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'The Greatest Catastrophe the World Has Seen'

R.J.W. Evans
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Did the peacebreakers of 1914 "sleepwalk" into hostilities?

Reviewed:

The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914
by Margaret MacMillan
Random House, 739 pp., $35.00

1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War
by Charles Emmerson
PublicAffairs, 526 pp., $30.00

The Russian Origins of the First World War
by Sean McMeekin
Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 324 pp., $29.95; $18.95 (paper)

July 1914: Countdown to War
by Sean McMeekin
Basic Books, 461 pp., $29.99

The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914
by Christopher Clark
Harper, 697 pp., $29.99

Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War
by Max Hastings
Knopf, 628 pp., $35.00

— See Less

June 28, 1914, Sarajevo, Bosnia. The Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the multinational Habsburg realms, resplendent in the dress uniform of an Austrian cavalry general, but also absurd in his plumed headdress, was shot at close range by Gavrilo Princip, a local student dropout obsessed with the Serbian national cause. Sarajevo was one of history's most purple passages: there was the drama of bungled security and hamfisted conspiracy; spectacle and gore; the play of intention and chance; the clash of generations and civilizations, of the old monarchical Europe and the modern terrorist cell.

But of course the Sarajevo assassination captivates posterity for its consequences. Piqued in its prestige and fearful of the threat to its status as a great power by subversion fanned from Serbia, the Austro-Hungarian government delivered an ultimatum to its obstreperous little Balkan neighbor, demanding a say in the management of its internal affairs.

Russia stepped in to protect its Serbian clients; the Germans supported their Austrian allies; the French marched to fulfill their treaty obligations to Russia; Great Britain honored its commitment to come to the aid of France. Within five weeks a great war had broken

out. At the very least, this is a gripping tale. Sean McMeekin's chronicle of these weeks in *July 1914: Countdown to War* is almost impossible to put down.

Thus was unleashed the calamitous conflict that, more than any other series of events, has shaped the world ever since; without it we can doubt that communism would have taken hold in Russia, fascism in Italy, and Nazism in Germany, or that global empires would have disintegrated so rapidly and so chaotically. A century on we still search for its causes, and very often, if possible, for people to blame. In the immediate aftermath of war that seemed clear to many: Germany, and especially its leaders, had been responsible; the Austrians too, as accomplices, in lesser degree. The Treaty of Versailles made this official, as the victorious powers there spoke of a "war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies." This was the notorious guilt clause used to justify severe "reparation" payments stretching far into the future. It was a widespread view, and ordinary Germans might have shared it if the vanquishers had not gone for the premise of collective responsibility, which undermined attempts to build a fresh German regime untainted by the past.

So Germans soon turned their hand to challenging the verdict of history. They established a Center for Study of the Question of War Guilt,[1] with its own journal (entitled simply *Die Kriegsschuldfrage*), and in five years issued forty volumes of a massive collection of sources selected to vindicate German actions. Other participants responded in kind: thirteen volumes of *British Documents on the Origins of the War*; a run of *Documents diplomatiques français* that eventually stretched to forty-one volumes; nine volumes on *Österreichs-Ungarns Außenpolitik* from the much-reduced Austrian state, in defense of its imperial predecessor's foreign policy. Meanwhile—by contrast—the new Soviet government sought to expose the iniquities of the former tsarist regime with revelations of secrets in the so-called "red archive."[2]

Progressively, however, all sides moved to a more balanced attribution of responsibility for 1914. There seemed to be a wealth of evidence that all sides had taken risks and been complicit in decisions that made war likelier. Moreover, literary witnesses, such as Robert Graves, encouraged the conclusion that the whole story was one of monstrous stupidness and futility. The first phase of reflection culminated in a long work of scholarship, published in 1942–1943, by the Italian politician and journalist Luigi Albertini. Silenced by the Fascist regime, Albertini immersed himself in all the sources, and added more of his own by arranging interviews with survivors. That lent an immediacy to his wonderfully nuanced presentation of the individuals who actually made (or ducked) the fateful decisions. Albertini's magnum opus eventually made its mark in the 1950s, when it appeared in English translation.[3] As the fiftieth anniversary of Sarajevo approached, the verdict seemed clear: the road to war, an immensely complex and protracted process, was paved with shared culpability.

