**Behind the Storm**

**Was World War I the outcome of elite machinations?**Tara Zahra is professor of history at the University of Chicago and Berthold Leibinger Fellow at the American Academy.

As Europe’s great powers mobilized their armies in August 1914, many of their citizens and subjects were in denial. They were convinced that war had died out—at least among the “civilized” nations of Europe. “War is declared! Up to the last minute I would not believe it…. I thought that in our day and generation disputes were settled…without bloodshed,” wrote one observer. During World War II, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig recalled that at the onset of the previous conflict, “People no more believed in the possibility of barbaric relapses, such as wars between the nations of Europe, than they believed in ghosts or witches.”

When war came on August 4, the most common metaphor used by Europeans to describe it was that of a natural disaster. It was a “terrible storm,” a “bolt from the blue,” a “flash of lightning,” a “tempest,” a “peal of thunder,” a “volcano on which we have slumbered for years,” an “avalanche that could not be halted”—images that evoked the shock of the event and its seemingly unstoppable nature. Whatever its form, the force that spoiled the summer vacations of middle-class Europeans in 1914 also “ended the peace” to which they had become accustomed and ushered in a century of unprecedented mass slaughter on European soil. On August 4, 1914, Rudyard Kipling remarked in his diary, “Incidentally, Armageddon begins.” Four years later, 65 million people had been mobilized, 8.5 million killed, 21 million wounded, and untold others psychologically maimed or destroyed.

What caused Europe to immolate itself? World War I, after all, was neither an avalanche nor a tempest but a ghastly man-made disaster. The question of responsibility has preoccupied Europe, and its historians, since the war began, and the identification of culprits has also varied over time, running the gamut from German militarism to reckless diplomacy, the faceless forces of imperialism and nationalism, and ideologies like social Darwinism. The debate has never been purely academic. Disagreement over the causes of World War I profoundly shaped the subsequent course of European and world history, most immediately through the Treaty of Versailles and its infamous “war guilt clause,” which assigned sole blame to the Germans and exacted severe reparations in retaliation. Both provisions were bitterly resented by many Germans, and their anger helped to fuel the Nazis’ rise to power and Europe’s second descent into hell in 1939.

Not surprisingly, the approaching centenary of the fateful summer of 1914 has elicited new reflections on the war’s causes. While the current crop of books on the outbreak of the war offer a range of perspectives, they tend, on balance, to find blood primarily on the hands of Europe’s “Great Men,” a small cabal of diplomats, kings, military leaders and their advisers. In her highly readable *The War That Ended Peace*, Margaret MacMillan concludes that “the decisions that took Europe into that war—or failed to prevent it—were made by a surprisingly small number, and those men—few women played a role—came largely but not entirely from the upper classes, whether the landed aristocracy or the urban plutocracy.” Christopher Clark’s *The Sleepwalkers* likewise locates the causes of the war in the decision-making of key individuals rather than broad categorical forces. In *Dance of the Furies*, written from the very different perspective of social history, Michael S. Neiberg comes to similar conclusions yet holds responsible an even smaller circle of men: “the elites in Berlin and Austria (and to a lesser extent St. Petersburg) were the only ones who truly did want war” that summer. “War broke out because a select group of perhaps a dozen men willed it or stumbled incompetently around a situation that they thought they could control until it was too late to stop the machinery they had set in motion.”

MacMillan, Clark and Neiberg all blame “Great Men” for the war, and all assume that such an approach can offer an accurate account of the forces that propelled Europe to war in 1914. In several respects, their arguments are compelling and convincing. National loyalties, after all, were not the only or overriding influence on politics at the turn of the twentieth century—to the extent that ordinary Europeans cared about politics at all. “A focus on nationality at the expense of other sources of identity clouds our understanding of the war,” Neiberg argues. “To be sure, people of European nations came together in the face of a common threat, but they did not stop being socialists, farmers, Catholics, or members of the middle class even as they did so.” The nationalist hatreds routinely associated with the war years, he claims, “were an effect, not a cause, of the outbreak of war.”

