

REVIEW ESSAY

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In Search of Lost Time: A View of Contemporary Historiography on the Origins of the First World War

IN MEMORY OF SIMO BEGOVIĆ (1871–1953)

Charles Emmerson, *1913: In Search of the World before the Great War*. London: Vintage Books, 2013, 528 p.

Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War*. London: William Collins, 2013, 628 p.

Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013, 344 p.

Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War*. London: Icon Books, 2013, 560 p.

Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 2012, 697 p.

David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Why the World Went to War in 1914*. London: Vintage Books, 2005, 349 p.

Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War, Controversies and Consensus*. London: Routledge, 2002, 272 p.

Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War*. London: Profile Books, 2013, 699 p.

The hundredth anniversary of the start of the First World War (The Great War as it was once called, and as it is again referred to more frequently today) is an opportunity for the modern world to once again focus its attention on the beginning of the war that was one of the largest tectonic shifts in modern history. These shifts marked the beginning of the twentieth century, and paved the way for — and perhaps even caused — many of the evils of that century and left consequences which can still be

felt. Moreover, the claim that this war, from the aspect of the consequences, has still not ended in some parts of the world is not entirely unconvincing. What were the causes of the First World War? How and why did it break out? Could it have been prevented? Is there a guilty party or multiple guilty parties, regardless of whether it is an individual or a nation? Even a hundred years after the beginning of the 1914 catastrophe, as it is referred to in the title of one of the books covered by this review, we are still uncertain about the answers to these questions, and also being re-examined are some of the conventional wisdoms about the beginning of the military conflict.

Quite expectedly, this many open issues on the centennial of the First World War has led to the appearance of a large number of publications on the topic of its beginning and the causes that led to it. All these works, written in English in order, among other reasons, to reach a maximum audience, are big commercial publishing undertakings. Consequently, these are not books that are intended for the expert audience of dedicated historians, which would be published in the few journals covering this field, and which would be the topic of conferences far removed from the eyes of the media and the public. These are books which are sold in large numbers, which have to reach general readers and have a social impact far beyond the circles of dedicated professionals. This is why the authors, even if they wanted to do it differently, had no choice and needed to adapt their manner of presentation and writing style to educated non-specialists, such as the author of this review. All the books listed in this review are easy to read, they hold the reader's attention, and can almost, at least in some cases, be compared to well-penned fiction. Searching for ways to attract a wide circle of readers, i.e. to hold on to them, the authors occasionally sought analogies between events a hundred years ago and the present events. The examples used were relatively recently headline news and can hold the attention of contemporary (Western) readers, who are not so interested in, for example, the situation in Bosnia or Serbia a hundred years ago, and perhaps are unable to keep their attention for a longer period of time on anything that is not related to September 11, Al-Qaeda, Afghanistan or at least Hezbollah. Nonetheless, such an approach can hardly be accepted from a methodological point of view — therefore there are inevitably errors when value judgements are made on someone's role in the past based on common present-day value models, especially in the Western world, where the largest number of the readers of these books lives. The result is, for example, the parallel drawn between Young Bosnia and present-day Islamic fundamentalists, or the parallel between contemporary Serbia and present-day Iran, regardless of its being poorly substantiated by facts, in a situation where the media image of present-day Iran (with or without reason) is completely negative, causing, i.e. calling for such a view of Serbia from a different time.

Also, secondary historical sources are mainly used with well-known facts only being interpreted in new ways — seeking new points of view. There is no magic wand, except in the case of MacMillan, at least to some extent; there are no new documents that shed completely new light on the period a century ago. This is quite understandable — most of the mining work has been done in the past hundred years. One should be empathetic to those who are disappointed that documents have not been unearthed unambiguously blaming or exonerating any of the sides of the historical guilt, but unfortunately for them this is simply how things are and one should accept it. This is especially true since during completely unrestrained access to the Serbian archives on two occasions (1915–1918 and 1941–1944) nothing was found that would unquestionably link the Serbian authorities to the assassination in Sarajevo.

