

The Great War: One Hundred Years Later

Douglas V. Mastriano

The Great War is fixed in collective memory as a war of rigid battle lines and trench warfare. However, it was far from so simple. It was marked by almost continuous open warfare on the Eastern Front, while the Western Front witnessed myriad phases including maneuver warfare, breakout strategies and battles of attrition. Additionally, few wars experienced so many Revolutions in Military Affairs (RMAs) entailing the employment of machineguns, airplanes, chemical warfare, and tanks. Strategic leaders were faced with a complex strategic dilemma: how to beat an ever adapting foe, and how to integrate and employ new technologies on the battlefield.

Yet, there was considerably more to this war than battlefield innovation. The First World War was a clash of empires that transformed societies, changed governments and even created new nations, such as Syria and Iraq. Despite the upheaval left behind by this terrible war, it is all but forgotten by large segments of society. Adding to this dilemma is that many of the books written about the Great War are dry histories focused on the movements of armies. Due in part to this, the First World War is an untapped subject with a potentially large audience, especially as we commemorate the centennial of this cataclysmic struggle. To fill this historiographical gap, dozens of books are being published to take advantage of a surge in interest in this often over-looked struggle. The focus of this review is to consider four of these books that address the causes and events that triggered the war.

July 1914: Countdown to War

Sean McMeekin's *July 1914* is a rare addition to the new Great War Centennial books recently published. In *July 1914*, McMeekin grapples with the diplomatic and political machinations that led to the outbreak of this tragic war in an understandable and dramatic fashion. The book begins with the fateful assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Crown Prince, Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist. From that tragic beginning, McMeekin unveils how this triggered a European political crisis that led to the outbreak of the First World War.

July 1914 literally gives a day by day description of each political move and countermove by the Europe's five great powers. McMeekin takes the reader to London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and St. Petersburg to hear the discussions, the political discourses, strategy and the hidden agendas of the Russian Czar, the French President, and the German Kaiser, the British King, the Austro-Hungarian Emperor and their chief diplomats. McMeekin personalizes these scenes with dialogues that come alive. Knowing the outcome of the July 1914 crisis, one feels frustrated at the many missed opportunities that could have averted war, while reading McMeekin's well crafted scenes.

Books Reviewed:

July 1914:

Countdown to War

By Sean McMeekin

The War That Ended Peace

By Margaret MacMillan

The Sleepwalkers:

How Europe Went to

War in 1914

By Christopher Clark

The Making of the

First World War

By Ian F.W. Beckett

COL Douglas V. Mastriano, PhD, is part of the Department of Military Strategy Plans and Operations, US Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, PA.

McMeekin also paints a chilling picture of the European political and social condition. As Europe rapidly heads on a collision course with war, two of the most important players, France and the United Kingdom were distracted by domestic events and because of this, miss the gravity of the July crisis. Throughout the month of July, the French were consumed by a sex/murder trial that reached to a former Prime Minister. Because of this, the French press and public took little note of Franz Ferdinand's assassination and even less notice of the growing political crisis that culminated in the First World War.

Meanwhile, across the channel, McMeekin tells us that the UK was consumed by Ireland and discussions related "Home Rule." Because of this, McMeekin implies that the British were slow to formulate a coherent diplomatic policy in approaching the July crisis. McMeekin also paints the British as being out of touch and pursuing a neutral approach to the troubles on the European Continent. Had the British declared a firm policy to defend the borders of Belgium early on, McMeekin implies, this would have been enough to deter German aggression. It was with this goal in mind that Czar Nicholas of Russia told the French Ambassador on July 20, "Unless she has gone out of her mind altogether, Germany will never attack Russia, France and England combined." (McMeekin, 148). Yet, the British remained circumspect and coy about their policy until it was too late.

The central theme for McMeekin's book is that Germany was not responsible for the war. He sums up this point by saying, "...far from 'willing the war,' the Germans went into it kicking and screaming as the Austrian noose snapped shut around their necks" (McMeekin, 405). He goes on to place the preponderance of the blame on Russia and its July 25, partial military mobilization order. Although this is not new scholarship, and assigning guilt for who actually started the war is up for debate, McMeekin does a fine job of making his case, although, downplaying German guilt via its "blank check" to support the Austro-Hungarians in whatever course they pursued.

