

{essays in history}

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Tragedy's Centenary: The First World War at 100



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Reviewed Work(s)

The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914. By Christopher Clark (New York: HarperCollins, 2013)

Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War. By Max Hastings (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013)

The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914. By Margaret MacMillan (New York: Random House, 2013)

The seven Serbian assassins who mingled with the crowds lining the streets of Sarajevo to greet the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914 had some difficulty in executing their mission. One lobbed his bomb and missed. Several more were overcome by nerves, simply unable to throw their bombs or fire their guns as the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary rode by in an open limousine. It seemed, momentarily at least, that the plot might have failed. Gavrilo Princip, however, succeeded where his comrades had failed: stepping up to the car as it slowed, he fired two shots, killing both Franz Ferdinand and the Archduke's wife, the Duchess of Hohenberg. Princip's bullets set in motion a series of monumental historical events, the narrative of which is a familiar one. Austria, with the backing of its close ally Germany, sought retribution for the murders by invading Serbia. Russia, which considered Serbia within its Slavic sphere of influence, mobilized simultaneously against Austria and Germany. France, bound by treaty to aid Russia, also mobilized against Germany. Britain, ally to France and guarantor of Belgian sovereignty was consequently drawn into the fray. In short order, the world was at war.

The causes behind the events that spiraled from that Balkan summer afternoon began to be debated even before the war itself was properly underway. The passage of nearly one hundred years has done little to stem the controversy surrounding the outbreak of the First World War, as the recent explosion of writing about the conflict and its origins demonstrates. The historical literature on the war's beginning fills libraries; in 1991, it was calculated that relevant books and articles had been churned out at a rate of well over 300 per year since the armistice. [1] This number has grown steadily in the intervening years and is sure to increase significantly as the world marks the centenary of the first great calamity of the twentieth century. The three books under review here all

belong to this recent surge of scholarly interest and effectively demonstrate how far the historiography of World War I's origins (until recently characterized by a pendulum of blame) has come since the first debates began in 1914.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, each of the belligerent powers mobilized cohorts of scholars to sift through state archives and compile collections of official documents relating to the war's origins. Stretching to dozens of volumes and thousands of pages, this exercise amounted to a continuation of the war by documentary means; during the interwar period, each government in turn sought to vindicate its behavior leading up to the outbreak of hostilities. Through a combination of selective omission and tendentious emphasis, the German collection strives to alleviate the burden of war guilt imposed by the Versailles settlement. The French effort offers an explicit alternative to the German narrative, and Soviet sources vilify the autocratic tsar and his bourgeois western allies. Scholars charged with assembling the British and Austrian official documentary collections likewise found themselves incapable of objectivity and oftentimes produced imbalanced accounts of their countries' roles in the unfolding catastrophe.^[2] The question of responsibility dominates these initial efforts. With millions dead and the global political order in ruins, each power desperately sought to absolve itself and find a culprit to blame.

Luigi Albertini introduced nuance and objectivity into the World War I origins historiography with his massive, three-volume study *The Origins of the War of 1914*, published in 1942-43 and translated into English by Isabella Massey a decade later.^[3] Drawing from the existing documentary collections described above, as well as memoirs by and personal interviews with the leading statesmen involved in the July Crisis, Albertini's achievement is his laborious reconstruction of the events between the Sarajevo assassination in late June and the outbreak of war in the first week of August 1914. While Albertini is concerned almost exclusively with the realm of high diplomacy—social, cultural, and economic factors do not feature prominently in his narrative—his general conclusion is that no European power sought deliberately to provoke a war. Rather, Europe's statesmen consistently failed to grasp the larger ramifications of their actions as the crisis mounted. Ultimate

responsibility, he argues, could be distributed evenly among the diplomats and politicians of the great powers.

