

Historical falsification as war propaganda: The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* declares Russia chiefly responsible for World War I

Joshua Seubert
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Germany's leading conservative daily, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (F.A.Z.), published an article in May headlined "Russia's role in the First World War reassessed" by historian René Schlott.

The piece is based on an essay published in 2025 by Viennese philosopher of law Joachim Dolezik in the *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (*Journal of Historical Science*), titled "Historiographical Debates on the July Crisis and the Question of Responsibility for the Outbreak of War in 1914." As the subheading to Schlott's article notes, Dolezik "goes beyond Christopher Clark and seeks the primary guilt with Russia." Instead of the German Reich (Empire), it is the Tsarist Empire and France that are declared the truly responsible parties for the "seminal catastrophe of the 20th century." Germany is presented as a power that was merely defending itself.

This reinterpretation is no accident. It comes at a time when the German government is rearming for a war against Russia on a scale not seen since the Nazis. The history of German imperialism is being rewritten because it is preparing a new war in the present.

To understand the meaning of this reinterpretation, one must go back to Fritz Fischer. When the Hamburg historian published his book *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (*Griff nach der Weltmacht*) in 1961, it triggered a storm of indignation that lasted for years. The controversy dragged on for over a decade; at the 1964 Historians' Day, even Chancellor Ludwig Erhard and Defence Minister Franz Josef Strauß publicly took a stand against him. Fischer had shattered the post-war consensus that denied any special German responsibility for World War I.

Fischer was not concerned with the moral question of Germany's "sole guilt." He systematically investigated the war aims and interests of German imperialism, placing the July Crisis in the context of Germany's *Weltpolitik* (global policy), its pursuit of world power, and the social interests of industry, banks, large landowners, the military and the state apparatus. German policy in July 1914, he wrote, "must not be viewed in isolation. It appears in its proper light only when it is seen as a link between Germany's *Weltpolitik* since the mid-1890s and Germany's war aims policy since August 1914."

Germany's "blank cheque" must be seen in this context: the unconditional military and diplomatic support the German Reich promised to its ally, Austria-Hungary, on July 5–6, 1914, following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Berlin encouraged Vienna to declare war on Serbia and promised Austria-Hungary Germany's military backing against Russia. This was the deliberate endorsement of an attack on Serbia—fully aware it could lead to a war with Russia and France.

The full scope of Germany's war aims became clear as soon as the

conflict began. In Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's 1914 "September Program," official policy called for a German-dominated Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*), the territorial and economic subordination of neighbouring states, a contiguous German colonial empire in Central Africa and the containment of Russia.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (F.A.Z.) writes that 12 years after Christopher Clark's bestseller *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, his thesis of the shared responsibility of all major powers had come to dominate, and Dolezik was now sharpening it "with an emphasis on the implications for international law." The result: While Germany and Austria-Hungary bore "considerable co-responsibility," the "primary responsibility" could be "attributed to Russia and France."

Dolezik's line of reasoning is constructed step by step as a legal argument. He treats the Austro-Serbian conflict as a purely regional dispute, which was only expanded into a European war by Russia and France's "forced [...] delocalization of a purely regional Balkan conflict." He views the *casus foederis* (the obligation to support an ally) between Vienna and Berlin as a defensive loyalty to an alliance covered by international law.

He sees the actual turning point not in the Austrian attack or the German blank cheque but in the Russian mobilization; it was "as decisive [...] as the blank cheque." Consequently, Germany's declaration of war on Russia is presented as a lawful reaction to an "imminent threat situation," and "primary responsibility" for the war is attributed to St. Petersburg and Paris. In doing so, Dolezik explicitly aligns himself with the judgment of Herfried Münkler: "The key to the war" lay "in the Russian capital."

These theses are by no means new. The *World Socialist Web Site* has opposed this falsification of history for more than a decade. As early as 2014, the WSWWS analysed the flood of books, broadcasts and commentaries that appeared on the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I as "targeted efforts to revise the previous understanding of the causes of the war and Germany's responsibility, and to bring it into line with the German government's new foreign policy goals."

That same year, at the Munich Security Conference, Germany's Federal President, Foreign Minister and Defence Minister announced that the era of military restraint was over. At the forefront of the accompanying historical campaign was Humboldt University Professor Herfried Münkler. He publicly demanded "a departure from the theses of Fritz Fischer" and claimed—without any evidence—that "recent research" was now "tending more toward the position of Ritter," meaning those right-wing conservative historians who after 1945 had denied any connection between imperial *Weltpolitik* and war.

As the WSWWS demonstrated at the time, the attacks on Fischer and the

return to an aggressive foreign policy are inextricably linked. “In order to prepare new crimes of German imperialism,” wrote Ulrich Rippert and Peter Schwarz in July 2014, “its historical crimes, to the understanding of which Fischer contributed decisively, must be downplayed and whitewashed.”

In a lecture at Humboldt University in early 2015, Peter Schwarz quoted David North, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US): “History has become a battleground. ... The past is falsified in the interest of present-day political reaction.” Münkler’s attacks, Schwarz noted, served to “poison the intellectual climate and stifle resistance to militarism.”

