

Background to World War I and Bernhardi

When it comes to the *Second World War*, it can be said with confidence that Hitler's Germany started the European portion of the war and Hirohito's Japan initiated the Pacific portion. In the case of the *First World War*, however, while a large number of historians have blamed Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany for the war's onset, many others are unconvinced regarding German culpability. In a complicated debate that continues to this day, historical opinion has ranged widely in assigning responsibility for World War I.

The following factors—in no particular order here—have been identified regarding the outbreak of World War I: militarism, an arms race, rigid and time-sensitive military plans, offensive—rather than defensive—strategies that anticipated a short war, absolutist governments, weak or weary leaders, governments lacking in transparency, economic rivalry and trade wars, imperialism, alliance systems, nationalism, German racism with respect to Slavic hordes, the demands of honor and manliness, and Social Darwinism. As for blaming a nation's decisions at the time, the list includes: Serbia's recklessness leading up to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Austria-Hungary's vengefulness toward Serbia, Germany's blank check to Austria-Hungary following the archduke's assassination, and Russia's insistence on supporting Serbia by mobilizing its army.

Some historians have given up on ever getting to the bottom of who or what actually caused the war, due to a lack of conclusive evidence. Others have jettisoned the very notion of blame or responsibility and have adopted the perspective that World War I is best understood as a colossal human tragedy. And finally, some have suggested that virtually everyone and everything is to blame—the entire milieu at the time caused it to happen.

Included in this milieu was Friedrich von Bernhardi (1849-1930), a German general, a military historian, and a bestselling author. His most famous book was *Germany and the Next War*, which was published in 1911, three years before the First World War started. With a long career in the German military that began with the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, Bernhardi would serve as the army's chief military historian from 1898 to 1901 and as a commanding general in World War I (1914-1918); he was honored in 1916 for his important role in the successful German response to a powerful Russian offensive.

Bernhardi's life and writings intersected with many of the possible causes of the First World War, but the one with which he is most closely associated is Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism is a moral code that stemmed from the evolutionary ideas of the English philosopher, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), though the English naturalist, Charles Darwin, largely shared it as well. This moral code called for "the survival of the fittest" (a term coined by Spencer) in the human world; this meant that, for humans to progress, societies must follow nature's lead and let unfettered competition reign among individuals, nations, and races. This struggle could be quite brutal—neglecting the poor and even entailing war, but fair economic competition would be the ideal. By contrast, Bernhardi, in his own version of Social Darwinism, elevated war as an absolutely critical mechanism for human development. Unfortunately, there were others, in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, who thought the same way. An excerpt from Bernhardi's *Germany and the Next War* will follow.