“How significant an impact were domestic politics on foreign affairs in Germany in the run-up to the war?”

After the second world war, David Lloyd George suggested that all nations shared blame for the outbreak of the First World War, and that they had ‘slithered’ in almost accidentally. However, in 1961, Fritz Fischer came up with new ground-breaking arguments that placed almost the entire blame on Germany, and he links the importance of German domestic policy with the resulting foreign policy. Sources P and Q both largely agree with this thesis, and even Source R recognizes the influence of social imperialism in the run-up to the war, though points are raised as to the precise nature of German foreign policy and the ambiguity of Germany’s position in 1914.

Source Q argues most strongly that domestic policy was instrumental in shaping up Germany’s foreign policy which led to war in August 1914. In source Q, Berghahn suggests that domestic policy was inextricably linked with foreign policy, especially in that the building of a more extensive navy and army would have ‘stabilising benefits’ on the nation. Fischer’s theory supports this idea, and Wehler takes it further by calling Germany’s leaping into war in 1914 a form of Social Darwinism, where only foreign war could unite a nation behind the ruling class. Source P recognizes there is ‘much evidence’ to support the theory of Primat der Innenpolitik (dominance of domestic policy) and source R agrees to some extent, acknowledging the parallel between Bismarck and Bethmann-Hollweg and raising the question of whether, as in 1870, the 1914 Chancellor would have to conquer other nations to rule his own. However, Source P argues strongly that it was international movements such as socialism that pushed leading Germans into war (the SPD was the largest party in the Reichstag since 1912), instead of strictly domestic issues, even though Germany had suffered financial deficit and racial tensions for over a decade. Also, Source R implies that war was hardly a product of domestic policy because the press should be prepared (presumably to stir up patriotic feelings), yet Fischer in one of his works notes how news of the outbreak of war was received with ‘numb shock’. Therefore, perhaps domestic policies were more linked with foreign policy than with events in or with the reality of pre-war Germany, as indeed is suggested by Berghahn in another part of ‘Germany and the Approach of War’.

Source P alludes to Germany’s paranoia due to its geographical, diplomatic and military encirclement for years prior to the war, and suggests that Germany securing its position in the ‘hostile world’ was a matter of principle rather than planned-out strategy. This ties in with Fischer’s thesis in the sense that clearly some groups in German society were determined to establish European hegemony, but disagrees with him because according to Fischer war had been planned and intended for years, not just grimly anticipated as part of domestic policy as Joll implies. Source R agrees with P however that German leaders were ‘gripped’ with ‘desperation’, probably as much by its fear of encirclement by a hostile coalition (the triple Alliance) as by its determination to break it. Berghahn’s theory on armaments in Source Q can be linked to this view, because the arms race between the Triple Alliance and Germany since the birth of the twentieth century rapidly developed into German domestic policy, and Germany felt it would lose its military advantage over other nations unless it welcomed and escalated the July crisis into a war. However, as mentioned above, it seemed that world reality counted for remarkably less in pre-war Germany than the ‘warped reality’ (Berghahn) perceived by its ruling elite. But since German foreign policy had been aggressive for years (the Moroccan Crises especially worsened Anglo-German relations), it is hard to believe Hillgruber’s theory that Germany was being defensive and waging a ‘preventive’ war, especially since Fischer’s new documents came to light and seemed to prove Germany had been planning a war and indeed world domination.