Consequently it is quite expected that present-day historiographic literature is to a great extent reduced to re-examining facts and observing them in a new light. It is interesting, however, what this new light does. Clark, for example, makes it clear that this new light consists of the things that have transpired in the meantime, especially present-day events that still occupy the attention of the general public. For instance, Clark claims that today, being aware of all the difficulties that the European Union is facing, we have far greater sympathy for the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and he also claims that following the events in Srebrenica and the siege of Sarajevo, we have far less understanding for Serbian national liberation in the early twentieth century, and it becomes more difficult to consider Serbia as the object or victim of the politics of the Great Powers. It seems that the issue of the justification of the placement of events of a hundred years ago in such a context remains open. This is supported by the fact that the same author does not offer any explanation of contemporary events, but only lists them, and, for example, he does not provide a comparative analysis of the sources of the structural problems of the European Union and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This would undoubtedly be interesting and relevant, but he stops at the declaration that today we have more sympathies for the latter. Regardless of the fact that in respect to sympathies it seems that Clark unjustifiably transformed the first person singular into the first person plural, one should point out that historiography as a science still aims to comprehend reality as it was once, and not to comprehend its values and express sympathies from the standpoint of present-day dominant values, whatever they may be.

Even more interesting is the process in which present-day events are used as a benchmark for the evaluation and even justification of past events — a process that Clark uses by comparatively analysing the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum issued to Serbia in 1914 and the so-called peace offer

(proposed agreement) in Rambouillet in 1999, and claims that terms of the issued ultimatum were more lenient.¹ Regardless of whether this is true, it has nothing in common with the nature of the 1914 ultimatum. Worst of all, such a process does not allow us to understand the behaviour of the interested parties in either case, nor do we learn anything more than the incentives that the decision makers were exposed to, especially bearing in mind that much had changed in international relations during the eight decades that separate the two events. If nothing else, we are richer for the collective experience of nearly a hundred years. And what an experience it is — the experience of world wars, the Holocaust, Nazism, Communism, in short, the darkest totalitarianism, the atomic bomb, and the world on the brink of nuclear war. Can it be that all this does not affect how each of us thinks, regardless of who it is that is making a particular decision.

Regardless of the rather loud cries surrounding it, the revision of historiography is quite a natural process. It is not necessary for new documents to be discovered — old ones can be interpreted in new alternative ways, and the question is not whether historiography is being revised, but whether such a revision will allow us to better understand the past and consequently to better understand the time that we live in and the world around us. However, in the case of the First World War the revision is specific, as Mom-bauer clearly demonstrates, since the issue of German guilt for the war had become a political issue in that country even during the war (apparently the main German participants had no illusions about their own roles or about the outcome of the war), and especially after the Treaty of Versailles and the consequently determined German war guilt, as the basis for war reparations. Since Germany was in the focus of global attention one more time during the twentieth century (this time there was no dilemma about its war guilt), the issue was raised as to whether Nazism was the natural continuance of German (primarily Prussian) militarism, or a strange aberration that occurred under extremely specific circumstances in the Weimar Republic. In fact, if Germany was not to blame for the First World War, then the thesis about the continuity of German militarism and authoritarianism loses its credibility — then Hitler would not have been part of German political tradition, but rather happened to be head of state by pure chance.

It is likely that the last great revision of historiography, i.e. the last great revolution in the interpretation of the causes of the First World War

¹ In addition to the book that is being reviewed, this comparison, for completely unknown reasons, can be found in Clark's biography of Emperor Wilhelm II. The character of the causality link between the Kaiser and the conference in Rambouillet truly remains a mystery. See Christopher Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II, A Life in Power* (Penguin Books, 2009), 304.

occurred in Germany with the Fischer controversy, since the new documents that Fischer discovered,² including the so-called September Program,³ led to scientific as well as non-scientific conflicts, primarily in the Federal (at the time western) Republic of Germany. It was not only science that was in question, as demonstrated by Mombauer, but rather the debate included categories of treason, national consciousness and all other categories that are under no circumstances part of academic debate. The reviewed books, with the exception of Hastings to a certain degree, and Fromkin in a specific manner, do not accept Fischer's original thesis, that a clear German strategy existed, i.e. a consistent political plan to place Europe under German domination⁴ through war, and in keeping with the tradition of Prussian militarism and state formation. However, this in itself does not mean that there is no German war guilt, i.e. that Germany did not want to start the war, regardless of the stated goal.

However, let us start chronologically, from the newest books, to those that were published somewhat earlier. Margaret MacMillan's book is not only the newest but is certainly the most encompassing, it is the only truly comprehensive book among those reviewed. The structure of the book corresponds to what the author sets as her goal, which is to answer the question why peace ended, not why war started. Namely, in the year that the First World War broke out Europe celebrated a hundred years of unprecedented peace (with smaller incidents such as the Crimean War and the Franco-Prussian War). It was a period of unmatched technological, economic and social progress. The book starts with this new Europe in 1900, and the Ex-

² Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag und Druckerei GmbH, 1961). Translated into English as *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2007 [1967]).

