

Review - The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914

Written by Christian Scheinpflug

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CHRISTIAN SCHEINPFLUG, NOV 17 2015

The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914

By Christopher Clark

New York: HarperCollins, 2013

Christopher Clark's book on the origins of World War I has rightly already received much praise. His easy-to-read style makes this complex subject accessible to a broad audience. Even more so, his multi-angle approach does not seek to single out one culprit and thus is a novel contribution to European, and indeed World history. This is exactly why students of international politics cannot ignore *The Sleepwalkers* either.

Clark explicitly did not want to recount the unfolding of "the most complex event of modern times" (introduction) in the confines of *why* questions, which fit systemic analysis most widespread in IR scholarship. Rather, *The Sleepwalkers* asks *how* did the war develop; and thus focuses on human agency (ibid). Fortunately, Clark does not succeed in ignoring systemic process altogether; the passages about the emergence of the bipolar order and inter-imperialist rivalry beyond the European theatre are particularly useful for International Relations (IR) scholars.

Who is to Blame?

The choice to use the concept of sleepwalking to analyse the run-up to the Great War, Clark explains, was logical because the actors were "watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to reality..." (conclusion). Furthermore, back then the international system with its Empires and countless vassal states was too fissured to base the state entity at the centre of any analysis (introduction). Individual agency as driver also makes sense because the personnel in the various foreign ministries knew each other very well – and indulged in mutual antipathy (chapter 2). Placing the magnifying glass on people precludes a "bad apple" approach that aims to identify the one culprit that started it all. Clark argues against this approach for it naively assigns blame and take sides (conclusion), yet no state actually planned this war. Liberal audiences, with their often Manichean and moralistic view of state actors, might take issue with this argument, especially since Great War commemorations are huge public events in countries such as Britain and Australia. The central thesis of *The Sleepwalkers* has the potential to derail the excitement and expressions of national honour such commemoration events exhibit.

Leaving good morals behind has even more reverberations in Germany, often seen as the one guilty actor. Clark, an expert on the country (he received knighthood for his service to Anglo-German relations and is married to a German-born art historian) certainly knows the controversies, debates, and emotions that still surround historical guilt in Germany. Raising doubts about the Reich's sole responsibility for both world wars creates some consternation. Clark shows that in contrast to World War II, when the widespread anti-Semitism and fascism culminated into apocalypse largely because of Nazism's popularity, the case of World War I is more complex. Realists therefore will feel instantly at home with Clark's book, despite his agency driven approach.

He concedes that German and Austrian "belligerence and imperialist paranoia" certainly fuelled the war, but that at

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the same time “the Germans were not the only imperialists.” Therefore, “the outbreak of the war was a tragedy, not a crime” (conclusion). There had been no grand scheme to subdue the world to the rule of a single actor. Perhaps Germany has been singled out to take the blame because it survived as the only one of the losers.

When I was a pupil, World War I as the pretext to World War II became a subject in Grade 8. Teachers taught as they had been taught, assigning sole responsibility to Germany. The Reich, the story goes, started the war because the Austro-Hungarian archduke was assassinated in Serbia. Citizens whether in school or elsewhere have never been encouraged to challenge this established truth, and have been required to accept World War as a heavy weight on national identity. This in turn causes ruptures in society today, as more people are not passive receivers of information anymore, but cultivate a general deep distrust of elite media and hegemonic discourse. The task for modern German society is not to diminish the Second Reich’s responsibility, but to place its guilt in the more complicated workings of the international, i.e. European, system at large. *The Sleepwalkers* convincingly blazes the path.

Clark divides his argument of the Great War as unintended fallout into three parts—‘Roads to Sarajevo’, ‘One Continent Divided’, ‘Crisis’—and twelve chapters with numerous sub-chapters. His sources range from ordinary scientific papers and biographies to diplomatic cables or diary entries. The linguistic diversity of his sources should cause envy in field of IR. A discipline that purports to study primarily global (historical) events caricatures itself by allowing itself to be dominated by just one language. At the level of intellectual exchange a lingua franca might be defensible, but *The Sleepwalkers* demonstrates how superior scholarship at the research level could come out once scholars need to get language skills as straight as methodology and the like.

The German Pivot

Clark’s three-part exercise is guided by four questions: 1) why did Russia and France ally against Germany in 1890?; 2) why did Britain support this alliance?; 3) in how far was Germany at fault of its encirclement?; and, 4) how far did the structural transformation of that alliance system facilitate the events that led to war (Chapter 3)? The key event, for Clark, is the emergence of the German Empire in 1870. Discussing the upshot of this event, Clark cannot rely on agency and has to deal with structure. Forming the Second Reich Bismarck also ended the traditional German ‘small-statism’ (*kleinstaaterei*). A territorially and politically unified Reich altered balance of power on the continent and gave rise to the bipolar alliance system that emerged by 1907. The event that sparked the reshuffling was Germany’s cold blooded takeover of Alsace-Lorraine (*ibid*). France, still dreaming of Napoleonism suddenly faced a contender who threatened to gradually chip away territory.

