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The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War In 1914

Reviewed Work(s)

The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War In 1914. By Christopher Clark (New York: HarperCollins, 2012. First US Edition, 2013). Pp. 736. Cloth, \$29.99.

At a Baltic port in the summer of 1912, two royal cousins, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Tsar Nicholas II, met to discuss their respective national and continental interests. By all appearances, these relatives of Queen Victoria seemed to have arrested the decline in relations between Berlin and St. Petersburg. Two years later, however, they, along with the other powers of Europe, became embroiled in a conflict of unprecedented scale and scope. When World War I finally ended on 11 November 1918, twenty million people had lost their lives. Another twenty-one million had become physically injured, and Western civilization itself had sustained a deep emotional and psychological wound from four years of total war (xxiii). Nearly a century after the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo by Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip on 28 June 1914, scholars continue to investigate and debate the origins of the catastrophe. In *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War In 1914* (2013), Cambridge University historian Christopher Clark examines the evolution and breakdown of security on the continent from the late nineteenth century to the summer of 1914. The result is a rigorously researched monograph that will be drawn on by scholars of the period for the foreseeable future.

As the First World War was a conflict of global dimensions, Clark demonstrates a full appreciation of its multiple origins within the transnational politics of Europe and the increasingly contested terrain of overseas empire in Africa and Asia. In the opening chapter, he presents a finely-tuned account of the instability between the bordering states of Austria-Hungary and Serbia – a collective cauldron of competing nationalisms and a potential flashpoint for regional conflict. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, which existed as a loose patchwork of peoples (Croats, Italians, Magyars, Serbs, Romanians, Slovenes, Ukrainians etc.), was indeed a precarious political entity at the turn of the century. In order to maintain its influence in the Balkans and its own national integrity, Vienna employed a policy of containment toward the Kingdom of Serbia and a divide, conquer, and occupy strategy toward Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite productive negotiations between Tsar Nicholas II and Emperor Franz Joseph I over the security of the Balkans at Murzsteg, Austria in the autumn of 1903, the assassination of Alexander I of Serbia several months earlier and the rise of the Serbian Radical Party spelled the beginning of a more aggressive form of Serbian nationalism. In the first part of the book, Clark's portraits of the pan-Serbian aims of Prime Minister Nikola Pasic and the Austrian militarism of Baron Conrad von Hotzendorf serve to put faces on stridently opposed ambitions.

Clark rightly calls the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908 "a turning point in Balkan geopolitics" (86). As Slavs constituted nearly fifty-percent of Austria-Hungary and Serbs comprised approximately forty-percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the decision of Vienna to absorb nationalist Belgrade sowed one of the fatal seeds of World War I. When Italy emerged victorious in a war over Libya against the declining Ottoman Empire in 1912, it inspired Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia to form the Balkan League for the purpose of eradicating Ottoman power on the peninsula. Although successful against Constantinople in the First Balkan War (1912-13), the Second Balkan War (1913), which pitted Bulgaria against its allies, wrecked the chances of total Balkan independence. As a result of the conflicts, Serbia doubled its territory, increased its population and emboldened the 'Black Hand' – a secret political organization devoted to Serbian irredentism by all necessary means - including political assassination. By the end of 1913, not only was the security of Austria in tatters but all politics in the Balkans had become de-localized. Over the next few chapters, Clark backtracks and provides a thorough analysis of the structural transformation of the European system of security in the three decades prior to the world crisis.

In 1873, Wilhelm I of Germany, Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary and Alexander II of Russia established the League of the Three Emperors in part to maintain a dialogue on the status of southeastern Europe. Five years later, however, disagreements over the volatile peninsula strained relations between the royals and dissolved the fraternity. Although subsequently resurrected for six more years (1881-1887), the League proved ineffectual and ultimately founded on intractable rivalries in the Balkans. In contrast, the Triple Alliance of Austria-Hungary, Germany and Italy (1882) brought a measure of security to the region. Yet, a pivotal diplomatic shift by the Ottoman Empire after the British invaded Egypt in the same year altered the geopolitical landscape. To offset the imperial designs of Britain, Constantinople began forging significant diplomatic and trade ties with Berlin. Clark's emphasis on the realignment and the attendant power struggle over control of the Turkish Straits, which served as a conduit for trade and influence for Britain and Germany in the East and Russia in the West, judiciously reinforces the point that the Balkans and the Bosphorus were largely regarded by the competing empires as strategically interrelated.

