

Annika Mombauer, *The Causes of the First World War: The Long Blame Game*. London, New York: Routledge, 2024, 386.

The historiography dealing with the genesis of the war of 1914–1918 is a never-ending saga, famously replete with heated scholarly debates prompted by countless revisionist interventions. Its lifeblood has been, of course, the existence of a massive body of documentary evidence and memoir literature, and its controversies can in part be explained as a consequence of the very considerable elbow room available to historians in selecting and annotating this evidence. Even when the same sources are used, the conclusions reached can be substantially dissimilar. In her new work on this subject, Professor Annika Mombauer draws attention to Sidney Fay and Bernadotte Schmitt, two distinguished American scholars from the interwar period who had handed down discordant verdicts regarding the role played by Germany in the origins of the war. She cites Schmitt, who, reflecting later on the matter, wrote that it had always “troubled” him: “We used the same documents and the same biographies and memoirs in preparing our respective books—and came up with quite different interpretations.”

History is hardly an exact science, and Mombauer is keen to remind us of E.H. Carr’s succinct observation: “History means interpretation.” But what is it that makes the historical inquiry concerned with the origins of the First World War so unique and indeed peculiar? There has hardly been an exploration of a single theme yielding so many conflicting interpretations and lasting such a long time. What are the reasons for its longevity and fervour, and why do historians still dis-

agree? These are the two key questions that Mombauer seeks to address in her book, pointing out the paradox that for this subject “we have, almost certainly, more evidence than for any other historical chain of events.”

Mombauer is certainly well qualified to delve into the 1914 historiography, having published in 2002 *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*, which deservedly became a standard work. She has now given us a much revised and expanded rendition with a telling change of the subtitle: *The Long Blame Game*. Whereas back in 2002 she believed that a sort of consensus had been reached by historians (that Germany was primarily, or at least in a very large measure, to blame for the outbreak of the war, but that the actions of other powers also needed to be taken into account), she is now no longer sure that the whole matter has been consigned to history given the “unexpected ferocity of the centenary debates”. In fact, this was perhaps not so unexpected to Mombauer. At the very end of her 2002 book, she wrote that as long as the subject of the First World War continued to occupy historians, “it is still possible that today’s consensus will be tomorrow’s contested ground.”

Quite. Those debates around 2014, amid an avalanche of new publications and unprecedented media engagement, not only confirmed the enduring interest of the historical profession in the causes of the war of 1914 but also revealed that the topic can hold a strong allure to a wider public—and especially to the one in Germany. This is where Mombauer’s

subtitle (“blame game”) is right on-target. Ever since the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and its Article 231 that burdened Germany (“and her allies”) with responsibility for starting the war, the whole discussion about the origins of the conflict has been one lengthy and often tempestuous blame game involving governments and the public, as well as historians. When, in the 1960s, the German historian Fritz Fischer identified Germany as the aggressor in 1914, he caused a major public uproar at home and faced huge hostility from conservative German colleagues. In the wider international community of scholars (as well as among many German historians), however, his thesis largely stood. Although important new research on other European actors had since the 1960s and 1970s shifted somewhat the spotlight from Germany, no one could seriously challenge Fischer. This is why Mombauer could sense in 2002 that, post-Fischer, the debate had calmed down.

But not for long. Something remarkable occurred as the centenary approached. In 2012, Christopher Clark, an Australian historian teaching at Cambridge, published a book that injected a major stimulus into the debate. Entitled *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, it argued that no power was really to blame for the outbreak of the war, that it was erroneous in the first place to engage in “prosecutorial narratives”, and that the right approach was to explain how, rather than why, it came to war. Although his own answer to the question “how” was a little hazy (“multilateral processes of interaction” within “a shared political culture”), his book was a runaway success. Translated in Germany in 2013, it became a publishing sensation, selling hundreds of thousands of

copies. Here was a non-German professor of history from a major Anglo-Saxon university telling the Germans that their country should not be held as primarily responsible for 1914 since there were other actors involved in a “genuinely interactive” crisis that led to war. Quite a few German experts disagreed with Clark, but others, along with ordinary patriotic Germans, enthusiastically welcomed what had already become an internationally acclaimed work and one which, in effect, absolved Germany from the verdict of war guilt imposed first by the Treaty of Versailles and then, decades later, elaborated by Fritz Fischer. Klaus Gietinger and Winfried Wolf called Clark *Der Seelen-tröster* (consoler of souls).

