

Who started the First World War?

John Gittings

John Gittings' excellent book, The Glorious Art of Peace, is published by Oxford University Press (see Spokesman 118, 120). He reviews six recent works which offer some answers to an abiding question. They are listed at the end.

Early in 2014, the BBC along with most other British media decided to anticipate the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War later in the year by firing its big guns of comment, analysis, documentary and feature programmes in advance. In its online *News Magazine* (12 February 2014), the BBC posed the question: Who Started WW1? to ten leading British scholars. It was a question over which, it said, debate still ranged, citing the recent intervention by the then British education secretary Michael Gove, who had complained of the myth – which he claimed to be propagated by ‘left-wing academics’ – that the war was a ‘series of catastrophic mistakes’ (*Daily Mail*, 2 January 2014). Of the ten scholars polled, six gave their opinion that Germany with its ally Austria-Hungary was solely or principally to blame; the other four suggested that responsibility should be much more widely shared. Opinions in the first group included that of John Rohl (University of Sussex) that the war resulted from ‘a conspiracy between the governments of Germany and Austria-Hungary’ and of Annika Mombauer (Open University) that ‘the decision-makers of Austria-Hungary and Germany unleashed a war to preserve and expand their empires’, while the military historian Max Hastings said that Germany deserved most responsibility, and that the British had to intervene because a victorious Germany ‘would never afterwards have accommodated a Britain which still dominated the oceans and global financial system’. Against these views, Richard Evans (Regius professor of history at Cambridge) cited ‘the generally positive attitude of European statesmen towards war, based on

notions of honour, expectations of a swift victory, and ideas of Social Darwinism', as a significant factor. Sean McMeekin (Koc University, Istanbul) warned against the temptation 'to seek simple, satisfying answers' and judged that 'all five Great Power belligerents, along with Serbia [complicit in the original assassination of the Arch-Duke Ferdinand at Sarajevo] unleashed Armageddon'.

The six books under review here tip the balance more firmly towards the view that all the parties involved shared responsibility, with the exception of the work by Max Hastings. My own reading leads me to believe that this view represents the prevailing academic consensus today. (Regrettably, however, it seems that among the general public, the 'Germany to blame' thesis, which has been propagated by the BBC and other media, is much more widespread.) Three of these six books look at the origins of the war from a broad chronological and thematic perspective (Clark, Hastings, MacMillan), while the other three focus on the events in the immediate month or weeks before its outbreak (Martel, McMeekin, Newton). Both approaches seem to me equally valid and necessary to reach a full understanding. The perennial question 'Who Started the War?' requires a minute examination of the chain of events and decisions in those 30 days between the assassination on 28 June at Sarajevo and the first shot being fired on 28 July by Austro-Hungarian forces. (With typical insularity, British accounts often imply that the war began on 4 August when Britain declared war on Germany – hence the title '37 Days' of a successful BBC feature film shown in the anniversary year.) The larger and more interesting question of 'What Caused the War?' requires us to delve deeply into diplomatic military and political history over at least the previous decade and to look at subjective moods and assumptions among leaders, elites and public opinion in all the countries concerned. It is an immensely rich though difficult subject: these six books alone contain well over three thousand pages of text, apart from footnotes etc, but almost every page is worth reading.

By concluding that the responsibility for the start of World War One was shared by all participants, we are in effect asserting that a tragedy on this scale has a cast of tens if not hundreds of principal actors who between them have staged the play, and that it makes little or no sense to ask 'who is to blame?' Clark in his conclusion to *The Sleepwalkers* puts this very well. The problem with a blame-centred account is not just that one may blame the wrong party, but that it narrows the field of enquiry 'by focusing on the political temperament and initiatives of one particular state rather than on multilateral processes of interaction'. This approach also assumes that decision-makers always make coherent decisions and is likely to lead

to the making of ‘conspiratorial narratives’. ‘The outbreak of war in 1914,’ Clark concludes, ‘is not an Agatha Christie drama at the end of which we will discover the culprit standing over a corpse in the conservatory with a smoking pistol.’

