

The return of German Great Power politics and the attacks on the historian Fritz Fischer

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The hundredth anniversary of the First World War has unleashed a flood of articles, commentaries, book publications, special broadcasts and events of all kinds in Germany. They are not just limited to recounting “the great seminal catastrophe” of the twentieth century; rather, there is a deliberate effort to revise the previous understanding of the causes of the war and of Germany’s responsibility, and to bring them into line with the new foreign policy goals of the German government.

A central role is being played by the fierce attacks on the Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer (1908-1999), who, since the 1960s, has been a major influence on the understanding of German war policy. Leading these attacks is Herfried Münkler, who teaches political theory at Berlin’s Humboldt University.

Münkler is conducting a veritable campaign against Fischer. He has published his attacks on the renowned historian in a broad spectrum of publications, stretching from the *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, a journal in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, to the leading news weekly *Der Spiegel* and the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, right up to the elitist *Rotary Magazin*. He regularly appears in public discussions, speaks at official gatherings with the German president and advises political parties, the federal government and the armed forces.

Münkler’s attacks on Fischer are marked by their spiteful tone and lack of substance. He has accused a historian of international renown of findings that are “outrageous” and “untenable” and claimed that his “methodology would not be accepted in any introductory seminar today.” He resorts to distortions and lies, and ascribes views to Fischer that he never held and had repeatedly rejected.

Münkler likes referring to a “scientific approach” and “the latest results of scientific research,” but in reality, there is not a trace of science in Münkler’s tirades against Fischer. He presents dozens of allegations without any supporting sources. All the more obviously, Münkler is pursuing a political agenda: he vehemently defends the return to an aggressive imperialist German foreign policy.

At the beginning of the year, the German president, the foreign minister and the defence minister announced that the time for military restraint was over, Germany would, in the future, once again intervene self-confidently and independently in the crisis regions of the world. Münkler has helped to prepare this change in foreign policy and has promoted it ever since in numerous lectures and articles.

In May, he published an article on the web site Review 2014, an official foreign ministry site that calls for more “German leadership” in Europe and the world. In his article, Münkler speaks out for a foreign policy that is less based on German values than on German interests. He urgently advises the government to argue more aggressively for these interests. This was the only way to reduce the “democratic vulnerability” of German politics, which arises out of the “discrepancy between its public presentation and its real orientation.”

In this essay, Münkler determines “Germany’s specific interests” in a similar way to the propagandists of German imperialism at the beginning

of the last century: they arise out of Germany’s role “as a ‘trading nation’, or rather an exporting nation, from the implications of Germany’s geopolitical ‘central position’ in Europe, and from the enhanced need to pay security-political attention to the European periphery.”

Münkler’s attacks on Fritz Fischer and his advocacy of a more aggressive imperialist foreign policy are closely linked. To prepare new crimes, German imperialism’s historic crimes—to whose understanding Fischer has greatly contributed—must be played down and glossed over.

In the 1960s, Fritz Fischer initiated the first great *Historikerstreit* (historians’ dispute) in post-war West Germany. It concerned German responsibility for the First World War, as well as the continuity of German war aims in the First and Second World Wars. The second historians’ dispute arose in 1986, when Ernst Nolte tried to play down the crimes of Nazism and presented them as an understandable reaction to Bolshevism.

In both controversies, historians prevailed who agreed that Germany either shared or bore the main responsibility for the two world wars: in the first, Fritz Fischer, influencing a younger generation of historians who contributed considerably to the understanding of the First World War and its causes; in the second, the opponents of Ernst Nolte, who rejected a relativisation of Nazi crimes.

This is all now to be changed. Historical understanding is to be brought into accord with the new aims of German foreign policy. Professor Münkler shares this work with his colleague Jörg Baberowski, head of the Department of Eastern European History at the Humboldt University. While Münkler attacks Fritz Fischer, Baberowski has taken on the task of rehabilitating Ernst Nolte. “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right,” he said in February to *Der Spiegel*.