At that point the learned consensus was shattered, and earlier assumptions seemed corroborated in a new perspective. The Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer issued a series of works incriminating the German side in a premeditated "bid for world power."[4] By the time of his closest examination of pre-war diplomacy, in *Krieg der Illusionen* (1969),[5] he argued that Kaiser Wilhelm II and his ministers more or less single-mindedly provoked the conflict out of a combination of expansionist ambition and a desire to distract and discipline socialists and other increasingly insubordinate elements in domestic German society. The resultant "Fischer controversy" had its roots in intellectual instabilities of the then Federal Republic of Germany, including ambivalent attitudes toward the recent National Socialist past, in its relation to the course of German history as a whole, and in a vogue for socioeconomic explanations of political behavior. In any event, it brought influential confirmation that the much-maligned drafters of the Versailles settlement might not have been so far wrong after all.

Decades of contention followed, akin to a rerun of the interwar *Kriegsschuldfrage*, or war guilt question; but like the Versailles diktat before it, the Fischer thesis has not worn well. In fact, to judge by the crop of books reviewed here, it is almost dead (lingering on in a qualified way only with Max Hastings). As we approach the centenary of Sarajevo, Albertini has triumphed. And so fully that—with one partial exception—there is a notable absence of polemic in these texts. Indeed they have much in common. Intensive mining of the sources (by the authors and sometimes their amanuenses) has unearthed nuggets of new information, but mainly they sift through the existing store of knowledge. That yields little real novelty of interpretation, but many fresh subtleties, among them the transfer of current insights into issues of cross-border terrorism and invasions of state sovereignty. (To see their relevance we need look no further than the plotting of the murder at Sarajevo and the resultant interventionist Austrian ultimatum to Serbia.)

On the other hand these accounts share a grace and eloquence of exposition, as if replicating the stylishness and civility of that pre-war world so soon to be lost in the obscenity and barbarism of the trenches. They make much allusion to the literary chronicles of that age, such as the memoirs of Stefan Zweig and Harry Kessler. And above all they tell stories of individuals: rulers, diplomats, politicians, generals. They leave us in no doubt that—for our generation at least—it's the play of personality (and mainly of personalities in high office) that signifies most in the countdown of the years and months to Armageddon.

Margaret MacMillan provides the broadest treatment. Her theme is the fall of the Concert of Europe. That loose form of diplomatic cooperation had been established just a hundred years before Sarajevo, in the aftermath of Napoleon's brief hegemony. By the start

of the twentieth century—she focuses first on the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris, which attracted 50 million visitors—the concert seemed to have fostered an age of comparative reason and humanity across the continent. As a distinguished international historian, MacMillan charts the formation and deployment of the alliances that would undermine the concert and play a fateful part in the coming of war. In equal measure, the alliances fostered both the strength and confidence of the contracting parties, but also the weakness and insecurity of the system as a whole. These were new-style bilateral and then multilateral agreements that stressed mutual military obligations, and were indeed often largely defined by such.

The core alliance agenda was set by the ambitions of the newly united imperial Germany, and by others' suspicions of it, at least once the assured hand of Bismarck gave way to the venturesome and unpredictable management of Kaiser Wilhelm II (whom MacMillan neatly characterizes as performing like an actor who secretly lacked confidence in his own role). Austria-Hungary settled into a posture broadly supportive of Germany, ordained by the existing bond between the two Central European powers: the dual monarchy was patronizingly described by some as Germany's glorious second. But republican France and tsarist Russia developed an awkward but ever more interdependent relationship, an "entente," directed against the perceived German threat and underpinned by heavy French investment in Russia's industrial transformation. Meanwhile Britain gradually shifted from isolation to guarded support for a partnership with France and Russia; whereas Italy drifted away from the German-Austrian camp to which it was formally attached.