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Clark repeatedly references the decision of Count Leo von Caprivi (Bismarck's successor) to discontinue the defensive agreement with St. Petersburg in 1890 as a fateful moment in continental relations. Indeed, Germany was on the move. After sending a provocative congratulatory telegram to President Kruger of Transvaal (which contained a sizable German community) for repulsing a pro-British raid in southern Africa (1896), seizing a portion of the Shangtung (Shandong) Peninsula in China (1897), and personally disembarking at Tangier, Morocco on 31 March 1905 to announce his support for the Sultan against French influence, the Kaiser had signaled the beginning of a new era in the politics of empire. Conventional scholars have viewed the diplomatic realignment of the Franco-Russian Alliance (1894), the Anglo-French Entente Cordiale (1904) and the Anglo-Russian Convention (1907) as legitimate measures to mediate colonial disputes and balance German power. Clark, however, endorses the somewhat provocative view of historian Keith M. Wilson. Rather than accommodate the burgeoning German state into the international system, Great Britain expediently cast Germany as an enemy due to its potential challenge to British global hegemony (166).[1] While perhaps true to a degree, the decision of the Kaiser to employ *realpolitik* rather than diplomatic means to achieve his objectives profoundly inspired an anti-German slant in the reconfiguration of European alliances. Three years before the war, for example, France landed soldiers in Morocco in violation of the terms of the Algeciras Conference of 1906. In response, Germany dispatched the gunboat *Panther* to the port of Agadir. By contrast, Whitehall had attempted to use its diplomatic leverage as a member of the Entente Cordiale (the Anglo-French alliance) to stop the initial French deployment. Nevertheless, Clark downplays and de-emphasizes the erratic and repeated uses of force by Berlin in Africa and Asia that prompted the other European powers to take necessary diplomatic measures to forestall German encroachments – particularly on French possessions.

In the months following Agadir, relations between London and Berlin rapidly improved. Although no formal agreements were signed, conversations between the two governments diffused tensions over the Balkan Peninsula. British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey was convinced that Berlin would restrain Vienna from taking a heavy-handed approach with Serbia. Why? Only two years earlier in 1909, Austria-Hungary coerced Russia into recognizing the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by issuing an ultimatum backed by threat of war against Serbia. If Berlin had had the power to exercise a moderating influence on Vienna, it certainly did not use its leverage. Significantly, talks on the status of the Turkish Straits ran parallel to the high-stakes diplomacy on the annexation crisis of 1908-09, and these outstanding issues would propel the continent into a war beyond the imagination of all belligerents.

In Part III's "Crisis," Clark reveals an unmistakable bias. Despite portraying his work as neutral and transcendent of assigning a preponderant amount of blame to one nation or a particular actor for causing the war, the construction of his narrative largely exonerates Germany and pins most of the responsibility on Russia. As such, Clark is continuing a trend among current historians, including Niall Ferguson and Sean McMeekin, in attempting to refute the long-held view of Germany being the principal villain of the piece.[2] Along with emphasizing the stark increase in Russian defense expenditures, the massive size of the Russian army (twice the number of the German army), Russia's war plans against Germany (rather than Austria-Hungary) and calling the alliance between France and Russia "a geopolitical trigger along the Austro-Serbian frontier" (350). Clark completes his thinly-veiled indictment of St. Petersburg by casting its decision to mobilize as "momentous" instead of a logical response to deter Austrian aggression on Serbia (509). Throughout the account, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov is depicted as a duplicitous diplomat with the traits of a Machiavellian statesman. By contrast, Clark's portrayal of the Kaiser is that of an out-of-touch, temperamental figure who wished to contain the conflict between Belgrade and Vienna. In a word, Clark's etiological relocation of the crisis from West to East ultimately proves somewhat problematic, and his selection of evidence does not seem to fully support his historical renderings of either the Russian or the German leadership.

The weight of importance assigned to events in the final years before the war will surely come under scholarly scrutiny. Beyond Clark's minimization of the anti-Russian posture of the German Imperial War Council on 8 December 1912 and Germany's dispatch of General Liman von Sanders to Constantinople to bolster Turkish forces – a threat to Russia's security, his rendition of the July Crisis of 1914 will be questioned as well. For example, one week after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand (28 June 1914), documents indicate that the Kaiser gave his full support of an attack on Serbia by Austria-Hungary on at least two occasions.[3] Yet, this evidence, which Clark probably discounted as bluster, did not influence his interpretation.

Overall, Clark has offered an accomplished and thought-provoking study. Due to its density of detail, those new to the period should first read *The Origins of The First World War* (2003) by Gordon Martel and/or *The Origins of The First World War* (2010) by William Mulligan to become familiarized with the history and the historiographical debate – one that will continue to be fought by bands of collegial historians long after the one-hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the war in 2014.[4]

[1] Keith M. Wilson, who currently serves as a professor of history at the University of Leeds (UK), has published a number of works on British foreign policy prior to the First World War.

[2] See Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (New York: Penguin, 1999) and Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011). While Ferguson blames England for the catastrophe, McMeekin considers Russia as the main culprit behind the slide into war.

[3] In the German Imperial War Council on 8 December 1912, German General Helmuth Von Moltke declared "I believe a war is unavoidable and the sooner the better." According to the diary of Admiral Georg Alexander von Muller, the Kaiser agreed. After writing in the margin of a report from his Ambassador to Vienna "The Serbs must be disposed of, and that right soon!" on 30 June 1914, the Kaiser apparently told the Austrian Ambassador to Germany to seize the moment for war against Serbia six days later (5 July 1914). To review these documents, see Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Pearson, 2003), 105-106, 109-110. For scholarly accounts that assign primary blame on Germany for the outbreak of war, see John C.G. Rohl, *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile, 1900-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth Von Moltke and The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[4] Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Pearson, 2003); William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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