The Fischer controversy

Until the beginning of the 1960s, history teaching and historiography in West Germany were dominated by right-wing conservative historians, who had already been teaching in the Weimar Republic and also in Hitler’s Third Reich.

The first chairman of the German Historians Association, and later the main adversary of Fischer, the Freiburg historian Gerhard Ritter (1888-1967), had fought on the front in the First World War. Afterwards, he supported German nationalist parties that rejected the Weimar Republic, supported the return of the monarchy and initially welcomed Hitler’s policies. Later, he was close to the conservative opposition to Hitler, but took no active part in the resistance. Ritter held to his right-wing conservative views even after the war. In his view, the Weimar Republic had failed due to too much democracy; had the Kaiser remained, Hitler would not have come to power.

The official doctrine on the First World War at the time was that it was forced on Germany, that the country had conducted a defensive war. There was no connection between the war and the imperialist “world power policy” that the Reich had propagated and pursued since the end of the nineteenth century. At best, it was admitted that Germany had

“slithered” into the war without the responsible politicians or military leaders consciously wanting it.

Above all, any connection between the war aims of the Reich and those of the Nazi dictatorship was denied categorically. The Hitler regime was regarded as an “accident” of German history, which had nothing to do with previous or subsequent events.

This question was of extraordinary political explosiveness. The continuity of the German elites in business, state and politics in the post-war period was obvious. The larger enterprises were returned to their old owners, who had financed Hitler. Many supporters and fellow travellers of the Nazi dictatorship sat in high state and government offices, in the judiciary and in the universities, some of whose careers reached back to the days of the Kaiser. The recognition of a continuity of Germany politics, reaching from Kaiser Wilhelm II to Hitler, would have discredited the entire ruling elites, collapsing like a house of cards the assertion that only Hitler and his closest confidantes had been responsible for the crimes of the Nazis.

Fritz Fischer broke through this official consensus. In October 1961, when he presented his book *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (“The Grab for World Power”, the English edition was published under the original subtitle, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*), he unleashed a storm of indignation and was treated with extreme hostility by conservative historians and politicians.

Fischer’s work, dealing with the war aims of imperial Germany from 1914 to 1918, showed in minute detail that there was a direct link between the “world power politics”, which formulated the global aspirations of an economically rapidly expanding German Reich, the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914 and the aims pursued by Germany during the war. It rested on thorough research and the systematic evaluation of a multitude of new sources. Fischer was one of the first German historians to have access to the files of the foreign ministry and the imperial chancellery, which the Allies had kept under lock and key, and, with the permission of the East German government, to the Potsdam Central Archive.

In the first chapter, titled “German imperialism: From Great Power policy to world power policy”, Fischer sketches in 50 pages the rise of German imperialism from the formation of the Reich in 1871.

He looks at the relationship between the rapid economic expansion of Germany and its claim to world power that brought it into conflict with its imperialist rivals who had already divided the world among themselves: “As the volume of Germany’s production grew, the narrowness of the basis of her raw materials market became increasingly apparent, and as she penetrated more deeply into world markets, this narrowness became increasingly irksome.”

Fischer describes how, “the link between business and politics grew progressively closer in the opening years of the new century, as the basic political outlook of the leading industrialists, bankers and officers of the employers’ associations came to conform more closely with that of the intellectual bourgeoisie, the higher bureaucracy and army and navy officers.” He shows how “economic calculation, emotions and straining after world power interacted mutually” and found expression in the broad agreement for the building of a war fleet and in the agitation of the Navy League (*Flottenverein*). This state-directed and state-supported league had the task of mobilising support for militarism among civil servants, teachers and other parts of the middle class.