This interpretation also offers a more optimistic portrait of Europeans (and human nature generally) than other accounts of Europe on the eve of war. Contrary to popular images, most Europeans were not rabid nationalists hankering for a blood feud. In fact, they were mostly rather indifferent to the news from Sarajevo that June about the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb and member of the revolutionary Black Hand movement. Ultimately, ordinary Europeans were victims of a war that no one wanted but in which everyone suffered.

The focus on diplomatic decision-making also accords well with historians’ desire to challenge teleological thinking and to emphasize human agency. Accordingly, all three books tend to eschew structural explanations and to emphasize that war was not inevitable. Down to the last days and hours before the first shots were fired, individual decisions could have averted the worst-case scenario.

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Clark’s view of diplomacy is complex. He stresses that the “executive structures from which policies emerged were far from unified” and that “policy-making was not the prerogative of single sovereign individuals,” but he still tries to pinpoint the individual decisions that ultimately took Europe over the brink. MacMillan is also determined to challenge the notion that war was inevitable, but by focusing on the question of why peace failed. She insists, “There is a danger in so concentrating on the factors pushing Europe towards war that we may neglect those pulling the other way, towards peace.” These included the forces of globalization and economic interdependence, a growing international peace movement, socialist internationalism, the success of the diplomatic mediation in averting previous crises, and a general faith in civilization and progress.

And yet the search for agency in high places does tend to exonerate the vast majority of Europeans of culpability for the war. This focus on elite responsibility is surprising in part because recent historiography, particularly by French scholars, has emphasized that a popular and violent “culture of war” existed in Europe on the eve of the conflict. It included many (though certainly not all) “ordinary people” as well as elites. Austrians melted down their wedding bands and donated the precious metal to be used in armaments for the fatherland; German socialists voted for war bonds (however reluctantly); Berliners denounced their neighbors as spies. In France, a woman was acquitted of infanticide on the grounds that the father of the child she was carrying was allegedly a *Boche*. The fetus was fated to become a monster, according to the eugenicist and racist thinking of the time, and its mother had committed an act of national defense by eliminating it.

Memoirs abound with stories of the spirit of 1914. Ernst Toller rushed to enlist in the German army in August 1914 and witnessed a disturbing scene in Munich: “Someone heard two women speaking French, and they were immediately surrounded and set upon. They protested that they were Germans, but it did not avail them in the least; with torn clothes, disheveled hair and bleeding faces they were taken off by the police.” What explained this atmosphere? “We were living in a state of emotional delirium,” Toller recalled. “The words ‘German,’ ‘Fatherland,’ ‘War’ had a magic power, and when we uttered them they did not die away but seemed to soar, dazzling in the air above us, intoxicating us.” He spent thirteen devastating months on the Western front and was transformed by the experience into a Communist.

This culture of war afflicted children as well as adults. Raimund Pretzel (the German journalist better known by his pseudonym Sebastian Haffner) recalled that as a 7-year-old, he knew within days of mobilization that “the war was due to France’s lust for revenge, England’s commercial envy, and Russia’s barbarism.” While his father “belonged to the many liberal spirits of his generation who had secretly been convinced that war among Europeans was a thing of the past,” Pretzel became, in his own words, “a fanatical jingoist and armchair warrior.” Even liberal spirits like Sigmund Freud and Thomas Mann were caught up in the moment. Freud wrote in his diary that “for the first time in thirty years I feel myself to be an Austrian and feel like giving this not very hopeful empire another chance,” while Mann fantasized that the war would “end the rotten old world with which we were fed up.” In other words, many Europeans believed that war would make the world—and the men who fought it—better rather than worse.

