level, see Martin Bayer, 'Commemoration on Germany', pp.556-7.

the view that Germany did not confine but fuelled the escalation that led to war'.<sup>35</sup> Thus their message stood in sharp contrast to the concurrent public debate.

Interestingly, in their official speeches delivered to mark key moments one hundred years ago, Germany's leaders also accepted Germany's large share of responsibility for the outbreak of war, steering a cautious course through the controversy which had occupied the German public since the autumn of 2013. In the official statements of members of the German government, the question of war guilt was not dodged, nor was an attempt made to divert from Germany's role in the events that led to the war. On the whole, these speeches used the occasion to stress the importance of European integration and good neighbourly relations in preserving peace in Europe over the last seven decades and hopefully into the future, rather than dwelling on the causes of the war.<sup>36</sup> In this speech of 3 July 2014, for example, the President of the German Bundestag, Norbert Lammert, claimed that 'politically irresponsible action' had led to the crisis a hundred years before. In the summer of 1914, de-escalation of the crisis was neglected in favour of a 'calculated as well as headless' jump into the abyss. For this he attributed a 'large measure of responsibility' to the Kaiserreich and the German military.<sup>37</sup> He addressed head-on the 'brutal attack on neutral Belgium' which was 'against international law', and the crimes committed against civilians, the destruction of towns, mentioning Reims and Louvain in particular as 'embarrassing and inexcusable'. Repeatedly he posed the rhetorical question: 'What concern of ours is the First World War?', and in conclusion his answer pointed to the future. 'We have lived in peace for seven decades. We are the lucky ones! From this stems our responsibility!'<sup>38</sup>

In a similar vein, Bundespräsident Joachim Gauck used the occasion of his speech in Liège on 4 August 2014, the anniversary of the British declaration of war on Germany, to blame the 'striking failure of diplomacy, the unfortunate Schlieffen Plan', the belief that war could cleanse society, the mistaken belief in a short war as a solution for international disputes for

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<sup>35</sup> Martin Bayer, *Commemoration in Germany*, p.557.

<sup>36</sup> There was a similar emphasis on the European angle in France, albeit for different reasons. Here, arguments over the role of French soldiers (coerced to fight by the French state, or taking up the fight as part of their duties as Republican citizens?) have made it necessary to transfer commemoration to a local or a larger, European level, rather than focusing on the national. See Heather Jones, 'The Centenary in France: International, European and Local', unpublished conference paper given at King's College London, 12 January 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Norbert Lammert's speech in the German Bundestag, 3 July 2014

<https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/praesidium/reden/2014/001/286046>. See also Epkenhans, 'Der Erste Weltkrieg', p.142.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/praesidium/reden/2014/001/286046>.

the outbreak of ‘a war among brothers which eventually set large parts of the world alight’.<sup>39</sup> The message here, as in similar speeches, was a focus on the responsibility of later generations to preserve peace and to acknowledge that ‘peace and reconciliation are possible’.

### 3. The German Centenary in International Perspective

The centenary year has seen an unusual, if not entirely surprising, increase in public interest in Germany in the history of the First World War. Public history has captured the imagination of Germans who – like their European counterparts and indeed others around the world – embraced the memory of the First World War, perhaps in the case of Germany (and Austria) for the first time. Whereas the victors had always maintained a positive memory of the war by focusing on remembering its many victims while highlighting that this had been a just and necessary war, in the case of the Central Powers, the losers had never found much to celebrate or commemorate.<sup>40</sup> When it came to planning the centenary celebrations, it looked initially as if the German Government was inclined to ‘look away’ rather than to tackle how Germany might remember such an uncomfortable event.<sup>41</sup>

However, the government was out of step, as exhibitions at local and regional levels and extensive media coverage brought the war back to life and into German living rooms. And public interest also changed as Germans in unprecedented numbers engaged with Clark and his critics and contributed via online discussions and comment pages to the public debate that unfolded on the eve of the centenary. At the height of the controversy around *The Sleepwalkers*, some 69 percent of respondents to a German opinion poll expressed an interest in the First World War, rising to as high as 77 percent among the fourteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds.<sup>42</sup> For the first time, books on the First World War outsold those on the Second, and the interest among a younger audience is particularly noteworthy.

