

German Historical Institute  
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Annika Mombauer:  
*The Fischer Controversy Fifty Years On*  
Conference Report  
German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 34, No. 1  
(May 2012), pp169-175

Copyright © 2012 German Historical Institute London. All rights reserved.

*The Fischer Controversy Fifty Years On.* International conference supported by the German Historical Institute London, the *Journal of Contemporary History*, the Open University, the Alfred Toepfer Stiftung, and the German History Society and held at the GHIL, 13–15 Oct. 2011. Conveners: Annika Mombauer (Open University), John Röhl (Sussex), and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann (Oxford).

In October 2011, an international conference was held at the GHIL to mark the publication, fifty years ago, of a book which would spark one of the most heated historiographical debates of the twentieth century. In his 900-page study *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (the later English translation less provocatively entitled *Germany's Aims in the First World War*), the German historian Fritz Fischer argued that Germany had expansionist war aims in 1914, had pursued these war aims continuously throughout the war, and that Germany bore a considerable (*erheblich*) amount of responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War. These audacious assertions turned on their head a comfortable consensus in Germany which had existed since the late 1920s, rejecting the war-guilt allegations made by the victorious allies at Versailles in 1919. After the Second World War, for whose outbreak German responsibility was not in question, revisiting the causes of the First World War seemed unnecessarily soul-searching, and, moreover, politically unwise in the 1960s. As a consequence, the reactions to Fischer's theses by national conservative historians and in official circles were hostile. Among the insights revealed at the conference was a postcard which Gerd Krumeich had found in the papers of the late Wilhelm Deist, written by Fischer's most dogged opponent, Gerhard Ritter, in 1966: 'That man [i.e. Fischer] no longer exists for me as a colleague', Ritter wrote bitterly. This summed up perfectly what many conservative German historians felt in the 1960s. Fischer's raising of the 'guilt-question' at a time when this uncomfortable topic had been all but forgotten was unforgivable, at least for a generation of historians who, like Ritter, Zechlin, and Hans Herzfeld, had fought in the Great War with the conviction that they were engaged in a defensive war.

Events and anniversaries contemporaneous with the Fischer controversy help to explain the outrage with which Fischer's theses were received. The full conference programme can be found on the GHIL's website <[www.ghil.ac.uk](http://www.ghil.ac.uk)> under Events and Conferences.

## Conference Reports

received in the Federal Republic. 1961 was, of course, the year the Berlin Wall was built, and saw the Eichmann trial in Israel, soon to be followed by the Auschwitz trials. The Fischer debate reached its peak in 1964, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the war's outbreak, coincidentally the twenty-fifth anniversary of the outbreak of the even more destructive Second World War which, at least according to Fischer, Germany had instigated with similar aims to the First. At a time when Germany felt insecure and on the front line of opposing Cold War alliances, it is indeed easy to see why Fischer was *persona non grata* in many official circles.

Fifty years on, historians from Europe and North America gathered in London to take stock of this debate, and of the once so controversial views advanced by Fischer and his supporters. Had they stood the test of time? Is there any consensus after nearly 100 years of controversy, and five decades of the Fischer debate, as to why war broke out in 1914? The programme focused on a number of different aspects of Fischer's theses and of the historiographical debate, including the political significance of the controversy in the 1960s, the war aims of Germany and of the Entente, the Anglo-German naval race, and international decision-making on the eve of the war. The fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Fischer's path-breaking book also served as an occasion to invite a number of *Zeitzeugen* (among them Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann and Helmut Bley, though regrettably due to illness not Imanuel Geiss) who had either witnessed the development of the controversy first-hand or had worked with Fischer in the early 1960s and were able to illuminate some of Fischer's working methods.

The conference participants were spellbound when the account of one of Fischer's former *Doktoranden* Imanuel Geiss was read out in which he remembered working with Fischer on the book. A number of chapters of the controversial book were written collaboratively – with Geiss and another doctoral student, surrounded in Fischer's home by copies of documents from the archives, typing the first draft on an aged Remington typewriter. The crucial first chapter of *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (which gave rise to almost all of the controversy that followed its publication) was dictated by Geiss, with the three volumes by Luigi Albertini on his lap. Such reliance on the collaboration of assistants was, of course, not unusual within the German academic system at the time, as was confirmed by Egmont Zechlin's

former *Assistent*, Helmut Bley. Nonetheless, it may help to explain some of the stylistic oddities of *Griff nach der Weltmacht*.