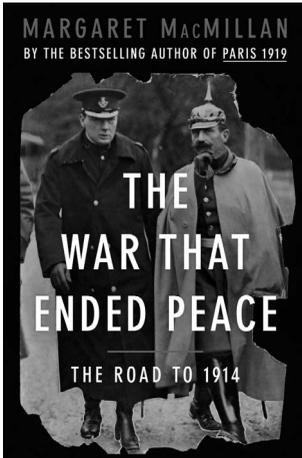
McMeekin's description of the diplomatic maneuverings is gripping and he does a superb job of making a complex confusing story understandable. Adding to this readable prose is that the book contains considerable research outside North America. One of the biggest criticisms of American scholarship is the research rarely includes documentation from European archives. McMeekin, residing in Istanbul, has used his geographic location to craft a well-researched book. However, there are some reasons for caution when reading the book. From a scholastic point of view, its weakness is the dearth of endnotes. McMeekin provides engaging dialogue between the key European leaders and diplomats throughout the book. Yet, he averages only one endnote per page. This leaves the reader wondering just how much is actual history and how much is speculation, or his filling the gaps to tell an interesting



Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (New York: Basic Books, 2013) 480 pages. \$29.99.

story. With this caution, *July 1914* is worth reading by strategic leaders who can see how domestic distractions (as in the case of the UK and France) can blind a nation to impending doom and, even more so, how personal relationships can make the difference between peace and war.

The War that Ended Peace



Margaret MacMillan, *The War that Ended Peace* (New York: Random House, 2013) 784 pages. \$35.00

Margaret MacMillan's book, *The War that Ended Peace*, is yet another attempt to understand the factors that led to the outbreak of the First World War. MacMillan's approach is rigorous and convincing as she describes the diplomatic, political, military, economic and societal environment of Europe and the United States during the decade (or more) before 1914. The book opens with the 14 April 1900 Paris Universal Exposition and the excitement that it signified for a prosperous and peaceful future. MacMillan uses this event to describe in some detail what message each national display at the expo is sending to Europe and the world. For example, we are told that the Austrian pavilion was opulent and regal, signifying the rich history of the Hapsburg dynasty,

while the German display denoted some level of exhilaration at being Europe's newest power, while, tastefully hinting at a naval rivalry with Great Britain (which would be a chief contributor to the UK's participation in the war).

The War that Ended Peace builds upon the promise and excitement of the 1900 Paris Expo to describe that much of Europe's elite viewed itself as sophisticated, believing "... that a general war was simply inconceivable in the modern world." (27) Europe's elite had every reason to embrace the idea that state-on-state war was a thing of the past on the continent as the nations were economically interdependent. Most experts at the time agreed. MacMillan drives this point home by paraphrasing a prewar writer, "... even if Europe was so foolish as to go to war, the resulting economic chaos and domestic misery would rapidly force the warring nations to negotiate peace." (634)

Yet, despite the elite's belief that war in Europe was obsolete, MacMillan brilliantly illustrates that not everything was as it seemed. Rather, imperial interests tended to clash with those of the other powers. One example is how the Austro-Hungarians sought to dominate the lands in southeastern Europe lost by the receding power of the Ottomans. Yet, the Russians would not sit idly by as the Austro-Hungarian Empire overran vast regions of Slavs, of whom Russia saw itself as the supreme protector (in addition to Moscow's obsession with securing a warm water port). Such rivalry triggered several Balkan Wars and foretold the eventuality of a larger European war.

Then, there was the rise of Imperial Germany that began in 1870. Although new to the European power game, Germany quickly snatched

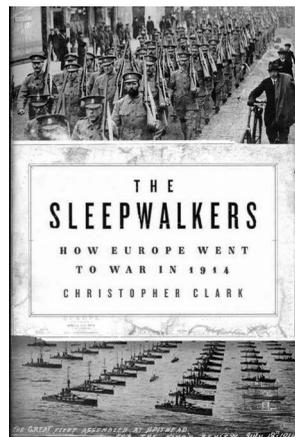
up swathes of colonial land in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. In an impressively short period of time, Germany constructed a navy seemingly destined to uproot the UK's role as the dominant seapower. Although at the pinnacle of its power, the United Kingdom felt threatened by the increasing militaristic policies of Germany as well as the bombastic rhetoric of its Kaiser. *The War That Ended Peace* describes this dilemma: "Political scientists might say that the fact Germany and Britain found themselves on the opposite sides in the Great War was foreordained, the result of the clash between a major power feeling its advantage slip away and a rising challenger. Such transitions are rarely managed peacefully" (58).