MacMillan charts the series of resultant international crises that had a cumulative effect, among them the two Balkan Wars of 1912–1913: they tested commitments and amplified anxieties, but also fostered a sense of controlled brinkmanship. Much depended upon the "unspoken assumptions," the mental maps that made war seem acceptable, at least as a last resort; and upon the increasingly autonomous army chiefs wedded to the doctrine of the offensive, just as significant sections of the populace were seduced by war's perceived glamour, and vaunted its benefits with reference to the ideas of thinkers as diverse as Darwin, Nietzsche, and Bergson. By May 1914 President Woodrow Wilson's adviser Colonel House summarized the mood in Europe as "militarism run stark mad."

Clashes came to be concentrated in two overlapping spheres: North Africa, where the Western powers—notably France and Germany—twice, in 1905 and 1911, clashed dramatically over Morocco; and the Balkans, where in 1908 Austria-Hungary unleashed a storm by its unilateral pronouncement of the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (capital Sarajevo) against a background of regional turmoil, as the lands of the decaying Ottoman Empire began to implode and dealings

with Russia in the region grew ever more fraught. By 1913 two Balkan wars—localized but brutish—had recast borders, exacerbated tensions to the breaking point, and left the major powers staring into an abyss.

Let's pause at this point, for Charles Emmerson's book presents a remarkable anatomy of the world in that single year 1913. He casts it in the form of spirited and diverting vignettes, with lively quotations and local color. He looks at cities, and mainly at the most dynamic aspects of urban life. Emmerson's stress lies on cosmopolitan and global interconnections; but Europe was avowedly still the model and the trendsetter. So he naturally opens with the main European capitals, cunningly contrived to reflect distinctive elements of the states they represented. Thus Berlin features as a modernist "electropolis," incorporating some of the nervous posturing of its ruler; the ramshackle polity of Austria-Hungary—which encompassed much of the heart of the continent, from the Alps to the Ukrainian steppe, from the hills of Bohemia to the coasts of the Adriatic—still slowly turns in the stuttering arc of Vienna's famous giant Ferris wheel; St. Petersburg highlights the strengths and weaknesses of its autocracy in the tercentenary year of the Romanov dynasty's assumption of power.

The same technique is then elegantly employed with a string of American metropolises, from Washington in the early months of Wilson's presidency and New York (symbolized by the death of J.P. Morgan and the completion of the then-highest skyscraper, the Woolworth building), to Detroit (where the Model T production line was inaugurated in 1913) and Mexico City, still in the throes of its revolution. Likewise in Asia and Africa, where the cameos include a fascinating double portrait of Bombay and Durban as well as the convulsive attempts to reanimate two effete empires based in Constantinople and Peking.

No storm clouds darken Emmerson's horizons; but of course we can never forget (as his subtitle betrays) that 1913 was the last calendar year of peace. His is an explicitly world view: an attempt to show what would be lost, damaged, or at least redirected by a world war, a *Weltkrieg* (as the Germans would be the first to call it, though they were less exposed globally than any of the other great powers). Whereas in 1913 many different networks of peaceful international contact were a fact of life—Emmerson avers—they would afterward remain at best an aspiration.

Sean McMeekin also looks beyond the confines of Europe. In his *Russian Origins of the First World War*, he makes a trenchant argument for the Great War as essentially Russia's bid for control, not so much of the Balkans as of the whole of the Near East. It was, he contends, a "war...that absolutely everyone [in Russia] wanted." Immemorial Russian dreams of winning Constantinople and the Dardanelles Straits were now inflated by rivalry with the rising Balkan states and

menace from a revival of Turkish naval might (with the delivery of the first Ottoman dreadnought due precisely in the summer of 1914). He makes much play with the sinister double-dealing of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov and with the secret Russian army mobilization (from July 25), which he argues was designed to hasten a showdown with Austria-Hungary, whether or not Germany came to the Austrians' aid.

