

WWI: How Europe *nearly* devoured itself

Just over 100 years ago, in July and August 1914, events unfolded which are known at least in outline by anyone the least bit familiar with world history. But before the first shot was fired of what soon would be called the Great War, and later the First World War, there was the death of a family man and his wife. This family man, though, was heir to an empire, and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Este set in motion a series of events which would lead to the first truly worldwide war and bring about the near collapse of white civilization. Here, THE BARNES REVIEW attempts to unravel the knot of circumstances surrounding the tragic beginning of World War I with the aid of a magisterial new book by Christopher Clark called *The Sleepwalkers*.

By Ronald L. Ray

INTRODUCTION

How does one explain a world war? Is it possible to do so in the face of its enormity and complexity? If we attempt it, can we avoid the trite, the bombastic and the just plain stupid and wrong? Dare a single human being even to elucidate the history of those events and actions which conspired, so to speak, towards the inception of a global conflagration? These are the thoughts which trouble us as we set out upon the task.

Every war is prepared. Such a massive movement of men and arms into deadly conflict with other men of belligerent intentions does not occur with the spontaneity of a barroom brawl. Likewise, every historical essay of value begins with investigative research into the factuality of events, before looking for their causes. For us, that effort has been made simpler by a new, one-volume history on how Europe entered into World War I—one which, for the first time, also

gives Westerners a view into contemporary documentation previously available only in Slavic languages.

Christopher Clark is a fellow and professor of modern European history at St. Catharine's College, Cambridge University, in Great Britain. He previously authored three books on the history of Prussia. Now he has turned his efforts to the massive task of explicating *how* an entire continent went to war in 1914. As Clark himself notes, this is fundamentally different from writing about *why*. The latter question often has the motive of assigning blame, which can color one's interpretation of events. By exploring the question of "how," the author may be able to free himself from some of his prejudices, so that, in the end, a more truthful view of "why" emerges. Such an approach may also allow the reader to recognize historical parallels to current events and learn from the past, in order not to repeat it.

In the case of the First World War, the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, was merely the catalyst, not the cause, of military hostilities. Many people in the early 20th century, at least in governing circles, had for several years been of the feeling that a major war would be "un-



avoidable” in the near future. This certainly skewed their thinking and responses to international events.

But was a continental war—soon a world war—really inevitable? Could not other reasonable choices have been made? To answer these questions, we must look at origins. Where, though, does it all begin?

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

It is an intriguing fact of World War I that neither of the initial antagonists, the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary and the Kingdom of Serbia, were major players in the conflict, once it had ceased to be merely a “local” war. Not a single nation involved in the massacre of tens of millions of human beings can be said to be without blame. So how did it all come about?

Perhaps it begins with the Ottoman empire, the remnants of which continue today in Turkey. But in the 19th century, Ottoman rule extended from the Balkan peninsula, across the Dardanelles and Levant, through much of the Middle East, and into Egypt and Libya. It was, however, an empire in decline, whose territories were being nibbled at by numerous other nations. And once the Jewish Freemasons known as the Young Turks took over the empire, things entered into free fall.

Bloodiest Battle(s) of WWI . . .

The bloodiest battle, or set of battles, of World War I was the “100 Days Offensive” at the end of the war. The Allies launched a series of attacks on the western front from Aug. 8 to Nov. 11, 1918. There were over 2 million casualties. It began with the Battle of Amiens, a surprise attack using vast fleets of tanks, in which the Germans lost some 30,000 killed, wounded or missing, while on the Entente side there were 22,200. Altogether in the “100 Days” the Central Powers had 785,733 killed or wounded, 386,342 taken prisoner, for a total of 1,172,075; France had 531,000 k/w/p, the British empire 411,636 and the U.S. 127,000, for a total of some 1,070,000. Above, British machinegunners with gas masks at the First Battle of the Somme in 1916.

The Ottomans had, for all their Islamic opposition to the Christians, been a geopolitical force for stability for some time. Their presence checked the regional ambitions of other countries, but no longer. The previous system of European alliances, establishing checks and balances on imperialistic endeavors, began to come unglued. European colonialist expansion, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean where the Ottomans were retreating, dis-

rupted the previous stability, leading to a dangerous realignment of interests and forces among the European “Great Powers.” The Ottoman decline was the *sine qua non* without which events could not so easily have developed toward a continental war.

ITALY

Or perhaps it begins with the Kingdom of Italy.

It seems stunning, in retrospect, how intense were the colonialist ambitions of any number of European governments, and even of the United States of America. Today, it is no different, of course, but the harsh, mercantilist exploitation of the darker races (and whites, too) and their lands now has to be couched in high-sounding words like “democracy” and “nation-building.” But in those former days, it was simply a matter of a country with superior military capability saying: “We want it. We can take it. It’s ours.”