This is where things have stood for the past decade or so: there is no denying that the Clarkian interpretation of 1914 has led to what Samuel R. Williamson calls “the erosion of the German paradigm”. What is interesting in all this is that we have been here before—in the 1920s and 1930s—and that Clark’s work contains little or no new archival research, revamping as it does old arguments and drawing on old materials. Stephen Schuker labelled it “old wine in new bottles”. Writing in 2014, Professor Sir Hew Strachan observed: “Today, Germany welcomes Clark’s account as a revisionist respite as though such arguments had never been advanced by others.” Robert C. Moore has argued that Clark’s study is based on the literature from the 1920s and that it is “only a summary of the opinions of others while he has no primary sources to show for.”

The above references to earlier historiography are appropriate, for the charge that Germany had brought on the war was indeed extensively challenged

long before Clark. Mombauer discusses this in the early sections of her book. Throughout those sections, she draws attention to the prevailing political dimension in the debate. The latter began “before the first shots had even been fired.” To the governments involved in the July Crisis, it was important to protest innocence, as only a defensive war would ensure that soldiers would fight and civilians would go along. Subsequent postwar controversies, however, were largely due to the imposition at Versailles of the so-called “war guilt clause”. This was always going to be contested by Weimar governments, not least because that clause provided the legal basis for extracting war reparations from Germany. “Simply put,” Mombauer writes, “without the German initiative to fight the ‘war guilt lie’ following the Treaty of Versailles, there may not have been much of a controversy.”

Germany’s revisionist struggle in the 1920s was organized by its foreign office. It was fully government-controlled and financed. And it was very successful. Mombauer relates in great detail how the *Auswärtiges Amt* set up special departments in 1919–1921 to kick off the “innocence campaign”. Books were commissioned, collections of documents were published, and journals were launched. Patriotic historians were inevitably deeply associated with this enterprise. Some of them, as Mombauer notes, may have been “amateur historians” (like Alfred von Wegerer), but they did an excellent job in persuading audiences both at home and abroad that Germany was guilt-free in 1914. Moreover, eminent historians with pro-German sympathies were found abroad. In the United States, Sidney Fay and, in particular, Harry Barnes were perhaps the most useful revisionist

supporters. Barnes, popular with the wider public, was echoing Germany’s propaganda that it had been unjustly vilified. In 1926, he wrote that responsibility for the world war fell upon Serbia, France, and Russia. Interestingly, in 2012, Christopher Clark all but named those three countries as culprits for 1914—in a work that supposedly refrains from pinning responsibility for the war on any one power. Mombauer rightly calls Barnes “an apologist for the Central Powers.” She is far more polite towards Clark but cannot help noticing that his critical view of Serbia “sits somewhat uneasily” with his suggestion that historians had for too long been engaged in the blame game.

As Mombauer points out, what helped Germany’s revisionist undertaking in the 1920s was the fact that Britain and France were rather late in bringing out their official documents. The Germans published their major 40-volume collection (*Die Grosse Politik*) between 1922 and 1927. The French began to lay open their diplomatic documents as late as 1929. The British were not much faster, beginning in 1926. “By that date,” Selig Adler commented, “world-wide revisionism was so well organized that the extremists used these Allied documents as ammunition in their own cause. All this gave Germany an enormous advantage in the historical battle.” Nevertheless, a battle it was. Pierre Renouvin in France produced in 1925 an influential work that was critical of Austria-Hungary but also of Germany, which, “fully aware of what the consequences might be”, allowed its ally to start a war in the Balkans. Perhaps surprisingly, Mombauer does not mention in her survey H.W. Wilson’s *The War Guilt* (1928). In his well-researched book, this British historian maintained wonderful

open-mindedness before finally attaching to Vienna and Berlin “the guilt of the war.” Notable “anti-revisionists”, as Mombauer calls them, included Prince Lichnowsky, Germany’s ambassador to London in 1914, whose 1927 memoirs were “greeted by a storm of hostile reviews and criticism throughout Germany.” Other dissident voices in Germany were simply censored, as was the case with Hermann Kantorowicz. Mombauer observes that in the United States Bernadotte Schmitt was a determined opponent of Barnes and Fay, but like other anti-revisionists, he “struggled against the developing international revisionist consensus.”

