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## **The Fischer Controversy, the War Origins Debate and France: a non-history.**

The controversy that followed publication in 1961 of Fritz Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht* was not restricted to West Germany. Even if the Fischer debate abroad did not acquire the vehemence it took on domestically, intellectually the effect was powerful. This article will demonstrate that France was potentially a most propitious terrain for the Fischer controversy to spread. Yet for a variety of reasons, largely to do with the nature of history practised in France in the 1950s and 1960s, it had remarkably little impact. The reasons for there being little reaction to the Fischer controversy also explain the state of the war origins debate in France fifty years on and why the war's causes have not been seriously investigated by French historians for several decades.

Of all the great powers of 1914, it might have been thought that France would be most interested by the Fischer controversy. First, because in the ebb and flow of revisionist and counter-revisionist interpretations of the causes of the First World War and war guilt since the 1920s, France still retained target status as the alternative culprit, at least in some quarters in the early 1960s.<sup>1</sup> That Fischer had insisted in *Griff nach der Weltmacht* in 1961 that Germany was guilty of premeditation in the outbreak of war potentially relieved France of some blame; a cause for some interest in France, at least amongst historians.

Second, despite the publication of the 42 volumes of official *Documents Diplomatiques Français* from 1929-1959<sup>2</sup>, French diplomatic archives and private papers of politicians and officials were not yet in the public domain and would not be until 1964 for official

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<sup>1</sup> On the historiography of the origins of the First World War see Jacques Droz, *Les causes de la Première Guerre mondiale. Essai d'historiographie* (Seuil Paris 1973); John W. Langdon, *July 1914. The Long Debate 1918-1990* (Berg New York Oxford 1991); Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Grande Guerre des Français, 1914-1918. L'Incompréhensible* (Perrin Paris 1994) 23-33; Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War. Controversies and Consensus* (Longman Harlow 2002). For the endurance of the idea of French responsibility for the war's origins around the figure of Raymond Poincaré, see J.F.V. Keiger, *Raymond Poincaré* (Cambridge University Press Cambridge 1997) 193-201.

<sup>2</sup> The volume on 25 July-4 Aug 1914 was only published in 1936, whereas its British equivalent for that period had appeared in 1926, Duroselle, *Grande Guerre des Français*, 26.

documents, given the French fifty-year rule. As Fischer's revelations about German responsibility were based on new documentary evidence there was always the possibility that undiscovered documents might yet demonstrate French guilt.

Third, France, like Germany, had the most historically attuned and historically sensitive public as a result of recent history connected to the Second World War. That French sensitivity would certainly display itself a decade later, with some of the same political, nationalist and personal ferocity reserved for Fischer in Germany, around the works of the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell and his suggestion of a continuity in French history from the nationalism of the 1890s through the fascism of the 1930s to Second World War France.<sup>3</sup> Although the underlying question of continuity and rupture in German history had resonance in France, this did not surface for some time; yet historical sensitivity was still palpable.<sup>4</sup> The other erstwhile great powers did not match up to this historical sensitivity: Austria-Hungary was no more and modern Austria felt no responsibility for its past, Russia had mutated into the USSR with other agendas, Britain had never really felt the finger of guilt and had not been sensitised by a humiliating war-time role.

Fourth, the French and German historical professions had worked particularly closely together since 1951, notably on a mission to expunge old images stigmatising their respective enemy status and to come up with 'denationalised' recommendations for the teaching of history in both countries. The First World War, its origins, evolution and consequences, made up two thirds of those recommendations. Surprisingly, it was not the disasters of the Second World War that were viewed as the root of national disagreements, but the First World War. Consequently, this was now seen as the terrain for a rapprochement between the two former enemies. Thus article 18 of the 1951 Franco-German agreement on history textbooks stipulated: 'the documents do not allow the attribution in 1914 of premeditated will for a European war to any government or

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<sup>3</sup> Zeev Sternhell, *La droite révolutionnaire 1885-1914. Les origines françaises du fascisme* (Seuil Paris 1978) ; idem, *Ni droite ni gauche. L'idéologie fasciste en France* (Seuil Paris 1983).

<sup>4</sup> For an historiographical account of the political sensitivity of French perceptions of Vichy France see Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy*, (Seuil Paris 1987).

any people.’<sup>5</sup> Fischer’s work did not align with that directive and thus had the potential to attract attention in France.