Of course, this meant that European Great Power conflicts between Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia were often fought on the periphery of “civilization.” This led to a false sense of security, into the pool of which Italy dropped a sizable stone by invading and rather incompetently conquering Libya in 1911. Faced with intense poverty in the populous southern provinces, Italian rulers decided an African colony was just the thing to solve the problem and make Italy a “great” power.

Germany and Austria-Hungary, which comprised with Italy the Triple Alliance, attempted in vain to warn the Southern Mediterranean country of the dangers which would arise in the South Slavic regions. In part, this was because the powers of the Entente (France, Russia and later Great Britain) were encouraging Italy’s overseas adventurism and infidelity towards the Alliance partners.

Seeing the weakness of the Ottoman response, the Balkan and Adriatic nations launched a number of opportunistic attacks on the northwest reaches of the Islamic empire. The resulting Balkan wars of 1912-1913 saw Serbia and Bulgaria, in particular, increase their territory significantly. For the former, it was a significant step toward establishing “Greater Serbia” throughout the Balkan peninsula, wherever Serbs lived. It was also a new and unsettling security threat to Austria-Hungary’s southeastern extremities.

It did not help that Italy was an uncertain ally of Austria-Hungary and Germany, and was secretly aligning itself increasingly with France and Great Britain. Prof. Clark believes, quite reasonably, that Italy’s haphazard African imperialism and European diplomatic double game are in fact what most destabilized the delicate balance among the Great Powers and led to a rapid shift in political align-

ments, which soon hardened into increasingly militaristic alliances across Europe.

Seen from this standpoint, Italy’s actions likewise were a *sine qua non*, but even more the remote efficient cause of World War I.

SERBIA

Or maybe it all really does begin with Serbia.

The modern state of Serbia is of relatively recent origin, arising only in 1817 after separate coup attempts against the Ottoman overlords by two highly nationalistic leaders, “Kara Djordje” (“Black George”) Petrovic and Milos Obrenovic. After Milos became the suffragan prince of Serbia under the Ottoman empire, a great hostility developed between the Karadjordjevic and Obrenovic dynasties. Prince Milan Obrenovic declared himself king in 1882.

The Serbians, though, possessed three significant faults: a powerful national mythology originating in the Middle Ages, which drove irredentist pan-Serbianism; a fair amount of societal instability due to rampant governmental corruption; and slightly unhinged, overly autocratic rulers, whose primary social trait seemed to be to make themselves hated by their own people.

On June 11, 1903, however, a major shift in Balkan politics occurred, when King Alexandar and Queen Draga were murdered in a most violent and shameful manner by a conspiracy of Serbian army officers, led by Lt. Dragutin Dimitrijevic. This young man was utterly ruthless and a mesmerizing leader who exercised nearly hypnotic control over his associates. Later, Dimitrijevic would be given a nickname from Egyptian mythology: Apis. [See page 31 for more.—Ed.] And it was Apis who would be the kingpin in the plot to assassinate Franz Ferdinand a decade later.

The assassination was the end of the short-lived Obrenovic dynasty. A provisional government was established, and Petar Karadjordjevic was called back from Switzerland by Parliament to be elected king. For the Serbian people, this seemed to augur well. King Petar was clearly of a more liberal bent, being something of a scholar on the theories of John Stuart Mill. Petar promised to reign as merely a constitutional monarch.

On the other hand, while the Obrenovic kings were Austrophiles, the new government tilted clearly toward fellow Slavs in Russia, viewing Austria-Hungary as the “oppressor” of fellow Serbs in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and what would become Armenia. This resulted in part from Austria’s politically necessary annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908, accomplished with the consent of the Russian government. The unexpected result was popular Slavic outrage, creating a foreign policy



ITALY ATTACKS: Author Christopher Clark believes that Italy's attack on the Ottoman province of Tripolitania (what would become Italian Libya) was one of the most important yet overlooked causes of World War I for a variety of reasons. Above, Lt. Giulio Gavotti drops one of his "bombs" on Ottoman forces on Nov. 1, 1911. (In reality, he dropped four basically ineffective grenades from about 300 feet in the air.) This incident is alleged to be the first time that an explosive device was dropped on an enemy from the air in the history of warfare. According to accounts, the Turks were so enraged about the incident, they called for an international investigation, believing the attack was "indiscriminate."

PICTURE: PICTUREDESK/NEWSCOM

crisis for the dual monarchy, which needed nearly all of its resources to maintain the fragile internal unity of the multinational Habsburg crown lands and provide some modicum of social improvements.