Despite such brilliant insight, MacMillan's book warrants caution. At times, the author interjects a curt paragraph attempting to compare some event or circumstance from the pre-war geo-political situation with a contemporary issue. An example is when MacMillan unconvincingly compares the Austrian response to the 1914 assassination of Franz Ferdinand with how the United States and United Kingdom responded to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The logic of such a comparison is difficult to grasp. Such attempts by the author to compare a pre-1914 event to something in modern times were unconvincing and seemingly an attempt to vent a leftist political view rather than providing relevant insight to her argument. Such forays into fancy detracted from an otherwise excellent and well-researched book. Another concern is the author tends to gloss over the ramifications of the United Kingdom's incoherent foreign policy in the crisis leading up to the war. Arguably, had the British declared early they would stand by France and not tolerate an invasion of Belgium, they would have deterred the Kaiser, as the German plan was contingent upon British neutrality. Yet, MacMillan, though willing to make illogical leaps in comparing Franz Ferdinand's assassination to 9/11, fails to provide any insight into the ramifications of British prewar diplomacy. Most scholars agree, had London declared a firm policy early in July 1914, perhaps the greater European war could have been avoided.

The Sleepwalkers

The Sleepwalkers is yet another retelling of how the European powers stumbled into the Great War. Christopher Clark does a superb job making sense of the complexities leading to the war. Simply put, Clark tells us that there is no easy explanation as to how sophisticated European leaders unleashed a torrent of carnage across the continent. Yet, *Sleepwalkers* weaves together a story of intrigue and diplomatic failures going back several decades, and helps the reader grapple with how Europe ended up in a bloody world war in 1914.

Sleepwalkers begins not in 1914 Sarajevo, as many such works do, but rather in 1903 in Belgrade where Serb military officers assassinate their king and unleash a coup. Thus, begins the road to Sarajevo. Yet, there is more to the book than trouble in the Balkans. Clark desires the reader understand the



Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012) 736 pages. \$ 29.99.

geo-strategic environment that set the conditions for the First World War. In particular, *Sleepwalkers* points to three key events that radically affected the balance of power in Europe and played the central role in setting the conditions for global conflict.

The first, according to Clark, was the German victory over France in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. The defeat motivated France to seek every opportunity to “contain” Germany. This aim, according to *Sleepwalkers*, ultimately caused the bi-polarization of Europe, with everything hinging on Russia. Early on, this delicate balance of power was brilliantly managed by Germany’s First Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, who recognized the danger inherent in a multipolar Europe operating from a bipolar point of reference. However, his retirement in 1890, combined with increasingly bombastic behavior from Kaiser Wilhelm II, put Germany in a precarious state, and prevented it from pulling Russia into its camp. Instead, France prevailed, and generously gave Russia money to modernize its army and national infrastructure with this, Paris could count on Russian help if it came to another war with Germany.

The second key event *Sleepwalkers* suggests was the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War. The war was a crushing defeat for the Czar, and blunted his ambitions in the Far East. St. Petersburg then focused its attention on the Balkans, which, according to Clark, amplified its importance in 1914.

The third key event was the 1911 Italian-Turkish War, which Rome used to wrestle Libya and other colonies from the Ottoman Empire. The war was the signal to the Balkan’s diverse ethnic groups to move against the Ottomans. Clark sees a direct correlation between the Italian-Turkish conflict and the Balkan Wars that forever changed European geopolitical strategy.

Clark brilliantly weaves together how international relations, regional conflict and the problem of the security dilemma conspired to draw Europe into a catastrophic war. His linkages to national strategy and current events are among the best of any book on the causes of the Great War. Yet, Clark goes on to demonstrate that, even on the brink of war, the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, could have prevented or contained the conflagration. However, Grey failed to demarcate British policy clearly regarding an invasion of Belgium. Clark agrees with most modern scholarship that, had Grey done so, the Germans would not have attacked France and the conflict would have been another regional conflict instead of a world war. A century later, national leaders still struggle with telegraphing clear foreign policy goals in the face of aggression. The lesson from *Sleepwalkers* is prevarication and lack of clarity when facing disturbances to the international order could cause events to rapidly spin out of control.