³ According to the program, one of the German war objectives was "We must create a *central European economic association* through common customs treaties, to include France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Austria-Hungary, Poland, and perhaps Italy, Sweden and Norway. This association will not have any common constitutional supreme authority and all its members will be normally equal, but in practice will be under German leadership and must stabilise Germany's economic dominance over *Mitteleuropa*", quoted Nail Ferguson, *The Pity of War 1914–1918* (London: The Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1998), 171. The title of Ferguson's chapter *The Kaiser's European Union*, although not so much the content, focuses on proving that entering the 1914 war was a strategic mistake on the part of Great Britain, indicating the possibility of similarities between the present-day EU and German war objectives in 1914.

⁴ The existence of a German war plan, better known as the Schlieffen Plan, is beyond any reasonable doubt, though in this respect there have been certain exceptions lately, although not very convincing. See Terence Zuber, *The Real German War Plan 1904–14* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2011).

position *Universelle* in Paris that year, and the author claims that the concept of playing with a zero-sum was abandoned in international relations at that time, with the dominant concept being that the sum can be increased through cooperation. However, MacMillan takes us back to the roots of that Europe, the strongest being the unification of Germany three decades earlier, as well as the absence of Bismarck and Germany's departure from his concept of partial and balanced alliances with its neighbours, primarily Russia.

MacMillan repeats in several places that war was not unavoidable and she builds the explanation why it did in fact occur by arranging pieces into a mosaic: the forming of alliances led to the establishment of a bipolar world, the world of opposed alliances that went to war. The book reviews the history of Anglo-French, Anglo-Russian, Franco-Russian and Austro-German relations. Each of the big players had their own strategic interests and the author thoroughly analyses the strategic thinking of each of them, which led precisely to such, and not some other alliances. At the same time the biggest players are playing their strategic games throughout the already globalised world, and the Anglo-Russian "big game" was played in the foothills of the Himalayas and in China, and the Anglo-French — in the Sudan, Indochina and Central Africa.

MacMillan covers all the significant international crises that preceded the outbreak of the First World War and clearly shows that war did not occur out of the blue, but rather that tensions were clearly visible. Both the first and second Moroccan crises, the Italian occupation of Libya, the annexation of Bosnia, the Balkan Wars, the Eastern Question, which was the name at the time for everything that came with the weakening and breakup of the Ottoman Empire — these are all crises that were, in present-day financial jargon, the stress-tests of peace in Europe at the time. Europe survived all the stress-tests until the assassination in Sarajevo. And had it not failed that stress-test, it probably would have failed the next one — it is quite clear from MacMillan's account.

Great attention is rightfully given to the Anglo-German naval arms race, as the likely crucial single factor that led to war, and accordingly an analysis is presented of the strategic impact of this race on what created the basis for Britain indeed opting for an alliance with France and Russia, and ultimately entering the war against Germany. MacMillan clearly shows how this coerced and needless German move led to the alienation of Great Britain, as Germany's natural ally (Germany's domination of the continent was not a threat to British maritime domination, and vice versa). And MacMillan uses this example to analyse the way the German military and political elite made (wrong) decisions. Many things are apparent in this arms race: the unclear strategic thinking, the superficial knowledge of

the other side, and the poor prediction of its reactions, huge ambition and rather erroneous reasoning.

The author has an interesting approach, which was also applied in her previous books,⁵ where history is reviewed by considering the individuals who made key decisions. Therefore we get suggestive portraits of the political and military elite of the period, such as genuine pacifist and diligent politician, French socialist Jean Jaurès, but also the not exactly perfectly balanced personality of Wilhelm II, the depression prone Helmut von Moltke the Younger (Chief of the German General Staff), or colourful, to put it mildly, Conrad von Hötzendorf (Chief of the Austrian General Staff). On all sides there was evidently a rather small breadth in thinking, a lack of inventiveness, lethargy, lack of inquisitiveness and historic irresponsibility. It is not a question of the decision makers being convinced that war would not break out, but rather their conviction that the war would be short and that the war objectives would inevitably be achieved quickly. In places where analogies with the present-day or at least subsequent events (the way that strategic decisions were taken, for example) are possible as well as necessary, unfortunately there are none (with one exception). However, the analogy with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, from the standpoint of the relations of the military and political leadership and their crucial individuals in the decision-making process — a very interesting topic — is mentioned rather superficially. Even though the decision was to primarily follow individuals, MacMillan does not hesitate to allocate guilt for the war to peoples, i.e. countries. In her opinion, to blame for the war were Austria's "mad determination" to destroy Serbia, Germany's support to Austria's war desires "to the hilt", and Russia's anxiousness to mobilise the army as soon as possible.