Fifth, the early years of the Fifth Republic were marked by ever-closer formal relations between Paris and Berlin, notably in the youth and educational arenas, with President Charles de Gaulle exhorting the two states to be brothers. This culminated in the Franco-German Friendship Treaty of 22 January 1963.<sup>6</sup> Fischer’s interpretation had the potential to trouble that harmony and revive old French fears about Germany by its suggestion of continuity in German history.

Finally, 1964 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War and, by dint of the 50 year rule, also the year in which French archives came into the public domain. This inspired a few academic conferences providing seemingly fertile soil for the Fischer controversy to take root. However, closure of the French official archives prior to 1964 meant that few, if any, in France were researching the immediate causes of the First World War. Consequently, the causes debate was not a serious topic for French academics, as will be demonstrated later.

Following publication in 1961 of *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, the Fischer controversy broke in Germany as a ‘cause célèbre’ or, as the prominent French historian, Jacques Droz, specialist of Germany put it in 1973, ‘a German Dreyfus Affair’. In suggesting that German imperialism had been responsible for the First World War, according to Droz, Fischer ‘had touched in provocative manner the political conscience of Germans’.<sup>7</sup> Undeniably, Germany had attempted to dominate the world in 1939: was that not also the case for 1914? The subsequent debate and polemic was refuelled in 1969 with Fischer’s second volume *Krieg der Illusionen*.

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Rainer Bendick, « La première Guerre mondiale à travers l’opposition des deux États allemands (1949-1989) », *Tréma* [En ligne], 29, 2008, mis en ligne le 01 mars 2010. URL : <http://trema.revues.org/717>, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> J.F.V. Keiger, *France and the World since 1870* (Arnold London 2001) 148-49.

<sup>7</sup> Droz, *Les causes de la Première Guerre mondiale*, 9.

In France, however, this polemic was a damp squib. First, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* contained little on France. There were, for instance, only three references to France's pre-war and war-time leader, Raymond Poincaré, and then in only a marginal context.<sup>8</sup> Second Fischer's book was greeted with a stinging review in 1962 from France's foremost specialist of the First World War and its origins, Pierre Renouvin. That review opened with references to work already done on Germany's war aims, underlining those that Fischer had failed to refer to. 'In France, the *Revue d'histoire de la guerre* has published several articles on this subject. But M. Fischer (all his volume demonstrates this) knows practically nothing of publications in France.' While recognising the quality of the archival research, the new documents, the scholarship and acknowledging Fischer's new assessment of Bethmann Hollweg, Renouvin was dismissive of the preliminary chapter on the immediate origins of the war as bringing no new documents to bear on the question. Regretting that the author 'did not believe it necessary to give to the work a general conclusion' the reviewer commented waspishly that all the same 'his personal views affirm themselves with perfect clarity.' As to Fischer's revelations on German imperialism and the close collaboration between economic and political forces, Renouvin commented wearily: 'In this regard, the views of M.Fritz Fischer are close to those that French historiography held as valid, in the light of documents known and used, some thirty years ago'. But Renouvin was able to acknowledge, albeit ambiguously, that Fischer's demonstration did bring additional detail and new arguments 'which are very important'. On Germany's significant share of responsibility Renouvin limited himself to saying that Fischer's interpretations were based on well known documents and were 'not new, at least for non German readers'. All in all for Renouvin *Griff nach der Weltmacht*'s strength lay in its new documentation, of which the 9 September 1914 'Peace Programme' was 'capital', but he was far less taken with the book's interpretations.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, it was Renouvin who had represented France at the Franco-German historians' meeting in Mainz in October 1951, which had been assembled to make recommendations about how school text-books in both countries could eliminate

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<sup>8</sup> François Roth, *Raymond Poincaré* (Fayard Paris 2000) 279.

<sup>9</sup> 'Pierre Renouvin, 'Les buts de guerre de l'Allemagne d'après les travaux de Fritz Fischer' in P. Renouvin and Jacques Bariéty 'Nouvelles recherches sur la politique extérieure allemande (1914-1945)' *Revue Historique*, 228, 2 (1962) 381-90.

nationalistic interpretations of the outbreak of the First World War. Renouvin's counterpart at that meeting was Professor Gerhard Ritter (1888-1967) of Freiburg University, doyen of German historians, a future fierce and formidable opponent of Fischer's arguments on methodological and factual grounds. Even though both national delegations stuck to their inter-war positions about responsibility a compromise was reached. That compromise, as mentioned above, was one of no fault on either side, even if the German delegation gave ground by admitting that there was more of a predisposition to risk war in Germany than France, because of the greater importance of the army in German society.<sup>10</sup> Fischer's thesis starkly contradicted the 1951 Franco-German Commission's report which stated unambiguously: 'German policy in 1914 did not aim to provoke a European war.'<sup>11</sup> One wonders whether Renouvin's severe position on Fischer's work may in some part also be due to his working relationship with Gerhard Ritter and to Fischer's overturning of Ritter and Renouvin's 'official' work and hard-won compromise on the Franco-German committee ten years earlier.