With the later work of Fritz Fischer, however, the pendulum of blame seemed to swing back and point to the *Kaiserreich*. In his 1961 *Bid For World Power* (its more soberly titled translation *Germany's Aims in the First World War* appeared in English in 1967), Fischer argues that Germany opportunistically sought to instigate a general European war to realize its long-held aspirations to world-power status. With a previously unseen protocol produced by Germany's chancellor early in the war, Fisher demonstrates that Germany hoped to gain either through political influence or outright annexation control over much of central Europe, which would be incorporated under a Germanic economic association. A similar reorganization of colonial possessions was planned for central Africa as well.[4] Fischer was emphatic that Germany bore "considerable" (as opposed to total) responsibility for the war, though the German academic and conservative political establishment responded with a blaze of criticism that accused him of reopening the wounds of war guilt and implying that National Socialism was not an historical aberration but a movement with clear roots in Germany's imperial past.[5] The Fritz Fischer controversy, as it was called, was based in large part on a misreading of *Bid for World Power*, though it did much to fuel public debate on Germany's role in both world wars. In any case, Fischer held firm and published two subsequent books in which he not only addressed his critics head-on, but also expanded his argument for German culpability to include the years leading up to the war as well as during it.[6]

Subsequent writing on the war's origins has vacillated between the extremes explored above, and the sheer volume of primary sources enable scholars to put forth convincing arguments from virtually every quarter.[7] With the renewal of interest in the First World War surrounding the its centennial anniversary, however, it is possible to discern in the historiography continuing interest in determining who or what was to blame for 1914. Yet there are also attempts to move beyond this seemingly fruitless quest for culpability and to address larger questions about the war's place in historical narratives of modernity.

In *Catastrophe 1914*, Max Hastings sets out to tell the story of the war in its first calendar year, weaving together a diplomatic narrative that

culminates in the commencement of hostilities and a military narrative of the war's opening gambits.[8] This is a worthy goal as few historians have attempted to combine the two. The result, however, lacks balance. Hastings is clearly eager to apply his formidable talents as a military historian to the war's under-analyzed early stages. Consequently, he rushes through the years leading up to the war with a narrative of simple determinism. His tone in the book's chapters on the prewar era (comprising less than one fifth of the whole) reflects his view of them: a "doom-laden efficiency" blankets this first section.[9] Borne along by the tide of history, the statesmen who steered Europe through the July Crisis and into war are "fated" to lose the "doom-game [that] played out in 1914." [10] Indeed, these individuals hardly seem to matter in his story: the decision-makers who steered Europe through the July Crisis and into war were simply "wing-collared statesmen," anachronisms in their own time wholly unequal to "a crisis of the electric age," and unable "to defy inexorable social, political, and economic forces" pushing them towards conflict.[11]

Such an interpretation precludes any possibility of contingency and the outcome is a breezy, conventional interpretation of the events leading up to and immediately following those in Sarajevo. Austria, long hopeful for a decisive solution to the problem of its truculent Balkan neighbor, "made an almost immediate decision to respond to Franz Ferdinand's assassination by invading Serbia"— a decision which triggered the clockwork of mobilization described at the beginning of this essay and which, according to Hastings, earns Austria and its backer Germany the distinction being of the main instigators of the war.[12] In fact, the decision was not immediate: Austria waited more than three weeks to issue its ultimatum to Serbia, the rejection of which resulted in Austrian mobilization. The elision of these crucial weeks of crisis in Hastings' narrative is unfortunate though not surprising: with war inevitable, the details of its prologue become less important. Such is the challenge of the historical project Hastings undertakes. How can one tell the story of a war without seeing the preceding peace through the lens of teleological reduction?

A response to this thesis of inevitability is Margaret MacMillan's *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914*, which takes as its starting point the claim that "[v]ery little in history is inevitable. Europe did not have to go

to war in 1914; a general war could have been avoided up to the last moment..."[13] MacMillan's goal is to insert contingency into the narrative of the outbreak of the war; her book "traces Europe's path to 1914 and picks out those turning points when its options narrowed." [14]

In the tradition of Barbara Tuchman, much of MacMillan's efforts to understand the events of 1914 are devoted to painting an elaborate portrait of prewar European society.[15] Unlike Tuchman's Europe (which resembles Hastings' picture of a continent inexorably darkened by the thunderheads of war), MacMillan's is deeply ambiguous. Present are the familiar strains of imperial rivalry, arms races, and hardening alliance blocs—but these are skillfully balanced against an integrated (even globalized) Europe entering the modern age characterized by scientific achievement, diplomatic collaboration, and a robust international peace movement. Indeed, by guiding readers through the wildly successful Paris Universal Exposition of 1900, MacMillan shows how it was possible at this time to believe that Europe "was moving away from war" to the tune of the Concert of Europe, which had, by and large, peacefully preserved the European order since the fall of Napoleon eighty-five years earlier.[16] There was little reason to believe that future international crises could not be amicably resolved in the way they had been for the better part of a century.