In places McMeekin clearly overreaches himself in a desire to gain distance from conventional assumptions, as when he dismisses wartime Flanders as a sideshow without "lasting strategic importance," or asserts that Russia had no need to fear German forces on the eastern front, so its crushing defeat at Tannenberg was just "accidental." A century later we can see the force of his claim that the Great War, "The War of the Ottoman Succession" as he calls it, reshaped the eastern Mediterranean and the west of Asia in profoundly important ways. Yet in the last phase of its gestation this was still a squarely *European* affair: even the "route to Constantinople," as a Russian staff officer put it, "runs through Vienna…and Berlin." At length the eye of the storm moved from earlier colonial contests in distant parts of the planet to Europe's own Balkan backyard on the quayside in downtown Sarajevo.

Thus the stage is set for McMeekin's other volume, *July 1914*, that "drama never surpassed," as Winston Churchill, one of its chief protagonists, later described it. Now the pugilist McMeekin gives way to the raconteur, who delivers a punchy and riveting narrative of high politics and diplomacy over the five weeks after Sarajevo, more or less day by day, dwelling on small groups of decision-makers in and between the various capitals, and their interactions, by turns measured, perplexed, cordial, artful, angry, even tearful. This account reveals McMeekin's other book as special pleading. Sazonov is no evil genius here; Russian responses exacerbated the situation, but they were not designed to provoke more than perhaps a third Balkan war.

McMeekin concludes that July 1914 witnessed a unique concatenation of events that would not have repeated itself. There were sins of omission and commission, and crass diplomatic blunders, but no chief culprit. Germany bore major responsibility at the beginning, for offering a blank check to a vengeful Austria-Hungary, and at the end, for its folly in invading Belgium (in fulfillment of Germany's long-standing strategy of a quick strike to outflank French forces). But otherwise Germany was drawn in first by the Austrians, whose inflexibility and bungling recklessness over what they regarded until far too late as merely a settling of accounts with Serbia are heavily censured by McMeekin; and then by Russia and France, whose saber-rattling premobilizations seemed to confirm the nightmare scenario of an imminent attack on two fronts.

The most consistently subtle, perspicacious, and thought-provoking of all the new books under consideration is Christopher Clark's. On the face of it he offers a thick narrative, seeking—as he tells us—the "how" rather than the "why" of a series of events so often viewed in an inculpatory mode. Clark starts with Serbia (a simple but novel ploy), and thus with the actual casus belli for the Russians in 1914, whatever their ulterior motives about the straits further south. For once we reach Sarajevo by the same route as was taken by the assassin, Gavrilo Princip, and his fellow conspirators. They were encouraged and trained in the ultranationalistic atmosphere of Belgrade amid the heady expansionism of a Serb program that targeted the archduke precisely because he had plans for reaching a compromise in the South Slav area. Clark then moves to Austria-Hungary, whose essential decency and durability he recognizes, but whose dysfunctionality in July did so much to heighten the crisis. Nicely he likens the Austrians to "hedgehogs scurrying across a highway with their eyes averted from the rushing traffic."

By the time war broke out, both Vienna and Belgrade were bit players: at the end of July the Kaiser even told his Habsburg counterpart that the Serbian border "requir[ed] only a necessary minimum of defensive measures," whereas Austria's sole game plan so far had been to cross it. Now the running had been taken over by Russia, which Clark, like McMeekin, accuses of playing a devious and risky game, and France, which saw the Balkan crisis as the best warranty that Russia would join it in a fight with Germany. The French response was hardened by hazard, by the personal factors so prominent in Clark's account. A strong nationalist, Raymond Poincaré, had just begun to revive presidential authority there, and he also happened to be paying a state visit to Russia at the crucial juncture. Once he and Sazonov had concerted their militant stance on mobilization, the Germans had to reap what they had sown. By August 1 the mainland of Europe was at war.

There remained the United Kingdom. If Britain had stayed out, would everything have been different? More realistically, if Britain had affirmed during July its readiness to fight with the Entente, would the Germans have backed down? All our authors, but particularly Clark (whose scintillating history of Prussia made waves a few years ago[6]), examine the growth of Anglo-German antagonism from the 1890s, fueled particularly by the naval arms race and by ever more entrenched mutual suspicions, often in high places (one example is the belief in some quarters that thousands of German spies were posing as waiters in the restaurants of London). Some signs of détente appeared by the eve of the conflict—at least economic and cultural relations were always marked as much by emulation as by rivalry—and Britain had won out on the construction of dreadnoughts, by dint of levying higher taxes on the population.

