

## Was Anyone Responsible for WW I – a summary review of books on the matter

By GARY D. SHEFFIELD

Was anyone responsible for the outbreak of World War I? The victorious powers of 1918 certainly thought so. The "war guilt clause" of the Treaty of Versailles blamed the conflict on "the aggression of Germany and her allies."

Yet within a few years, the allocation of guilt had gone out of fashion. In 1929, the American historian Sidney B. Fay, after an exhaustive study of the available documentation, stated: "No one country and no one man was solely, or probably even mainly, to blame." Fay's view was supported by the testimony of David Lloyd George, who had been intimately involved in the "July Crisis" and served as British prime minister in the second half of the war. In his memoirs, Lloyd George argued that the war had been a tragic accident. Following the assassination on June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, "nobody wanted war," he wrote, but European governments had "slithered over the brink."

Such views capture the zeitgeist of the interwar years. Surveying the wreckage, it was all too easy to wonder if nearly 10 million men had died unnecessarily. As the world neared and then plunged into a second, even greater, conflict, the 1914-18 war appeared futile indeed. It was judged to have been allowed to escalate from a minor incident in the Balkans into a global cataclysm and blamed on international alliances, militarism, unscrupulous arms merchants, and blundering politicians and diplomats.

This consensus was broken in 1961 by the German historian Fritz Fischer. The uncompromising German title of his first book set out his stall; World War I was caused by **"Germany's Grab for World Power"** (Griff nach der Weltmacht, translated into milder English as "Germany's Aims in the First World War"). Fischer pointed to the "War Council" of Dec. 8, 1912, where Wilhelm II and his inner circle had decided to go to war 18 months later. The assassination in Sarajevo was just an opportunity to precipitate their plans. Fischer's most explosive discovery was the 1914 "September program" that set out extensive territorial annexations to cement Germany's domination of the continent. He highlighted clear continuities between the foreign policies of Kaiser Wilhelm and of Hitler. Many Germans struggling to come to terms with World War II had turned to the Kaiserreich as the true, decent Germany. For such people, Fischer's claims, as he admitted, were "nothing short of treason."

Fischer's thesis, though often modified, became the new orthodoxy, and only very recently has a serious challenge appeared. In 2012, the Cambridge-based historian Christopher Clark published **"The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914."** He argued strongly against the allocation of blame for the outbreak of the war. In his view, all the major actors played a role: "Viewed in this light, the outbreak of war was a tragedy, not a crime." In Germany, the book became a best seller. Germans, it seems, appreciate a foreigner—Mr. Clark is Australian—telling them that their country cannot be blamed for launching the first of the world wars. Margaret MacMillan, an Oxford-based historian, was also equivocal about

apportioning the "blame" for the war in her 600-page **"The War That Ended Peace"** (2013). This return to the "no one or everyone was to blame" stance of the 1920s and '30s easily leads to the view that the war was futile, a position adopted by numerous commentators as we mark the war's centennial this year.

Yet this school of thought has failed to convince the majority of historians. While recognizing the importance of Mr. Clark's meticulous study of the background to the war, critics have pointed to the fact that he rushes through the events of the last week in July 1914—surely the most significant period of the entire prewar period. Similarly, military planning and preparedness, seen by many as essential to understanding the outbreak of war, get little attention from Mr. Clark. The most controversial of his ideas, though, is that of the sovereigns, politicians and generals of Europe collectively "sleepwalking" into catastrophe. It makes responsibility between individuals and states relative. Far from somnambulating, the key players knew all too well the paths they were traveling.

Whatever reservations one might have about Mr. Clark's broader thesis, in "The Sleepwalkers" he did a very valuable service in putting Austria-Hungary, Serbia and the Balkans back at the center of the debate and in demonstrating the immense complexity of the issues at stake. The emergence of Austria-Hungary out of Germany's shadow is one of the most significant post-Fischer historiographical developments. Shut out of its traditional spheres of influence in Italy and Germany by the creation of those nations, Austria-Hungary increasingly looked to the Balkans in the early 20th century. There the decline of the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) appeared to offer rich territorial pickings. But the Austro-Hungarians faced a rival force in the form of Balkan nationalism, centered on the resurgent state of Serbia, which aspired to create "Yugoslavia," a nation encompassing all Serbs, including the large number living under Habsburg rule in provinces like Bosnia, Croatia and Vojvodina. In the background loomed Russia, which saw itself as the protector of the South Slavic people.

