

WWI Document Packet – Austria-Hungary

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The following excerpt is from a book by the American historian Sidney Bradshaw Fay, entitled *Origins of the World War*. It focuses on the problem, long debated by historians, of fixing responsibility for the outbreak of World War 1. This issue is complicated. Everyone agrees that the murder of the Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand by a Bosnian patriot at Sarajevo was the incident that touched off the war, but there is little agreement about the underlying causes of the war or the ultimate responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities.

Fay's two-volume work on the causes of the war, first published in 1928, has stood the test of time and critical scholarship. To Professor Fay's credit is the fact that he waited until official records of events were available. In his first volume he explored the long-range causes of the war, extending his study far back into the 19th century. He devoted his entire second volume to the immediate causes of the war and examined in detail the responsibilities of each major party.

Questions:

1. In what way was each of the nations involved partly responsible for the outbreak of hostilities?
2. Do you agree with Fay's analysis of individual responsibility?

None of the powers wanted a European War. Their governing rulers and ministers, with very few exceptions, all foresaw that it must be a frightful struggle, in which the political results were not absolutely certain, but in which the loss of life, suffering, and economic consequences were bound to be terrible.

Nevertheless, a European War broke out. Why? Because in each country political and military leaders did certain things which led to mobilizations and declarations of war, or failed to do certain things which might have prevented them. In this sense, all the European countries, in a greater or less degree, were responsible. One must abandon the dictum of the Versailles Treaty that Germany and her allies were solely responsible. It was a dictum exacted by victors from vanquished, under the influence of the blindness, ignorance, hatred, and the propagandist misconceptions to which war had given rise. It was based on evidence which was incomplete and not always sound. It is generally recognized by the best historical scholars in all countries to be no longer tenable or defensible. They are agreed that the responsibility for the War is a divided responsibility. But they still disagree very much as to the relative part of this responsibility that falls on each country and on each individual political or military leader.

Some writers like to fix positively in some precise mathematical fashion the exact responsibility for the war. This was done in one way by the framers of Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles. It has been done in other ways by those who would fix the responsibility in some relative fashion, as, for instance, Austria first, then Russia, France and Germany and England. But the present writer deprecates such efforts to assess by a precise formula a very complicated question, which is after all more a matter of delicate shading than of definite white and black. . . . Moreover, even supposing that

a general consensus of opinion might be reached as to the relative responsibility of any individual country or man for immediate causes connected with the July crisis of 1914, it is by no means necessarily true that the same relative responsibility would hold for the underlying causes, which for years had been tending toward the creation of a dangerous situation.

One may, however, sum up very briefly the most salient facts in regard to each country.

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Austria was more responsible for the immediate origin of the war than any other Power. Yet from her own point of view she was acting in self-defense—not against an immediate military attack, but against the corroding Greater Serbia and Yugoslav agitation which her leaders believed threatened her very existence. No State can be expected to sit with folded arms and await dismemberment at the hands of its neighbors. Russia was believed to be intriguing with Serbia and Rumania against the Dual Monarchy. The assassination of the heir to the throne, as a result of a plot prepared in Belgrade, demanded severe retribution; otherwise Austria would be regarded as incapable of action, "wonneaten" as the Serbian Press expressed it, would sink in prestige, and hasten her own downfall. To avert this Berchtold {Count Leopold von Berchtold, Austrian foreign minister} determined to crush Serbia with war. He deliberately framed the ultimatum with the expectation and hope that it would be rejected. He hurriedly declared war against Serbia in order to forestall all efforts at mediation. He refused even to answer his own ally's urgent requests to come to an understanding with Russia, on the basis of a military occupation of Belgrade as a pledge that Serbia would carry 'out the promises in her reply to the ultimatum. Berchtold gambled on a "local" war with Serbia only, believing that he could rattle the German sword; but rather than abandon his war with Serbia, he was ready to drag the rest of Europe into war