Fischer's own Nazi past has recently been the focus of historical investigation, and the conference heard about Fischer's membership of the Nazi Party. It would seem that the experience of being a prisoner of war immediately after the Second World War (and there mixing with former Nazis who were still not willing to renounce their National Socialist views in spite of the obvious destruction that ideology had brought), as well as, more crucially, his experience of the USA and Britain in later years, turned him into a convinced liberal who consistently voted for the Social Democrats after 1945. Fischer had already distanced himself from the political aims of national-conservative historiography long before the 1960s—in fact, as early as the 1930s, when his theological background and his emphasis on a more conceptual history led him to reject the 'mandarin tradition'. In the 1960s, this helped him to distance himself openly from the prevailing tendencies of the predominant national-conservative historiographical tradition in West Germany, leading him, at least in the eyes of his critics, to a transformation from theological scholar to apparent 'Nestbeschmutzer'.

The difficult reception of Fischer's thesis in West Germany in the early 1960s was the topic of Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann's contribution. He was able to show that attempts to sideline Fischer were ultimately foiled by media interests and, in particular, by the support of two weekly papers, *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*. The impact of Fischer's theses outside West Germany was a particular focus of the conference, with examples being drawn from East Germany (Matthew Stibbe), Russia (Joshua Sanborn), Austria (Günther Kronenbitter), and France (John Keiger). In East Germany, the developing debate was watched with much interest, as Matthew Stibbe showed. With varying degrees of scepticism and enthusiasm, GDR historians sought both to maintain links with, and to distance themselves ideologically from, the 'Fischer school' in Hamburg. Stibbe argued that Fischer had a significant impact on the methodological approach and style of argument adopted by leading East German historians of the First World War, such as Fritz Klein and Willibald Gutsche. Stibbe also asked to what extent Fischer was influenced by his contacts with GDR historians, and by the findings of East German research, but suggested that there is less evidence for such an ex-

## Conference Reports

change having taken place, and that an asymmetrical process of 'intertwining and differentiation' existed between East and West German historians.

In other European countries, it was much easier to accept Fischer's views than in West Germany, not least because in many ways he reiterated what Germany's former enemies already felt they knew – that Germany had deliberately caused the First World War. Russia and France had little to lose by agreeing with Fischer's interpretation. In fact, as John Keiger argued, France had rather a lot to gain from this new interpretation, not least because so much revisionist attention in the inter-war years had been focused on trying to prove that France had been to blame for the outbreak of war to a greater or lesser extent. This, and the recent experience of the Second World War, had led in France to a historical sensitivity which was unrivalled by the other former Great Powers. As a result, the impact of the Fischer controversy was acutely observed in France, where the consequences of Fischer's allegations might also have had the most important potential impact on current political concerns given that, at the time, the governments of the Fifth Republic and of West Germany were attempting to establish closer formal relations. This culminated in the Franco-German Friendship Treaty of 22 January 1963, and Fischer's controversial theses and the ensuing public debate (the prominent French historian, Jacques Droz, called it 'a German Dreyfus Affair'), published just around this critical juncture, had the potential to undermine this new *détente*. In contrast, in the Soviet Union, and in post-Soviet historiography of the war and its origins, Fischer's theses were not much discussed, and not particularly controversial. As Joshua Sanborn demonstrated, the crux of Fischer's arguments did not go against the Soviet historiographical grain. Moreover, of course, there was no controversy over Fischer's theses in the 1960s because there was no open historiographical debate in the Soviet historical profession.

In Austria after 1945, Christian-conservative historians in particular favoured a nostalgic view of the Habsburg Monarchy. As a consequence, as Günther Kronenbitter argued, they avoided the question of Austria-Hungary's responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914, and tended to ignore Fischer's theses. The Fischer controversy did not lead to any major soul-searching among Austria's historians. Only one prominent historian, Fritz Fellner, attempted to widen the

debate by directing attention towards Vienna's decision-making during the July Crisis. Of course, in recent years historians have focused extensively on Austria-Hungary's role in and before 1914, and the work of Fellner, Sam Williamson, John Leslie, and Kronenbitter in particular has shown that Fischer would have done well to focus more of his attention on Germany's chief alliance partner.

Fischer's research on war aims was highlighted in a comparative framework. Holger Afflerbach explored the question of Fischer's analysis of the war aims of the Central Powers, while David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye analysed the war aims of Tsarist Russia. The foundations of Britain's war aims were considered by Keith Neilson, and Jennifer Jenkins provided an in-depth look at Germany's attempts to instigate nationalist (rather than jihadist) revolution in the Middle East. A close reading of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk by John W. Steinberg revealed that it was not a dress-rehearsal for Versailles, but rather harked back to the ideas of Bethmann Hollweg's infamous September Programme.