Lack of interest in France was epitomised by the publication date of the French translation of Fischer's first volume, which appeared only in 1970 as *Les buts de guerre de l'Allemagne impériale*<sup>12</sup>, coming after *Krieg der Illusionen* in 1969. Thus Fischer's work only entered French academic consciousness by a slow process of osmosis. As Jacques Droz asked in his short historiographical essay *Les causes de la Première Guerre mondiale*: 'what was the point of all this polemic?' And he went on to state that the greatest specialist of this period, Pierre Renouvin, had in a review of *Griff Nach der Weltmacht* in 1962, recognised that Fischer 'had not really supplied any new conclusions, but only a ringing confirmation, on many points, of the arguments defended thirty or forty years earlier by a certain number of French or American historians'.<sup>13</sup> For Droz, Fischer's debunking of German innocence took the debate back to the 1920s and

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<sup>10</sup> On this see *Bulletin de la société des professeurs d'histoire et géographie*, no 130 bis (mars 1952), pp. 11-12, cited in Duroselle, *Grande Guerre des Français*, 27-8; also Droz, *Les causes*, 55-6.

<sup>11</sup> *Rencontres franco-allemandes d'historiens 1950-1953*, Direction générale des Affaires culturelles, Mainz, n.d. p. 21, document in R. Poidevin, *les origines de la première guerre mondiale* (Presses Universitaires de France Paris 1975) 105

<sup>12</sup> F. Fischer, *Les buts de guerre de l'Allemagne impériale* (Trévise Paris 1970) preface by Jacques Droz.

<sup>13</sup> Droz, *Les causes*, 9. For Renouvin's review see part 1 'Les buts de guerre de l'Allemagne (1914-1918) d'après les travaux de Fritz Fischer' in 'Nouvelles recherches sur la politique extérieure allemande (1914-1945)' P. Renouvin and Jacques Bariéty *Revue Historique*, 228, 2 (1962) 381-408.

pre-revisionist interpretations which, unlike in Germany, had never really been controversial in France.

Droz went on to state that the reason why the impact was so great in Germany was because of the ignorance and *bonne conscience* into which the German public had lapsed and which not even the Second World War had shaken. There was also the fact that Fischer blamed the traditional concepts of German historiography, its attachment to historicism and the primacy of foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> According to Droz's analysis, the Fischer controversy could only be a German phenomenon.

More specific reasons why Fischer's work did not have the same impact in France as it had in Germany, even amongst specialists, were set out in an obituary for Fritz Fischer in 2000, by the historian of the 1911 Agadir crisis and former Renouvin doctoral student, Jean-Claude Allain. The first reason he gave was the difference in approach. Fischer's thesis focused on the primacy of domestic issues in foreign policy (*Primat der Innenpolitik*), whereas the French school of international relations, detailed below, was focused more on the international interplay of political, economic and financial relations in which the German Empire was only one, albeit an essential, element. The second reason, he argued, flowed from the first: Fischer's concentration on the premeditated responsibility of imperial Germany 'seemed to want to settle scores with German society, and even with personalities, like Bethmann Hollweg'. This according to Allain resembled 'the indictment of Poincaré, the Tsar or the Kaiser' formulated 'with infinitely less talent and documents,' just after the Great War.<sup>15</sup> Allain asserted that since 1927 'this national or individual personalisation of responsibility for the war had been demolished by Pierre Renouvin', who had shown that responsibility was shared, albeit to different degrees, so that there was no monopoly of responsibility for any one state. This reading of the war's origins, according to Allain, was well known amongst the young historians who made up the Renouvin-Duroselle school, who were therefore unlikely to respond to Fischer's thesis.

