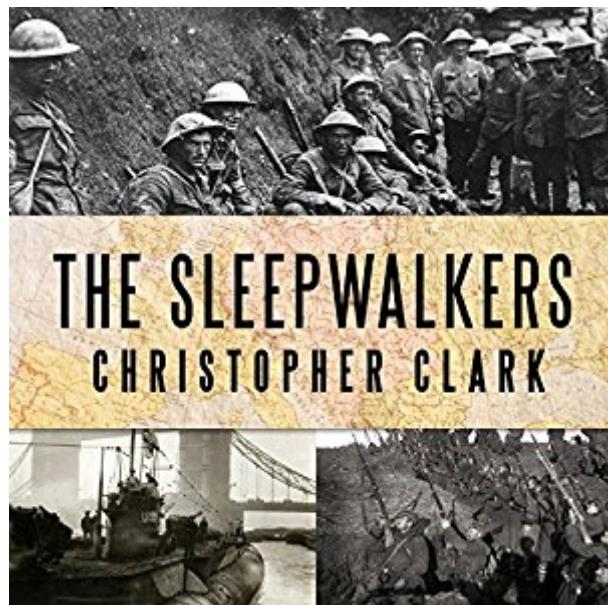


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The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War In 1914



Synopsis

The Sleepwalkers is historian Christopher Clark's riveting account of the explosive beginnings of World War I. Drawing on new scholarship, Clark offers a fresh look at World War I, focusing not on the battles and atrocities of the war itself but on the complex events and relationships that led a group of well-meaning leaders into brutal conflict. Clark traces the paths to war in a minute-by-minute, action-packed narrative that cuts between the key decision centers in Vienna, Berlin, St. Petersburg, Paris, London, and Belgrade, and he examines the decades of history that informed the events of 1914 and details the mutual misunderstandings and unintended signals that drove the crisis forward in a few short weeks. Meticulously researched and masterfully written, The Sleepwalkers is a dramatic and authoritative chronicle of Europe's descent into a war that tore the world apart.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The standard mid-20th century narrative explained how WW1 happened: Europe was a tinderbox primed for war; the assassination of an obscure Austrian arch-duke not important in itself, merely the match struck which finally plunged the continent into a war that was waiting to happen; then a quick cut to the military mechanics: who mobilized when and where. Somewhat mystifying and ultimately unsatisfying considering the scope and the horrific after-shock of WW1. I could never settle for "it just happened". What I liked right away about Christopher Clark's book is that he takes the Sarajevo assassination seriously, he takes the Serbian assassins seriously, he tells us more about that obscure Austrian arch-duke. He devotes the first two chapters of his book to the history of

Serbia and its relationship to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. With a few swift strokes he sketches in how the Austro-Hungarian Empire came to be, writing as if the reader knows nothing about central European history and needs to be brought up to speed. He elucidates great power tensions arising from the declining Ottoman Empire; what that decline meant for Russian interests in the Turkish Straits; the effect of that on Russia's relationship with Austro-Hungary.... I could feel myself relaxing into this book right away. Serbs, Russians, Hungarians, Austrians, Bulgarians and Ottoman Turks -- it reminded me of my favorite WW2 novelist Alan Furst who writes about the lesser-known venues of the war. A new perspective on the familiar story, and illuminating because of that. The particular strength of Clark's history is elucidation of the great power alliance systems of pre-war Europe, starting in the 1890's.

Which was most important, the spark or the powder keg? There are probably enough books on the origins of the First World War to rebuild the great wall of China with. Thanks to the influence of the 'annales' school and its long view of history, however, and then of Marxist thinking and its predilection for structural causes, most of that literature has focused on the powder keg. In *Sleepwalkers*, Clark chooses to ask about the spark: how the First World War came about rather than why, though how is of course also expected to inform the question why. The book thus devotes close attention to Balkan politics, and it includes what must be one of the most detailed accounts of the Sarajevo murders anywhere. In this sense and to a degree, it is a return to the 'battles and princes' history of earlier times. Look for irony in this if you like, but Clark makes the point that our twenty-first century multi-polar world, with its fluid politics and shock-prone environment - think 9/11 and its aftermath - resembles the pre-WWI era more than much of the twentieth century, and perhaps makes that era more approachable. *Sleepwalkers* is actually divided into three sections. The first, which I found the best, deals with the Balkans, Serbian irredentism, the Black Hand, and the Habsburgs' fraught involvement and Russo-French investment in the region. The second teases out longer-term risk factors over the ten to fifteen years to 1914, and the third section puts the characters and events immediately leading to the war declarations under the microscope. Inevitably the book's second section rehashes already well-covered points: the hardening of the alliance system, mobilisation plans, colonial competition, though it does make the important argument that not every trend pointed towards military confrontation.

This is a difficult review to compose. The difficulty lies in the fact that Professor Clark starts off very well. He covers the deep political background of the war thoroughly. He lays out the tangled

rivalries, ambitions, agendas and animosities in a manner that gives the reader a good understanding of the historical context within which the 1914 assassination crisis will unfold. The first 2/3rds of the book rate a solid 4 to 5 stars. Unfortunately, things go downhill after that. I think that we have to start by drawing a critical distinction. Deep historical background is just that... deep historical background. It doesn't explain HOW or WHY a particular event escalates from being a potentially resolvable diplomatic crisis into a war, it only describes the context in which this transformation occurs. Bitter rivalries can persist for decades without crossing the threshold into war. The transformation to war requires specific choices, made by specific actors, made within a specific timeline. The sword doesn't come out of the scabbard without someone deciding to draw it. If we are going to attempt to answer the question "How Europe went to War in 1914", then there's no way that we can shy away from focusing on the questions of which specific choices, made by which specific actors, at which specific points in time, resulted in the threshold to war being crossed, thereby opening the door to further escalation. The assignment of responsibility/guilt is not a prerequisite of answering the question "How Europe went to War in 1914", but we must allow that it is a possible outcome of our pursuit of the available evidence.

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