MacMillan's treatment of these prewar diplomatic disputes—including major crises over colonial influence in central and east Africa, control of Morocco, and the annexation of Bosnia—is characterized by close scrutiny of the individual statesmen responsible for their resolution. In presenting studies of the surprisingly small cast of characters responsible for determining the course of Europe's prewar international affairs, MacMillan impresses upon her readers the contingencies surrounding the developments leading to the outbreak war. For example, she attributes the Anglo-German naval rivalry solely to the Secretary of State of the German Imperial Naval Office, Alfred von Tirpitz, without whose aggressive expansion efforts the course of history could "so easily have been different." [17] But for Tirpitz and his backer the Kaiser, Germany and Britain could have remained each other's largest trading partners and supported one another strategically, with the British dominant at sea and the Germans dominant on land.

Individuals come to the fore in the July Crisis as well, where policy decisions are deeply influenced by each leader's personal life. German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg's fatalistic attitude is closely linked to the recent death of his wife, while Chief of the Austrian General Staff Conrad von Hötzendorf's hawkish attitude seems to originate as much from a desire to crush Serbia as it does to win the affections of a married woman.[18] Ultimately, however, MacMillan refuses to assign blame to those who oversaw the outbreak of the war from Europe's embassies and foreign offices; she is more interested understanding the world they lived in and the cultural, political, and strategic assumptions that guided their choices.

Christopher Clark is likewise disinterested in identifying parties most worthy of blame in *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, by far the best of the books here under review.[19] Indeed, for Clark, one cannot ask *why* the First World War broke out, for such a question inevitably produces abstract answers remote from the individuals directly involved in the July Crisis. If long-term trends of militarism, nationalism, and imperialism are to blame for the war, the decision makers of 1914 are merely history's executors, essentially powerless to confront a crisis not of their own making. Instead, Clark asks *how* the war came about and, in doing so, aims to construct a narrative "saturated with agency," whose key players "walked toward danger in watchful, calculated steps." [20]

According to Clark, this narrative can only be realized if the outbreak of the war is examined "as a modern event, the most complex of modern times, perhaps of any time so far"; it began, after all, "with a squad of suicide bombers and a cavalcade of automobiles." [21] This is a crucial point. If, as is too often the case, the events are conceived of as a sepia-toned Edwardian costume drama, then they become less relevant to our time. With the world no longer ruled by hereditary monarchs and diplomacy no longer the bailiwick of beribboned aristocrats, it is too easy to see the prewar era as an antiquated age fated to be swept away by modernity. In attempting to cut through this perception, Clark aims to demonstrate that it was by no means preordained that this world would disappear. Its continued existence was contingent. Choices mattered.

The light of raw modernity shines brightest in Clark's focus on Serbia, which he removes from the margins of the war's origins historiography

and makes a central aspect of his narrative. On the eve of war Serbia was a young nation (its independence from the Ottoman Empire recognized only in 1878) and one severely underdeveloped. Belgrade, its capital, was a city of peasants: it boasted a literacy rate of just over 20 percent, and traditional elements of peasant culture remained dominant even as Serbia began to assert itself on the international stage. Thus “the development of modern [Serbian] consciousness was experienced not as an evolution from previous ways of understanding the world, but rather as a dissonant overlaying of modern attitudes on to a way of thinking that was still enchanted by traditional beliefs and values.”^[22] The most significant of these “modern attitudes” was Serbian nationalism, which enjoyed widespread popularity and formed the basis of a volatile relationship with Austria-Hungary. Serbs saw this relationship as intractably opposed to their aspirations to a “Greater Serbia” extending far beyond their existing borders.^[23] Such details contribute to Clark’s image of Serbia as a rogue state ready to use any means to realize its outsized national ambitions. A hundred years later, the type of threat posed by Serbia remains an all-too-familiar aspect of international affairs.