A third reason for the poor reception of Fischer's work was, Allain suggested tactfully, its 'lively and alert' tone 'dispensing with, as Pierre Renouvin remarked in 1971, "half-

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<sup>14</sup> Droz, *Les causes*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Claude Allain, 'Nekrologe. Fritz Fischer (1908-2000)', in *Francia*, 27, 3, 2000, 234.

shades and prudent nuances”, and creating a very personal form of expression, which was not without consequences for the methodology. Here Allain detailed the selection of documents cited and the peremptory interpretations made which had a ‘counter-productive effect’, provoking reservations about the thesis. Fischer’s arguments, according to Allain, generated surprise and interest among the group of young French historians of the Renouvin-Duroselle school. However, they provoked ‘neither infatuation nor rebellion’ and certainly no hostility to Fischer himself, unlike in Germany where the controversy became politicised against the backdrop of the Cold War and the strained relations between the two Germanies. Such emotion had little chance of spreading across the Rhine given the differing socio-political environments.<sup>16</sup>

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Where does that leave French historiography of the war’s origins today? That historiography has been influenced by availability of evidence, methodology and the towering figure of Pierre Renouvin.

In 1964, as mentioned above, no French historians were working on the immediate causes of the war in part because of the constraints of the French ‘50 year rule’ and the limit it placed on access to state archives. The nature of the French doctoral research restricted the subject that could be studied given that the enormous theses (*thèse d’état*) were expected to be exhaustive and definitive. Without the legitimacy of archival documentation that was impossible.

Even so there was a healthy French historical school of the history of international relations at the Sorbonne around Pierre Renouvin, who had done so much work on the war’s origins since the 1920s, and his successor Jean-Baptiste Duroselle. Renouvin’s doctoral students at this time were restricted to working only on the period before 1914:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 234-5.



Pierre Guillen on Germany and Morocco up to 1905 (1967); Raymond Poidevin on Franco-German economic and financial relations (1969); René Girault on French loans to Russia (1971); Jacques Thobie on French interests in the Ottoman empire (1973); Jean-Claude Allain on the Second Moroccan Crisis (1974).<sup>17</sup> The emphasis was on the inter-action of political and economic factors in the decision-making process of French expansion in Europe and beyond<sup>18</sup>.

The methodological approach these doctoral students were expected to follow was the one pioneered by Pierre Renouvin in the 1950s when he had expressed the desire to go beyond ‘diplomatic history’ and replace it with a ‘history of international relations’. For Renouvin the history of the relations between diplomats, embassies and governments was too restrictive and limited; what needed to be studied was the history of the relations between peoples.<sup>19</sup> This could be done by researching what Renouvin had already announced in the 1930s<sup>20</sup>: “*force profondes*”, deep underlying forces which influence the course of international relations and which Renouvin divided, on the one hand, into material forces, such as geography, demography, economics, and, on the other, ‘spiritual forces’ or ‘collective mentalities’ such as national identity, nationalism or pacifism.<sup>21</sup> Thus from the point of view of the methodological orthodoxy established by Renouvin a mere diplomatic history of the outbreak of the First World War was unacceptable. So none tackled the war origins debate. The nearest that any came to it chronologically was another Renouvin doctoral student, Jean-Jacques Becker. His *doctorat d’etat*, published

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<sup>17</sup> The brackets denote date of thesis. They appeared in publishable format as : Raymond Poidevin, *Les Relations économiques et financières entre la France et l’Allemagne de 1898 à 1914*, Paris, 1969; Pierre Guillen, *Les Emprunts marocains de 1902 à 1904*, Paris, 1972; René Girault, *Emprunts russes et investissements français en Russie, 1887-1914*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1973; Jean-Claude Allain, *Agadir 1911 : une crise impérialiste en Europe pour la conquête du Maroc*, Paris, 1976; Jacques Thobie, *Intérêts et impérialisme français dans l’Empire ottoman, 1885-1914*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> On this French school of the history of international relations see Allain, ‘Nekrologe. Fritz Fischer (1908-2000)’, 233-5.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Renouvin, « Introduction générale », in Pierre Renouvin (ed.), *Histoire des relations internationales* (vol. 1 : François-L. Ganshof (ed.), *Le Moyen Age*), Hachette, Paris, 1953. See the new 3 volume edition prefaced by René Girault (Paris, Hachette, 1994), cited in Robert Frank, ‘Penser historiquement les relations internationales’, *Annuaire Français des Relations Internationales*, 2003, volume IV, <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/FD001267.pdf>, pp. 42-3, accessed 21 Dec 2011. I have followed Frank’s description of the Renouvin/Duroselle approach to history.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Renouvin, *La Crise européenne et la Première Guerre mondiale*, Alcan, Paris, 1934 (1re éd.), p. 131, cited in Frank, ‘Penser historiquement’, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Renouvin/Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Introduction à l’histoire des relations internationales*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1964 (1st ed.), 1991 (4<sup>th</sup> ed.).