Moreover, the 120-150 conspirators in the regicide, who had shocked most of the world with their barbarity, did not go away. Having tasted the drug of political power, they became addicted; and neither king nor prime minister could control them sufficiently. In fact, one Austrian official described the new monarch as a political "nullity."¹

Serbians (at least the men) of that time were fanatical in their enthusiasm for similarly fanatical secret societies, which often met and recruited in coffeehouses. They dreamt of a pan-Serbian state across much of the Balkan peninsula. "Where a Serb dwells, there is Serbia."² Naturally, this upset the neighboring countries and ethnic groups, particularly Bulgaria, which had slightly imperialistic ambitions of its own. So long as Austria-Hungary could play the two competitors against each other, some

regional stability could be preserved. That effort collapsed in 1912-1913, during the Balkan wars. It also had been undermined by two Serbian nationalist secret societies.

One was the Serbian National Defense (SND), which arose due to the Bosnian annexation crisis in 1908. Though partially suppressed, it continued limited agitation and propaganda activities. The other was the infamous "Black Hand," a revolutionary and terroristic Freemasonic society, whose utterly ruthless members swore to take their dark secrets to the grave. The Black Hand was founded on March 3, 1911, about the time Italy annexed Libya. Its unscrupulous irredentist program was revealed by its Serbian name, which means "Union or Death!"

Apis was a key player here—perhaps *the* key player, as in the assassination of King Alexander. By 1913, he had been appointed head of intelligence for the Serbian military's general staff, from whence he was able to oversee activities of the SND and Black Hand, funnel weapons to other Black Hand members attempting to consolidate po-

litical control at home, and undermine the relatively benevolent Austrian rule in Bosnia. Ultimately, it was Apis who directed the assassination plot against Franz Ferdinand, although Austrian investigations never could penetrate that far into the murky world of Serbian intrigue. The Austrians were morally certain that the Serbian government was involved in the killing, but without clear documentary or physical evidence, they were unwilling to state publicly that the Serbian kingdom was directly responsible when they declared war some weeks later. If they could have found the Apis connection, they certainly would not have issued the carefully worded statements that have been twisted falsely by others, who suggest that Austria-Hungary had exonerated the Serbian government and simply wanted a pretext for war.

It should likewise be stated that Franz Ferdinand was not targeted because of any hostility to Serbia or Bosnia. Quite to the contrary, he was a known Slavophile and social reformer who pioneered efforts to provide more autonomy for the various ethnic nationalities and accompanying imperial administrative changes throughout Habsburg domains, much to the chagrin of the wily and somewhat paranoid Hungarian political establishment. Prof. Clark notes, “The targeting of the archduke thus exemplified one abiding strand in the logic of terrorist movements, namely that reformers and moderates are more to be feared than outright enemies and hardliners.”³ The imperial heir’s political goals threatened to take the wind out of the Black Hand’s violent revolutionary agenda.

THE GREAT POWERS

Space does not allow us to cover in detail the frequently self-contradictory and variable foreign policies of Russia, France, Great Britain, Germany and Austria-Hungary—all of which are covered in minute and revealing detail in *The Sleepwalkers*. Here, at least, is a short summary of the trends which developed in the early 1900s, meant to give our readers a small portrait of the incredible wealth of information in Prof. Clark’s book.

The propaganda of the victorious powers has attempted to portray Germany and Austria-Hungary as power-mad, tin-pot dictatorships, oppressing their peoples at home and seeking world empire without. Clark, at least, has the courage to contradict these lies.

Of all the participants in World War I, Austria-Hungary is the most misunderstood. Afflicted by the mounting ten-

sions of a multi-ethnic state in a time of rising nationalism, the government’s primary goal was to maintain peace with other nations and among their own. But prosperity was not evenly distributed in the empire, with the highly successful German Austrians subsidizing a fair majority of the realms. While the Habsburg rulers sought to implement significant social and political reforms, they were hampered by external and internal enemies. The Hungarian ruling classes, in particular, expressed an extreme “entitlement mentality” and hampered change. While every Great Power country had its war faction, in the dual monarchy it was most opposed by the emperor and the heir apparent. Only in seeming final necessity did Emperor Franz Josef sign a declaration of war against Serbia.

Germany’s Second Reich was a young empire, fiercely opposed by nearly all except the weaker Austria-Hungary. But the nation was very limited in its colonial ambitions and typically sought to act as a peacemaker in Europe, wishing to avoid a nearly unwinnable two-front war. Still, the ribbons-and-medals-loving Wilhelm II often introduced a fair amount of uncertainty into German foreign policy with his changing moods. Eventually, the militaristic types gained the ascendancy, but as a reaction to external hos-

“Emperor Wilhelm II was always conscious of his duties to God and chose war with reluctance—even though champagne apparently was drunk by some to celebrate its outbreak.”