Fischer also deals with the domestic political function of militarism: the diversion of growing class tensions abroad and the suppression of the socialist workers’ movement. He cites a directive that Kaiser Wilhelm, who feared the spread of the Russian revolution to Germany, sent to Chancellor Bülow after the bloody suppression of the Moscow workers’ uprising in December 1905: “Shoot down, behead and eliminate the Socialists first, if need be, by a blood-bath, then war abroad.”

As it turned out in August 1914, Wilhelm did not have to behead the

Socialists. In the intervening period, the SPD had identified so broadly with the aims of German imperialism that it betrayed its own programme and supported the war.

Under the sub-heading “The Inevitable War”, Fischer describes how the international crises (in Morocco, in the Balkans) intensified in the years before the outbreak of war, and leading representatives of the ruling elites came to the conclusion that a world war was not only unavoidable but also necessary.

For example, the chief of the General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke, wrote in February 1913 to his Austrian colleague, Conrad von Hötzendorf, saying he “remains convinced that a European war is bound to come sooner or later, and then it will, in the last resort, be a struggle between *Teuton and Slav*.”

In 1912, the military historian Friedrich von Bernhardi published the best-seller *Germany and the Next War*, whose considerations and demands, according to Fischer, “epitomised the intentions of official Germany with great precision.” For Germany’s advance to the position of world power, three things were necessary according to Bernhardi: the “elimination of France”, the “foundation of a Central European federation under German leadership” and “the development of Germany as a world power through the acquisition of new colonies”.

In this context, Fisher examines the July crisis—the events between the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, and the declaration of war by Austria on Serbia on July 28. “The July crisis must not be regarded in isolation”, he writes. “It appears in its true light only when seen as a link between Germany’s ‘world policy’, as followed since the mid-1890s, and her war aims policy after August 1914.”

Fischer writes explicitly that there could be no talk of “slithering” into the war (the expression originates from the British politician David Lloyd George). Berlin had encouraged Vienna to declare war on Serbia, and gave Austria-Hungary a “blank cheque” promising German military support against Russia. This alone shows that the German leadership wanted war, or at least accepted it approvingly.

Fischer also substantiates this through the statements of several witnesses. He cites a diary entry of the pro-German Austrian politician Joseph Maria Baernreither describing German policy in July 1914 with the words: “So when the Sarajevo murder took place, Germany seized her opportunity and made an Austrian grievance her signal for action. That is the history of the war.”

In the remaining chapters that make up the core of the book, Fischer demonstrates extensively how the war aims that had been formulated before the war were pursued consistently until the German defeat.

An important source he cites is the September Programme by Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg. The German chancellor had had it prepared in the military headquarters in Koblenz, and in September 1914, when a French collapse at the Battle of Marne seemed imminent, sent it to his deputy in Berlin. Fischer had found the document, which had previously been kept secret, in the Potsdam archives.

The core of the September Programme was an economically unified *Mitteleuropa* (Central Europe) under German hegemony. This goal had long been advocated by leading bankers and industrialists like Walther Rathenau, who argued that “only a Germany reinforced by ‘Mitteleuropa’ would be in a position to maintain herself as an equal world power between the world powers of Britain and the United States on the one side and Russia on the other.” Moreover, Germany should round off and expand its colonial possessions in Africa at the expense of France and Belgium.

German hegemony in Central Europe should be achieved through the ceding of territory by France, Belgium and Luxembourg; trade agreements bringing these countries under German dependence; the founding of a central European economic association including France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Austria-Hungary, Poland and eventually Italy, Sweden

and Norway, as well as the thrusting back of Russia.

The September Programme was “no isolated inspiration of the Chancellor’s”, writes Fischer, “it represents the ideas of leading economic, political—and also military—circles” and was to remain “the essential basis of Germany’s war aims right up to the end of the war.”