The swell of popular enthusiasm for war in August 1914 seems to contradict Neiberg’s claim that it had few supporters outside Europe’s cabinet rooms. Yet he argues that the enthusiasm for war was short-lived, and also that Europeans were basically duped. Support for the war effort, he maintains, was a product of the popular conviction that the war was “a justifiable, defensive struggle against an aggressive enemy,” and that it would be successful and short. He may be right on both counts, but the question remains: Why were so many Europeans so gullible? Neiberg blames a jingoistic press and the speed with which the mobilization took place. But surely deeper prejudices must have primed Europeans to believe in the mortal threat posed by “hereditary enemies.”

The argument that World War I was the outcome of elite machinations tends to overlook or slight the impact of mass politics on European political culture in the decades leading up to the conflict. A more persuasive and complete view of the war’s outbreak would have to account for the broader political and cultural forces that led elite decision-makers to choose war over peace. Otherwise, one risks underestimating the extent to which political elites were shaped by their societies. In the effort to avoid “teleology” and imbue historical subjects with agency, one cannot neglect the broader structural factors—political, social and cultural—that color individual decisions. Even Europe’s most conservative monarchies—the Russian, Austrian and German empires—were hotbeds of mass politics in the first decade of the twentieth century, dominated by an imperialist and militarist mass culture, nationalist pressure groups and a strong belief in social Darwinism. Without exaggerating the degree of democratic accountability in these empires (the German military, notoriously, was answerable only to itself), no leader in Europe was completely insulated from popular opinion or popular culture in 1914.

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The notion of World War I as a senseless war, divorced from popular or real political interests, also rests on a longstanding view of Eastern Europe and the Balkans as inherently unworthy of European engagement. “To the rest of Europe the Balkan states were something of a joke,” MacMillan quips—but it is hard to escape the impression that for her, too, the Balkans are just that. Similarly, Neiberg claims that one of the chief factors militating against war in 1914 was that no one in Europe cared a whit about the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, a city that few people could locate on a map. MacMillan and Neiberg seem to agree that the assassination of an Austrian archduke was not worth losing sleep over. Why, after all, would Europe go to war over a place so backward, insignificant and hopelessly violent as the Balkans? “Sarajevo seemed too far away and the violent nature of the Balkans too removed from the pleasant summer evenings for people to dwell on the assassination for long,” Neiberg maintains. “Most saw the assassination as another turn in the long, bloody cycle of violence for which the Balkans had justifiably become known.”

MacMillan predictably describes the Balkans as “the poor relations of Europe,” noting that in 1912 Belgrade “was a small provincial town, just starting to pave its main streets with wooden blocks, and with only one good hotel.” Romania was populated by “eunuch cabmen,” “gypsies who played their violins in the nightclubs” and “barefoot children who begged in the streets”; in Montenegro, she recounts, “the capital was merely an overgrown village and the new royal palace looked like a German boarding house.” Why should European blood have been shed over such backwaters?

In promoting this view, Neiberg and MacMillan ignore decades of scholarship that debunks stereotypical images of the region as intractably violent, backward, autocratic and riven by nationalist conflict. Similarly, Neiberg’s general (and laudable) claim that Europe was not composed of hermetically sealed nation-states falls to the wayside as soon as he ventures into Eastern Europe. He writes that in the Austro-Hungarian empire, “Czechs proved especially reluctant to fight for the goals of the German elites in Vienna, whom they associated with absolutism, expansion, oppression, and Prussian-style militarism…. [T]he Czechs saw no connection between themselves and an Austrian war in the Balkans.” Neiberg exempts Czechs from his general claim that Europeans did not all see themselves as members of nations possessed by “a single way of viewing the world,” even though it’s now generally known that Czech enthusiasm for war rivaled that of German speakers or Magyars at the outset. MacMillan also reiterates tired clichés about the inevitable tendency toward nationalist dissolution and violence in Eastern Europe. Austria “had no strong countervailing identity around which its citizens could rally,” she insists. “Austria-Hungary was by no means the corpse on the Danube, as some in its ally Germany had taken to calling it, but it clearly was sick.”