Besides, we should be clear that the question ‘who started it?’ is by no means the same as the much broader enquiry as to ‘what caused it?’ MacMillan’s clear summary of the multiple factors which we need to consider is worth quoting at length:

For a start the arms race, rigid military plans, economic rivalry, trade wars, imperialism with its scramble for colonies, or the alliance systems dividing Europe into unfriendly camps. Ideas and emotions often crossed national boundaries: nationalism with its unsavoury riders of hatred and contempt for others; fears, of loss or revolution, of terrorists and anarchists; hopes, for change or a better world; the demands of honour and manliness which meant not backing down or appearing weak; or Social Darwinism which ranked human societies as if they were species and which promoted a faith not merely in evolution and progress but in the inevitability of struggle. And what about the role of individual nations and their motivations: the ambitions of the rising ones such as Germany or Japan; the fears of declining ones such as Great Britain; revenge for France and Russia; or the struggle for survival for Austria-Hungary?

Yet our enquiry should still begin with the narrow focus implied in the first question before broadening out to examine the underlying causes: the issue of culpability has to be addressed simply because it is the one to which so much commentary has reduced what is a far more complex subject. This is particularly true in these centenary years when, in Britain at least, this reductionism has already assumed such proportions. Far more people will have heard Jeremy Paxman, the spiky BBC interviewer, declare (in his TV series ‘Britain’s Great War’) that ‘Kaiser Wilhelm aimed to dominate all of Europe by invading both France and Russia. He also had his eyes on a chunk of the British empire’ than will have read – in any one of these books – how the Kaiser hesitated, agonised, and at least twice seized on a hint of possible peace to hold back his generals.

This reductionism is also encountered among some other academics who appear to relish the chance to demolish what they regard as ‘myths’ about the war, and particularly the ‘myth’ that everyone shared the blame. Max Hastings, the only representative of this school here – I have included him not only for balance but because his book has other merits – even refers to those holding a different view as ‘apologists’ for Germany, and he derides what he calls the ‘Blackadder take on history’. (This satirical TV

series was also blamed by Michael Gove in his egregious *Daily Mail* rant for portraying the war as ‘a series of catastrophic mistakes perpetrated by an out-of-touch elite’. Gove also targeted the malign influence of the musical *Oh What a Lovely War*, staged famously by Joan Littlewood in 1964 and later made into a film by Richard Attenborough.)

This hard-headed approach of Hastings and others, I would suggest, is part of a broader neo-revisionist tendency in the post-Cold War climate of Western scholarship to expose such alleged leftwing myths as the contention that the West shared responsibility for the Cold War itself. Douglas Newton sets out in *The Darkest Days* to confront what he calls the ‘comforting consensus’ that Britain was wholly in the right to go to war and had done everything possible to avoid it. Newton’s close examination of the lead-up to the British entry to the war focuses principally on the discussions within the Liberal cabinet under Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, but also takes into full account public opinion and outside political pressures for and against war. In doing so, Newton explicitly targets what he calls the ‘feel-good story’ that Britain did its very best to avoid war and was driven to intervene only out of ‘dire necessity’ when Germany finally invaded Belgium. While the timescale of Newton’s enquiry is the shortest of the books under review, its implications carry just as far.

Newton’s approach is by no means crudely revisionist: he is not recasting Britain as the villain of the piece, but he does seek to show that Britain suffered from many of the same destructive forces in its political culture – and feebleness of leadership – as did the other European players. ‘Britain was not especially to blame – but neither was she free from blame – when in 1914 the tragedy of war engulfed a rotten system.’ In Newton’s version of events, buttressed by a mass of detailed evidence, Britain failed to mediate effectively as a genuinely neutral power and was entrapped by a perceived need to show solidarity with its Entente partners, Russia and France, whom Britain did little or nothing to restrain.