The reactions to Fischer’s book were fierce. The controversy stretched over 10 years. It culminated in 1964, 50 years after the outbreak of the First World War, in an hours-long war of words at the German Historians Conference. Besides historians, leading politicians like Chancellor Ludwig Erhard, the president of parliament Eugen Gerstenmaier and the defence minister Franz Josef Strauß spoke openly against Fischer. A 1964 lecture tour in the US by Fischer at the invitation of the Goethe Institute was prevented because the foreign minister, Gerhard Schröder (Christian Democrat), at the behest of the historian Gerhard Ritter, withheld the already agreed funding.

Fischer’s opponents accused him of historical falsification. He had interpreted his sources wrongly or one-sidedly, and had failed to investigate Germany’s policy in connection with the policies of the other Great Powers, they claimed. Germany had been “encircled” through ententes and military alliances, and could not even think about grabbing world power. The main responsibility for the outbreak of war and the course of the war was borne by the two real world powers, England and Russia, they asserted.

The greatest taboo broken by Fischer in *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, which he had only mentioned, but which flowed inevitably from his analysis, was the continuity of German history from the First to the Second World War. In the course of the debate, this issue moved more and more to the fore, and Fischer, in later books and articles, took an unequivocal position.

In 1969, he published an article in *Der Spiegel*, “Hitler was not an accident,” pointing out that Hitler’s aim—the conquest and colonisation of the East—had been the official objective of the German Reich since 1912-1913. He also discussed the relationship between Hitler’s hatred of Jews and the anti-Semitic traditions of the Reich and his hostility to the socialist workers’ movement. “In his head, Judaism and ‘Bolshevism’ became one,” he wrote. “From Karl Marx to Rosa Luxemburg, for Hitler, every form of ‘Marxism’ is identical with ‘subversive’ Judaism, whose elimination was also essential for him because of this connection.”

Fritz Fischer finally emerged victorious from the controversy of the 1960s. The political atmosphere of the time contributed to this. The trial of Adolf Eichmann (1961) and the Auschwitz Trial (1963 to 1965) had inspired a younger generation to deal critically with the past. The reckoning with the crimes of the Nazis was a central topic of the student protests in 1967-1968.

Many well-known German historians were influenced by Fischer, taking up and developing his work. “Despite the hostile attitude of nearly all the leading historians in West Germany and the calling in of political authorities, Fischer’s theses from *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* ...increasingly held sway, above all with the younger generation, in the course of the sixties,” the historian Klaus Große Kracht concludes.

Münkler’s campaign against Fischer

Herfried Münkler and a series of other authors have set themselves the goal of ending the “domination of the Fischer school in Germany” and of breaking “the grip on this theme by Fischer and his pupils,” as Münkler wrote in a contribution for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on June 20, headlined “For a renunciation of the theses of Fritz Fischer.” Without providing any evidence, he asserts: “The more recent research tends to support Ritter’s position.”

At stake is a “turning point in historiography,” as Volker Ulrich, one of the few historians who defends Fischer, noted in *Die Zeit* in January. “What the conservatives in the ‘historians dispute’ in the eighties still failed to do, namely to win back the interpretative authority over German

history, is now to succeed. It stands out how weak the dissent was until now.”

The arguments that Münkler and his fellow campaigners employ are neither new nor original. They repeat long-familiar assertions from the Fischer controversy, which have been answered and refuted. Münkler’s most important accusation against Fischer is that his thesis “of a main guilt of the German Reich in the First World War” is false. Already in the foreword of his own 800-page book about the First World War, which appeared in December of last year, Münkler claimed that “the theses of Fritz Fischer blaming the Germans for the main guilt for the war” were no longer tenable.

Following the publication of the German edition of the book *Sleepwalkers* by the Australian historian Christopher Clark, this accusation became massively inflated. The German media published dozens of articles that celebrated Clark’s work as the final refutation of Fischer’s thesis of the “exclusive guilt” of Germany.

