



**Anthony D'Agostino**, "The Revisionist Tradition in European Diplomatic History", *Journal of the Historical Society*, Vol. 4, Issue 2 (June 2004): 255-287.

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Confronted with the term "revisionism," most diplomatic historians will probably think first of the body of scholarship challenging the orthodox view that the Soviet Union was primarily responsible for the breakup of the Grand Alliance and the advent of the Cold War. My first reaction to Anthony D'Agostino's stimulating review of an earlier tradition of historical revisionism addressing the origins of the two world wars of the twentieth century was gratitude to the author for having devoted a great deal of intellectual effort on a historical period from which most of our colleagues have increasingly turned away. Our profession's preoccupation with the causes the Cold War has generated an extraordinary outpouring of excellent historical work. But fewer and fewer journal articles, conference papers, and doctoral dissertations reach back to the history of international relations before 1945. I suspect that a major explanation of this disparity is that, with a few notable exceptions, all of the important diplomatic archives and collections of the private papers of decision-makers in the 1914-1945 period have been available to scholars for many decades. In recent years, as more and more primary sources dealing with the Cold War are declassified and placed in the public domain, enterprising scholars and graduate students eagerly engage in the exhilarating pursuit of the "smoking gun" that disproves the conventional wisdom about this or that event and forces us to revise our understanding of the East-West conflict. The opening of government archives in the former Warsaw Pact states of Eastern Europe [1], together with the partial availability of records from the former Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China [2], have yielded fascinating revelations that have prompted a fundamental reevaluation of the origins of the Korean War, the Soviet-American showdown over Iran in 1945-46, the Cuban missile crisis, and other key developments the Cold War.

By contrast, the once contentious debates over the origins of the two world wars, which Professor D'Agostino reviews with admirable clarity and sensitivity, have faded into relative obscurity. All of the relevant records have long been available, legions of historians have pored over them, and hundreds of articles and books have conveyed the results of this monographic research. The sheer magnitude of the secondary literature on these subjects has led some to pose the rhetorical question: is there anything worthwhile left to say about these dry-as-dust events? Book proposals to publishers and articles submitted to all but the most specialized journals that address topics of diplomatic history in the distant past are often met with the response "Hasn't that already been done?" or "Isn't this well plowed ground?" Such an attitude betrays the positivist assumption of an objective truth that, once discovered, will put all scholarly disputes to rest. What could one possibly learn from an intensive reexamination of the origins of the First and Second World Wars that is not already well known? Professor D'Agostino argues persuasively that there is much to be learned, not only from recent works on the subjects at hand, but from earlier scholarly inquiries as well.

Before addressing some of the major issues that he raises, I would like to take up a point that he touches only in passing but which has long intrigued me. That is the yawning gap between the consensus of scholarly specialists about a particular historical subject and the popular perception of the educated public. Let us take as examples of this phenomenon the two general topics of Professor D'Agostino's lucid essay. If one were to question the historically knowledgeable person today about the origins of the Great War, one would probably receive a reply something like the following: the great powers of Europe blundered into a war in the summer of 1914 that none of them wanted to fight, because their leaders failed to negotiate a peaceful resolution of an arcane dispute in the Balkans. All of the belligerent states therefore deserve equal blame for permitting, through the blindness, miscalculation, and inaction of their leaders, the outbreak of the most deadly conflict in human history up to that time. That is what President Kennedy gleaned from his reading of Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* as he sought to avoid an even more lethal outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis. There is an abundant scholarship that has definitively demonstrated that Imperial Germany used the Sarajevo assassination as a pretext to wage a carefully planned preventive war and sabotaged all efforts to reach a peaceful solution of the crisis. But this interpretation has never advanced beyond the professional journals and scholarly monographs to challenge the "blundering into Armageddon, all were guilty" thesis, which continues to hold pride of place in the public imagination.[3] Similarly, if one posed the question why Hitler was able to take power legally in a democratic Germany and then successfully mobilize its population to launch the Second World War, the historically attuned person on the street might reply something like this: The Treaty of Versailles was a monstrous act of injustice reflecting the vindictive Germanophobia of France, which saddled the Weimar Republic with horrendous territorial losses and a crushing reparations burden that foreordained the collapse of the new international system and the revival of a revisionist, aggressive Germany. That became the standard interpretation of the postwar settlement in Great Britain and the United States and continues to retain its hold on educated public opinion despite the appearance of a substantial body of monographic scholarship and one recent best-seller that refutes it. [4]