Then the German ultimatum to Belgium, demanding free passage of its troops, and thus threatening to infringe that country's internationally guaranteed neutrality, settled the issue. Or did it? London's policy, entrusted to the tentative grasp of the country squire Sir Edward Grey, wobbled both before and after Berlin's foolhardy démarche, and was determined at least as much by parliamentary frictions and civil disturbance at home. Perhaps only a diversion on the Continent (and this even affords some scope for a British version of the Fischer thesis) could take the heat out of the ferocious clashes over Ireland's home-rule legislation—and release troops who would otherwise have been required to keep order there.

The British decision for war was also most openly a public one. Clark has an excellent section on the modalities of power: the actions of monarchs and their advisers; of governments and their diplomatic representatives; the interlocking spheres of civil and military authority; their relations with one another and with broader opinion as represented especially by the print media. The press exercised suasion on governments. Jules Cambon, French ambassador in Berlin in 1914, could even report: "It is false that in Germany the nation is peaceful and the government is bellicose—the exact opposite is true." However, the domestic press could also be useful as a pretext for official policies determined independently of it. And decisions for war required the other side to be branded as the aggressor—a transparent but effective strategy that distorted both the diplomatic and military preliminaries. That's where Germans and Austrians played their hand very ineptly in July, by issuing bullying ultimatums and then declaring war before their armies were actually ready to fight.

So did the peacebreakers of 1914 "sleepwalk" into hostilities? Certainly the mood had become jittery, and many were psyched up to action by a succession of frustrating compromises, with the cumulative sense that it was "better now than later." The onset of war left a mass of contradictions and confusions. The bewildering implications of the structure of alliances made for strange bedfellows on one's own side, little coordination at crucial junctures, and powers set at odds—Britain and Austria for example—that had very little cause to fight each other. Troops fought officially for their sovereigns (except in the French case where they fought for the republic) and were animated in good part (including the French case) by concerns of prestige, honor, and martiality that lay in the monarchical tradition. Yet the hesitant kings of 1914 would not actually have gone to war themselves.

Then there was the immediate falsification of so many assumptions: Germans held up by Belgians, whose army had seemed puny; Austrians flung back by Serbs; Russian military superiority on the eastern front belied by the spectacular disaster of Tannenberg at German hands; the woeful French failure to penetrate their cherished lost province of Lorraine. Finally the most arrant misconception of all

came home to roost—the interconnected premises that war would be limited and short. These premises may have done most to determine a willingness to go over the brink in July, and called forth those signs of initial enthusiasm that were long much exaggerated by posterity.

By December Max Hastings's "catastrophe" had occurred; and the time frame in his book, from Sarajevo until the end of 1914, is coherent above all in this setting of pre-war expectations of how the conflict would go. "Home by Christmas" was a popular slogan. What, then, protracted the contest so cruelly? What happened to the peace movements, carefully examined by MacMillan? Why were there no serious attempts by the belligerents to find compromise, even once the extent of present and future devastation became apparent?

Most obvious is an amplification of military power once armies entered the field. In most belligerent countries martial law immediately extended to conscripts and others in war service. Censorship also soon grew rampant with the tools for savage repression of any potential dissent. Then there was a systemic factor: the ultimate malign vindication of that balance of power long so cherished by upholders of the Concert of Europe. The reckonings that had helped shape decisions for war—for example that staying out of it would leave rival powers in a position to crush prospective allies—were now so finely equilibrized that military stalemate inevitably resulted. Besides, none of the combatants had a ready exit strategy. Rather, war aims responded to the need to justify sacrifices already made. Finally there was the fact of a remarkably swift acceptance of the dictates of total war on all sides, in societies where deference to established authority remained strong.