Yet Dolezik goes beyond Clark and Münkler. In 2014, the message was that all powers had stumbled into war together, “sleepwalking.” Dolezik, by contrast, shifts the Central Powers into the role of defenders of a “defensive security paradigm.” The German blank cheque becomes “defensive, lawful alliance loyalty,” and the German declaration of war becomes an action “lawfully in self-defence.” According to him, the decisive factor was not the Austrian attack or the German blank cheque, but “Russia’s decision to intervene in the regional conflict and mobilize against Austria-Hungary.”

Germany is thus no longer merely relieved of a special responsibility; it is declared the victim of Russian-French aggression. And the F.A.Z. presents this well-worn exoneration narrative as a “new thesis.”

This exoneration myth relies on a misrepresentation of Fritz Fischer. He never claimed Germany bore “sole guilt.” Upon the publication of his book in 1961, he rejected the formula attributed to him, writing in the weekly *Die Zeit*: “I did not use this term in my book; rather, I explicitly pointed out that [...] the governments of the participating European powers share in the responsibility for the outbreak of the world war in one way or another and in very varied degrees.”

The First World War was an imperialist war. Germany, which had arrived too late for the division of the world due to the absence of a bourgeois revolution, confronted the old colonial powers of Great Britain and France, who defended their plunder by all available means. The United States, which entered the war late, began its rise to become the dominant world power.

Sixteen years before the outbreak of the war, Germany had already launched an intensive naval construction program to challenge British dominance over the world’s oceans. However, the primary direction of German imperialism’s expansion lay to the East—in Central Europe and Russia. The generals of the *Reich* forged war plans against Russia and pushed to start the war as soon as possible because time was working in Russia’s favour. The Schlieffen Plan, which served as the strategic foundation for the Kaiser’s imperial army at the start of the war, had been drawn up as early as 1905.

Fischer’s alleged “sole guilt” thesis is a straw man. What Fischer investigated was the specific responsibility of the German imperial leadership: It had wanted and backed the Austro-Serbian war, deliberately accepting a conflict with Russia and France in the process.

Dolezik treats the Austro-Serbian conflict as a neutral starting point that only became a European war through the intervention of Russia and France. Yet this conflict did not fall from the sky: The German leadership had actively promoted it and politically secured it with the blank cheque. Therefore, the question of German responsibility cannot be reduced to the subsequent sequence of mobilizations, ultimatums and formal alliances. That the other imperialist powers also bore guilt was something Fischer never denied—but that did not mitigate the responsibility of Germany’s ruling class for the war,” as Rippert and Schwarz commented at the time.

Dolezik’s key concepts—*casus foederis* (alliance obligation), *casus belli* (justification for war), mobilization and legality under international law—shift the investigation to the immediate legal sequence of the crisis: who mobilized first, which declaration was formally justified, when was

the alliance obligation triggered. What is lost from view are the imperialist interests that led to the war. Austria-Hungary’s attack on Serbia was not a given starting point but a deliberate decision to provoke a war with Russia, which Berlin encouraged and supported with the blank cheque.

The German leadership wanted the war against Russia and deliberately accepted the risk of a major European war in service of its own power-political goals. Just how far these goals reached became openly apparent as soon as the war began—in the September Program, with its German-dominated Central Europe and the containment of Russia. The fact that France, Russia and Britain also pursued imperialist interests does not refute German responsibility.

For his interpretation, Dolezik explicitly invokes the historical revisionists of the interwar period—Barnes, Wegerer, Montgelas and Lutz. At the time, they had highlighted the shared responsibility of all major powers in order to combat the War Guilt Clause of the Versailles Treaty, which imposed excruciating reparations on Germany. Today, the old exoneration myths are returning.

But why are these old theses being brought back to the surface? On November 28, 2025, Germany’s parliament, the Bundestag, approved a defence budget of 108.2 billion euros—the highest since the end of the Cold War. By 2029, it is set to rise to 3.5 percent of economic output. The military strategy introduced in April 2026 openly names Russia as the central threat and aims to build the Bundeswehr into the “strongest conventional army in Europe.” Defence Minister Pistorius justifies every increase by citing the “Russian threat.”

For such a program, the memory of the crimes of German imperialism in two world wars is an obstacle; the rejection of war and militarism runs deep. Thus, Germany must appear as a threatened power, merely reacting—and Russia must be seen not just today but retroactively as the aggressor of 1914. The continuity of German great power interests and the eastward direction of expansion, which in 1914 already stretched from Ukraine through the Baltics to the Caucasus, is meant to be concealed. Our previous warnings are being confirmed in the escalation of the Ukraine war, which is now being driven forward, above all, by Germany.

The falsification of the past serves the preparation of present and future wars. Fischer already showed that militarism always had an internal political function as well. In 1905, Kaiser Wilhelm instructed Chancellor Bülow: “First shoot, behead, and render the socialists harmless, if necessary via a bloodbath, and then war abroad.” Today, too, rearmament is directed both inward and outward.

The falsification of history is part of the ideological preparation for war—both internationally and domestically. The answer to this is the struggle for the international unity of the working class on the basis of socialism.



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