The statesmen and diplomats confronted with Serbia and the calamity that would emerge from this dangerous state of internal affairs also experienced something of a crisis of modernity. In a chapter on “The Many Voices of European Diplomacy,” Clark effectively demonstrates the difficulties facing the governments of Europe, and those nineteenth-century power structures that were ill-suited to meet the demands of modern imperial states. In each of the great powers, authority over foreign policy was unclear and constantly shifting. Sovereigns—including Edward VII, who was technically bound by conventions of constitutional monarchy—could subvert or enhance the efforts of their ministers through personal access to the sprawling family tree of European royalty.^[24] Almost to a man, Europe’s ambassadors possessed towering egos and were in the habit of ignoring distasteful instructions from their superiors.^[25] Foreign ministers (in Germany and Russia especially) found themselves in direct competition with military staff officers for influence over executive authority—itsself dangerously located in the capricious (as with Wilhelm II) or vacuous (as with Nicholas II) person of the monarch.^[26] Clark’s detailed reconstructions of the decision-making processes driving the European powers reveal that

international affairs on the eve of the war remained in the hands of a relatively small number of men, whose personal ambition, incompetence, prejudice, or (more rarely) perspicacity could heavily influence the outcome of a crisis. This “hive-like” system, which managed to muddle through the prewar crises listed above, “was simply not conducive to the formulation of decisions through the careful sifting and balancing of contradictory information”—a hallmark of the July Crisis, the short, sharp shock of which would be the system’s undoing.

[27]

It is worth noting the authors whose work is under review here all admit to the impossibility of comprehensive engagement with the primary source material related to the outbreak of the First World War; there is simply too much of it, spread out across too many languages, for one historian to bend it to his or her will. The only thing left for a scholar of these events is to choose which sources, and which aspects of this story, deserve emphasis. As is apparent with the official histories of the war that appeared in the aftermath of the war, this is a fraught methodology easily abused for political ends. The passage of a century, however, has perhaps lowered the stakes of recounting this narrative, enabling historians to move beyond attempting to establish culpability and to ask broader questions about the processes by which states go to war.

For Clark, the outbreak of the war is ultimately a “tragedy, not a crime,” with responsibility distributed across a “shared political culture” rather than located in the machinations of a particular power or bloc of powers.

[28] The events that came to a head in the first week of August 1914 displayed all the signs of a modern political crisis and must be understood as such if we are to be fully able to appreciate the roles that individuals can play in the outcome of international debates, both historical and contemporary. MacMillan also strives to move beyond the question of blame and draws similar conclusions about the contingency of these events. If Hastings takes a more deterministic view of history and is more eager to identify a guilt party, he certainly agrees that perhaps the defining characteristic of the men on whose watch Europe descended into total war was the lethal complacency with which they regarded the world and their places in it.

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[1] John Langdon, *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918-1990* (Oxford: OUP, 1991) 51.

[2] Keith M. Wilson, ed., *Forging the Collective Memory: Government and International Historians through Two World Wars* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996).

[3] Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, trans. Isabella Massey, 3 vols. (Oxford: OUP, 1953).

[4] Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1967).

[5] Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fritz Fischer Controversy," *The Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2013), 254-255.

[6] Fritz Fischer, *World Power or Decline: The Controversy over Germany's Aims in the First World War*, Lancelot L. Farrar, Robert Kimber, and Rita Kimber, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974); *Ibid*, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914*, Marion Jackson, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975).

[7] For a detailed examination of later literature on the outbreak of the war, see Niall Ferguson, "Germany and the Origins of the First World War: New Perspectives," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Sep., 1992), 725-752. More recently, both Britain and Russia have been the target of historiographical finger-pointing: see Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), and Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2011).

[8] Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), xviii.

[9] Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 103.

[10] Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 11, 6.

- [11] Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 3, 10.
- [12] Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 42, 562.
- [13] Margaret Macmillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Random House, 2013), xxix.
- [14] MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace*, xxxiii.
- [15] Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of Europe before the War* (London: Macmillan, 1966); see also *ibid*, *The Guns of August* (London: MacMillan, 1962).
- [16] Macmillan, *The War That Ended Peace*, 22. This image of prewar Europe is convincingly advanced in two other recent studies: see Charles Emmerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013); and Florian Illies, *1913: The Year Before the Storm*, Sean Whiteside and Jamie Lee Searle, trans. (London: Melville House, 2013).
- [17] MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace*, 140.
- [18] MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace*, 561, 236.
- [19] Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).
- [20] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, xxix.
- [21] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, xxvii-ix.
- [22] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 32.
- [23] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 21.
- [24] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 173.
- [25] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 192-4. The brothers Paul and Jules Cambon, French ambassadors to Britain and Germany respectively, provide excellent examples of diplomatic conduct that today would be considered unthinkable.
- [26] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 185-190, 197-200. Both Hastings and MacMillan deserve credit for comparing the German Emperor to the

capricious Mr. Toad of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*.

[27] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 429.

[28] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 561.

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