



**World War I: Sleepwalk to Suicide**

**Guest: Paul Gottfried**

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**WOODS:** There are maybe a dozen neocons who still defend Woodrow Wilson's decision to intervene in World War I, and that's about it. But I want to start off by having you explain who Fritz Fischer was and what the Fischer Thesis is, and how that relates to World War I.

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, right now I'm looking at a long German treatise called *Der Fischer-Komplex* by a man who's almost as old as I am, named Gunter Spraul. And he deals with the rise of Fischer's arguments about why the Germans, and I suppose more generally the Central Powers, Germany and Austria, bear sole responsibility for the Great War. According to Fischer, the Germans had in fact planned a general war for the purpose of creating a great German empire extending into, really into the heartland of Russia, including the Ukraine, and then chopping off all of eastern France, Belgium and other areas. And this would bring France and other European powers to their knees. Germany just needed a war as an excuse for doing this.

Now this argument, I should point out, was very popular for about six months in East Germany after the Second World War. But it represented a departure from traditional Marxist-Leninist understandings of the war, which was seen as a struggle among capitalist powers for markets. It was seen as the last stage of capitalism, which culminated in this international strife, and this would be the beginning of a workers' revolution. So the Fischer Thesis seemed to be focused entirely on German guilt and German blame. And it also tries to establish a continuity between World War I and World War II, arguing that most of the racist thinking, the search for *Lebensraum* that you see in Hitler was already present in the Kaiser's government. I would argue that the Fischer Thesis rests upon very, very tenuous evidence. One of their major sources to confirm their argument is a September 1914 memorandum sent by Theobald von Bethman-Hollweg, the German chancellor, arguing for, or presenting the possibility of, German expansion into certain regions. The problem, of course, is that there's nothing to suggest Bethman-Hollweg was an imperialist. For several years after he came into office, before the First World War, he tried strenuously to appease England. He stopped the naval program, promised England part of the Berlin to Baghdad railroad line. He did everything he could to bring the English into the German camp, at least to appease England's anger at Germany as a kind of upstart competitor. So there's no reason to assume that Bethman-Hollweg was a man motivated by desire to start a war. He leaves 1917 because he's opposed to any peace by then, but a peace that will return to a kind of status quo ante bellum. There are also other arguments that Fischer makes, generally by misquoting people. He misquotes von Moltke, the German commander. He grossly misquotes the Kaiser. The arguments presented by somebody like Christopher Walker in his book *The Sleepwalker*, that the Germans, for the most part, sort of blunder their way into the war, they have no desire to get into any war. And they feel they have to back up Austria in 1914 because the Serbs really were trying to destroy the Austrian Empire. It was a perfectly obvious threat by then. They had their hand in the assassination of the Archduke and his wife, the operation, the Black Hand, in Bosnia was carried out with the support of the Serbian general staff. All of this is Christopher Walker shows. It's been known for years. The Fischer Thesis survives largely in Germany because the German government, and many of the German academics, are intent on showing exclusive German guilt for World War I as a way of keeping the Germans anti-fascist, penitent about their past, their entire past. So they push guilt for World War I, as well as guilt for Hitler. However, I think by now you're quite right: except for neoconservatives, some Teutonophobic English Tories, to whom someone like Paul Johnson and Margaret Thatcher spoke, there are very few who will defend the Fischer Thesis. I even saw it being attacked in the *New York Review of Books*, so you know that it's all over.

**WOODS:** So in other words, the Fischer Thesis is situating Hitlerism within an alleged broader tradition of German imperialism.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right. Right. Exactly.

**WOODS:** So he's got this, we might say, presentist agenda there. Also, of course, immediately after World War I, there was the development of revisionist history in the U.S. of the war. You had Harry Elmer Barnes. You had Sidney Fay. And they were claiming

that the German war guilt was a lot of hooey. Barnes said: if anything, the Germans were the *least* responsible for the outbreak of the war. So he went completely in the other direction. But was the revisionist view that Versailles had drastically overstated German war guilt, was that still the conventional wisdom on the eve of the release of the Fischer book in the early '60s?

**GOTTFRIED:** Absolutely. I wrote another article, and it's, believe it or not, for the *American Spectator*, before it became totally neoconservative, making that argument that into the 1950s, you get people like Raymond Aron and others taking exactly this view. I mean, they were disputing the Fischer Thesis. Even the French patriot said, well you know, the Germans may have been more guilty for the war but they weren't entirely, part of the responsibility was ours. We all blundered into it. What the Fischer Thesis does is simply change the terms of the debate, trying to use a kind of moral blackmail to do this. You know, if you don't accept this, you don't accept that Auschwitz really happened.