Professor D'Agostino's article represents a useful reminder that in earlier days the scholarly debate about the origins of the two world wars was just as heated as the more recent arguments over the origins of the Cold War. Based on a careful reading of the relevant historiographical literature, it demonstrates how the "orthodox" explanation of the origins of the Great War advanced by the governments of the victorious allies — that Imperial Germany had waged a premeditated war of aggression that compelled France, Russia, and Great Britain to oppose it — rapidly collapsed after the peace conference broke up. Relying heavily on the German diplomatic documents rushed into print by the Weimar Republic, *Die grosse Politik der europäischer Kabinette*, the revisionist historical literature of the 1920s and 1930s both expressed and nourished the growing disillusionment with the recent war and the peace settlement in the English-speaking world. By attributing blame to every other power but Imperial Germany for the outbreak of the conflict, these works challenged the so-called "war guilt" clause of the peace treaty and therefore undermined the requirement that Germany pay for the damage its forces has caused.[5] Sidney Fay's *Origins of the World War* (1928) denounced the war guilt clause and held France responsible for spurring Russia into mobilizing its army, which made Germany's offensive against Belgium and France unavoidable.[6] The ultimate revisionist work in the United States that D'Agostino examines was Harry Elmer Barnes's *Genesis of the World War* (1926), which also blamed France and Russia for goading Germany into war. On the British side

the revisionist cause was most effectively advanced in the writings of H.N. Brailsford and other pro-Labour and Liberal intellectuals associated with the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), such as E.D. Morel, G. P. Gooch, and Bertrand Russell. Influenced by the pre-war economic analyses of J.A. Hobson, they saw the war as the result of the two major imperial powers ganging up on Germany to prevent it from threatening their global dominance. [7]

It is remarkable that, so soon after a conflict in which the Germans were portrayed by allied propaganda as inhuman brutes and the Kaiser as a beast who deserved execution as a war criminal, the former enemy was exonerated and forgiven while the entente powers were depicted as the initiators of the war. With the emergence of the Nazi regime, the revisionist school was faced with a challenge to its formidable campaign to get Germany off the hook for the launching of the last war. One of the most fascinating parts of D'Agostino's article is its treatment of the political evolution of A.J.P. Taylor. The young Manchester historian's careful reading of the diplomatic documents in the mid-thirties led him to abandon the Brailsford UDC line, which emphasized the overwhelming importance of European imperial rivalries and blamed the entente imperial powers for dragging Germany into war. Like many (though not all) of his contemporaries on the left in Britain, he had come to appreciate the critical importance of the German threat to the balance of power on the continent. [8] D'Agostino handles with great finesse the nuances of Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War*, which has been unjustly accused of "scrubbing up Hitler" by linking Nazi foreign policy goals to those of the Imperial regime. As D'Agostino makes plain, Taylor's emphasis on the continuity of Germany policy (which supported the thesis of *der deutsche Sonderweg*) did not so much exonerate Hitler as spread the blame more widely throughout German society.

In the end, this well written, amply documented essay demonstrates that scholarly disputes of long ago should not be consigned to the library shelves. They ought to receive the serious attention of historians interested in learning how their professional forebears grappled with interpretive questions that were once as contentious as those that fill the pages of journals and doctoral dissertations today. At the conclusion of his essay Professor D'Agostino offers a sensible observation that nicely summarizes the point he has made: "It is useful for historians to resist the pull of fashion and the allure of current "definitive" accounts to try to appreciate how the story was once told." [9]

Notes:

[1] See Vojtech Mastny's ambitious Parallel History Project at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/php/>.

[2] See the many illuminating publications of the Cold War International History Project at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/cwihp/>.

[3] Fritz Fischer unearthed the evidence of the German plan long ago, but while his path-breaking *Graff nach der Weltmacht* generated a lively debate in Germany and among academic historians in the English-speaking world, its findings never found their way into popular histories of the war. David Fromkin's recent work *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (New York, 2004) brilliantly confirms the Fischer thesis and summarizes the evidence from recent scholarship of the German preventive war scheme.

[4] See William R. Keylor, "Versailles and International Diplomacy," in Manfred Boemeke, Gerald D. Feldman, and Elisabeth Glaser, eds., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 Years* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 469-505. The scholarly literature that had undermined the old Keynesian verdict on the peace settlement is admirably summarized in Margaret MacMillan's *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York, 2003).

[5] The myth of the "war guilt clause" is probably the most impressive example of a lie repeated so often that it acquires almost universal acceptance. Coined by officials in the Weimar Republic shortly after the signing of the peace treaty, popularized by Hitler in the 1930s, it continues to crop up in textbooks and works of general history as evidence of the "unjust treatment" of Germany at Versailles. For explanations of the origins of article 231 of the Versailles Treaty, see Sally Marks, "Smoke and Mirrors: Smoke-Filled Rooms and the Galerie des Glaces," in Boemeke, Feldman, and Glaser, pp. 342-343, and Keylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 500-501.

[6] D'Agostino, p. 271.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 266.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 280.

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