
World War One and National Bias: Analytical Essay

Introduction

World War One was the first instance of conflict that synthesised most all of the greatest world powers. This wasn't centralised to one region as previously, hence the "world" war. However, debate has continued ever since 1914 as to whether it was inevitable. Unfortunately, primary and secondary sources from the time are often plagued with bias and patriotism due to national perspectives' influence. To reach a conclusion, we have to synthesise all of the consistent and/or supported evidence. At the most basic level, history is made of sources and historians. However, both of these factors may contain bias or misrepresentation and selectiveness. As humans, we are naturally inclined to make those we align with look better. To determine whether World War One was inevitable, we must ask; How can we gauge the extent to which history is told from a national perspective and what indicators are present?

Historical Context

Most modern historians believe there is no one sole cause for World War One, but rather a timeline of events causing a level of tension mostly in Europe. In the late 19th century we saw the creation of the Triple Entente (France, Russia, Britain) and the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy) (Schmitt, 1924). This caused a level of "rivalry," both feeling intimidated by the other. Around this time, military weapons were rapidly advancing, causing an arms-race – a competition of sorts (Brose, 1924). Additionally, we saw the growth of developing regions into world powers – notably Germany and Austria-Hungary (Gunther 2016; BBC Bitesize, 2019). Finally, thanks to globalisation Britain had now furthered its economic advancement and believed this would make Germany more vulnerable. Due to Britain's further increasing power, Germany considered war a viable option to close this gap as proven by documents released at the time (Stevenson, 2014).

Source Overview

One of the most notable thesis's on World War One was Fritz Fischer's "Germany's Aims in the First World War." In the first chapter, he immediately cites his own country's government (Germany) as the sole cause for the war. After being "attacked by his colleagues," he published a sequel – War of Illusions. He only stood to further his claims, stating that Germany had planned the war for decades previously in a lunge to become a world power. The assertions he made have been criticised as being outlandish and controversial. However, his so-called "downfall" came in his contrarian inclination, often leading to disproven and/or impossible conclusions. This is most evident in the fact that he claimed Germany's constant involvement in both World War I and World War II was carefully planned – from Franz Ferdinand's assassination to Hitler, he believed they were all connected. In British Historian William Gatzke's more recent analysis, Germany and the United States, he criticizes the evidence – or lack thereof - to prove Fischer's claims (Gatzke, 1980).

Prior to this, Sidney Bradshaw Fay (an American historian) had published The Origins of the

World War. He stated, "American public opinion began to denounce Germany as being guilty of causing World War 1." To paraphrase, he blamed most participants an even amount rather criticizing terms of the Treaty of Versailles. As with most revisionist historians, he often victimised Germany in favour of calling the Allies aggressors (Lipstat, 1994). Given Fay's nation of origin, his assertions may be less biased due to an outsider perspective. However, it must be noted that his book may have been created under the influence of the German government. They paid "special attention" to his writings, providing hundreds of copies to hand out at embassies and consulates (Herwig, 1997). This implies an amount of bribery involved. Additionally, few German citizens would have read Fischer's thesis as novels criticising Germany were not permitted to be published (Herwig, 1997).

Source Analysis/Evaluation

We can gauge how much national perspective affected these two books' assertions by comparing them to known facts – facts of which have evidence and are agreed upon by modern historians. We can also observe whether the books align with perspectives of the nations at which the authors come from. By this evaluation, Fischer's book contains little national bias. His assertions are entirely controversial contrasted the German Conservative perspective. His book was not permitted to be published in German at the time due to the criticism thrown against solely Germany (Herwig, 1997). It must be noted that he had full access to German archives of World War One, indicating the evidence he had access to had proved Germany's fault. Additionally, most of his conclusions are supported by evidence in the novel, with the most notable exception being the aforementioned claims of Germany's calculated attacks. Modern historians with access to newer evidence (such as Gerhard Ritter) have criticised this due to a lack of sources linking the events that Fischer did. Despite Fay's outsider perspective, his own assertions do contain national bias, though not his own. To reiterate, immediately after publishing the book the German government spread it to numerous German embassies therefore indicating there may have been some communication at this point. Whether this proves Fay was bribed, or had favours done for him as modern theories state is unknown as there is a lack of evidence to prove so. Given this uncertainty, we cannot gauge this source as entirely lacking national bias. Additionally, Fay's theories contain very little criticism of Germany, despite the existence of evidence proving their guilt in terms of calculated attacks (Fischer, 1964). His ignorance of these facts is a major factor in why his assertions contained significant national bias. It begs the question of whether his representation is holistic. The assertions made are often one-sided and victimizing of Germany. However, Fischer's book also contains an amount of selectiveness and it must be noted that neither book is completely lacking in bias or selectiveness, especially considering the solely-Germany aimed attacks of Fischer. The extent to which is what differs.

Conclusion

The comparison between Fischer and Fay's assertions allow us to evaluate the influence of national perspectives on historians and secondary sources. Upon evaluating the events of the time and comparing the novel's conclusions to that of popular opinion, we can gauge whether a source is reliable and to what extent national bias is present. We must also look at how one-sided an author's arguments are. To conclude, different sources contain different extents of national perspective. It is possible to gauge this through the evaluation of known evidence both now and at the time, as well as holistically viewing what bias may be implied in the language

and assertions made. Due to the nature of history, we may never know whether World War One was truly inevitable but assessing the national bias evident in sources is an integral step to making a conclusion.

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