By the way, I heard this argument as a graduate student at Yale because my professor, Hajo Holborn, together with his disciple, Fritz Stern, were the strongest advocates for the Fischer Thesis probably in the world. I mean, even more than Fischer and Immanuel Geiss in Germany. They were absolutely passionate about this. And also to show that German histories throughout the—well, from Bismarck's time on (they didn't like Bismarck, either)—was heading in the wrong direction and that Nazism was a probable outcome of the peculiar path pursued by the Germans since the period of unification.

**WOODS:** Once we get to late summer, I'm going to start talking on this program much more about World War I, and we'll look at the outbreak. I'm going to have Hunt Tooley on and it'll be great. Right now as we look at it broadly 100 years on, I'm sure there are people who would say, this was a period in which you had several openly imperial powers who were rivals of one another, you had one power trying to encircle another with hostile alliances, etc. And some of them had struggled over colonies. Whereas today, okay, we have the U.S. as a major imperial power, but not in the same way that those powers were. The likelihood of a full-blown world war between the major countries, excepting the Middle East, seems very unlikely. So are there really any lessons to be learned that would be applicable in 2014 from the blunders that were made in 1914?

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, I think you're quite right. Actually alluding to something that comes out of my article in *The American Conservative*, mainly that I'm not sure there are too many lessons that would be applicable and if you notice, while I deplore neoconservative imperialism and global democratic hooey, I say the United States can get away with things that Germany and France and Russia could not get away with in 1914 because they were essentially in a kind of fish bowl. And because of our power, our military-economic primacy, we do get away with pushing around other countries in a way that would have been much harder back then. I do think it is important, simply to clear the air, to accept the proposition that both sides caused the war. It's not that one is more to blame than the other. Both sides are equally responsible. And I think the Germans have to get this monkey off their back. Ten years ago, Merkel went to France. It may have been more recently than that. And she apologized to the French head of state, that Germany by itself started the First World War. She's supposedly a conservative Christian Democrat, and she apologized. The Frenchman looked at her like she was crazy. They don't even remember what she was talking about. So I think the Germans, for their own mental sanity, have to get rid of the Fischer Thesis and to recognize that while they had some responsibility for the war, it's no greater than the responsibility borne by the other side.

**WOODS:** You know, I just had Walter Williams on the program last week, and I love his proclamation of amnesty and forgiveness. He basically tells white audiences: look, quit making fools of yourselves. I forgive you already. You know, let's just move on.

I suppose one thing though that Americans can take away from this—we may not have the same English versus German naval rivalry that existed 100 years ago, but Americans can certainly learn something in terms of how foreign policy is made. Today, is it fair to say that the range of allowable opinion—Ron Paul has changed this a bit—but for the most part, the range of allowable opinion in the U.S. is really a choice between Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt?

**GOTTFRIED:** I think you're absolutely right. I think this sort of gets back to the question of what relevance does this have for the United States now? And I think in many ways, World War I, much more than even the Civil War, is the beginning and one might say almost the primal justification for liberal internationalism. That if Wilson was right, then everything which comes after is right. He would try to make the world safe for democracy. He was justified in intervening when he did. It's sort of hard to defend his domestic policies. I mean, he was a eugenicist, he held strong racial views, whatever. But you can defend his foreign policy because he spoke about a war to end wars, a crusade for democracy. And these slogans and ideas are very much tied up with American intervention in World War I. So this becomes the justification. The Civil War is an internal affair. This is an occasion for the United States to implement its ideas about democracy throughout the world, through becoming militarily involved in the European conflict.

**WOODS:** If you had to explain the range of debate between Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt, how were they different?