In **"A Mad Catastrophe: The Outbreak of World War I and the Collapse of the Habsburg Empire"** (Basic, 440 pages, \$29.99), Geoffrey Wawro accepts German "war guilt" but makes a powerful case for sharing it with Vienna. Mr. Wawro, an American military historian, offers a picture of an Austro-Hungarian leadership that was reckless in the extreme. A fatalistic sense of "now or never" gripped men such as Emperor Franz Josef—depicted here not as a charming anachronism but as "an altogether malevolent force"—the foreign minister, Count Berchtold, and the army chief of staff, Conrad von Hötzendorf. The outrage in Sarajevo offered an opportunity to settle accounts once and for all with Serbia, suspected of being behind the crime. The decision-makers were very aware that an attack on Serbia might bring in Russia, and Vienna did not want a general war. But wishful thinking prevailed. Serbia was presented with an ultimatum designed to be rejected. When, to general surprise, the Serbs accepted nearly all the demands, Austria attacked anyway.

Out-of-control elements of the Belgrade government had certainly encouraged the assassins, and Mr. Wawro makes clear that Vienna regarded Serbia as a rogue state deserving of dismemberment. The Habsburg leadership ignored the possibility of chastisement without war. British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey offered mediation or an international

conference on no fewer than six occasions that summer. If the crisis had been internationalized in this way, it is highly likely to have resulted in Serbia being punished but also with its sovereignty left intact—and with the threat of a European war averted.

Alongside those pointing the finger of blame at this or that politician or state, there have been no shortage of writers eager to assign responsibility to long-term structural forces like imperialism, economic rivalry, militarism or arms races. Such explanations have the whiff of inevitability about them. In 1981, the German historian Wolfgang Mommsen went so far as to write an essay about "The Topos of Inevitable War in Germany in the Decade Before 1914." Such deterministic interpretations are much less in favor these days, and both Gordon Martel, in **"The Month That Changed the World: July 1914"** (Oxford, 484 pages, \$34.95), and T.G. Otte, in **"July Crisis: The World's Descent Into War"** (Cambridge, 534 pages, \$29.99), argue persuasively and at length that what individuals did during the July Crisis really mattered. These books are minute dissections of the events and the decisions that were made between the Sarajevo assassination and the outbreak of a general war on Aug. 4. Mr. Martel, a Canadian professor of history, argues that too much investigation of the origins of the war has taken place under "a dark cloud of predetermination, of profound forces having produced a situation in which war was inevitable."

Germany looms large in these discussions. It is unthinkable that Austria would have taken the path of confrontation with Serbia without the active backing of the Continent's dominant military power. This support was the result of a conscious decision taken by a tiny group of the German imperial elite, and on July 5, 1914, Wilhelm II issued what has become known to history as the "blank check" of unconditional support to Austria-Hungary. Three days later, a senior Austrian official privately wrote that there was "complete agreement" with the Germans; Serbia must be attacked "even at the risk of a world war which is not ruled out [by Berlin]." This letter, printed in Annika Mombauer's invaluable **"The Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents"** (2013), is one of many pieces of evidence that Fritz Fischer's arguments remain fundamentally sound. The belligerence of German foreign policy, the readiness of the German leadership to court war in pursuit of diplomatic objectives (in this case breaking up the "Triple Entente" of Russia, France and Britain) and its willingness to initiate an aggressive war are all Fischerite themes. John Röhl, who studied under Fischer, makes a compelling case in the recent third volume of his hugely impressive biography of Wilhelm ("Into the Abyss of War and Exile") that "the military-political discussions" of the war council of Dec. 8, 1912, "finally led to Armageddon in the summer of 1914."

Messrs. Martel and Otte are covering well-trod ground, yet they have produced distinguished and readable books that offer much detail of the failings and miscalculations of politicians, soldiers and diplomats across Europe. Mr. Martel's "The Month That Changed the World" relies on published primary sources (which are exploited very thoroughly) and secondary works, and the author makes very effective use of a day-by-day narrative approach. He has some acute insights. He notes that in 1938, during the Sudetenland Crisis, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was determined to learn from the failure in July 1914 and hold a great-power conference. This resulted in his meeting with Adolf Hitler at Munich. "Men do learn from their mistakes," Mr. Martel dryly observes; "they learn how to make new ones."

The book is rich in the traditional resources of the diplomatic historian: letters, telegrams and memoranda. Mr. Martel's conclusions are reminiscent of those of Margaret MacMillan: "War was neither premeditated nor accidental," he writes. He quite specifically states, moreover, that the leaders of 1914 "did not walk in their sleep."

