After several days of military preparation and debate, Russia declared a general troop mobilisation, including those on the border with Germany. Germany sent an ultimatum on 31 July demanding the withdrawal of these troops and also sent an enquiry to Paris regarding the intentions of the French. The die was cast when Russia did not reply to the ultimatum. Germany, committed to the Schlieffen Plan in the event of war (see Chapter 8), refused the British request to respect Belgian neutrality, and when France stated vaguely that it would ‘follow its own interests’, on 1 August, Germany took action in accord with the Schlieffen Plan.

The violation of Belgian neutrality greatly influenced the British decision to go to war. Already committed by prior naval agreements to guarding France’s northern coastline, Britain was given the excuse to enter the war by the clear violation of Belgium’s neutrality in the face of an international agreement signed by Germany in 1839. The First World War had begun.

**DOCUMENT STUDY: RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

**GERMANY’S RESPONSIBILITY**

Fritz Fischer, writing in the 1960s, argued that Germany provoked war and ensured that compromise was impossible. Germany had economic problems; however, it was convinced of its own military strength and was ready to use war to achieve its aims. Thus, German leaders encouraged Austria–Hungary between 6 and 8 July to frame an ultimatum, which was meant to be rejected. War was also necessary because of the encirclement of Germany by the Triple Entente. Given these considerations, it appears logical that Kaiser Wilhelm II believed that it was ‘now or never’ and thus the ‘blank cheque’ was issued.

**Source 6.4**

The other way in which Germany was exerting pressure on Austria was by insisting that the ultimatum to Serbia should be couched in terms so strong as to make acceptance impossible. As Germany willed and coveted the Austro-Serbian war and, in her confidence in her military superiority, deliberately faced the risk of a conflict with Russia and France, her leaders must bear a substantial share of the historical responsibility for the outbreak of general war in 1914. This responsibility is not diminished by the fact that at the last moment Germany tried to arrest the march of destiny, for her efforts to influence Vienna were due exclusively to the threat of British intervention and, even so, they were half-hearted, belated and immediately revoked.


**DOCUMENT STUDY QUESTION**

List the reasons why Fischer attempts to blame Germany for the outbreak of war.
Immanuel Geiss, writing in 1967, also took up this position by emphasising the role of Germany’s imperial aims in creating the tension in Europe.

The industrialists wanted overseas expansion so that their raw materials and markets could be secured. Germany had a huge merchant fleet and led the world in chemical and electrical industries. To maintain this position, expansion was essential. However, expansion was being blocked by Britain, which was also fighting for sustainable economic growth. This was not the only problem for Germany. Geiss points out that a successful expansionist policy would solve domestic and political problems by taking the minds of the population off them. The power of the government was under attack by socialist politicians, who wanted a more responsible government. Geiss believed that the German elite felt compelled to defend themselves against these democratic and revolutionary forces.

Source 6.5

The logical consequence was the concept of preventive war. Objectively, German fears were unfounded. But the more Russia recovered her former military strength after her defeat at the hands of Japan and the revolution of 1904–5, the more urgently the idea of preventive war was formulated in Germany.


DOCUMENT STUDY QUESTION

In your opinion, does the concept of a preventive war, as used by Geiss, justify Germany’s actions?

GERMANY RISKED WAR, BUT DID NOT PLAN IT

This position was a response to Fischer’s argument and essentially attempted to explain away Germany’s responsibility.

Egmont Zechlin, writing in 1964, believed that Germany was ready to accept the risk that war would eventually break out, but had no desire to provoke it. The Germans had a real fear of being surrounded by the hostile Entente powers, which, they believed, had become a reality during the July crisis of 1914. Thus the ‘blank cheque’ was a reaction to many fears and could not be considered as aggression. Indeed, Bethmann-Hollweg, the German Chancellor, hoped for a limited war. The First World War was therefore a preventive defensive war for Germany.

Gerhard Ritter, writing in 1971, believed that Germany did not want war but was overwhelmed by events. Germany’s actions in the July crisis were defensive, and, to a large extent, it was led on by Austria–Hungary. According to Ritter, the German leaders believed that war with Russia was inevitable. Despite this, their use of power in 1914 did not necessarily mean that Germany wanted or planned for war.