This view of Eastern Europe undermines Neiberg and MacMillan’s stated goal of avoiding narratives that naturalize the world of nation-states that emerged from the treaty settlements at Versailles and St. Germain. Their arguments rest partly on the implicit assumption that any kind of linguistic or national difference inevitably leads to hopeless conflict—so hopeless that “civilized” Europe should have stayed out of it. Europe’s continental empires likewise appeared “doomed” to fall, with or without a war. According to MacMillan, “Because Austria-Hungary’s population had been so mixed by centuries of history almost every locality had its own nationalist struggle.” This argument assumes that East Europeans had actually possessed strong nationalist loyalties for hundreds of years (when, in fact, large numbers of people were indifferent to nationalist politics), and also that those loyalties inevitably led to centuries of conflict (even though different linguistic and religious groups had lived in peace for centuries).

Clark’s *The Sleepwalkers*, which devotes several hundred pages to analyzing the Balkan context, is the exception that proves the rule. He challenges accounts that treat Franz Ferdinand’s death as a flimsy pretext for war, “an event with little bearing on the real forces whose interaction brought about the conflict.” Clark dedicates welcome attention both to explaining why the Balkans came to be the focus of European great power politics, as the Austrian and Russian empires competed to gobble up the western territories of the crumbling Ottoman Empire, and to illuminating the worldview of the Serbian nationalists who carried out the murder.

The nationalist irredentism that motivated the Black Hand was more than a provincial matter. The supposedly remote and irrelevant “Balkan” problem of linguistic, religious and national diversity was a European problem, and very much on the minds of all of Europe’s rulers in 1914. It was the “problem” of Polish speakers in the Ruhr, Jewish immigrants in London, Basque and Breton nationalists in Spain and France, and colonial uprisings in India and Algeria. As Neiberg reminds us, the conflict that seemed most explosive to many Europeans in 1914 was not in the Balkans, but rather between Irish Republicans and British Unionists over Home Rule. In this context, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist was no joke.

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These books tend to mystify prewar Europe in another way. Concentrating blame for the war’s outbreak on a small group of elites can foster an overly idyllic image of Europe at the turn of the century. It seems that historians may not be immune to *Downton Abbey* syndrome: nostalgia for the Belle Époque emerges partly from the sources they rely on, especially memoirs written after the war. It is not surprising that Europeans who survived World War I (and may have lived to endure World War II) would look back on the years before 1914 with longing for an Age of Innocence. Yet it’s a problem when historians uncritically adopt this perspective. MacMillan writes, “In 1900 Europeans had good reason to feel pleased with the recent past and confident about the future…. Life was good, especially for the middle classes…. Given such power and such prosperity, given the evidence of so many advances in so many fields in the past century, why would Europe want to throw it all away?”

The truth is that peace and prosperity in *fin-de-siècle* Europe depended on some fairly dark realities. Most of the “barbaric” methods of waging war that so shocked Europeans in 1914–18 had been introduced in Europe’s colonies before World War I—from the British practice of rounding up people in “concentration camps” during the Boer War, to the use of forced labor, violent attacks on civilians and outright genocide, all justified by a colonial rhetoric of racial and “civilizational” superiority. At the same time, women were still excluded from the franchise throughout Europe. In Britain on the eve of World War I, the extreme tactics of suffragettes were increasingly in the news, including the hunger strikes and notorious force feedings in Holloway Prison. France, Britain and Russia also faced major industrial strikes and labor mobilizations in the decade before the war. These were often answered with extreme violence, as armies fired on unarmed workers.

Romanticized images of Europe in 1900 also tend to efface the continuities between Europe before and after the war, which were more substantial than postwar revolutionaries cared to admit. The first act of the “revolutionary” democratic Czechoslovak government in 1918 was to declare that all of Austria’s old laws remained in full effect. Neiberg rightly points out the ways the experiences of violence and loss during World War I created and reinforced new nationalist divisions and tensions, but Europe at the turn of the century—the Europe that produced the Herero Genocide, the Dreyfus Affair, anti-Semitic blood libel trials, anarchist assassinations, Russia’s Bloody Sunday and the Black Hand itself—was no idyll, however much middle-class liberals believed themselves to be living in a bubble of prosperity and progress.