The book was obviously written under great pressure from the publisher that it be published at the prime time, in the year prior to the hundredth anniversary of the breakout of the war. This is why, even though the book was not written quickly, the editor's work has been carried out hastily and sloppily. That is the only explanation for mistakes such as the "European Community for Iron and Steel" (instead of European Community for Coal and Steel, p. 270), or the formulation according to which the legal council of the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs "unfortunately" (probably for those who sent him, not for historiography) did not succeed in finding any facts regarding the involvement of the Serbian government in the assassination in Sarajevo (p. 538), and that instead of Franz Joseph (who appears in the picture above the text) the Austro-Hungarian monarch was labelled as Franz Ferdinand (p. 379). However, these oversights do not

⁵ Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers, Six months that Changed the World: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End the War* (London: John Murrey, 2001).

diminish the great value of the book. The sentences are completely clear, the dynamics of the text exceptional, drawing readers to the next page, which they turn with anticipation. The First World War was not inevitable, Mac-Millan reiterates in this excellent book, it was brought about by people who did not realise what its nature would be, let alone what the consequences would be, and those who did have some idea did not have the courage to oppose the war (p. 605) — in both cases, people who were not up to challenges of the time they lived in.

The questions could be raised whether Emmerson's book should have been included in this review at all. The reason for including it was that it is an interesting supplement to central contemporary historiography. The book offers a comprehensive description of the year 1913, the last year before the war. The author moves from country to country, i.e. from city to city, describing life in different places at the time. The book provides a series of images of peace that could have lasted another hundred years — it is almost a travel guide from a distant past. However, the attentive reader of this not especially interesting or comprehensive book can notice that there is a slow but certain change in the balance of power. Even though the European countries, i.e. their metropolises, are still the centre of the world, new countries on the fringes of this centre were slowly gaining strength, i.e. other peoples were growing stronger on the wave of the so-called first globalisation. These were primarily the U.S.A., as well as other countries on the American continents, certainly Japan, the almost unnoticed Australia (*Down Under*), and China's potentials were slowly becoming apparent. Some of them, such as the U.S.A., will take Europe's place in global affairs after the exhausting war on the continent and the appearance of destructive political projects, such as Fascism and Communism. The rise of some, especially China and India, will come considerably later, and the prospects of some, such as Argentina, will become significantly darker.

In many ways Hastings' book differs from the others reviewed in this article. It is by far the closest to journalism, but the best journalism possible. There are no footnotes or references, and it includes many more personal stories "from the scene", not only about the decision makers but also about common people, who, whether they wanted to or not — felt the consequences of these decisions. It is almost like a novel about the year 1914, only both the characters and the events are real. The book is written in an elegant English language, the likes of which are slightly fading today, especially outside of the British Isles. As is the case with every novel, there are protagonists, individuals as well as peoples, good and bad, only all are tragedians — it is no wonder that the title of his book is *Catastrophe*.

Hastings has no dilemmas and moral relativism is not acceptable to him: the First World War was a war between good and evil. Evil is embodied

in Germany, in every respect. Not only is Germany guilty for the beginning of the war, but its elite started it in order to achieve German political domination over the peoples of Europe. For Hastings, as opposed to the other authors, another dilemma simply does not exist — Fischer was absolutely right. War occurred because there was a German political plan for that war. All those that fought against Germany in that war represent good.

The Serbs are given by Hastings a special place among those on the side of good, disproportionate to their military and especially economic power, and with deep respect. To the British readers Hastings explains, since he is slightly less interested in others, that the Serbs were to Austria-Hungary what the Irish were to Britain in the twentieth century. The only difference is that Britain proved to be resilient, the author adds. Hastings is the only one of the authors to show how the year 1914 and what followed it were tragic for Serbia. Specifying that one in six residents of Serbia was killed during the war, Hastings concludes that Austria did in fact succeed in punishing Serbia for the death of Franz Ferdinand. However, the price for that punishment was the self-destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In fact, the clash between Austria and Serbia, as depicted by Hastings, is a Shakespearean embrace of two enemies, neither of which can get out of it. In present-day language, the interests were so opposed to each other that no compromise could be reached. It was only later, with the wrong political decisions of the Serbian elite, that Serbs became aware of the long-term consequences of these horrific human losses that Hastings mentions.