**GOTTFRIED:** I think what you find in Teddy Roosevelt is a more openly imperialistic, naturalistic understanding of international relations. He's very much, in many ways, a child of his time; he's really of the nineteenth century. And there were people in Germany, France, England, talking about war as a manly experience. It teaches us virility. And nations prove themselves in military combat. I think with Wilson, however, what you get is a characteristically left-wing form of militarism. That's we're to fight wars to

end wars. We're to fight wars to bring democracy to the world. You don't get these ideas in Teddy Roosevelt. Teddy Roosevelt to me was a man of the nineteenth century. Woodrow Wilson sort of creates his own century, which is the century of Bill Kristol, the century of other global interventionists. An American mission to bring democracy. You also get this in Ronald Reagan. Even in Barry Goldwater you get Wilsonian tropes. So I think Wilson is somebody who is sort of looking ahead. I think this is an argument that is also made by John Lukacs somewhere, that Wilson was the true revolutionary. And he was much more so than Teddy Roosevelt.

**WOODS:** Well, you know, one of the points you raise in the article is that it was pretty clear based, for one thing, just on the makeup of Wilson's cabinet and the people who were advising him—with the exception of William Jennings Bryan, who wound up resigning anyway—that they had made up their minds already regarding which side they were basically on and which side they would inevitably enter on. And that just rings so familiar because it seems that today, whatever the conflict is, we know the U.S. government has made up its mind. They don't care with the evidence is. When the evidence comes in to show that the bad guy wasn't so bad, it doesn't matter because the sorties are already flying. The Serbs were going to be bombed over Kosovo no matter how few Albanian Muslims turned out to have been murdered. It didn't matter. They were going to be bombed anyway. They had made up their minds.

That brings to mind the issue of William Jennings Bryan, because Robert Gates just came out with his memoir, in which he said: I knew that a lot of the foreign policy was totally ridiculous and pointless and stupid and a waste of money, but I didn't resign because I had to stay there and be the adult in the room. Who do you think was right? Bryan in resigning or Gates in staying on?

**GOTTFRIED:** I think William Jennings Bryan was a man of conscience. I think he did exactly what he had to. He was right about the *Lusitania*. History vindicated his position that in fact, it was carrying contraband, the British were sort of using it to push the United States into war. He read that right. And then with the accession of Robert Lansing, you have as secretary of state somebody who was totally committed to getting us into war. So I think Bryan was a man of principle and a man of intelligence.

**WOODS:** So how do I take your view of Gates, then? Was Gates just an opportunist who wants the levers of power and then gets the best of both worlds because later he can write the hand-wringing memoir?

**GOTTFRIED:** Yeah, that's correct. That's correct. Yeah. I don't think he's a man of principle at all. It's also, in the case of Gates, it's curious that he tells you what a fine fellow Obama is, what a great president, and then of course turns around and sticks a knife in his back to make himself look good. He really wants to have it both ways. I think he's trying to justify his own presence in the cabinet.

**WOODS:** I'm curious to get your views, then, on somebody like Rand Paul, who obviously is trying to hold up, to one degree or another, some kind of Taftian approach to foreign policy and yet, at another level, seems like he's trying to be careful of what he says and measure his words little bit more, be a little bit more restrained. What are your overall impressions of him?

**GOTTFRIED:** I can understand why he is careful in what he says on international relations. He's walking in a minefield. He does not want to get the *Wall Street Journal*, the Charles Krauthammer, the Murdoch Media empire beating up on him. Because that would be the end of any ambitions he might have to move into the presidency and move up politically. I think his instincts are right. I also find him much more articulate on international relations than his father. My complaints with Ron is that he was generally right in the positions he took but he gave you bad reasons. He would just snarl. Rand Paul will give you reasons, he gives you compelling reasons why he takes his position. But I think he is also very careful because he understands that he is associated with the party of war. Republicans more than the Democrats, not only now, but throughout history have been committed to war, as I learned maybe about two years ago as an old man. I was deluding myself. I thought that Robert Taft was the paradigmatic Republican. He's not. It's the Republicans who want to push us into World War I, the Republican internationalists—they were at the heart of the party. And I think Rand Paul is simply associated with the party that is hot to trot whenever an occasion for war comes along. So I think he's very careful.

**WOODS:** Do you think that his presence is symbolic of any kind of permanent shift or movement or at least challenge for the party mainstream on this? Or is this just going to wind up as an asterisk or a footnote in history?

**GOTTFRIED:** It'll be a footnote in history, unfortunately. I don't see how he's going to prevail against the Republican National Committee, against the big donors, against the military-industrial complex, if you will. The defense industry gives money to the cause. I think in some ways, George W. Bush or McCain is much more typical of what we're likely to see as the Republican presidential candidate than Rand Paul.

