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Sleepwalkers Review

Christopher Clark’s *Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* is a story about the events and opportunities, many of them not taken, which led to the breakout of the First World War. The book is a vast historiographical work that examines the multitude of possibilities, changes, and decisions in Europe during this time period that transformed the possibility of the occurrence of the First World War into an inevitability. Clark presents his work in a way that is blameless, and without a teleological approach to understanding the events that led to the war. He writes, “This book thus strives to understand the July Crisis of 1914 as a modern event, the most complex of modern times, perhaps of any time so far. It is concerned less with why the war happened than with how it came about”[[1]](#footnote-1).

The book is divided into 3 parts. It begins with the regicide of Serbian king Alexander and his wife in 1903. This is an important event because that act was perpetrated by some of the same men who were influential in the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand some 11 years later. The Archduke’s assassination would be one of the leading causes of the First World War because of its ensuing ramifications.

This part of the book primarily seeks to refocus or sharpen the reader’s knowledge of what is often considered the spark that started the First World War. A particular focus was upon the rise of Serbian nationalism and Irredentism, the sentiment from an ethnic group to retake ‘lost’ land, especially after the 1908 annexation of Bosnia by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Clark writes that the annexation of Bosnia was a tipping point for many, “The announcement created an ‘unparalleled outburst of resentment and national enthusiasm’, both in Belgrade and the provinces”[[2]](#footnote-2). Clark depicts the Balkans as an area of great political tension at this point in time. The Austro- Hungarian Empire had occupied many of the provinces on the Balkan Peninsula for some years by this time and their presence only added to the controversy and feelings of injustice[[3]](#footnote-3).

The second part of the book examines the alliances of Europe in the years leading up to the war. Specifically, this section covers the many ententes and treaties created between the world powers at this time, as well as the political objectives and biases held by many of the political leaders. An aspect that was given particular attention in this section, was the difficulty by which foreign policy decisions were made. Clark writes, “Policy-making was not the prerogative of single sovereign individuals. Initiatives with a bearing on the course of a country’s policy could and did emanate from quite peripheral locations in the political structure. Factional alignments, functional frictions, within government, economic or financial constraints and the volatile chemistry of public opinion all exerted a constantly varying pressure on decision-making processes”[[4]](#footnote-4). Clark devotes a section of the book to examining the influence of various monarchs in foreign policy-making. Clark notes here that as a whole, the political power of the monarchs was in a period of waning and that far more policy making force was in the hands of the foreign policy ministers of the governments. Clark uses George V as an example here, writing, “George never acquired a political network to rival his father’s, refrained from backstairs intrigue and avoided expounding policy without the explicit permission of his minister. He was in more or less constant communication with Edward Grey and granted the foreign secretary office frequent audiences whenever he was in London”[[5]](#footnote-5). This passage exemplifies the reliance of many monarchs upon their foreign ministers and advisors, which assists in indicating the complexity of the decision making processes that went in to foreign policy at this time.

The last part of the book is about the last days before the declaration of war in August of 1914. This part of the book focuses on the policies and decisions that made the war impossible to avoid. The Germans stuck to their policy of “localization”. The German foreign ministry believed that there would be enough international sympathy for the Austro-Hungarian Empire if they declared war on Serbia in the 37 days immediately following the assassination of the Archduke. The Austrian government was advised by some senior German commanders to “beat the Serbs and then make peace quickly”[[6]](#footnote-6). Here one can clearly see how the books examines ‘how’ the war happened rather than striving to answer ‘why’ it happened. The Germans believed that even though the Russians, English, and French had various alliances between them, they would not be eager to go to war. This period of history was characterized by uneasy relations and uncertain reactions. This can be seen from Wilhelm’s reaction in this paragraph, “Wilhelm was thus shocked to learn, on the morning of 30 July, of a conversation between Grey and the German ambassador, Prince Lichnowsky, in which the former had warned that whereas Britain would stand aside if the conflict remained confined to Austria, Serbia, and Russia, it would intervene on the side of the entente if Germany and France were to become involved”[[7]](#footnote-7). Clark describes the unfolding of the events without pointing fingers to any one government as the perpetrator. Instead he shows the complexity of the decisions that led to the war and how it was not by any means a foregone conclusion. Clark writes, “There is no smoking gun in this story; or, rather, there is one in the hands of every major character”[[8]](#footnote-8).

Christopher Clark is a professor of modern European history at the University of Cambridge. Clark draws from a array of sources including personal letters, documents, and memoirs. Clark notes here that many of his sources contain “tendentious omissions”, especially when written after the war[[9]](#footnote-9). Sleepwalkers received significant attention in Germany after its publication because of the way it challenged the general ideas behind the perpetrators of World War 1. However, Sleepwalkers is by no means without critique. Many critiques of Clark’s work suggest that the description of Europe's nations as sleepwalkers is unfitting. Even highlighting Clarks own words of, “ the key decision makers- kings, emperors, foreign ministers, ambassadors, military officials, and a host of lesser officials- walked towards danger in watchful, calculated steps” which sounds like the furthest thing from sleepwalking[[10]](#footnote-10).

Christopher Clark’s *Sleepwalkers* depicts the world around 1900 as being one of the most complex periods in history. The Europe described is this work is one of extreme interconnectedness, and dependency. Communication between ambassadors in many nations, the rise of the media, and the ease of travel verify Charles Emmerson's quote, “In a world made smaller by the distance-destroying innovations of technology, and made more integrated by the flow of goods, money and people, it was inevitable that Europe, the engine room of these developments, would be most densely interconnected, criss-crossed by railway lines and telegraph wires”[[11]](#footnote-11).  The world of 1900 could also be viewed as the waning of the monarchy. Emmerson writing about the meeting of the Tsar, the Kaiser and the King at a royal wedding in 1913 writes, “the presence of the three rulers confirmed, perhaps, the value of monarchy as a conciliatory, if waning, force in European politics”[[12]](#footnote-12). A local newspaper was cited as saying, “When great potentates who are near relatives can meet in public and give full rein to their natural affection, it is always legitimate to assume that the political horizon is clear”[[13]](#footnote-13). The writer of that newspaper article could not have been more wrong.

Bibliography

1. Clark, Christopher M. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013.
2. Emmerson, Charles. *1913: In Search of the World before the Great War*. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2014.

1. Cristopher Clark, Sleepwalkers, xxvii [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Clark, 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Clark, 73 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Clark, 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Clark, 175 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Clark, 517 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Clark, 529 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Clark, 561 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Clark, xxii [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Clark, xxvii [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Charles Emmerson, 1913, 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Emmerson, 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Emmerson, 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)