Drina, Liège, Tannenberg, Marne, Ypres all appear as in the chapters of Hastings' novel, ending with the "the Serbs' last triumph" (the Battle of Kolubara) and what marked the end of 1914 "in the field" — life (for those that were so lucky) in the muddy trenches. It is a quite expected content for a book by a military historian such as Hastings. However, the reader might be somewhat disappointed by the treatment of the Battle of Tannenberg — there is too little material on this extremely important event. This catastrophic Russian defeat, from which the Imperial Army never recovered, brought about by the epochal incompetence and arrogance of the officers of the Imperial Army, and not by any special exceptionality of the German army, regardless of other consequences, fortified the myth of the invincibility of this army and the Prussian aristocracy, with von Hindenburg as the role model. The first myth was destroyed exactly thirty years later, relatively near Tannenberg, on the Eastern Front. The only difference is that it was no longer the Imperial Army on the other side, but rather the Red Army. And there was no armistice, like the one in 1918. The second myth was destroyed by the unobstructed political rise and survival of Nazism.

With this book Hastings proves that he is a member of the "old guard", the one that apparently is slowly disappearing. This is a man who

still believes that we can and must draw a line between good and evil, and that the attempt to understand something or someone does not mean that we should also inevitably justify them. This is a man who considers courage, commitment to ideals, loyalty and sacrifice for others to be virtues. This is a man who believes that patriotism is not passé and that freedom represents one of the pillars of the dignity of human existence. This is a man who apparently does not know the meaning of the expression “political correctness”. Hats off to him!

In his first book, of the two that are included in this review, McMeekin tries to show which is the main party guilty for the First World War, but not the only guilty party — none other than Russia. This is done from the position of the Turkish Empire and the great injustice that was done to it by breaking up the formerly powerful empire. McMeekin believes that it is precisely Russia that should be declared the main scavenger. The finger is pointed at the duplicitous Sazonov, as though duplicity in politics was a Russian invention that this empire had monopoly over. However, if Russia wanted the war so badly, what then is the explanation for the assessments by the German General Staff that it was not until after 1916 that Russia was ready for war (this is how long it took to lay railway tracks in the so-called Polish bulge). Also, what is the explanation for the catastrophic defeat of the aggressor country in the first battle of Tannenberg — usually the aggressor scores victories against the unprepared adversary in the early days of war, at least the Germans have experience in this.

This extremely unusual thesis about the sole Russian guilt for the breakout of the First World War was presented by McMeekin in this chaotically and unsystematically written book, in an attempt to defend it with confusing arguments, with the ever-present desire to distinguish in Manichaean style the evil Russia, the aggressor, and good Turkey, the victim of aggression. It seems that the Western Front did not exist for McMeekin. It is as though also non-existent was the German war plan, according to which the focus of operations was on the Western Front. It is as though the Battle of the Marne did not take place. Russia's sole guilt would be a Copernican Revolution in the perception of the causes of the First World War, and McMeekin, a young and anonymous author prior to this book, trades precisely on that fact. Proving or disproving Germany's guilt is something that is usual, it has been going on for a long time, but exclusive Russian guilt — that would certainly contribute to the publicity of the book and its author. However, one should remember that the Copernican Revolution occurred because Copernicus was right.

The author published a second book in the same year, practically a daily chronicle of the last days of peace, in which he examines things in a completely different way. There are no more evil, duplicitous, cunning and

self-confident Russians, but rather all the decision makers are now ordinary human beings, with all their limitations. One should not waste any more words on McMeekin's contribution to contemporary historiography.

Christopher Clark became the main star of the new historiographic cycle with his book *The Sleepwalkers*, which has become widely known. It is likely that one of the reasons for this is that in this book the entwining of the fields of history and international relations is quite clear, perhaps clearer than in any other of the reviewed books.