in 1977 as *1914: Comment les français sont entrés dans la guerre*<sup>22</sup> was, however, about French public opinion on the eve of war not the diplomatic history of the outbreak of the conflict. Similarly, but much later in 1989, Duroselle's doctoral pupil Georges-Henri Soutou analysed the economic war aims of all the major powers in the First World War, but again without tackling in any detail the question of the war's origins, although in it he did criticise Fischer's too deterministic approach.<sup>23</sup>

What then did Renouvin's successor Jean-Baptiste Duroselle bring to the methodology of the French school of international relations and to the war origins debate? Influenced by American political science of the 1950s, Duroselle introduced to the French school the notion of the 'decision-making process'. How was the decision-maker influenced by the *forces profondes*, through his education, his milieu, his advisors and the mood of the time, and to what extent could he in turn change or influence those forces? Duroselle set out this methodological approach in the second part of the volume he co-authored with Renouvin entitled 'The statesman'.<sup>24</sup> It might have been expected that this methodological approach would have inspired some archival study of the war's origins through the prism of the role of individuals in the outbreak of the First World War. It did not do so.

The small 'corporation' of historians of international relations who emerged from the Renouvin/ Duroselle doctoral school, then went on to university positions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here they might have been expected, in the light of the now open French archives and profusion of private papers, to encourage doctoral students to tackle the war's origins anew, especially under the 'new regime' lighter doctorate created by national decree in 1984 to align with the PhD. None appear to have done so. As a consequence there have been very few, if any, French works on the war's origins fifty years on from the Fischer controversy. So why has no real in-depth archive-based study of the war's outbreak been conducted in France?

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<sup>22</sup> Jean-Jacques Becker, *1914: Comment les français sont entrés dans la guerre* (Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Paris, 1977). The doctoral thesis was entitled 'L'opinion publique française et les débuts de la guerre de 1914'.

<sup>23</sup> Georges-Henri Soutou, *L'Or et le Sang: les buts de guerre économiques de la Première Guerre mondiale* (Fayard, Paris, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Renouvin/Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Introduction à l'histoire des relations internationales*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1964 (1st ed.), 1991 (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), quoted in Frank, 'Penser historiquement', 43.

The first explanation may be the ‘cultural turn’ in French history since at least the 1980s. This produced a schism in French historiography of the First World War: those interested, albeit few in number, in the more traditional politico-diplomatic analysis of the war; and younger historians attracted by the new ‘pioneering’ work in the area of *histoire culturelle* on subjects such as the soldiers’ experience, memory and commemoration led by Jean-Jacques Becker, his daughter Annette Becker and his doctoral student Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, clustered around the *Historial de la Grande Guerre*, which they organised and opened at Péronne on the Somme in 1992.<sup>25</sup> Certain facets of this schism, though less outwardly sectarian, are a continuation of the long-standing bitter divide between the French school of international relations and the French *Annales* School of history which characterised the 1950s and 1960s. That schism was both methodological and personal. Methodological in that the *Annales* School had nothing but scorn for the History of international relations, even if Renouvin and Duroselle took on board certain aspects of the *Annales*’ advances in economic and social history and *histoire des mentalités*; personal in that Fernand Braudel, leader of the *Annales*, and Pierre Renouvin, were at daggers drawn, refusing even to cite each other<sup>26</sup>. The enmity even had an institutional dimension with Renouvin’s Sorbonne pitted against Braudel’s elite *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*.<sup>27</sup> Their epistemological difference continued over the former’s refusal to forsake the importance of events, individuals, ‘great men’ and political history. Even if *Annales* School historians have since embraced what they once despised - biography and the political dimension of history<sup>28</sup> - the political and diplomatic history of the War and its origins has continued to be shunned by the new cultural historical school of the War. As a consequence few French doctoral students if any work in these areas.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See for instance, Jean-Jacques Becker, Jay Winter, Gerd Krumeich, Annette Becker, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau (eds) *Guerre et Cultures 1914-1918* (Armand Colin, Paris, 1994), which is the proceedings of the inaugural conference for the *Historial*.