**WOODS:** And so now, with Chris Christie de facto out of the running, I guess we're going to wind up with Jeb Bush for—

**GOTTFRIED:** Why de facto out of the running? I think he can easily get back into it.

**WOODS:** You think so? Even with everything that's been going on?

**GOTTFRIED:** Oh, yeah. Yeah.

**WOODS:** The fact that they launched that federal investigation, I took that to be an indication that they really don't like him, for whatever reason. Because I bet you that kind of thing goes on with every governor in the Union. To single him out meant that they are going to be throwing some serious ammunition at him, and I don't think he's charismatic enough to survive it. But maybe I'm wrong.

**GOTTFRIED:** No, I think they're going after him because the Obama administration is trying to destroy any Republican challenge to Democratic rule. That's why they use the IRS. That's why they're going after Christie. I don't like Christie, by the way. I mean, I wouldn't vote for him or for Hillary, if given the choice. But I think the Democrats recognize that he is a danger to their party, that he has a good chance, or had a good chance, of beating Hillary. That's why they're going after him.

**WOODS:** You know, Roger Stone just Tweeted the other day that he thinks that for undisclosed health reasons, Hillary is probably actually not going to run, and, he said, you know who is going to run? It's going to be Michelle Obama. You think there's a possibility of that? I mean, who cares, right? At some level, right? Who cares?

**GOTTFRIED:** I feel that way, too. I mean, if I were asked to choose between two I would leave the choice to my dachshund or something. I couldn't make it.

**WOODS:** All right, fine. Well, on that note of dystopia, I think we'll draw to a close.

**GOTTFRIED:** Okay.

**WOODS:** But I'm going to, in the show notes, make sure and link to your article in *The American Conservative*. I want people to read that. We need more commentary on World War I. We need more commentary on Wilsonianism and his legacy. We've got all year for this 100th anniversary. In fact, we can keep on doing this because in 2017, we'll have 100 years since the stupid U.S. intervention.

Actually, you know what? Before I let you go, let me ask you this question. There are scholars on our side of things who say that Wilson's intervention had all these unbelievably negative consequences, that if it hadn't been for Wilson's intervention, you probably wouldn't have had the Nazis. You might not have had the communists come to power. Do you buy into that?

**GOTTFRIED:** Yes, I do. Let's put it this way. If Wilson had sincerely tried to make peace—and the Germans and Austrians were more than willing to make peace; the Allies were not. But if he had pushed his own side toward the peace table, and if some kind of negotiated peace could have been made, the 20th century would have been saved from all of these totalitarian nightmares. And I think the American government had it in its power to broker an honest peace. And the Germans were more than willing. There's a very good book by a man named Hans Fenske, I won't give the German title, but it's a German work on the attempts by the German government to have a negotiated peace. You see, the Allies never did this. The Germans and Austrians, particularly the Austrians, as we know, because the last Kaiser, Karl, to the Pope through his cousin in Italy, Sixtus, and others worked diligently to make peace. And the Americans had the opportunity and they blew it because the government was intent on going to war against the Germans.

**WOODS:** Now is the argument primarily that in the absence of the U.S. intervention, you would have had either a stalemate or one or the other side would have barely squeaked out a victory? Nothing that would have allowed it to get control of any significant territory in the continent or anything. And that then you wouldn't have had this aggrieved party in Germany that feels like they were stabbed in the back, so to speak? You wouldn't have had this unpopular treaty that a populist group could then ride to political success campaigning against, etc.? I mean, is that the basic argument here against Wilson?

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, yes, but it goes beyond that. Wilson was also committed to the destruction of the Habsburg Empire, which was a stabilizing force, a force for peace in central Europe. And it was not only the Treaty of Versailles that was unjust, every other treaty was more unjust, Trianon against Hungary, Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory. Ethnic Hungarians were put under the rule of other countries. Austrians were put under the rule of the Italians in the Tyrol. The treaties were totally unjust. The Turks managed to get out of perhaps the most unjust treaty of all because they just fought on until they got the Treaty of Lausanne, which gave them an ethnically cohesive state. But the other countries were ruined. We also have large German minorities living under Poles, living under others, who were treated very badly at the end of war period. So what the Treaty of Versailles does, or the treaties to end the war, not only Versailles but Trianon, Saint-Germain, and the other treaties, is to create a kind of permanent festering sore in the heart of Europe. Every aspect of those treaties was unjust and, I think, pointed in the direction of another war.