Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus

Review Number:
291
Publish date:
Saturday, 31 August, 2002
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ISBN:
9780582418721
Date of Publication:
2002
Price:
£20.99
Pages:
272pp.
Publisher:
Longman
Publisher url:
http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/Bookshop/detail.asp?item=100000000006372
Place of Publication:
London
Reviewer:
Matthew Hughes

The First World War is a seminal historical event; an historical caesura whose aftershocks still resonate. For Eric Hobsbawm, it began the ?Age of Extremes? ? the start of the ?short? twentieth century lasting from 1914 to 1991 in which fascism, communism and liberal democracy clashed for world hegemony.(1) This contest for power dominated world history in the twentieth century and resulted in two world wars, the Cold War and the end of European empire. For Sir Michael Howard, the Great War shattered the ?hopes and self-confidence with which the century began.?(2) One has only to open general history textbooks to see that 1914 has become the established jumping-off point for most examinations of the recent past. This periodisation, with 1914 marking a break between an old and new world, is contestable. The *fin de siècle* mood embedded in Edvard Munch?s ?The Scream? (1893) or Pablo Picasso?s ?Les Demoiselles d?Avignon? (1906-7) suggests a world in motion long before 1914. Indeed, the idea of pre-war change is well expressed in books such as George Dangerfield?s *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (Constable & Co.; London, 1936) and Modris Eksteins? *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Era* (Bantam; London, 1989).

However, notwithstanding the debate on continuity and change, the war that erupted in 1914 still

reverberates, arousing passionate and on-going debate among historians. Over the years, all aspects of the First World War have come in for intense scrutiny: experience, memory, tactics, operational method, strategy, gender, empire, race, consequences and, of course, the origins of the war. Indeed, the origins of the war were the first entry point for scholars examining the First World War. Even before the guns fell silent in 1918, books were being published ? many (most?) partisan and biased ? that sought to provide an answer to the question of why such a terrible event had happened. There followed a deluge of books on the origins of the war that has continued to this day. The origins of the Great War have become one of the key debates in contemporary history. The linkage between 1914 and the contemporary debate on a united Germany and its future in Europe has only heightened interest in the origins of the Great War.

The corpus on the origins of the war is a daunting prospect, even for the fastest reader. Thus, do we really need another book on the subject? Annika Mombauer of the Open University has produced a volume that synthesises the existing scholarship on the origins of the war into one handy tome. This is no mean feat and her volume bears obvious comparison to John Langdon?s excellent *July 1914: The Long Debate* (Berg; Oxford, 1991). But, crucially, Langdon?s hardback volume is out of print. (Which begs the question: why has Berg Publishing not produced a reprint in paperback?) As with Langdon, Mombauer has combined brevity with depth to produce a book with intellectual clout that stretches beyond the seminar study format without straying into the specialist monograph field.(4) Mombauer has digested and processed a mass of information and produced a readable, informative and lucid account of the war?s origins. It is to be highly recommended. Her work broadens the discussion from Langdon?s focus on the events of July 1914, and includes the latest debates that Langdon?s slightly dated account unavoidably omits. The volume under review also benefits from Mombauer?s command of the German-language material.

Mombauer?s book works on two inter-connected levels. Firstly, it is an account of the changing historiographical perspectives on the origins of the war. Mombauer takes the reader on a journey through the ups-and-downs of who or what was responsible for war in 1914. For the initiated, this examination will not be new but for the reader coming at this subject for the first time ? the obvious market for such a book ? this is a first-rate synthesis of the vast scholarship on the subject. Mombauer starts with an introductory survey of the events leading up to the war. It has to be said that this survey seems rather superfluous, adding little to the analytical strands that tie together this book. Thereafter, Mombauer organises her analysis into four sections. Chapter one starts with the debate during and immediately after the First World War; chapter two looks at the historiography in the inter-war years; the third chapter takes the debate forward to the 1960s and examines the seismic impact of the work of the Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer; and a final chapter tackles the current debate on origins of the war.