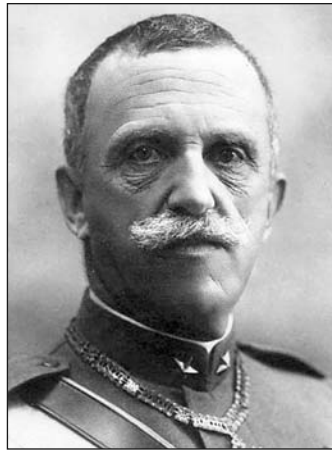
tility. Nevertheless, the emperor was always conscious of his duties to God and chose war with reluctance—even though champagne apparently was drunk by some to celebrate its outbreak.

Great Britain, in Clark’s account, seems most to have waffled in its foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the Triple Alliance and the Franco-Russian Entente. This was due in part to its traditional paranoid efforts to neutralize any continental power in the ascendancy. In the end, this appeared to be Germany, and the liberal imperialists, like Sir Edward Grey, Herbert Asquith and the young Winston Churchill were able to impose their aggressive Germanophobic domination on policy decisions.

While Clark seems reluctant to assign blame, the facts he relates appear to indicate clearly that socialist, republican France was a—possibly *the*—primary driving force impelling the continent toward war in the early 20th century. Prime Minister (later president) Raymond Poincare



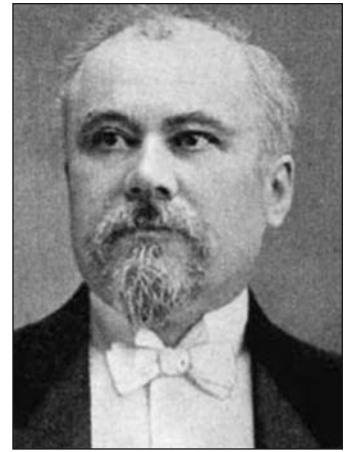
SULTAN MEHMET V
Leader of the Ottomans.



KING VICTOR EMMANUEL
King of Italy during WWI.



KING ALEXANDAR I
Serbian king killed in 1903.



RAYMOND POINCARE
France out for revenge?

is the epitome of this, whose views can be summarized by his fanatical, nearly hysterical hatred of, and desire for revenge against, Germany after the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 1870.

The militaristic French and their wealthy banks were bent on annihilating Germany, sparing no efforts to cajole, threaten or militarily supply other nations in order to eliminate the perceived enemy. They most promoted war and were the ones who finally helped drive Czar Nicholas II and the Russian empire toward a similarly warlike stance against Germany and Austria-Hungary.

For Mother Russia, there were also the motives of pan-Slavism and the Austro-Hungarian “threat” to her Serbian “children.” When the empire’s efforts to seek more *Lebensraum* in the East collapsed, after humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), the shift of foreign policy to the western frontier, including a port on the Bosphorus, sealed the fate of Austria-Hungary. And thanks to French intrigues, non-confrontational Germany became an “enemy,” too.

CONCLUSION

Once again, we are presented with a wealth of historical information that no 3,000 words ever made can summarize. We hope this tiny foretaste will inspire our readers to explore the more than 600 pages of intensely researched details in *The Sleepwalkers*. Prof. Clark provides much previously unknown information and many fascinating anecdotes, whether about the famous “Nicky,” “Willy” and “Georgie” letters or Sigmund Freud’s surprising reaction to the outbreak of war. You will want to know the seemingly surreal way in which events moved toward a continental conflagration. Find out who rejoiced, who had a nervous breakdown—and even what country’s minister surpris-

ingly was found weeping at his desk when war came.

Clark’s new book is not without its prejudices, though. The author seems rather too much the anti-monarchist republican, overly convinced that democratic political structures can bring peace and security for all. Of course, this might be understandable when confronted with the personal foibles and weaknesses of the royal relatives of Queen Victoria. Perhaps too tellingly, the historian steers clear of the machinations of the Rothschild banking empire’s Zionist and communist branches. He avoids, as well, the revolutionary efforts of Jewish-sponsored Freemasonry to bring down the Christian, particularly Catholic, monarchies and social order through the Grand Lodge of England and the Grand Orient of France, by means of imperialistic democracy and internationalist socialism. Nevertheless, Clark’s work is a new and compelling, fair and necessary investigation of how Europe went to war in 1914. World War I destroyed millions of lives and dragged nearly the entire civilized world over the precipice into the abyss of society-destroying revolution.

We feel the effects of that leap into internationalism yet today and must learn from the past—the real past, not victors’ history—if we are to return to a saner way of life. To this end, *The Sleepwalkers* is an indispensable weapon in the arsenal. Buy it today. (See page 33 for an ad.) ♦

ENDNOTES:

- 1 Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 15.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

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