Thus, Paris worked hard to forge the Entente Cordial with Britain and the Franco-Russian Alliance with the Tsarist Empire. Clark uses two maps that illustrate vividly how France became the magnet that pulled Britain and Russia deeper into the continent. Russia realised that controlling the Balkans would give it more leverage vis-à-vis the Berlin-Constantinople axis. Clark further explains that this paved the way for collision with the dominant power in the Balkans, the other German ally Austria-Hungary. Clark’s dubbing of the Balkans as “chessboard” for Russian and Austro-Hungarian geopolitics (chapters 1 & 2) captures the situation in comprehensible ways.

Of course, developments were much more complex and also involved Russia testing the boundaries against Britain’s jewel, the Crown Colony in South Asia, or Germany’s starting of a naval arms race against Britain in order to affirm its claim to superpower status (chapter 3). While Clark maps these developments out well, at least a slight reference to the *why*, i.e. International Relations theory, could have enhanced readers’ understanding of *how* it happened. In challenging Britain Germany acted in line with what realists acknowledge: relative, not absolute power counts. This shortcoming aside, the book’s most intriguing sections are indeed those that venture beyond the European theatre in order to highlight how aggression elsewhere heightened tension on the continent. For example, the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895 resulted from Russian adventures in northern China. Japan’s subsequent victory led to the bleeding of China. Russian presence in the region then prompted the European Imperial powers to race to Asia and scavenge upon the Chinese carcass Japan left. The aggression generated thus fed directly back into intra-European relations as it produced envy and mistrust between the respective powers. The Sino-Japanese war thus contributed decisively to mutual perceptions of friend and foe that would explode in 1914 (*ibid*). Again, a reference to *why* the

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imperial powers sought to out-compete each other in the quest for markets and territory would have improved analysis even further. Still, these sections provide more than enough substance for IR scholars to consider and incorporate into research on imperialism or territorial expansion.

The Spark in the Powder Keg

The last part of *The Sleepwalkers* finally takes up the immediate run-up to the war. In chapter seven 'Murder in Sarajevo' and specifically in the sub-chapter called 'The Assassination' Clark describes minutely what transpired on June 28, 1914: the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian archduke Franz Ferdinand. This attack, staged by a Serbian clandestine sub-state organisation called the 'Black Hand,' subsequently cascaded into almost every war and conflict of the 20th century. Clark admits that it is nearly impossible to recollect exactly why the archduke was murdered, but evidence is sufficiently clear to support the argument it was meant to damage the despised Habsburg monarchy that was blocking the way to a Greater Serbia (chapter 1). This sub-chapter contains so much detail and tension that it resembles a distinct novel-style. Readers easily immerse themselves into the scene and almost are part of the panic and confusion after the first bomb goes off. However, the real tragedy begins after a celebratory meeting with the mayor, when the car of the archduke takes a mistaken turn right into shooting range of his assassin—and into the abyss of the *Urkatastrophe* (chapter 7). Had the car proceeded as planned the world likely would have been spared much misery. This episode alone proves Clark a first-rate scholar, as it is hard to imagine a more engaging yet serious history lesson. IR scholars cannot always deal with such concrete historical events, but they should take the challenge nonetheless and seek to incorporate their abstract concepts into such lively language.

The Sleepwalkers is prime scholarship. Students of international relations will find plenty substance on alliance formation and interdependence, the (mis)construction of enemies, and geopolitics. The most intriguing sections are those that deal with reverberations between seemingly unconnected places, i.e. when Clark actually deals with the international relations of World War I. The book could have benefited from a more pronounced focus on the international environment, but this shortcoming does not diminish the value of the book in general. Another criticism weighs heavier. Clark claims the book is relevant today because as at the beginning of the 20th century, we now face terrorism, death cults, and sub-state actors that threaten world peace again (introduction). Clark fails to comprehend the distinct sources of threats to world peace that emanate from today and back then. Specifically, he does not grasp the role state actors have played in nurturing, financing, and indeed creating the contemporary terrorist organisations.

Yet more chilling is the ultimate lesson of *The Sleepwalkers*: Europe's heads of state of the time were all related to each other making the war look "like the culmination of a family feud" (chapter 4). But, when not even family ties could negate the power structure that resulted from the emergence of a unified Germany, what will come after trench warfare and industrialised genocide if Europe fails and Germany turns economic into military might yet again?

About the author:

Christian Scheinpflug is Lead Editor and Director of the Editorial Board at E-International Relations. He is also columnist at Chile Today.