The Making of the First World War

The Making of the First World War does not fit well with the previous books discussed. Beckett is less concerned with the causes of the Great War, and instead focuses on the seminal events or decisions that shaped nations and societies during and after the war. Despite this divergence from the causes of the war, the book includes several chapters related to the beginnings of this cataclysmic conflict worthy of discussion.

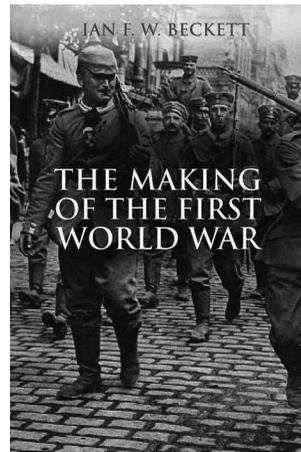
The Making of the First World War begins with a forgotten major decision in Belgium. Dubbing it a turning point of the war, Beckett brilliantly recounts the circumstances and effects of the Belgium decision to flood the Flemish plain between Nieuport and Dixmude. This act, Beckett argues, prevented the Germans from advancing to the channel ports and thereby ensured the survival of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).

Beckett's chapter on the Ottoman Empire covers an event that shaped the early half of the war. Here, the author argues the 11 June 1913 assassination of the Turkish Minister of War, Mahmud Sevek Pasha, set the conditions for the Ottomans to join the war due to the elevation of a pro-German faction in the government. Beckett then suggests this single act prolonged the war by two years by having the Ottoman Empire enter the fray on Germany's side.

The final chapter in *The Making of the First World War* related to the beginning of the conflict contends with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Focusing the discourse largely on Emperor Franz Joseph, who Beckett says, represents the legacy of his empire in many ways. Yet, despite ruling over a vast, and diverse population, Franz Joseph is portrayed quite fatalistic when he decided to lead his empire to war, saying, "If the monarchy has to perish, then it shall perish honorably" (115). Perish it did, thanks in large part to the "war-mongering" of Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, the Austrian army's Chief of Staff. Perhaps more than any member of Franz Joseph's cabinet, Hötzendorf is described as pushing the emperor into war. Beckett describes von Hötzendorf as a fanatical adherent of Social Darwinism, who zealously believed the empire would prevail due to its superior culture and education.

In the remainder of the book, Beckett does a superb job describing other transformational events or experiences that shaped various regions and nations. This includes a brilliant chapter on Australia's identity, the Russian Revolution, the Balfour Declaration and the rise of Israel, and several other interesting topics. The book, however, has its challenges. I was disappointed by the lack of academic rigor as evidenced by a dearth of endnotes, averaging only one per page. Also disappointing was the lack of more expansive international research, normally not an issue with a British author.

Compounding these deficiencies is there are too many chapters related to the United Kingdom's experience in the war (four dedicated solely to this); while there are none on France or Italy. One of the four chapters was on the impact of the "First Public Screening of *The Battle of the Somme*. Although ascetically interesting, the chapter floundered and made one wonder if there were not more significant strategic events that should have been in this book rather than this one. Furthermore, Beckett ignores the importance of the Canadian contribution and how their war experience forged a national identity arguably more than the



Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Making of the First World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). 280 pages. \$28.50

Australian experience at Gallipoli. Beckett lost a chance to discuss the Canadians at Vimy, or how they spearheaded the BEF offensive during the 100 Days Campaign of 1918. Canadian historians often assert that British writers downplay their contribution to the war, and Beckett seems to carry on that tradition by completely ignoring them.

Conclusion

The offerings arriving on the bookshelves during the Centennial of the First World War includes a mix of serious academic studies, to lighter dramatic presentations of the causes and triggers of how the struggle began. To be sure, the public has a great opportunity to grapple with the legacy of the First World War, which arguably we are still living with today. From the creation of Syria and Iraq, to the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to the application of airpower, to the mechanization of warfare, that cataclysmic experience has changed the modern world. Each of these works contributes to giving the public an opportunity to appreciate how the Great War shaped our world. It is my earnest desire that these books breathe renewed interest on both sides of the Atlantic in this important epoch of world history.