World War I was deadly and destructive, but whether the world seemed better or worse in 1918 depended a great deal on one’s social and geographic location. The conflict, after all, produced (however briefly) a crop of new democracies in Europe, powerful movements for colonial liberation, new rights for women and workers in many countries, and the expansion of European welfare provisions.

MacMillan and Clark lead themselves into another trap when they draw comparisons between 1913 and 2013, between the dawn of the twentieth century and that of the twenty-first. This may be inevitable in a time when historians struggle to be “relevant.” But comparisons between the Black Hand and Al Qaeda, or between Franz Ferdinand’s assassination and 9/11, obscure more than they illuminate. MacMillan highlights the similarities between the “rise of militant religion and social protest movements” at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as the friction caused by “rising and declining nations”; she also suggests that the Black Hand, like “Islamic fundamentalists such as Al Qaeda a century later,” were “usually fiercely puritanical, despising such things as alcohol and sexual intercourse…. Few of the adherents of the revolutionary Young Bosnian movement, which spearheaded the assassination, had regular jobs. Rather they depended on handouts from their families, with whom they had usually quarreled. They shared their few possessions, slept on each other’s floors…believed that they could only achieve their goals through violence and, if necessary, the sacrifice of their own lives.”

MacMillan also finds parallels between European elites in 1914 and the hawks surrounding George W. Bush and Tony Blair after 2001. Her portrayal of Kaiser Wilhelm II as a lazy, bumbling adolescent who boasted of having never read the German Constitution, made frequent gaffes, and issued pronouncements such as “I am the Supreme War Lord. I do not decide. I command!” inevitably reinforces such comparisons. “Just as the tragedy of September 11, 2001, gave the hardliners the opportunity to urge what they had advocated all along on President Bush and Prime Minister Blair—the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—so too the Sarajevo assassination opened the door wide for those in Austria-Hungary who wanted to settle the South Slav problem once and for all,” she asserts.

For his part, Clark sees World War I as a “modern” war that is “more relevant to our times than ever before.” The assassination of Franz Ferdinand itself, he elaborates, was plotted and carried out by “a terrorist organization with a cult of sacrifice, death, and revenge, but this organization was extra-territorial, without a clear geographical or political location; it was scattered in cells across political borders, it was unaccountable, its links to any sovereign government were oblique, hidden, and certainly very difficult to discern from outside the organization.” Like 9/11, he claims, the assassination demonstrated how “a single, symbolic event—however deeply it may be enmeshed in larger historical processes—can change politics irrevocably, rendering old options obsolete and endowing new ones with unforeseen urgency.”

But do these comparisons illuminate the outbreak of World War I or the political challenges of our own time? Does the fact that terrorists in 1913 and 2013 slept on floors and abstained from sex link our societies and politics across time and space? Such comparisons may obfuscate more than they reveal. The goals of the Black Hand were linked to specific interests of the Serbian nation-state, and they would be validated rather than repudiated by the settlement that emerged from World War I. In the interwar period, Gavrilo Princip was celebrated as a hero. Now, in an age of multicultural Bosnia, he is seen as a deranged terrorist. Facile comparisons between the “globalization” of 1913 and 2013 also have little meaning, given the differences of scale and technological change between the two eras.

Above all, the political, social and cultural configuration of Europe was irrevocably altered by the war. Ernst Jünger, one of the most infamous hawks of his time, called the war a “blacksmith that will pound the world into new shapes.” He was right. World War I was not simply the war that “ended the peace”; it also ended the lives of millions of people and four multiethnic empires. For better or worse, 1913 and 2013 are separated by that experience.