What stands out from Mombauer?s discussion is just how policy-relevant is the discussion on the origins the First World War. The debate on who started the war was, indeed still is, of critical importance if one wants to understand the future course of European history. In particular, there is the question of Germany ? a key focus of Mombauer?s study. If Germany wanted to evade the Versailles settlement after 1918, she needed to avoid the charge of having planned an aggressive war in 1914. After 1945, if she wanted to avoid the charge of continuity in German history stretching from the Kaiser to Hitler, drawing a distinction between the accidental war in 1914 and the war planned by Hitler in 1939 was even more crucial. In the context of this argument on German foreign policy, the writing of German history moved centre-stage and Mombauer sets out to show how Clio was deceived in the years after 1918 and, for while, after 1945.

In her frantic attempts to prove that she was as much wronged as the other protagonists in the Great War, Germany after 1918 set about traducing history to prove that Europe fell into the abyss of war through the general machinations of all parties concerned. Initially, this meant tackling the Versailles settlement, and in particular article 231, that ascribed war guilt to Germany. Therefore, in the 1920s and 1930s, the German government encouraged and sponsored a misrepresentation of history in which all the European states were responsible for the war that broke out in August 1914. In this, Germany, through government-run publications and the mobilisation of German historians, was largely successful in her attempts to rewrite history, so as to dodge the charge that she had planned and started the war. Sympathetic foreign historians aided this revisionism, to the extent that by the time the Second World War broke out there was little

impetus to blame Germany for the war of 1914-1918.

After the Second World War, German historians fully accepted the charge of an aggressive war waged by Germany from 1939. Germans accepted the grotesque character of Hitler and his regime, but this acceptance stressed that Hitler was exceptional, an aberration, who in no way represented the general course of German history. This all changed in the 1960s with the historiographical shift caused by the work of Fritz Fischer. Fischer produced two ground-breaking books on German war aims and German planning for war that completely changed the debate on the origins of the 1914-1918 war. Fischer?s argument that Germany planned the war and desired control over continental Europe caused a huge uproar in Germany. If one accepted the aggressive intent in German foreign policy in 1914, it was but a small step to make the connection with the war launched in 1939. Maybe the Kaiser and Hitler were not that dissimilar. The contentious nature of Fischer?s views meant that his arguments soon spilled over into the TV and the media. Having dealt comprehensively and effectively with the Fischer debate, and shown just how immense was the impact of Fischer?s work, Mombauer then outlines the post-Fischer perspectives on the origins of the war. As Mombauer argues, this more recent work, informed by Fischer, provides a more nuanced examination of the origins of the war that moves away from simplistic notions of German guilt.

While this book provides the reader with a clear account of the shifting debates surrounding the origins of the war, it is a book infused with Fischer?s ideas (and the work of later academics in the Fischer mould such as John Röhl). This is the second level on which one can approach this book. The notion that Germany, in some measure, was responsible for the war provides a parallel pathway of study in *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*. The focus on Germany helps raises this study from an undergraduate text in which the author simply presents the different points of view. Mombauer has a point to prove. Unlike Langdon, who is happy to lay out the arguments, Mombauer has an argument. She argues that Fischer was basically right and German attempts to write her guilt out of the history books should be recognised for what they are. This approach gives the book a passionate feel that makes for a good read and provides a clear line of argument through the book , which leaves the reader with a knowledge not just of all the perspectives surrounding the war?s origins but also of the key role Germany plays in any understanding of why war erupted in August 1914. Providing an excellent entry point into the labyrinth of debates on the origins of the Great War, this book will surely become a core text for students looking for a platform from which they can delve further into this historiographical minefield.

Notes

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (Michael Joseph; London, 1994).Back to (1)
2. Michael Howard and William Roger Louis, *The Oxford History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1998) p. 9.Back to (2)
3. Indeed, Mombauer's recent work includes her monograph on the origins of the First World War: *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 2001; for a review of this work, see no. 199. [2]Back to (3)

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