The debate among historians significantly contributed to this newly emerged interest. Although we are far removed today from the events of 1914, this has not diminished the

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Joachim-Gauck/Reden/2014/08/140804-Gedenken-Luettich.html>.

<sup>40</sup> On this point see also Cornelißen, “Wege ins Unbekannte”, p.281.

<sup>41</sup> Epkenhans, ‘Der Erste Weltkrieg’, p.135.

<sup>42</sup> Figures from the Forsa poll cited in Jeevan Vasagar, ‘Bestseller list’.

perceived national importance of arriving at a palatable interpretation of the causes of the war. Certainly the passage of time has not yet relegated the topic to history. Gerd Krumeich, writing before the centenary debate began, was unfortunately overly optimistic when he suggested that German historians no longer feel the need to defend their nation's honour, or that this topic no longer hit 'a raw nerve'.<sup>43</sup> In 2014, thinking about the origins of the war opened up new debates and demonstrated that among some members of the German public there were deeply-held resentments of the notion that Germany had started the First World War. The fact that in Clark Germany had an advocate of a less judgemental persuasion who was not German also played a part in the reception of his thesis; he was considered unbiased and objective.<sup>44</sup> That this question of war guilt should still exercise contemporaries to such an extent is perhaps the most surprising revelation of the centenary in Germany.

The way the debate unfolded in Germany in the centenary year showed that questions of national honour were still of considerable importance when it came to how Germans discussed the origins of the war. When Clark was read by the German public, as well as by many historians, as absolving Germany for the responsibility that it had shouldered for a hundred years, there was thus a palpable sense of relief in many quarters. His revision of the old consensus was, in Stig Förster's words, "balm for the soul of more self-confident educated citizens (*Bildungsbürger*)," at a time when Germany is once more a great power on the continent.<sup>45</sup>

The nature of Germany's conflicted relationship with its past meant that it was difficult for the German government to conceive of ways of commemorating the war. However, the

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<sup>43</sup> 'One is no longer enmeshed in cultural and social surroundings that demand that the historian not only explain how the catastrophe could happen, but also to defend the nation from the accusation that its "aggression" had caused the death of 10 million, as the Treaty of Versailles had wanted to decree'. Krumeich, *July 1914*, 10. Krumeich also suggested – erroneously – that the origins of the war no longer 'hit a raw nerve' in Germany. See Jeevan Vasagar, 'Bestseller list'.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, the online review, dated 16 November 2016, of 'Kreisleriana' on Amazon.de: 'As a Brit [sic] Clark is certainly not biased [...]'. [https://www.amazon.de/product-reviews/3421043590/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_see\\_all\\_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\\_reviews&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent](https://www.amazon.de/product-reviews/3421043590/ref=cm_cr_dp_see_all_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent) (accessed 31 March 2017); a similar view expressed by 'Wolfgang Peter', 27 March 2013: 'A German would not have been allowed to write such a book – it would have been defamed as an attempt at an apology. Clark allows us to breathe freely.' [https://www.amazon.de/product-reviews/3421043590/ref=cm\\_cr\\_getr\\_d\\_paging\\_btm\\_20?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\\_reviews&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=20](https://www.amazon.de/product-reviews/3421043590/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_paging_btm_20?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=20) (accessed 31 March 2017)

<sup>45</sup> Stig Förster, "Balsam auf die Seele selbstbewusster gewordener Bildungsbürger," L.I.S.A. Wissenschaftsportal, Dec. 12, 2013 (<http://goo.gl/cqiKe2>).

centenary posed problems of different kinds to all combatant nations.<sup>46</sup> Germany's neighbour France also struggled, albeit for different reasons, to develop a nationally coherent way of remembering the war,<sup>47</sup> while Britain's government found it hard to remember the war without mentioning its causes, conscious of the fact that this might upset present-day European sensibilities.<sup>48</sup> In Britain, the centenary gave rise to public discussions about the alleged futility of the sacrifices, and the question of whether Britain could have stayed out of the war – picking up a concern that had first emerged soon after the end of the war.<sup>49</sup> For Britain, the origins of the iconic Great War are still of national significance today, as debates there showed: to negate the responsibility of the Central Powers is to call into question the legitimacy of British suffering. The enormous sacrifices seem all the harder to comprehend and to commemorate if the war itself was both futile and avoidable, worse still, if Britain was perhaps even found on the side of those who had been responsible for its outbreak. Ever since the war had ended, suffering for a just cause had been the predominant way in which the war had been remembered in Britain, a notion that was also foregrounded in the national commemoration in 2014.<sup>50</sup>