However, let's start from the beginning. Already at the very beginning of the book Clark states that the book "is concerned less with why the war happened than with how it came about." His explanation is unconvincing — he believes that the answer to the question "*why* invites us to go in search of remote and categorical causes: imperialism, nationalism, armaments, alliances, high finance," etc. It remains unclear what then should be the focus of historiography if it does not address these issues. The methodological problem is clear, independent of this: such a dissection is understandable in certain areas (the separation of procedural law and substantive law, for example), but to analytically answer the question *how*, without analysing the *why*, certainly represents nothing more than an ordinary chronology, like the one presented by McMeekin, and that is certainly not worthy of mention in a review of historiographic works. Even though Clark tones down his stance a bit later, he defends it by citing the stance of Bulgarian historian Budinov "once we pose the question 'why', guilt becomes the focal point". Things are somewhat clearer now: such a methodological procedure allows for the elegant circumventing of Fischer's thesis on the German guilt for the war, as well as the guilt of its allies, such as Bulgaria. This is why the conclusion that no one was guilty for the First World War: "The outbreak of war was a tragedy, not a crime" (p. 561).

At the very beginning of the book Clark also presents a second interesting hypothesis — the First World War was not the consequences of any long-term deterioration of international relations, "but of short-term shocks to the international system". However, the problem is that well-organised international relations are resistant to short-term shock — they are resistant to stress-tests. If short-term shocks toppled the international system, it was not resistant to such shocks, which speaks enough about its vulnerability. And things become even more absurd when at the end of the book we learn from the author what these short-term shocks were: the creation of the Albanian state, the Russian diplomatic reorientation from Sofia to Belgrade (p. 557), and of course — the shots fired in Sarajevo. In line with the stated logic the absurd conclusion follows: the reason for the slaughter at Verdun was the creation of the Albanian state. However, such a methodological approach allows the author to circumvent a serious analysis of everything that

MacMillan had analysed: the long-term changes in relations between the great powers, which led to the establishment of a system of international relations, which were so deteriorated that Europe was constantly on the brink of war. None of this exists in Clark's book. Therefore German war guilt cannot exist whatsoever. And all that under the slogan "*How, not why!*"

The greatest weakness of Clark's book is the lack of arguments for his apodictic claims, i.e. their inconvincibility, if he even presents them at all. For example, Clark says that "In any case, it was not the building of German ships after 1898 that propelled Britain into closer relations with France and Russia." Without any evidence! Not even the fact that naval domination was crucial for Britain's national security, nor the clearly demonstrated British tolerance toward the growth of the navies of distant countries (the U.S.A. and Japan), nor the thought that Britain could feel threatened by the huge modern navy not far from its shores, nor the absence of any reason for Germany's aggressive program of maritime armament — none of this fazes Clark. Germany is not guilty and that's it. There's nothing to prove there!

Even more interesting is the treatment of the famous meeting of the Imperial War Council in 1912, which authorities consider the event that confirmed Germany's aggressive war intentions, embodied in the position of so-called preventive war, before future opponents, primarily Russia, gain military strength.⁶ The key historic source on the content of the meeting is the journal entry of Admiral von Müller, the Chief of the German Imperial Naval Cabinet, practically chief of staff of the German navy. Clark claims that this meeting had no significance, and in support of this he cites the conclusion from von Müller's journal entry that the result of the meeting "amounted to almost nothing". The problem is that Clark does not even try to consider what Admiral von Müller's expectations were, and based on what criteria he made the conclusion that he entered in his journal. It is reasonable to assume that the Chief of the Imperial Naval Cabinet was interested in operational issues related to the navy preparing for war: how many new ships would be outfitted, how recruitment would increase the human potential, how the new personnel would be trained. Admirals are in fact not interested in political conclusions, but formal operational decisions related to the navy that they command. If we look at Admiral von Müller's notes in this light, it becomes clear that his lapidary conclusion was (likely) not related to the political result of the meeting, and only such a result is relevant from the point of view of historiographic analysis. This was not neglected by MacMillan, who notes in von Müller's record that von Moltke's concurred that war was unavoidable and his words "War the sooner the

⁶ See J.C.G. Röhl, "Admiral von Müller and the Approach of War, 1911–1914", *The Historical Journal* vol. 12, 651–673.

better”, and the Kaiser’s position that Germany would have to go to war against Great Britain and France together (p. 479).