Clark also sees the British position (or that of the pro-war leadership which prevailed) in similar terms, writing that

‘Britain accepted – or at least did not challenge – the legitimacy of a Russian strike against Austria to resolve an Austro-Serbian quarrel, and the inevitability of French support for the Russian initiative. The precise circumstances of the Austro-Serbian dispute and questions of culpability were matters of subordinate interest ...’

We should not forget that if we wind back the clock to the early days of the July crisis, the threat of war was that of a war between Austria-Hungary

and Serbia, the former bent on revenge for the assassination of the Archduke. (We might compare the determination of the US to revenge itself on Afghanistan's Taliban government after 9-11.) Russia was not obliged to intervene. When Russia mobilised and Germany stepped up its own preparations for war, the threat of war was between Russia and Serbia on the one side and Austria-Hungary and Germany on the other. France was not obliged to intervene and could have avoided entanglement by declaring its own neutrality. When it was clear that France and Germany would also go to war, Britain still had the option of neutrality – as was urged by a large body of political and public opinion. Newton's view is not based on the benefit of hindsight but was expressed by critics at the time such as the *Manchester Guardian*. After war was declared between Austria and Serbia, the paper consistently warned against the knock-on dangers of Russia joining the conflict, and denounced the pro-Russian sentiment in the Northcliffe press. On 30 July, the paper criticised Grey and Asquith for having spoken so briefly on the crisis in the House of Commons: 'Sir Edward Grey walks deliberately past opportunities for saying that we are and will be neutral in the quarrels of Europe'. The following day, the *Guardian* expressed its fears that there were secret commitments which would lead Britain to 'the ruinous madness of a share in the wicked gamble of a war between two militarist leagues on the Continent'.

Newton argues powerfully that the “‘pro-Entente’ interventionists” in the Cabinet, who included the Prime Minister and, with some waverings, Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, steered what was a pro-neutralist majority in the Cabinet towards war, frustrating their demand for a ‘credible, active diplomacy of mediation’. Fatally, the neutralists were jockeyed into what amounted to a choice for war on 2 August – in the shape of a pledge of naval assistance to France – *before* news of the German ultimatum to Belgium. Throughout the crisis Asquith and the cabinet as a whole were under pressure from the Conservative party, who ‘stood firm for intervention, with no distinction between a war in the east and the west’, and from the supporting clamour of the Tory press which called for immediate mobilisation. The navy minister Winston Churchill, although a member of the government, was regarded by the Tories as ‘their man in the Liberal Cabinet’. More than once he acted without Cabinet authorisation, in particular on 28 July when he encouraged hard-liners by publicly ordering the British Fleet to be concentrated ready for deployment. Powerful voices in the Foreign Office and the military as well had ‘urged British military intervention from the very first days of the crisis’. Domestic politics were also a hidden factor: there was an implicit, and

sometimes explicit threat that if the Cabinet neutralists resigned en masse, the Government would fall or be forced to go into coalition with the pro-war Tories, anyhow.

Newton's emphasis on the strength (but ultimate weakness) of anti-war opinion in the run-up to 4 August is shared by other writers, again reminding us that it is not naïve leftwing revisionism to believe that other choices were available. These sentiments should be seen in the context of the strong current of pro-peace public opinion in many European countries in the late 19th century and the first decade of the 20th. Though the term 'pacifist' was coined at this time to describe such arguments (in a rather more limited sense than it later acquired), they were based on a clear realisation that modern technology and organisation meant that any major war would be a disaster for the winners as well the losers. Martel, in his wide-ranging prologue to *The Month that Changed the World*, sets this out in detail, quoting from hugely popular books such as Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* and Ivan Bloch's *Is War Now Impossible?* War could no longer be considered a rational policy, Bloch argued: the consequences of war in future would be 'not fighting, but famine, not the slaying of men, but the bankruptcy of nations and the breakup of the whole social organisation'.

