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The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the
University of Virginia

The Origins of the First World War

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WILLIAM MULLIGAN



New Approaches to European History

CAMBRIDGE

Volume 44 (2011)

Reviewed Work(s)

The Origins of the First World War. By William Mulligan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Pp. viii + 256. Cloth, \$70.00. Paper, \$24.99.

From May of 1871 to the summer of 1914, none of the great powers of Europe engaged in warfare with one another. These forty-three years represented an extraordinary period of stability, “the second longest period of peace amongst the great powers since the modern international system emerged in the mid-seventeenth century” (90-91). In his new textbook on the origins of the First World War, William Mulligan situates the story of the outbreak of the war within this unusual period of stability, asking his readers to consider how such relative peace could give way in 1914 to an unprecedented conflict on a global scale.

Mulligan identifies two main threads within the current debate regarding the origins of the war. Since 1914 scholarly opinion on the causes of the war has tended to be divided between those (known as structuralists) who have seen it as the result of “structural developments in international politics” and those (known as intentionalists) who have emphasized “the role of intention and agency – political and military leaders, institutions, states – in bringing about war” on the other (18). He identifies the tendency of many scholars to view the war as “the teleological culmination of great power politics in the late-nineteenth century,” an orthodoxy that has recently been challenged by historians who argue that the outbreak of war in 1914 was an improbable occurrence, unexpected at the time (16).

In his introduction, Mulligan argues that the intentionalist interpretation of the outbreak, most notably championed by Fritz Fischer, had become the “new orthodoxy” by the 1970s.^[1] Fischer famously argued that the German government had desired a war as a means of gaining hegemonic

power in Europe. He notes the tendency of Fischer's generation to emphasize factors that led to the war in such a way as to make the outbreak appear inevitable. More recently, Mulligan argues that the terms of the debate over the war's origins have shifted. He identifies recent scholarship, most notably that of Holger Afflerbach, as representing "a full assault on the broad outlines of the post-Fischer consensus," challenging both Fischer's intentionalist outlook and his assumptions about the inevitability of the war (16).^[2] Afflerbach's work emphasizes the structural elements of the international system that made the First World War "an improbable war." Mulligan finds this new critique convincing, contending that the outbreak of the war was neither expected nor desired by Europeans of all stations in June 1914, and that in fact, "the probability of a general war seemed to fade from European minds in the first six months of 1914" (159).

Following his first, introductory chapter, Mulligan seeks to apply Afflerbach's emphasis on the structural factors that prevented war and the contingent ones that brought it about to each of several broad topics. Chapter two "assesses the development of geopolitical competition among the great powers between 1871 and 1914," with particular attention to imperial expansion and the alliance system (21). He argues that the alliance system was a force for peace and a healthy balance of power and that its inherent flexibility helped to prevent great power conflicts rather than to bring them about. His explanation for the breakdown of this system is twofold. On one hand, he emphasizes the ways in which the great powers' conceptions of their "national interests" were changing in the period leading up to the war. These national interests became increasingly "incompatible with peace between the great powers," a factor that became "the fundamental weakness of the international system" at the beginning of the July Crisis (91). On top of this structural view, there is an argument for contingency that underlines the importance of several crises leading to the war, an emphasis that compresses the timeframe of the prewar period and shows the several points at which war might have been averted.

Chapter three focuses on the role of the militaries of the great powers in politics and in the decisions leading to the war. Mulligan plays down the influence of the military within the governments of the great powers, especially the importance of the so-called "war party" in Germany.

Chapter four discusses the influence of public opinion on the outbreak of the war, as well as governments' efforts to control public sentiment. Mulligan argues that even in Germany, the public's attitudes could be described as "defensive patriotism" and caution rather than any excitement about the prospect of war (159). Chapter five is concerned with economic factors and their role in geopolitics prior to 1914. He argues that economics, and particularly international commerce, was more often than not subjugated to national political interests and that bankers and commercial interests did not set agenda in any meaningful way. He argues in each case that the relevant interest groups generally desired and worked for peace among the great powers.

Chapter six breaks out of the thematic mold of the prior chapters and examines the importance of the so-called July Crisis of 1914 as a historical moment. He emphasizes how "a general war was not inevitable after the assassination" of Archduke Franz Ferdinand (209). Thus, the events that Mulligan sees as leading necessarily to war are compressed into the final months before the outbreak, emphasizing the importance of the responses by the great powers, and especially Austria-Hungary and Russia, to the assassination. This restructuring of the narrative leading up to the war, while thought provoking, is not without problems. Mulligan acknowledges that the recent scholarly emphasis on contingency may seem to make the war's eventual occurrence less explainable. In order to counteract this development, he suggests that the events immediately preceding the war (and especially the July Crisis of 1914) be accorded greater importance in narratives of the prewar period. He argues that that crisis ought to be viewed not only as a trigger for existing tensions and problems within the international system but also as a significant source of tensions in its own right. Thus while the inherent stability of the international system is best seen by looking at the long term of international history, the causes of that system's breakdown are best understood by examining the immediate circumstances of the historical moment in which that breakdown occurred. While Mulligan's emphasis on the disinterest of Europeans in waging a general war in 1914 is convincing, his emphasis on contingency seems to place an unrealistically heavy burden on the events immediately preceding the outbreak, and especially on the explanatory value of moments of crisis.

One of the greatest strengths of Mulligan's reading of the period is its truly global scope, incorporating discussions of imperial expansion by the European states and the growing influence of emerging powers such as the United States and Japan. He tells how countries formerly treated as peripheral, including China and Japan, fit into the great powers' developing notions of their national interests. His emphasis on the importance of the July Crisis necessarily privileges the Austro-Hungarian and Russian governments, and his narrative accords a more central role to Austria-Hungary than, for example, James Joll did in his 1984 synthesis by the same title.^[3] Mulligan succeeds in providing a new and provocative perspective on the origins of the First World War accessible to an undergraduate readership. He argues convincingly for contingency over inevitability, and particularly for the ways in which the perceived national interests of the Great Powers combined with unexpected and volatile periods of crisis to end 43 years of relative peace and stability. His efforts have resulted in a highly compelling and approachable introduction to a fascinating historical moment.

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[1] Fritz Fischer, *War of illusions: German policies from 1911 to 1914* (New York: Norton, 1975).

[2] Holger Afflerbach and D. Stevenson, *An improbable war?: the outbreak of World War I and European political culture before 1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

[3] James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Longman, 1984).



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