<sup>26</sup> Renouvin’s views of Fischer and his feud with Ritter may also have been influenced by the methodological and personal antipathy between Renouvin and Braudel?

<sup>27</sup> For the Braudel/Renouvin division see Frank, ‘Penser historiquement’, 43-4.

<sup>28</sup> On the *Annales* School’s scorn for political history and biography and the latter’s fight-back in the 1980s, see Philippe Levillain, ‘Les protagonistes de la biographie’ in René Rémond (ed) *Pour une histoire politique* (Armand Colin? Paris 1988) 121-59.

<sup>29</sup> One of the most interesting aspects of the research carried out around the *Historial* has been its international, in other words non-single state, approach. There has been a conscious attempt, in the Renouvin tradition, and in line with the work of the Franco-German historians’ committee of the 1950s to move away from what that committee referred to as nationalistic history. One excellent example of this is the Franco-German volume by Jean-Jacques Becker and Gerd Krumeich, *La Grande Guerre. Une histoire franco-allemande* (Tallandier Paris 2008).

Even amongst the few interested in the international history surrounding the war, the question of origins has not figured prominently, not even from a Renouvin/Duroselle methodological perspective. It is as if the subject area is off limits. To a large extent French doctoral dissertation subjects, for a long time dictated by the doctoral supervisor, have traditionally moved in step with the chronological opening of the public archives: first 50 years then from 1979 30 years. Like some collective historical steam-roller they have trundled forward across subject areas in their path abandoning them once dissertations have been completed in order to continue the inexorable chronological march forward to subsequent years. Consequently, whole areas have not been revisited for years, particularly given the vestiges of the ethos of French doctoral dissertations as definitive works.

The idea of the origins debate being off limits may also have something to do with the reverence paid to France's leading historian of the war's origins for much of the twentieth century, Pierre Renouvin (1893-1974). A product of the prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, he was at nineteen one of France's youngest *agrégés d'histoire*, France's highly competitive history examination and gateway to a university career. Despite researching for a doctorate on the origins of the French Revolution it was the origins of the Great War that drew his attention. From 1920 to 1922 he was curator of the documentary collection on the Great War at the Sorbonne from when and where he became a lecturer. Based on a close reading of the available documents, in 1925 he published *Les Origines immédiates de la guerre (28 juin-4 août 1914)*, which severely undermined revisionist writings attempts at demonstrating that Germany was not responsible for the war.<sup>30</sup> He was at this time editor of France's leading journal of the war, the *Revue d'histoire de la guerre mondiale*, publishing in it over 130 articles and reviews,<sup>31</sup> and he was remarkably productive in terms of the quality and number of books on the international relations surrounding the war.

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<sup>30</sup> Pierre Renouvin, *Les Origines immédiates de la guerre (28 juin-4 août 1914)* (Alcan Paris 1925) ; David Robin Watson, 'Pierre Renouvin' in Kelly Boyd (ed) *The Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing* ( Fitzroy Dearborn, London, 1999 ) 993-995.

<sup>31</sup> See Renouvin's biographical entry by Jean-Baptiste Duroselle in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*: <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/pierre-renouvin/> accessed 14 December 2011.

Other than the intellectual respect that these authoritative and nuanced publications commanded nationally and internationally in the course of the twentieth century, reverence for their author was heightened by his distinguished war record. Wounded for the first time in 1916, which impeded use of his right arm, he refused an administrative post and insisted on returning to the front losing an arm during the 1917 Nivelle offensive. Renouvin was of that generation who had fought in the War, like his German counterpart infantryman Gerhard Ritter only five years his senior, but unlike Fritz Fischer born a generation later. Both were committed to their side's victory in the War, but both had experienced first hand the patriotic emotion of August 1914 and were conscious and sceptical of its use in war as in history.<sup>32</sup> Thus as witness and scholar in France Renouvin had unique authority. Furthermore, from 1928 he had served as secretary general and then after the Second World War as president of the commission charged with publishing the *Documents Diplomatiques Français* and thus knew the official diplomatic documents intimately, especially the eleven volumes of the third series which covered the period November 1911 to August 1914, for which he was directly responsible.<sup>33</sup> In that capacity he was perceived at the time and since as doggedly protective of his historical independence vis a vis French state authorities, even if his own research pleased the latter in contradicting German-led revisionist arguments which alleged French responsibility for the war's outbreak.<sup>34</sup> Thus Renouvin's classic text from 1934 clearly states that: 'The firm decision taken by Germany, even at the cost of a European conflict, to "bail out" an Austria-Hungary threatened with disintegration by nationalist movements, is without doubt the essential explanation of the 1914-1918 war'.<sup>35</sup> Archival research in many countries since then has largely confirmed the Renouvin thesis.