And when the war did break out, thoughtful opinion in many quarters knew full well that the prospect was appalling. Max Hastings (who, when not arguing polemically the case for German blame, offers some useful insights) quotes *The Economist*. It warned that 'Since last week millions of men have been drawn from the field and the factory to slay one another by order of the warlords of Europe. It is perhaps the greatest tragedy of human history', and predicted 'a social upheaval, a tremendous upheaval [as] the certain consequence'. The legend that Europe welcomed the conflict, Hastings concludes, 'is today heavily qualified, if not discredited'. In Germany, as MacMillan records, working-class sentiment against war was strong and three quarters of a million marched in demonstrations for peace during the week before the war broke out. Newton gives a vivid account of the huge anti-war demonstration in Trafalgar Square on Sunday 2 August – an event which for readers today evokes more recent scenes of protest there.

Photographic evidence shows that the crowd was a mixture of middle-class and working-class men and women, with some children too. The hats worn advertised the broad alliance of classes: straw hats, boaters, bowlers, soft hats, and cloth caps. The speakers crowded together on their plinths, flanked by the great bronze lions, under ominously darkening skies. A thunderstorm was brewing.

The demonstrations were meant to be the first in a series and brought together both radicals and socialists, as did similar events around the country. Newton believes that if the neutralist forces had been given more time there was potentially a deep well of public support on which to draw. The movement for neutrality, he writes, was not a last-minute surge of anti-war sentiment, but was based on years of warning by Radical and Labour critics ‘against the danger of Britain’s entanglement in war by secret diplomacy’.

When we consider both the long-term argument for peace, as it had developed in the peace societies from the mid-19th century onwards, leading to two international peace conferences at The Hague, and the first agreement for arbitration of disputes between states, coupled with the more immediate and widespread opposition to a European war and fears of its terrible consequences, we may reasonably wonder why Europe’s leaders did not back off in the summer of 1914. MacMillan puts the issue very well. Very little in history is inevitable, she writes, and European leaders had choices to make: a general war ‘could have been avoided up to the last moment on 4 August when the British finally decided to come in’. As well as factors pushing Europe towards war there are other factors, which we should not neglect, pulling towards peace. Perhaps the real question to be asked, MacMillan suggests, is not why did the war break out, but why did the peace not continue, ‘why did the forces pushing towards peace – and they were strong ones – not prevail?’

There is a striking degree of consensus today on the issues raised by this enquiry. Most academic opinion (excepting Hastings in this selection) has moved away from the unicausal explanation – Germany was to blame – associated in modern scholarship with the work of Fritz Fischer which dominated the debate in the 1960s and ’70s. The result of this, McMeekin observes, had been that ‘many historians nearly forgot about the other powers in their zeal to unearth evidence of plotting in Berlin’. (Fischer himself, as Newton points out, ‘did not imagine that those in the Kaiser’s circle were solely to blame for the European catastrophe’.) We have also moved on from the A J P Taylor thesis – again often simplified at second hand – that, ultimately, the war was caused by the inflexibility of timetables for military mobilisation once they had been set in motion.

Individuals did matter. ‘It was Europe’s and the world’s tragedy,’ writes MacMillan, ‘that none of the key players in 1914 were great and imaginative leaders who had the courage to stand out against the pressures building up for war.’ The three imperial cousins of Britain, Germany and Russia played their solo unhelpful parts: all, writes Hastings, were ‘wild

cards in the doom game' – although the Kaiser was the wildest of all. MacMillan deplores 'a failure of imagination in not seeing how destructive such a conflict would be and second, their lack of courage to stand up to those who said there was no choice left but to go to war'. Martel shows that as late as 28 July, the major powers were 'extraordinarily close to peace', but the chance was missed. The Russian mobilisation tipped the balance of argument in Berlin towards war. In Britain, the neutralists in the cabinet hesitated to force a political crisis by publicly resigning. Martel argues strongly against the pre-determinist approach of some historians. War was not inevitable, he insists. 'It was the choices that men made during those fateful days that plunged the world into a war.'