Indeed, second thoughts about what had happened in 1914 were increasingly popping into the heads of even some unlikely persons. As early as 1920, David Lloyd George asserted that no one meant war in July 1914; it was something into which governments “staggered and stumbled.” In 1927, G.P. Gooch, who became the joint editor of the published collection of British official documents, approvingly referred to this assessment, adding: “Blind to danger and deaf to advice as were the statesmen of the three despotic empires, not one of them, when it came to the point, desired to set the world alight.” Lloyd George, of course, is the author of easily the most cited one-sentence appraisal of July 1914, penned in the first volume of his war memoirs (1933): “The nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay.” This conclusion, as Mombauer comments, epitomised the overall shift in attitudes towards the question of war guilt. The Germans could feel well pleased. It is very indicative, for example, how *Berliner Monatshefte*, the

German government-sponsored journal devoted exclusively to the consideration of the origins of the war, began from the mid-1930s to change its themes, soon becoming a publication dealing with contemporary international affairs.

Interest in the origins of the First World War dwindled in the aftermath of the Second World War, especially in Germany, now divided and grappling, Mombauer emphasizes, with the responsibility for the second. Admittedly, a notable development occurred in 1951 when a Franco-German historians’ commission agreed that school history textbooks in their countries should adopt a more conciliatory approach with regard to the outbreak of the war in 1914. Mombauer sees this event as a continuation of the consensus that had emerged in the interwar period to the effect that the war was basically an accident. But this consensus was not solid. The 1950s also saw the translation into English of Luigi Albertini’s massive, three-volume study of the war’s origins, first published in Italy in 1942–43. In his account, Germany emerges as principally culpable for starting the war. Although, in this reviewer’s view, Albertini’s findings are in some respects deeply flawed (for example, with regard to Serbia’s role), he is to this day considered by experts as one of the greatest authorities in the field. However, the impact of his work in West Germany, Mombauer explains, was limited as the historians there paid little attention to it.

By complete contrast, they showed tremendous interest in Fritz Fischer’s *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1961), a seminal work that reopened the debate by dealing a heavy blow to the revisionist thesis of shared responsibility. Unlike Al-

bertini, who provided a detailed examination of the policies of all the powers, Fischer concentrated on Germany in his analysis of the July crisis to argue that the country's leaders, both civilian and military, held to a consistently aggressive line that resulted in war. This, as Mombauer suggests, was hardly a new interpretation, although Fischer's documentary evidence was impressive. An important novelty, however, concerned the discovery by Fischer of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's so-called "September programme" that outlined Germany's ambitious war aims on the continent of Europe, in Africa, and on the seas. A "bid for world power" was indeed what Fischer implied as having happened in 1914. Used to the comfortable consensus about Germany's relative innocence, conservative German historians led by Gerhard Ritter were particularly upset by Fischer's very uncomfortable reference to "the problem of continuity in German history from the First to the Second World War." Mombauer comments here: "Clearly, there was more at stake than the history of the origins of the First World War."

Which is what in large measure explains the German patriots' hostile reaction to Fischer and, decades later, their warm embrace of Clark. However, as Mombauer points out, during the "Fischer controversy", even a few conservative German historians began to accept some of his premises while insisting on what they perceived as the defensive aspects of the policy pursued by Berlin in July 1914. This rather German-centred wrangle had fizzled out in the 1980s, with most of the historical profession acknowledging that Germany was mainly responsible for starting the war. The debate with-

in international scholarship had then moved on, focusing on the roles played by the other great powers: Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, France, Russia, and Italy. The blame game, however, continued even here, with, for example, Sean McMeekin pointing an accusing finger at Russia and Stefan Schmidt at France. Still, it was no longer "a German debate", and Mombauer gives a very helpful account of this extended endeavour by historians.