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<sup>32</sup> Though a national conservative Ritter had been a critic of the Nazi regime and imprisoned by the Gestapo from 1944-5.

<sup>33</sup> On the Commission's methods for publishing the *DDF* see Pierre Renouvin, 'Les documents diplomatiques français 1871-1914' in *Revue Historique*, 226, 1 (1961) pp. 139-52.

<sup>34</sup> Renouvin's impartiality as an 'official' historian has begun to be questioned in a recent article by a Canadian historian and a French colonel, former head of the French army archives at Vincennes, Andrew Barros and Frédéric Guelton, 'Les imprévus de l'histoire instrumentalisée: le livre jaune de 1914 et les Documents Français sur les Origines de la Grande Guerre, 1914-1918', *Revue d'histoire diplomatique*, I, 2006, pp. 3-22. Evidence is produced on Renouvin's writings in the 1920s being subsidized by the French foreign ministry even though this could be justified on the grounds of the Wilhelmstrasse's heavy subsidizing of revisionist literature since the end of the war (p. 19).

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Renouvin, *La Crise Européenne et la Première Guerre Mondiale* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1934) 3rd ed. 1948, 208.

Professor of the history of international relations at the Sorbonne from 1933, member of the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* of the august *Institut* from 1946, and President of the *Fondation nationale des Sciences Politiques* from 1959 to 1971 Renouvin commanded the heights of the academic establishment, even seemingly from beyond the grave with the establishment of the Institut Pierre Renouvin at the University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne in 1983. The *mandarin* status of French professors of Renouvin's authority conferred on them monopolistic control over the subject of doctoral theses through a network of national committees, such as the *conseil national des universités*, the final arbiter in deciding the award of any doctorate and any appointment to, or promotion in, any university position. Hence, no doctoral study could hope to succeed in the history of international relations and the First World War without Renouvin's *imprimatur*. Consequently few French historians sought to re-investigate the war's causes and France's role in it, even after Renouvin's death in 1974. Then the torch was passed to Jean-Baptiste Duroselle (1917-1994), his disciple, as keeper of the Renouvin faith. He had jointly authored with Renouvin the classic *Introduction à l'Histoire des Relations Internationales* in 1964, the same year that he took over Renouvin's chair at the Sorbonne, followed in 1975 by his seat in the *Institut*. Even when private papers of prominent French political figures (eg Delcassé, Poincaré, Clemenceau) and the permanent officials at the Quai became available in the 1970s, no French doctoral students sought to use them to study the war's causes. This left a vacuum for foreign historians to fill, first with doctoral theses, then with books on or around the question of France and the origins of the First World War, such as those by Gerd Krumeich<sup>36</sup>, David Stevenson<sup>37</sup> or this author<sup>38</sup>, and recently Stefan Schmidt, none of which, significantly, have been published in France.

So what is the state of French historiography on the war-origins debate today?

Compared with the equivalent historiography in the 'Anglo-Saxon' world it remains stunted, if not inexistent. The debate remains largely where Renouvin left it. For most of his life Renouvin's successor, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, did not himself engage directly

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<sup>36</sup> Gerd Krumeich, *Aufrüstung und Innenpolitik in Frankreich vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1980), English translation: *Armaments and Politics in France on the eve of the First World War: the introduction of three year conscription 1913-1914* (Berg, Leamington Spa, 1984).

<sup>37</sup> David Stevenson, *French War Aims against Germany, 1914-1919* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> John F.V. Keiger, *France and the Origins of the First World War* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1983)

via the archives with France's role in the outbreak of the First World War. The disciple respected the *domaine réservé* of his mentor by writing on international relations subjects tangential to the question, even after the latter's death, such as his 1988 biography of Clemenceau. But even that magisterial tome said next to nothing on the war's origins and certainly nothing based on archival evidence.<sup>39</sup>