Clark devotes a significant section of his book to 'the many voices of European policy-making', asking who governed in each country and how the balance lay between hawks and doves, soldiers and civilians. In another recent book which deserves reading (*The Lost History of 1914: How the Great War Was Not Inevitable*) Jack Beatty argues that personalities and what happened to them could be 'history changing'. If, for example, the wife of France's Minister of Finance, Madame Caillaux, had not caused a national scandal by shooting dead the editor of *Le Figaro* in March 1914, Joseph Caillaux would have become premier in July and his foreign minister would have been the socialist and passionate anti-militarist Jean Jaurès. Historical inevitability, says Beatty, 'is a doctrine for history without people'. Finally, and still controversially, if Lloyd George had remained in the neutralist (and until the end majority) faction within the British cabinet, a very different decision might have been made on 4 August. Chance played a part in other ways, too. After all, as MacMillan writes, 'during previous crises, some as bad as the one of 1914, Europe had not gone over the edge'. If Austria this time had taken punitive action against Serbia within days instead of dithering for weeks, Russia might not have widened the war and the German hawks would have not had time to manoeuvre for a wider war. Even at the last moment, Clark suggests, if the German army had simply 'barged through the south of Belgium', instead of issuing an ultimatum to Brussels which was bound to lead to rejection and resistance, the issue of 'gallant little Belgium' would have had less influence.

The contention for imperial power is also seen as a primary source of de-stabilisation in the long run-up to the war, and particularly in fuelling German resentment. Clark describes this very well: British policy-makers 'proceeded from the assumption that whereas British imperial interests were 'vital' and 'essential', German ones were a mere 'luxury', the

energetic pursuit of which must be construed as a provocation by other powers'. Germany by contrast 'showed both the insecurities and the ambitions of a rising world power'. Whenever Germany tried to take territory overseas, MacMillan notes, 'Britain invariably appeared to raise objections'. As Hastings puts it, 'Only Britain and France favoured maintenance of the status quo abroad, because their own imperial ambitions were sated. Others chafed.'

Altough the great alliance blocs seemed solid by the time of the war, their formation had been arbitrary and might well have assumed a different shape. During the decade 1894-1905, Clark observes, it was Russia rather than Germany that posed the most significant long-term threat to British interests, and the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 was driven not by hostility to Germany, but by the perceived need to tame the traditional Russian foe. 'Allegiances were not set in stone', writes Hastings, 'they wavered, flickered, shifted.' Britain in 1905 still had contingency plans to fight France, and in 1912 Austria toyed with the idea of a rapprochement with Russia.

We are also reminded that an appetite for war and the hysteria which it could arouse lay not far below the surface of the generally harmonious European power system. MacMillan recalls headlines in the French press during the 1898 Fashoda crisis: 'No Surrender to England', and there was talk on both sides of the Channel about the possibility of war. In the Dogger Bank incident of 1904 when the Russian fleet mistakenly fired on some British fishing boats, the British foreign secretary warned that 'we might find ourselves at war before the week was over'. Clark tells us that the Agadir crisis of 1911 'was allowed to escalate to the point where it seemed that a western-European war was imminent'. Less observed in the same year, Clark notes that Italy's unprovoked war of conquest in Libya (driven by imperialist appetite pure and simple) triggered 'a chain of opportunist assaults on Ottoman territories across the Balkans' which both de-stabilised and focused attention of both power blocs on a region which till then had seemed of secondary interest, with fatal consequences three years later.