The weakness of Clark’s arguments, where there are any, is a general feature of his opus. For example, in his history of Prussia one can find the claim that the Soviet authorities had greater understanding for the Prussian aristocracy than the Western allies did, differentiating between them and the Nazis, which the Western allies did not do, wanting to destroy Prussia as the cradle of German militarism.⁷ The argument supporting this claim can be found in the fact that Soviet media, unlike Western media, expressed sympathies for the conspirators who tried to eliminate Hitler, and that the Soviet authorities tried to organise German units that would fight against the German army, commended by Prussian offices, within the National Committee for a Free Germany. The only thing that Clark ignores is that this is a totalitarian government, where propaganda comes first (as is the case in their totalitarian Nazi opponent — previously ally, before the war — with the propaganda project based on General Vlasov and his Army) and which took this project to be a propaganda victory. The Western allies did not engage in propaganda, but rather in the destruction of Prussian militarism, which is why they had no need for such gestures. And the extent to which the Soviet authorities truly differentiated between Nazism and Prussian militarism, and to what extent they perceived virtues in the Prussian aristocracy, is best apparent in the ferocity with which that entire area was destroyed towards the end of the war and the tenacity with which all Prussians were forced out. Of course, none of that is important to Clark — he still believes that the Russians/Soviets saw virtue where no one else did, perhaps excluding himself. Someone had some understanding for his beloved Prussia, even if that someone was Stalin!

Clark has an interesting analysis of the transformation of the European multipolar system of alliances, which was based on the German concept of loose alliance with neighbours, into a bipolar world that led to the breakout of war. Of course, Clark is correct when he says that this bipolar system was necessary but not a sufficient condition, i.e. that it did not cause the war. He surprisingly successfully explains his view by pointing out the fact that Cold War bipolar world did not lead to a global war. Clark is correct when he explains that after Hiroshima and Nagasaki the decision makers and general public had no illusions about how a nuclear war would be conducted and what would be its consequences. In this sense Clark is correct that the decision makers in 1914 were sleepwalking. Even though

⁷ Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom, The Rise and Downfall of Prussia 1600–1947* (Allan Lane, Penguin Books, 2006), 674.

they knew they were going to war, most of the decision makers had no idea what kind of war awaited them.

The way that secondary historical sources are used in Clark's book is quite problematic. For example, Clark states, citing Bulgarian historian Teodorov, that after the First Balkan War Crown Prince Alexander toured various "Macedonian towns in the conquered areas" and spoke to "local Bulgars" in the following way. "What are you?" "Bulgarian." "You are not Bulgarian. Fuck your father."⁸ The credibility of the source is yet to be verified. Not everything that was ever published is appropriate for quotation — this is the advice to those who are preparing for a career in science, but Clark apparently does not abide by it. And the detailed recount of portions of the memoirs of a 26-year-old (therefore novice) French diplomat, Louis de Robien (pp. 433–435), on his experiences upon arriving in St. Petersburg, including his assessment of the local cuisine, is not only completely irrelevant, but is apparently supposed to serve to show that at the time Russia was a backward country and a country of Orthodox fundamentalism, in order to discredit the Russian side in 1914, especially in the eyes of the present-day more superficial readers, in whom the word fundamentalism elicits an association with Iran and some other present-day evils.

However, the question may be raised why *The Sleepwalkers*, a book with so many methodological deficiencies, has achieved such success that many people worldwide believe it to be a synonym for contemporary global historiography on the topic of the First World War. This is no coincidence; it is a very well-written book. The style is suitable, keeping the reader on edge, the right measure of connection with secondary historical sources has been made, and parallels with the present are such that it grasps the attention of the readers who are not so interested in the period a century ago — Clark is obviously an experienced author. *The Sleepwalkers* is a bad, but very well-written book — one might even say skilfully written.

Fromkin's book, even though published nearly a decade ago, has still made it into the selection for this review for its contributions to the field of international relations more than historiography, and for the very clearly expressed theses about the causes of the First World War. Fromkin points out one of the very important characteristics of the Triple Alliance, the alliance that Germany was in — the links between the allies were asymmetrical. The indubitable pillar of this alliance was Germany and its commitment to its allies was unquestionable. The other two allies, Austria and especially Italy, had less strength, military as well as economic, and were less reliable partners, i.e. with less commitment to the alliance and the obligations stemming from it.

⁸ Clark quotes (44 in chapter 5) Ivan T. Teodorov, *Balkanskite vojni (1912–1913): Istoricheski, diplomatsicheski i strategichaski ocherk* (Sofia 2007), 259–261.

The German leaders simply did not know how their allies would act when hard times came around, since they had not received a single credible signal from them regarding the acceptance of the agreed obligations. Judging that the alliance with Italy was a dead letter (time would prove that this was a good assessment) the German authorities knew that it was crucial that at least Austria-Hungary be their ally, otherwise they would be alone, between France and Russia. This is why it was crucial that they secure this alliance.