Mr. Otte is particularly strong on a forensic revisiting of the sources, which he notes have tended to be played down in "the focus on impersonal forces." A historian of international relations at the University of East Anglia, he is balanced in his criticism of the Germans. While he argues that "No-one at Berlin willed war," his picture of the behavior of the kaiser and his chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, is highly unfavorable—showing them concerned time and time again that Austria-Hungary not back down even as they struggled to localize the quarrel in the Balkans. Mr. Otte denies that the German leadership had "criminal intent" but in the same paragraph notes a "recklessness that borders on the criminal. Theirs comes very close to it." The evidence presented by these and many other scholars points to the conclusion that at the very least the Germans were prepared to run the risk of a general war in order to achieve their diplomatic goals. If Russia did not receive the support of its partners, it was not unlikely that the alliance would break up.

Russian mobilization on July 30 is often seen as the act that made war inevitable, and occasionally Russia is painted as the villain of the piece. Sean McMeekin in "**The Russian Origins of the First World War**" (2011) argued that Russia's desire for Constantinople and the Turkish Straits was a prime driver for war. Much the same criticism can be directed at this notion as was leveled at Fischer's interpretation of the "September Program," which proposed the creation of a European system that Germany would dominate completely. The fact that during the war a government develops extensive war aims does not mean the state went to war to achieve them.

In the standout chapter of the essay collection "**The Outbreak of the First World War**" (Cambridge, 305 pages, \$34.99), Ronald P. Bobroff offers a nuanced study of Russia's actions in the July Crisis. Enfeebled by defeat by Japan in 1904-05 and by the subsequent abortive revolution, the Russians had perceived Germany as the major threat in economic and diplomatic spheres for some time. Failure to respond in 1914, it was believed, would have undermined Russia's status as a great power. Enough was enough. In July 1914, to quote Mr. Bobroff, "the Russians reluctantly stood their ground, because they could no longer see any alternative." France certainly urged its Russian ally to stand firm. The nightmare for Paris was that the Triple Entente would collapse, leaving France to face Germany on its own.

"**The Outbreak of the First World War**," edited by Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, is a fruitful collaboration of historians and political scientists that contains much high-class scholarship. The editors' introduction says some interesting things about the differing perspectives of the two scholarly disciplines on the subject. The four essays on preventive war—addressing the notion that Germany or Austria-Hungary or Russia was acting to smash a rising rival—for instance, give multifaceted views on a topic that was once central to the debate but that has taken a back seat of late. As have causal questions about July 1914: "A good explanation for the First World War," the editors point out, "should explain not only why war occurred in 1914, but why it did not occur before."

London, Paris and St. Petersburg had come together in a loose grouping that reflected both a fear of Germany and a desire to defuse long-running colonial rivalries. The British and French armies and navies had made joint plans, but there was no guarantee they would be honored by the British government in time of war. The ruling Liberals, led by Prime Minister H.H. Asquith, were an uneasy coalition that included men such as Winston Churchill and Sir Edward Grey, who recognized the importance to British security of supporting France in the face of German aggression, and John Burns and John Morley, who were to resign in protest at the move to war. The Welsh radical David Lloyd George was the key man in the cabinet. If he had stood out against war, Asquith's government may well have collapsed.

In the end, the maladroitness German decision to invade Belgium on August 4 persuaded Lloyd George in favor of war. The brutal attack on a small neutral state in defiance of international agreements gave the British a standard around which all parts of the population could rally. It is entirely possible that had Germany refrained from invading Belgium, Britain would have stayed out of the war.

The British historian David Stevenson neatly summed up the relationship between structure and agency: "The European peace might have been a house of cards, but someone still had to topple it." War was not inevitable; it occurred because key individuals in Austria-Hungary and Germany took conscious decisions to achieve diplomatic objectives, even at the cost of war with Russia and France. The actions of the Great Powers in limiting the damage during the previous Balkan crises strongly suggests that, had the Austrians and Germans wished, the crisis of summer 1914 could have been resolved by the international community. Serbia could have been isolated and punished but left its independence. On this occasion, however, Austria-Hungary and Germany wanted war with Serbia and accepted the risk of escalation. The War Guilt clause of the Versailles Treaty got it right: The outbreak of World War I was caused by "the aggression of Germany and her allies."

—Mr. Sheffield holds the chair of war studies at the University of Wolverhampton. His "A Short History of the First World War" will be published in October.