Typical is an article by Dominik Geppert, Sönke Neitzel, Cora Stephan and Thomas Weber in *Die Welt* January 4, 2014, “Why Germany is not exclusively guilty.” Referring to Münkler and Clark, they write, “Fritz Fischer’s thesis of a determined German grab for world power has proved to be exaggerated and one-sided. Today, there can be just as little talk of ‘German exceptionalism’ as of ‘Prussia militarism’ as the cause of all evil. After a long period in which the German Reich’s foreign policy was interpreted as the epitome of diplomatic heavy-handedness, misplaced power-grabbing, aggressive expansionism and permanent failure, this has now been qualified.” In reality, the German leadership, “driven by fear of losing status and worries of being encircled,” had followed “the defensive aim in the precarious situation of once again establishing a limited hegemony on the European continent, which the Reich had possessed under Bismarck,” write the authors in *Die Welt*. One wonders what they would mean by an offensive policy if they consider the establishment of hegemony over the European continent as a defensive aim.

In this context, it is not surprising that Münkler dismisses the concept of guilt as a “moral or religious category” that has no place in political theory. Fischer’s approach, that “one can detect a clearly guilty party in the origins of armed conflicts and war” was “politically dangerous, because it is morally simplified,” he lectures in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

This whole argument is false from its foundations. It imputes to Fischer statements that he has never made, only to refute him with reasons that amount to a justification of imperialist war policy.

In reality, Fritz Fischer has never spoken of a main or sole guilt of the Germans in the First World War. In the introduction to a new edition of *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, he wrote in January 1977: “This book is not about denunciations of German imperialism as an extreme of power politics, but about the analysis of its preconditions and its position in the state system.” And a few paragraphs before, he stresses, “I have never questioned that in the age of imperialism, the other Great Powers also pursued expansionist policies and followed their own war aims.”

Already on its initial publication in the autumn of 1961, Fischer defended himself against the accusation that he was advancing a thesis of sole German guilt. *Die Zeit* had reviewed his book favourably, but talked of sole German guilt. Fischer immediately refuted this in an article of his own in *Die Zeit*.

He wrote, “As grateful I am for the comprehensive appreciation of the book, I regret the subtitle given, ‘Professor Fischer’s thesis of (Germany’s) sole guilt for the First World War’. I have not used this expression in my book, rather I have expressly pointed out ‘that the collision of political-military interests, resentments and ideas that came into effect in the July crisis meant that the governments of the participating European powers shared responsibility for the outbreak of the world war in one way or another and to varying degrees.’”

Fischer stressed that he could not examine the political responsibility of

all the European and international governments, because that would have demanded a multivolume mammoth work. He focused on the special German war responsibility, in the hope that historians in other countries would be encouraged on their part to investigate the responsibility of their government.

He wrote: “But I have established far more strongly than in the prevailing German view of history that the German Reich bore a considerable part of the historical responsibility for the outbreak of the general war because Germany wanted and shielded the local Austro-Serbian war, while, trusting in German military superiority, consciously risking a conflict with Russia and France in 1914.”

The assertion that Fischer had claimed a German sole responsibility for the First World War is a straw man. Münkler imputes views to Fischer that he has never represented, only then to refute them at length and to discredit Fischer, without dealing with his actual findings.

Fischer has repeatedly stressed that his priority was not the question of war guilt, but rather, “which layers, groups, interests and ideas before the war and during the war were the decisive ones.” German historiography was so fixated on the question of war guilt, “that in the controversy surrounding the book, its real subject—the German war aims and their roots in industrial capitalist, agrarian and foreign commercial interests bound together with the strategic demands of the Army and Navy”—was lost.

Although Fischer never adhered to the Marxist view that the war was the inevitable result of the fundamental contradiction of capitalism—the contradiction between world economy and its division into antagonistic nation-states, which form the basis for the private ownership of the means of production—his book contains extensive material to support that view.