Here, in the penultimate chapter, Mombauer also has a section on Serbia. This is the weakest part of her otherwise admirable book because of its significant omissions and some problematic observations on her part. For she writes: "There is no doubt today that Minister President Pašić and some of his colleagues, as well as the Chief of the Serbian intelligence service Colonel Dimitrijević and some members of the Serb military, had known about the [Sarajevo] assassination plan (which is, of course, not the same as saying they were instrumental in it)." Mombauer does not elaborate and thus leaves something pretty heavy hanging in the air. Not only were Pašić and Dimitrijević not instrumental in the plan, they were dismayed by the whole idea. Dimitrijević found out about it rather late and then made repeated attempts to halt the assassins. As for Pašić, he had received some very scant information to the effect that two students carrying weapons had crossed from Serbia into Bosnia—with no mention of Franz Ferdinand and with no details about an assassination plan whatsoever. He instructed the war minister to stop "every such activity because it is very dangerous for us." Mombauer states further and erroneously that the Yugoslav historian Vladimir Dedi-

jer “found evidence of the Serbian government’s complicity [sic] in the assassination of Franz Ferdinand.” But Dedijer found nothing of the kind. Discussing the paltry report available to Pašić, he merely speculated that the Serbian Prime Minister “no doubt concluded that the crossing of the boys with lethal weapons at the time of the Archduke’s visit to Bosnia was a thing which should be investigated at once.” This, of course, is a far cry from any “complicity”.

Nonetheless, when we put Balkan errors to one side, it has to be said that Mombauer has produced a work that is unlikely to be surpassed. She displays astonishing mastery of the vast amount and range of relevant literature, maintaining throughout a carefully balanced approach to bring to the reader a very clear overview of all the arguments in what a non-specialist may consider to have been a bewilderingly complex debate. As regards its future, Mombauer is all too well aware of the conjoined, non-scholarly aspects hitherto present and sees prospective interpretations of the 1914 history within the context of contemporary considerations. In the future, the debate will be fashioned by “current and future political concerns for as long as the events of the past have relevance for the present.”

But where, today, does Annika Mombauer herself stand in this debate? Or, rather, has she been swayed, like so many others, by Christopher Clark’s “no one is guilty” thesis? Not at all. For Mombauer is not a sleepwalker. She was a student of John C.G. Röhl, the great biographer of Wilhelm II, and a supporter of Fritz Fischer. Indeed, she dedicates her book to his memory. Her previous work indicates clearly her attachment to what

has been called the Fischer school. In her study of Helmuth von Moltke (2001), she wrote of Germany’s decision-makers’ “quest for a position of hegemony in Europe.” Moltke and his military colleagues, according to Mombauer, “wanted war” in July 1914, and Germany’s key political figure of the time, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, was on this issue by no means the reluctant civilian partner as he is sometimes partrayed. And in her more recent *Die Julikrise* published in 2014—two years after Clark’s *Sleepwalkers*—she rejects categorically the view that the war was an accident or that it came about as a result of the professional blunders of a relatively small group of statesmen and diplomats. They were “no sleepwalkers”, for, on the contrary, “they knew quite precisely what they were doing.” In terms of Mombauer’s current position, her latest book is an opus in which she is concerned to present the views of others rather than her own. Nevertheless, in just one sentence at the very end of this work, she again takes Clark head-on. In *The Sleepwalkers*, the Cambridge professor had argued, famously, that the outbreak of war in 1914 represented no “Agatha Christie drama”, where in the end the culprit is discovered standing over a corpse with a smoking pistol, insisting that: “There is no smoking gun in this story.” So, in her concluding sentence, Mombauer cannot resist sending this message to Clark: “Given that the decisions taken by the ‘men of 1914’ claimed the lives of millions, explaining the origins of the First World War remains the biggest unresolved murder mystery of them all.” The debate continues.

John ZAMETICA