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A NEW EXPLANATION OF THE ORIGINS OF WORLD WAR I?**DISA HÅSTAD****Sverker Astrom
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The author reviews two important books which have recently been published on the origins of World War I: *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* by Cambridge University professor Christopher Clark, and *The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* by Oxford University historian Margaret MacMillan.

Key words: origins of World War I, Europe, Germany, Britain, France, Russia.

Clark, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*. London: Harper, 2013. 736 p.
MacMillan, Margaret. *The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914*. London: Random House, 2013. 784 p.

One hundred years ago Europe went to war. It was not planned as a world war. The troops would surely "be home for Christmas." But they were not. It would take nine million dead (twenty million including civilian deaths), twenty-one million wounded and the fall of four empires before the world found peace again. And then the world was utterly changed.

Was this inevitable? If not, why did Europe, more peaceful and prosperous than ever, throw all this away and launch itself into a new adventure?

Two important books have recently been published on the subject: *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* by Cambridge University professor Christopher Clark, and *The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* by Oxford University historian Margaret MacMillan. (Both writers, incidentally, come from the periphery of the conflict, Clark from Australia, MacMillan from Canada, although the latter is a descendant of one of the actors of 1914, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George).

Both books have been hailed as offering important answers, although less definite ones than former generations have given, to the difficult question of why the war started. French and Anglo-Saxon tradition has laid all the blame on German militarism. Since Germany bears responsibility for the Second World War, why not for this one? Extant scholarship often cites the heavy war reparations after World War One as the real driving force for revanchism in Germany. But do such explanations provide satisfactory answers? Less than you may think.

More recent scholarship on this debate has added a new argument: that Britain should have stayed out of the war. This is the maverick opinion of British historian Niall Ferguson, who claims that if British Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey had not thought Britain must support Belgium, threatened by German invasion, because it was the honorable thing to do, Britain could have stayed neutral, or perhaps entered the war later if it proved necessary. In the contrafactual debate of what if we have also encountered the thoughts of a Europe plodding on, the result of which would have been no humiliation of Germany, thus no Second World War, no Hitler, no annihilation of the Jews, no communist Eastern Europe maybe...

However, historians try to avoid counterfactual history (that is the privilege of my profession, journalism) even if the two books are actually full of "what ifs." What if the carriage of Archduke Franz Ferdinand had turned with the escort in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914? What if he had had the sense to break off his visit as soon as the cortege was hit the first time, before lunch? What if one man had not become the foreign minister but another who was more open, more understanding, more haughty and less likely to support insults? The temptation to see a trend of fatal decisions is of course there, particularly as we, unlike the original actors, know the outcome of events.

President John F. Kennedy is said to have been so angry by a dialogue about the origins of the Great War (as it was called until the 1940s) where German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg answers the question with: "Ah if only one knew" that he decided that all discussion in the White House should be taped so that all decisions could be traced. This decision proved fatal to his successor in office Richard M. Nixon, but that is another story.

In fact, the problem with the leadup to WWI is not that we know too little. On the contrary, we know too much. Both Clark and MacMillan discuss the abundance of sources: official letters, telegrams, white papers, history books, and numerous memoirs from surviving officials, the latter written in the hopes that the world would see their point of view and



exonerate them. The authors ascribe more propaganda than scholarly value to such works.

Out of this source base Clark builds a string of events, each one in itself maybe not decisive, but together leading to a chain of decisions where the reader suddenly realizes the impossibility of stopping the course of history. Even if the tsar had only ordered mobilization (then changed it to partial mobilization) as a threat, not for a war, the Austrians made an ultimatum to the Serbs that they could have fulfilled (if was not worse than what was asked of the Albanians at Rambouillet, says Clark). The politicians act like sleepwalkers, not seeing the consequences. This does not mean that Clark sees everyone as equally blameless or guilty. He lays the main guilt at the door of the Serbian nationalists. The murder in Sarajevo was carried out by young terrorists from the Mlada Bosna movement, young fanatics similar to modern day Al-Qaeda. Yet the government of the young and assertive Serbian state was undoubtedly behind Mlada Bosna. Prime Minister Nicola Pasic knew; the conspiracy-master Apis, Dragutin Dimitrijevic, one of the officers from the first Serbian terror act – which is the opening scene in the book, the 1903 murder of King Alexander and Queen Draga – was giving them weapons and information. Ironically, the Archduke could have bettered the lot of the Serbs and other minorities in Austria-Hungary. In fact, this was the real reason that he was killed by the conspirators: a reformer who takes away the cause of oppression is dangerous to revolutionaries.

There were other conflicts, hidden and open, in the European concert. Germany competed with Britain in naval fleet construction; Germany and France clashed over control of Morocco. Russia switched allegiances from the Bulgarians to the Serbs, which made the Austrians into eager protectors of Albanian interests. Austria did not want Serbs on the Mediterranean coast, which could give a foothold to Russia.

In MacMillan's work, she paints a picture reminiscent of a large family novel, or, if you like, a TV series like *Downton Abbey* or the *Forsythe Saga*, with a large cast of actors from the happy upper class (the lower classes are conspicuously absent), including the most important diplomats, ministers, chancellors, and presidents. All of them have the same habits and interests: card playing in the evening, sea cruises in the summer, and tranquil weekends in remote country estates. It seems only natural that in the last scenes, when the declarations of war are given, the chief protagonists, an ambassador and a foreign minister (now enemies), embrace before they separate. Some break into tears. How could it be otherwise? The three monarchs, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, and King George V of England are cousins, sharing fond childhood memories of England with Queen Victoria. They speak and write to each other in English all their lives, using the nicknames Nicky, Willy, and Georgie.

It is not immediately clear to the reader whether the Triple Alliance of the Central Powers or the Entente for the others will hold, if the protagonists really stay loyal, or where they will turn. This becomes particularly pointed in the less systematic and analytical book by MacMillan. Given the choice between the two, I would recommend Clark as the more rewarding.

The books, it must be stressed, deal with the politics that lead up to war. The peace movement is present in MacMillan, but not very enthusiastically. The Russian revolutionaries, biding their time, are not visible here.

What can we learn from these narratives? First, it is difficult to foresee events we know. Second, some nations learn from their mistakes, as has become true about the Germans, but not in the case of the Serbs, who still feel sorry and misunderstood.

Can we draw any modern-day parallels? Angela Merkel has so far made the most decisive judgment of *The Sleepwalkers*, recommending it to everyone and stating that the European Union exists to prevent precisely this kind of situation. Will she be proven right? Those who live the longest will see.

НОВАЯ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ ПРИЧИН ПЕРВОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ?

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Автор рассматривает две значимые книги, посвященные причинам Первой мировой войны, которые были опубликованы в 2013 г.: «*The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*», автор – профессор Кембриджского университета Кристофер Кларк, и «*The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914*», написанную историком из Оксфордского университета Маргарет Макмиллан.

Ключевые слова: причины Первой мировой войны, Европа, Германия, Британия, Франция, Россия.