

The "outbreak" of World War One in German and Swedish history magazines

The way the beginning of World War One is presented in popular history magazines

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The way of presenting the "outbreak" of World War One in German textbooks

A closer look into curricula and textbooks is useful to get an idea of how the start of World War One is presented in German popular history magazines. In Bavaria, the start of World War One is always embedded within the complex of "Imperialism and WWI", dealing with four major subjects:

1. Crisis in the Balkan, assassination of Sarajevo and the "path to war"
2. The industrialised war and how people experienced this war at the front and at home
3. The landmark year of 1917 and the Russian Revolution
4. End of war, Treaty of Versailles and consequences

Having covered this chapter, there is often a close link to the chapter of "The Weimar Republic", ending in the collapse of the first German parliamentary democracy and the rise of National Socialism.

Principally, textbooks respond to the so-called "controversy of Fischer". In 1961, historian Fritz Fischer introduced in his work "Germany's Aims in the First World War" [Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschlands 1914/1918, Düsseldorf] a

thesis, stating that Imperial Germany had not “plunged” into World War One and there was no “outbreak” of World War One. Important parts of the social, political and military society had rather lead the German Reich deliberately into World War One, allegedly paying attention to not being the attacker. The thesis has been seriously criticized by German historians, because it would have confirmed belatedly the so-called German “guilt of war”, stated in article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles. However, in Germany, all social forces from left to right wing had been refusing to accept the accusations made in the Treaty of Versailles since 1919. Today, historians are of the opinion that there is no definite guilt of World War One’s start and above all that Germany cannot be held responsible exclusively for this outbreak, although they definitely acknowledge “plans of war” of certain parts of the German society and government.

Today, most of the textbooks consciously avoid formulations like “sliding into war” or “outbreak of the war”, using rather the more neutral terminology of “path to World War one”. Regarding the past and present significance of this question, it is important to clarify the implication of the choice of terminology (“plunge” vs. “outbreak” vs. “start”, etc.) and to encourage pupils to develop their own critical opinion.

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