Karl Erdmann, writing in the 1980s, believed that there was no real evidence of military planning after 1911. Indeed, Austria–Hungary did not act quickly enough after the assassination and it was left to Bethmann-Hollweg to attempt to localise the conflict. Germany considered that Britain would not remain neutral, but tried sincerely to achieve this neutrality and thus prevent a world war.

Erdmann uses the diaries of Dr K. Riezler, a companion of Bethmann-Hollweg, to attempt to disprove the aggressive nature of German foreign policy. He believes that the chancellor wanted to avoid war and support Austria–Hungary by attempting to divide the Entente powers through bluff. He hoped that Russia would back down. If not, the conflict could not be localised.
Neither was the wish for territorial gains a motive of Bethmann-Hollweg’s policy before and during the July crisis. In his private talks with Riezler, there is no hint which points in this direction, in contrast to the extensive reflections on war aims in the diaries of later date, once the war had started. The formulation of territorial war aims is a product of the war, but not its cause.


**DOCUMENT STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. How does Erdmann argue against the total responsibility of Germany for the outbreak of the war?
2. What weaknesses are there in the fact that Erdmann relies on Riezler as his source?

**ALL COUNTRIES BEAR SOME RESPONSIBILITY**

Joachim Remak, writing in 1971, regarded the First World War as the third Balkan war, which got out of control. The Russian mobilisation meant that a localised war was impossible. Serbia was too aggressive and acted under the belief that the stakes were worth the risk. France was not reconciled to the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871, and made no real attempt to restrain Russia. Germany blundered by giving the ‘blank cheque’ to Austria-Hungary, which in turn was in reckless pursuit of prestige, and so it was intended that the ultimatum should be rejected; Austria-Hungary, too, believed that the risk of war with Russia was worth the gains.

The historians A. J. P. Taylor and Martin Gilbert pointed to other factors. According to Taylor, Russia had to mobilise fully because of its limited amount of rolling stock. If Russia opted for limited mobilisation and a general war broke out, its military situation would have been disastrous as it could not have moved troops up to the front. Gilbert believed that Austria-Hungary’s Foreign Minister, Berchtold, was keen for war. Germany, despite its fear of Russia, opted for war as it considered the timing to be to its benefit and Bethmann-Hollweg did little to prevent its outbreak. Russia wanted revenge for its humiliation at the hands of Germany in 1909 and 1912. Russia was given its own ‘blank cheque’ by France when Poincaré, the prime minister, was in St Petersburg between 20 and 23 July. The military considerations of the Russians and the Germans thus prevented the last minute efforts of Grey, the foreign minister, to avert war.

**Source 6.7**

Of course, so was everybody right, and one wishes that Versailles had never introduced the concept of guilt. Serbia was right in wanting to expand, Austria in wanting to survive. Germany was right in fearing isolation, Great Britain in fearing German power. Everyone was right. And everyone was wrong, for no one foresaw what war would mean, either in terms of costs or of consequences. All were sinners, all were sinned against.


Writing in 1984, James Joll starts with the July crisis. Immediate decisions were made by the politicians with all their human weaknesses. These decisions were, of course, influenced by their context. The politicians were pressured by recent events as well as diplomatic deals made many years before. Public opinion supported the declaration of war because the politicians had ensured that the issues had been popularised on an emotional level, playing on the various national traditions, myths and legends.

War was not seen as something to be avoided; rather, it fitted the national mood of 1914.
Source 6.8

The building of the German navy ... led to the creation of a body of nationalist opinion and the development of an aggressive imperialist rhetoric which contributed to making war seem acceptable and even desirable. The existence of such a body of opinion was one of the factors which the German government between 1911 and 1914 had to take into account.


Source 6.9

Armaments bred armaments; and an armaments program once started was not easy to stop, for its reversal could have wide social and economic consequences ... German ambitions. Russian expansionism, British and Austro-Hungarian fears and French revenge had created a position where compromise would be seen as a selling-out of national pride and interests. For countries such as Germany, Russia and Britain war was a choice that could relieve domestic pressure. For Germany the socialists' power could be curtailed; for Russia, loyalty to the regime could be restored among the working class, and for Britain, the delicate and difficult Irish Question could diminish in importance.


DOCUMENT STUDY QUESTION

Germany has been blamed for the outbreak of war. How does Joll disagree with this view?

REVIEW TASK

Imagine that you are a neutral journalist in Europe in 1914. Write an article for publication in a neutral country in which you explain why the war broke out, and what and who was responsible. Use the ideas of the historians who support your opinions.

References