Fischer sought the cause of the war not “in the lack of ‘crisis management’ by the states involved,” but in the social interests of the ruling elites. He recognised that the other imperialist powers bore responsibility for the outbreak of the war, but that did not moderate the responsibility of the ruling class in Germany.

It is against this understanding that Münkler directs his attacks. Under conditions in which German imperialism is abandoning the military restraint imposed upon it after the Second World War, Münkler wants to suppress an historic understanding of the driving forces of war and militarism by every means.

Grab for World Power 3.0

One can only understand the fierceness with which Münkler attacks Fischer in the context of the current political situation. After two failed attempts, Germany now undertakes a third attempt to “grab for world power.” It does so under the influence of objective factors that hardly differ from those in the first and second World Wars. Münkler himself names them in his article for the web site *Review 2014* quoted above: Germany’s role as an export nation, its geopolitical “central position” in Europe and the security-political importance of the European periphery.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the European Union (EU) has turned more and more openly into an instrument of German hegemony over Europe. As the strongest economic power, Germany dictates the EU’s fiscal policy and the attacks on the European working class, including the working class in Germany. Bethmann Hollweg’s “September Programme”—according to which only a Germany strengthened by “Mitteleuropa” is able to compete among the other Great Powers as an equal world power—is in this way witnessing its resurrection.

Faced with growing international rivalry and conflicts, German imperialism is returning to its traditional direction of expansion, to the East. Reading the works of Fischer in connection with the latest events in Ukraine, they acquire a burning actuality.

Already in *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* Fischer dealt thoroughly with Germany’s Ukrainian policy, and in 1968 one of Fischer’s PhD students, Peter Borowsky (1938-2000), wrote his thesis on

this topic. In 1969, Fischer summarised his findings in the article “Hitler was no accident” as follows: “Two days after its beginning as a world war, on August 6, 1914, the German Chancellor named as a war aim the pushing back of the Russian border to Moscow, and the formation of a series of buffer states (Finland, Poland, Ukraine, Georgia) between Germany, or rather, Austria-Hungary, and Russia; and the Chancellor’s much discussed September Programme four weeks later says that Russia must be pushed back from Germany’s eastern frontier as far as possible and its hegemony over the non-Russian peoples must be broken.”

After the 1917 Russian Revolution, Germany’s *Ostpolitik* (Eastern Policy) continued and realised the aims of 1914, Fischer writes: “The peace of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918) was a peace between the German Reich and Soviet Russia and an independent Ukrainian state, following Poland and Finland being previously made independent states. In the supplementary treaties of August 1918, Estonia and Georgia were also cut away from Russia. The motive for this policy was formed by strategic territorial considerations and economic interests (Ukraine, as the bread basket and supplier of ore).” Russia was pushed back to its sixteenth century borders.

Fischer shows that a straight line led from the German occupation of Ukraine to Hitler’s milieu in Munich. Among the Ukrainian emigres who gathered there could be found the former ruler in Kiev, “Hetman” Skoropadsky. Skoropadsky was a co-founder of the Nazi party paper *Völkischer Beobachter*, and his political conceptions flowed into Hitler’s “Mein Kampf”. The conquest of Ukraine then played a central role in Hitler’s Eastern campaign. “The geo-political strategic and economic goals (‘We want to ride to Ostland!’) are in continuity with Wilhelmian all-Germany expansionism”, noted Fischer.

Now, German imperialism has once more set the goal of removing Ukraine, Georgia and other countries that once belonged to the Soviet Union and the Tsarist Empire from Moscow’s sphere of influence, and to integrate them into an EU sphere of influence dominated by Germany. To this end, Berlin is working with political forces like Svoboda and the Fatherland Party, who celebrate Skoropadsky and the Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera as national heroes.

Münkler’s attacks on Fritz Fischer are meant to prevent the study and understanding of the historical precursors of this policy. They serve to poison the intellectual climate and to strangle opposition to militarism. However, he will not succeed. His tirades against Fischer show how weak his arguments are.



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