Fromkin believes that the best way for that was for Austria (Fromkin writes about Austria, not referring to Austria-Hungary, likely implicitly pointing out the asymmetry in the adoption of foreign policy and military decisions) to attack Serbia, because then it would have to seek Germany's protection from Russia, Serbia's ally, i.e. protector. This is precisely how Fromkin interprets Germany giving Austria a free hand in early July 1914, and even Germany's dissatisfaction with the slow preparations for the war against Serbia, i.e. encouragement to speed up the start of the war. Simply, the moment that Austria is at war with Serbia, because of the Russian threat there would be no thought of abandoning the alliance with Germany, which is of crucial importance for the integrity of the German Eastern Front.

From this it follows that there was a strategic conformity between Austrian and German interests. Both countries wanted war: Austria against Serbia, and it was not interested in anything else, and Germany against Russia, with a preventive war on the Western Front, so that after the defeat of France, the entire German military force could focus on Russia. Therefore the Austrian alliance on the Eastern Front was of strategic importance to Germany in the defensive phase, i.e. until France was defeated and kicked out of the game. It takes two to keep the peace, Fromkin writes, but only one to start a war — the one that wants to start it; the other side does not have much choice. He considers the First World War to be Austrian and German, however Austria wanted a local war, in accordance with its capacities.

In Fromkin's book, as well as in several others reviewed, there is testimony of one of the possible implications of the Sarajevo assassination. The victim of this assassination was a person that many believed was opposed to a war against Serbia. It appears that Franz Ferdinand was aware that Austria-Hungary could not survive a war, that it was too weak a state structure. We will probably never learn the truth about this, but as Fromkin states, at the moment when the Austrian army moved against Serbia, Austrian Chief of the General Staff Conrad von Hötzendorf admitted "Had the Archduke still been alive, he would have had me shot" (p. 302). However, he was no more.

Annika Mombauer's book is included in this review because it presents a review of the history of revision of the historiography on Germany's war guilt, clearly showing how the issue of this guilt exceeds the historiographic, i.e. academic frame. This is a serious political issue. Namely, there

probably is not a country in the world with such a heavy historical heritage as Germany. Since no one can dispute Germany's guilt for the beginning of the Second World War — this matter is quite clear — the question is raised as to the continuity of Germany's aggressive policy and militarism, rooted in the German state up to 1945, which inevitably stems from Fischer's thesis. Mombauer showed how the German academic and non-academic public reacted to the appearance of Fischer's thesis, and how it was possible that Fischer's controversy led to him being denied financial support for traveling to a series of lectures in the U.S.A. solely based on his historiographic findings, i.e. the views that he argued. This is best apparent from the excerpt from Gerhard Ritter, Fischer's main opponent, and his thesis: "...if [the war] was caused solely or primarily by the excessive political ambition of our nation..., and has recently been affirmed by some German historians, then our national historical consciousness darkens even further than has already been the case through the experiences of the Hitler times!." ⁹ Indeed, the question emerges as to what historiography should be addressing. As Mombauer writes that Ritter, feeling secure in himself, explained that "it is the task of the historian to help elevate the political image of the nation about the nation by presenting the history that this nation creates" (p. 120). Fischer obviously had a different vision of his task — the search for the truth. And this is where Fischer's superiority over his most aggressive critics emerges. In a slightly altered form, one that does not dispute Germany's war guilt, regardless of whether there was a concrete political plan before the war, this thesis survived to the time when Mombauer published her book (2002).

And at the end of this review, one should point out that the word "understand" has two different meanings. One is the meaning of comprehension of the sense, i.e. apprehension of cause and effect relationships, implying value-neutral answers to questions of why and how. I believe that it is the task of every science, including historiography, to address such "understanding", i.e. the comprehension of reality as it is, i.e. in the case of historiography — as it was. The other meaning is in the sense of justification, i.e. having understanding for someone or something. This is a matter of value judgements, which inevitably leads to the creation of a heritage of national awareness, which is so dear to Ritter, regardless of whose it is, ours or theirs. This is something that is not, or at least should not be, part of science. Unfortunately, a great portion of the works went into justifying someone or something, and not the cognition what, why and how happened exactly a hundred years ago.

⁹ Gerhard Ritter, *Der erste Weltkrieg* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1964), 138. Quoted based on Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 224.