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Russia and the First World War: Time to Think Again?

LSE IDEAS

A summary by Harriet Shone, BSc Government & History



Professor Dominic Lieven, Senior Research Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge and co-head of the Russia Studies Programme at LSE IDEAS, discussed the role Russia played in the outbreak of the First World War, in the context of documents recently declassified from the Russian archives and new trends in scholarship.

Professor Lieven's first wrote about Russia and the First World War many years ago, as a postgraduate student in what he calls the "Fischer-era", because of the pre-eminence of historian Fritz Fischer who famously analysed the impact of German domestic factors on the outbreak of war in 1914. In this lecture, Professor Lieven discussed how his original conclusions stand up in light of a vast collection of newly declassified documents and in light of recent

trends in English and German language scholarship.

In his original thesis, Professor Lieven wrote about the role domestic factors in Russia might have played in the outbreak of war but focused slightly more on the very important role played by the "culture" amongst key Tsarist elites, most of whom attended the same academy and who all belonged to an elite rooted in military tradition and the pride of Russia.

Professor Lieven revisited these themes in this lecture, outlining the key roles played by individuals in the diplomacy of the period 1905-1914 and laid slightly more emphasis on the domestic factors than before, especially the sense of failure that existed within the Russian elite following defeat to Japan and crises in the Balkans, and the structural problems that made war more likely. Especially significant was Russia's monarchical system, which places one man in a role that no one could ever possibly fulfil alone, and as Professor Lieven put it "leaves a hole at the middle of government that is either filled with disastrous consequences, or unfilled with disastrous consequences".

Despite the fascinating insights made possible by new documents, especially regarding the role played by key figures in the Foreign Ministry and the Duma, Lieven concluded, as he did in his original book, that while domestic factors within Russia might have mattered more than he originally acknowledged, the blame for the First World War lies, not with a war-mongering Russia, but in Berlin and Vienna.

Professor Lieven's lecture finished on a chilling note as he drew parallels between the chaotic diplomacy that led to war in 1914 with similar patterns in Asia today. Despite this gloomy thought, and with the humour that LSE has come to expect from Professor Lieven, he concluded with a conversation had in a dream with Emperor Franz-Joesph in which "we both admitted that the war was a mistake".

For more information about this event please [click here](#).

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