Germany's challenge to British naval supremacy, often presented as evidence of a singular expansionist ambition, is also put into more rational context. The Germans, writes Clark, 'had ample reason to believe that they would not be taken seriously unless they acquired a credible naval weapon'. In the end, Germany 'lost the naval race hands down' in part because it slowed down the dreadnought-building programme, as McMeekin observes, in order not to over-antagonise Britain. According to

MacMillan, ‘in the two decades before 1914, overall defence spending took up approximately 40 per cent of the British government expenditure, a higher proportion than in any other of the great powers ...’ However, there is no doubt that the alleged threat of Germany’s naval challenge (we may compare the various Soviet ‘missile threats’ of the Cold War) contributed to a rise of anti-German hostility in Britain where naval equality would never be tolerated. If Germany secured an Atlantic port at Agadir, Lloyd George warned during that crisis, Britain would face the surrender of its ‘international pre-eminence’, and ‘peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable for a great nation like ours to endure’.

There is consensus, too, that the Russian preparations to mobilise in the last week of July were crucial in ensuring that ‘the looming conflict would not be confined to the Balkans’ (Hastings), and that the order for full mobilisation was ‘the decision for European war’ (McMeekin). It might have been unpalatable for Russia to stand by and watch Austria crush Serbia, but that would surely have been preferable to stoking a European war of whose terrible consequences the wavering Tsar Nicholas was well aware. The fact that Germany would subsequently use the fact of prior Russian mobilisation to justify all the war measures that it then took does not detract from this reality.

Indeed, the principal actors appear to have already lost a sense of perspective in the critical month leading up to the war’s outbreak. ‘As the great alliance blocs prepared for war’, Clark observes, ‘the intricate chain of events that had sparked the conflagration was swiftly lost from view.’ It was remembered only by a few voices persisting in the argument for peace, while patriotism, spontaneous or forced, dominated the popular discourse in all the combatant countries. More insidiously, it was argued then and still is today that even if other choices and decisions could have been made which might have averted this war, it would have made little difference. Sooner or later, it is claimed, Germany was bound to come into conflict with those European powers who opposed its expansionist designs. This over-determinist approach seeks to render irrelevant the ‘what if’ or counter-factual questions which we can usefully ask. (What if, asks Newton, Grey had ‘put both the Russian and French ambassadors in London under real pressure on the issue of Russia’s early mobilisation?’) Yet the view that German militarism would have provoked a European war at a later date is open to challenge. As McMeekin argues, Moltke and his fellow military hawks ‘had pushed for such a war before 1914, too, without success. Moltke was not sovereign of Germany; he was not even her chancellor.’ The truth is that we just do not know how things might

have turned out otherwise in the absence of war, but we are entitled to suspect that the outcome could hardly have been worse and in all likelihood would have been a very greater deal better.

What we do know, concludes Martel, ‘is how those in positions of authority made the choices that produced unprecedented suffering and upheaval. The tragic era that followed can be explained only by their hubris, combined with chance and circumstance.’ Perhaps the most fatal flaw was the conviction of all the leadership elites that ‘they could not appear to be weak in the eyes of the others’. Newton’s verdict is more trenchant: ‘the descent into war revealed the ignominious collapse of essential elements of the old order’. Whatever our conclusion, in the year 2014 we should surely heed MacMillan’s warning:

‘It is easy to throw up one’s hands and say the Great War was inevitable but that is dangerous thinking, especially in a time like our own which in some ways, not all, resembles that vanished world of the years before 1914.’

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Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, Penguin, 2013, 736 pages, ISBN 9780141027821, paperback, £10.99; Max Hastings, *Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War, 1914*, Collins, 2014, 672 pages, ISBN 9780007519743, paperback, £9.99; Margaret Macmillan, *The War that Ended Peace: How Europe abandoned peace for the First World War*, Profile, 2014, 704 pages, ISBN 9781846682735, paperback, £9.99; Gordon Martel, *The Month that Changed the World, July 1914*, OUP, 2014, 484 pages, ISBN: 9780199665389, hardback, £22; Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War*, Ikon Books, 2014, 560 pages, ISBN: 9781848316577, paperback, £9.99; Douglas Newton, *The Darkest Days: The Truth behind Britain’s Rush to War, 1914*, Verso, 2014, 386 pages, ISBN 9781781683607, hardback, £20.