The idea that the war of 1914-1918 was futile is not part of the national consciousness in France which had no choice but to fight as theirs really was a defensive war. But it was not a war that has been glorified in popular memory; 'today's French collective memory of the First World War is consensual. The French usually think of 14-18 as a *boucherie*, a futile slaughter and a pointless European civil war in which row after row of men were mown down by machine guns. In short, it was a bloody mistake.'<sup>51</sup> As Romain Fathi outlines, France's war experience was radically different to that of other nations, due to the destruction wreaked

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<sup>46</sup> For an interesting comparison between five combatant nations' centenary commemorations see Joan Beaumont, 'The politics of memory: Commemorating the centenary of the First World War', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 3, 50, September 2015, pp.529-535.

<sup>47</sup> For details on this see e.g. Heather Jones, 'The Centenary in France: International, European and Local', unpublished conference paper given at King's College London, 12 January 2017; Romain Fathi, 'French commemoration: The centenary effect and the (re)discovery of 14-18', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2015, pp.545-552.

<sup>48</sup> In the run-up to the centenary, the British Government found itself in a difficult position planning the commemoration for a war whose causes mattered to the British narrative of the conflict, while being conscious not to offend the Germans.

<sup>49</sup> Max Hastings, arguing against futility in the BBC TV programme "The necessary war," which aired on 25 February 2014. It was up against another BBC programme presented by Niall Ferguson, scheduled for screening a week later, titled 'The wrong war', in which he advanced his argument that war was unnecessary for Britain and that the sacrifices its citizens made were pointless.

<sup>50</sup> For more details on the planning for the Centenary in Britain, see e.g. Keith Jeffrey, 'Commemoration in the United Kingdom'.

<sup>51</sup> Romain Fathi, 'French commemoration', p.546.

on the country, that the relationship of later generations with that conflict is also unique. ‘The sheer toll of the conflict prevented the continuation of the positive narrative of the Great War that had been hammered out by war propaganda.’<sup>52</sup>

Germans, by contrast, were new to remembering the war at all; there had been no tradition of wearing poppies or observing a minute’s silence to remember the dead of 1914-1918. In terms of the all-consuming question of the causes of the war, the urgency of arriving at a new consensus was essentially about the country’s future role in Europe and beyond. In Germany the question of whether the war was worth fighting never arose – during the war, the German people considered it a war of defence, thus a just war that Germany needed to fight. That notion survived and, if anything, was further strengthened by the defeat and peace negotiations. Once there was a Second World War to contend with, which nobody in Germany could truthfully portray as a defensive war, such concerns overshadowed the memory of the First World War and certainly gave little rise to questions about the legitimacy of that first great war.

In December 2014, looking back at the centenary year, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, at the time Germany’s Foreign Minister, stressed that despite the joint memorial events in the summer of that year on the battlefields of Europe there could not be ‘a shared memory of the twentieth century on the European continent’. He stressed ‘how differently our ancestors experienced that history’ and how it ‘has also defined our countries differently until today.’<sup>53</sup> And indeed, this different history also affects views on the war’s origins.

Of course, who caused the war matters in all these countries, but for different reasons. More often, it is how the war impacted on the lives of those who fought it, and those who experienced it on the home front that has proved to hold most fascination for late generations. As we near the centenary of the war’s end, how the war was lost and won, and how the victors dealt with the spoils, will likely be equally as controversially discussed as how it started. Here, too, national memories and national commemorations will necessarily differ as winners and losers of 1918 remember the end and – crucially – the consequences of the war differently. Commemorating the war has proved challenging for Germany; commemorating its end and outcome will undoubtedly prove just as difficult.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2014/141217-BM\\_Erinnerungskulturen.html](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2014/141217-BM_Erinnerungskulturen.html).