It was only at the end of his own life and eighty years since the War's outbreak that Duroselle turned to the Great War in *La Grande Guerre des Français* of 1994, with the significant subtitle: *L'incompréhensible*<sup>40</sup>. The book, not based on archival sources, is more a personal account dedicated to his father and to Pierre Renouvin, both decorated soldiers of the First World War. In it the section on the war's origins is very much the classical one developed by Renouvin in the 1930s of France's relative passivity, Russia's understandable support for Serbia and an Austro-German willingness to risk general war. The interpretation is thus that of Austria-Hungary and Germany incurring the greater share of responsibility, but without the deterministic Fischerite premeditation. Duroselle died having just corrected the proofs and never saw the finished product.<sup>41</sup> That Renouvin flavour also permeates Jean-Jacques Becker's 2004 general book on the War, *L'Année 1914*, even though it attributes greater responsibility to Russia because of her general mobilisation.<sup>42</sup> In short no French academic historians, young or old, have investigated anew the many archives and private paper collections relating to the origins of the Great War that have become available since the 1970s. They have not done so for France's role in the origins, or for that of any other power. Only one, non-academic, French historian has in recent years attempted a re-assessment of France's responsibility in the outbreak of the conflict. That volume, based on no new archival material, blames France in the manner of the polemical 'Poincaré-la-guerre' writings of the 1920s.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps it is time for a new Renouvin to ride to France's rescue.

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<sup>39</sup> Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Clemenceau* (Fayard, Paris, 1988) 581-2.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Grande Guerre des Français : l'incompréhensible* (Perrin, Paris, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> Pierre Renouvin, *La crise européenne et la Première Guerre mondiale* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1934) 3rd edition 1948, 207-8. The same interpretation characterises Renouvin's many subsequent works on the war's origins right up to *La Première Guerre mondiale* (Que sais-je, PUF, Paris, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1971).

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Jacques Becker, *L'Année 1914* (Armand Colin, Paris, 2004) 91.

<sup>43</sup> Léon Schirmann, *Été 1914: Mensonges et Désinformation. Comment on "vend" une guerre*, (Editions italiques, Paris, 2003).

Few books by academic historians in France stray much from the Renouvin interpretation of the War's origins. None have used the archives of any country to research anew that question. It is not surprising therefore that the polemic generated by the Fischer controversy never took hold in France, as it did not fit with the Renouvin thesis. Rather it is the orthodoxy established over 90 years ago that is still alive and well and largely unchallenged, that of Pierre Renouvin. However, in a 2004 historiographical round-up of French research on the history of international relations, Robert Frank, successor to René Girault, himself the successor to Duroselle's chair at the Université Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne, notes an interesting development in French research in this field. He characterises French research on the history of international relations over the years as having two principal approaches: the '*renouvienne*' and the '*durosellienne*', the former linked to underlying forces and the latter to statesmen and the decision-making process. But more interestingly, he detects to a certain extent in recent French historiography a return to diplomatic history, via the *durosellienne* route and its focus on political decision-makers, strategists and diplomats.<sup>44</sup> As the inheritor of the Renouvin chair explains for the history of international relations:

All in all, French historiography still lives off the legacy of Pierre Renouvin and of Jean-Baptiste Duroselle. For forty years, it has experienced considerable change in many areas, but no epistemological revolution since that carried out by its two 'masters'. One senses however an important change looming linked to the desire of historians to invest more in the debate with other disciplines on international relations.<sup>45</sup>

Is there then a possibility of an after-Renouvin in French historiography of the origins of the First World War? Could that new approach not harness the benefits of Renouvin's pioneering methodological approach to that of Duroselle to produce a new in-depth archive-based study of the origins of the First World War.? Not even for the 2014 centenary of the outbreak of the First World War is a French historian working on such a project. However, it seems that such a work could be prompted by a recent volume on France's role in the origins of the First World War, not by a Frenchman but by a

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<sup>44</sup> Frank, 'Penser historiquement', 48.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid



German. That work by a young historian reconnects with the revisionist interpretations of the 1920s and the *Poincaré-la-guerre* theme.<sup>46</sup> It challenges the Renouvin thesis and this author's contention that both France and Poincaré had little responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914.<sup>47</sup> Will this at last be the lever for a French archive based study of the war's origins, a sort of nationalistic prod of the kind that originally motivated Renouvin's interest in the war's origins? Ironically, it was Renouvin who had hoped to ensure that both France and Germany moved away from that kind of history through his work on the Franco-German historical committee of 1951. That, after all, was one of the reasons why Renouvin had been so critical of Fritz Fischer.

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<sup>46</sup> Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914, Ein Betrag zur Geschichte des Ausbruchs des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Oldenbourg Munich 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Keiger, *France and the Origins of the First World War*; idem, *Raymond Poincaré*