Hastings is good on these realities of war, so little calculated in advance: the immediate economic dislocation, the distortions of armament production, and the collapse of financial certitudes (even if nonbelligerents experienced many benefits); the pillage and rapine, and the guerrilla tactics and atrocities on civilians (especially by Germans, but France and Britain were more brutal toward deserters). Everywhere military values trespassed into civilian life, which only accentuated the apparent incompetence of so many of the top brass: the melancholic Helmuth von Moltke, the blundering Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, the "poltroon" John French (who belied his name by commanding the British Expeditionary Force at arm's length from his allies). Everywhere ignorant and misleading coverage by a press starved of authentic information soon forfeited public trust. Above all, deadlock set in as offensives were abandoned, machine guns and heavy artillery emplaced to impede enemy movement, trenches dug across the western front, and navies withdrawn into frustratingly inactive defensive postures.

From 1915 new dynamics would be introduced. Alone among the books reviewed here (and despite its title), McMeekin's *Russian Origins* continues his story beyond 1914 and underlines the continuing significance of the eastern and southeastern fronts once Turkey joined the hostilities. Some of his most provocative sections document the tsarist government's incitement of its Western allies to the action at Gallipoli, and its incitement later of Armenians, and others in Anatolia and Persia, to pull Russia's own chestnuts out of the fire.

The coming years of centennial commemoration are sure to generate a library of new narratives of the whole Great War, but they will find it hard to beat Hew Strachan's superb survey, *The First World War*.[7] Strachan embraces all aspects and all fronts, and he is master of the one-line revelation—for example that Britain shipped more fodder than arms to France, or that the blockaded Germans devised over eight hundred varieties of *Ersatzwurst*, sausage substitute. But all texts that seek to convey the enormity of those times will need to be supplemented by the visual record, as in the haunting and often deeply revealing pictures in an astonishing new collection (albeit mainly of Western images) from London's Imperial War Museums.[8]

How simple it had all seemed to Gavrilo Princip on that sunny summer day in 1914! "I am not a criminal," he told his prosecutors, "because I destroyed that which was evil."[9] How much more evil had he unleashed. Still to come, after some strange and unreal local truces had been briefly implemented at Christmas 1914, were tanks and gas; air bombardments (anticipated already by German strafing of the east coast of England); an Alpine "white war" on the most merciless of all the fronts once Italy entered the fray; massacres of Armenians by Turks and Arab uprisings; the battles of the Somme and Verdun; German U-boats taking hostilities to the US—where Wilson's inaugural address in 1913 had not even mentioned international affairs; the African and Asian fronts; the revolution and prostration of many of the belligerents; 16 million killed and 20 million wounded.

Few in July 1914 could have foreseen any of this. The bustling and highly partisan Nikolai Hartwig, Russian minister in Belgrade, even applied for leave after Sarajevo as "no important events could be expected" anytime soon. However, the aloof and tentative Edward Grey, no hero in any of these accounts, did realize what was coming. Communing with nature on his country estate, for he passionately preferred live birds (he was an acknowledged expert in their observation) to the feathers on an archduke's hat, he had already reached the conclusion that "if war breaks out, it will be the greatest catastrophe the world has ever seen."

Letters:

Walter Daum

Imperialism and World War I: An Exchange

April 3, 2014

R.J.W. Evans

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1. Zentralstelle zur Erforschung der Kriegsschuldfrage. ↩
2. *Krasny Archiv*: a periodical launched in 1922. ↩
3. Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, translated and edited by Isabella M. Massey (Oxford University Press, 1952–1957, in three volumes); originally as *Le origini della guerra del 1914* (Milan: Fratelli Bocca, 1942, in three volumes). ↩
4. Especially in *Griff nach der Weltmacht: die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland, 1914–1918 (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961*); more blandly titled in English as *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (Norton, 1967). ↩
5. *Krieg der Illusionen: Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1969); in English as *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914* (Norton, 1975). ↩
6. *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Belknap Press/ Harvard University Press, 2006). ↩
7. Penguin, 2005. ↩
8. Mark Holborn and Hilary Roberts, *The Great War: A Photographic Narrative* (Knopf, 2013). ↩
9. *The Sarajevo Trial*, edited by W.A. Dolph Owings (Documentary Publications, 1984), Vol. 1, p. 54. ↩

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