A large number of papers addressed the decision-making process in the years 1912 to 1914, and here the conference made some important contributions to current historiographical interpretations. Although in conclusion a consensus emerged that Fischer had got it right in attributing 'a significant part of the historical responsibility for the outbreak of a general war' to Germany, the question of why this was so has yet to be answered. Armed with overwhelming amounts of primary source evidence, which, as Annika Mombauer argued, had been of central importance in explaining the origins of the war ever since it started, we know much about the 'how', but still too little about the 'why'.

Furthermore, the focus must now also be on the actions of the other Great Powers. In July 1914, France was driven by the existential wish to remain a Great Power and by its fear of eventually being abandoned by an increasingly strong Russia, as Stefan Schmidt was able to show, while Bruce Menning demonstrated that Russia's resolve was strengthened by encouraging noises from the French leadership, which only served to firm up its intransigence. Christopher Clark argued that Serbia was in part motivated by the support it had been promised by Russia, and had a definite agenda which aimed at undermining the Austro-Hungarian Empire. All the while, Britain was caught in an impossible bind whereby not sup-

## Conference Reports

porting the Entente would potentially threaten its Empire, and, indeed, its security at home in the long run. These motivations need to be considered when we focus in detail on the crisis management of July 1914, when all these constraints dictated to a greater or lesser extent how Paris, London, St Petersburg, and Belgrade reacted to the threats emanating from Vienna and Berlin.

It also emerged that the origins of the decision for war need to be sought much earlier than July 1914, with the mobilization crisis of winter 1912–13 identified as a crucial juncture when a general European war very nearly broke out. War was only avoided when Germany and Austria-Hungary stepped back from the brink at the last moment, largely out of fear of British involvement. This dress-rehearsal for war of November and December 1912 left its mark on the planning of all the major powers, notably Russia and France, helping to explain why, during the crisis of 1914, war was less likely to be avoided a second time. The importance of the crisis provoked by the Balkan Wars was stressed by John Röhl, Christopher Clark, and Bruce Menning, and seems to point towards a new focus of enquiry which is set to shed revealing new light on the war planning of the major powers in the two years before the outbreak of war. This focus also serves as a potential counter-argument to the recently advanced views that in the long tradition of ‘avoided wars’, the crisis of July 1914 need not have escalated. Some of the tentative conclusions reached in London seem to suggest that the key decision-makers in all European capitals, but particularly in Vienna, Berlin, Belgrade, and St Petersburg, were determined that there would not be another narrowly avoided war after the crisis of 1912–13. A logical outcome of that attitude would be that the next international crisis would unavoidably lead to the outbreak of war among the major powers.

Hew Strachan summed up the historiographical and historical significance of Fritz Fischer’s work, and of the debate on the origins of war and on war aims. He explained how, following *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, a new understanding of the First World War as part of a worldwide revolutionary situation developed. He argued that Fischer’s book demonstrated that war was not, in fact, a continuation of politics by other means, but that the First World War changed everything. The evidence which Fischer amassed showed that Germany was intent on a complete overthrow of the status quo, on

creating a New Order. The question which Fischer's work raised was why Germany did not decide to continue prospering as it had done, but instead chose war.

Of course, Fischer's work highlighted many uncomfortable continuities between the First and Second World Wars, and these were the topic of Gerhard Hirschfeld's contribution. It is clear that much of Hitler's war was directly influenced by the First World War. The war of 1939 continued the *Entgrenzung* of warfare which began in 1914, including such transgressions as gas warfare, blockade and mass starvation, the bombing of cities, the terrible treatment of prisoners of war, the absence of distinction between combatants and non-combatants, and the role of mass propaganda. Hirschfeld also emphasized the important role of memory, which provided further fateful links between the two wars. For example, the memory of the hunger winter of 1917-18 stood in direct relation to ten million slave labourers being brought into Germany during the Second World War to prevent starvation, while the memory of the attack of the Cossacks on Germany in 1914 led to fear of the Russians in 1944-5. In conclusion it became evident that the way we study the First, and, indeed, the Second World War, has changed profoundly since Fischer first undertook his research. Even our recent interest in the cultural history of the war would not have been possible, Hirschfeld contended, without Fritz Fischer's pioneering research and his resolute stand.

In summing up the conference's findings, Jonathan Steinberg felt compelled to revise the way he would teach the origins of the war in future. He suggested that a new model of explanation of the war's causes needed to include the five key powers (plus Serbia, one might add), whose decisions were concurrently influenced by deep pessimism and general fear as well as unfounded exuberance and optimism in equal measure. And yet, despite much new food for thought, fifty years after Fischer first published *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, Steinberg still concluded that the premise of Fischer's controversial thesis remained unchallenged: that Germany did indeed bear a considerable share of the blame in the events that led to the outbreak of the First World War.

ANNIKA MOMBAUER (The Open University)