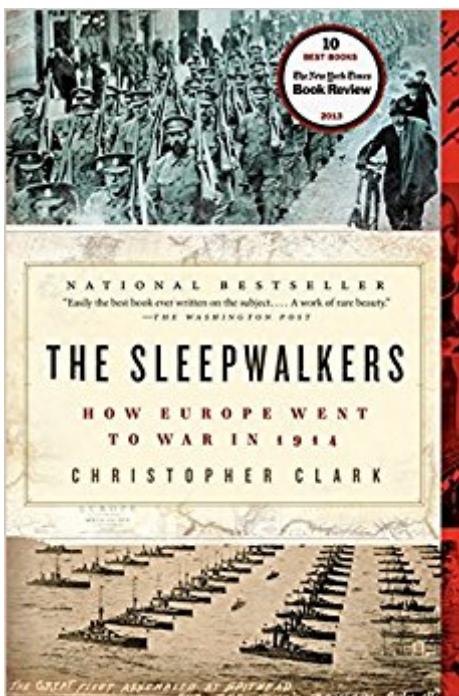


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The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War In 1914



Synopsis

One of The New York Times Book Review's 10 Best Books of the Year Winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize (History) The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914 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 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, Christopher Clark's 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 immense documentation of the origin of WWI, remarks historian Clark, can be marshaled to support a range of theses, and it but weakly sustains, in the tenor of his intricate analysis, the temptation to assign exclusive blame for the cataclysm to a particular country. Dispensing with a thesis, Clark interprets evidence in terms of the character, internal political heft, and external geopolitical perception and intention of a political actor. In other words, Clark centralizes human agency and, especially, human foibles of misperception, illogic, and emotion in his narrative.

Touching on every significant figure in European diplomacy in the decade leading to August 1914, Clark underscores an entanglement of an official's fluctuating domestic power with a foreign interlocutor's appreciation, accurate or not, of that official's ability to make something stick in foreign policy. As narrative background, Clark choreographs the alliances and series of crises that preceded the one provoked by the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, but he focuses on the men whose risk-taking mistakes detonated WWI. Emphasizing the human element, Clark bestows a tragic sensibility on a magisterial work of scholarship. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

“An important book. . . . One of the most impressive and stimulating studies of the period ever published.” (Max Hastings, *The Sunday Times*) “Excellent. . . . The book is stylishly written as well as superb scholarship. No analysis of the origins of the First World War will henceforth be able to bypass this magisterial work.” (Ian Kershaw, BBC History) “The most readable account of the origins of the First World War since Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*. The difference is that *The Sleepwalkers* is a lovingly researched work of the highest scholarship.” (Niall Ferguson) “This compelling examination of the causes of World War I deserves to become the new standard one-volume account of that contentious subject.” (Foreign Affairs) “Clark is a masterly historian. . . . His account vividly reconstructs key decision points while deftly sketching the context driving them. . . . A magisterial work.” (The Wall Street Journal) “A monumental new volume. . . . Revelatory, even revolutionary. . . . Clark has done a masterful job explaining the inexplicable.” (The Boston Globe) “Easily the best book ever written on the subject. . . . A work of rare beauty that combines meticulous research with sensitive analysis and elegant prose. The enormous weight of its quality inspires amazement and awe. . . . Academics should take note: Good history can still be a good story.” (The Washington Post) “A meticulously researched, superbly organized, and handsomely written account.” (MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History) “Superb. . . . One of the great mysteries of history is how Europe’s great powers could have stumbled into World War I. . . . This is the single best book I have read on this important topic.” (Fareed Zakaria) “A thoroughly comprehensive and highly readable account. . . . The brilliance of Clark’s far-reaching history is that we are able to discern how the past was genuinely prologue. . . . In conception, steely scholarship and piercing insights, his book is a masterpiece.” (Harold Evans, *The New York Times Book Review*) “As spacious and convincing a treatment as has yet appeared. . . .

Clark's prose is clear and laced with color. (The Daily Beast) "A great book. . . An amazing narrative history of the crisis and the larger context. (Slate) "A superb account of the causes of the first world war. . . . Clark brilliantly puts this illogical conflict into context. (The Guardian) "This book is as authoritative as it is gripping. . . . Clark provides a vivid panorama of the jostling among Europe's policymakers. . . . The reader is rapt as the watchful but unseeing protagonists head for inconceivable horror. (The Independent) "Excellent. . . . Where Clark excels is in explaining how the pre-war diplomatic maneuvers resembled a giant exercise in game theory. (The Economist) "Clark's narrative sophistication, his philosophical awareness, and his almost preternatural command of his sources make *The Sleepwalkers* an exemplary instance of how to navigate this tricky terrain. The best book on the origins of the First World War that I know. (Thomas Laqueur, The London Review of Books) "One of 2013's finest nonfiction books. . . . Offers more up-to-date scholarship than you'll find in a classic like Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*. (Matthew Yglesias, Slate)

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. Providing a very smooth introductory overview of the calculations of the great

powers, Clark embodies that rare blend of competent professional and talented teacher guiding the novice through the intricacies of a grandmaster chess game. A hard act to pull off but Clark makes it look easy. For long stretches his history reads like a bestselling novel of international intrigue with the writing geared well at the level of the general reader who has a strong interest in the subject. For the most part you don't need to be a history major or a WW1 buff to read the book easily, although it is densely written and requires concentration. You might get badly bogged down, as I did, slogging through the diplomatic intricacies of the Balkan Wars but this is about the only price to be paid for a superb understanding of the origins of WW1. The "sleepwalkers" metaphor is somewhat lame.

Sleepwalking into a general European war isn't much of an improvement over "Europe was a tinderbox waiting for the match to be struck". But the text belies the title. Clark gives sleepwalking lip service but he fails to make the case. Instead he clearly demonstrates two great powers, neither of them Germany, actively promoting a general European war -- because only in that milieu can each one hope to achieve its own particular "interests". It is possible that with 'sleepwalking' Clark is taking a gentlemanly step back from his powerful narrative. If history is the story of the winning side, this is an authoritative and persuasive rebuttal. Where most WW1 historians begin with the mobilizations -- at that time acts of war in themselves -- Clark ends with the mobilizations. His history deals with the individuals who unleashed those armies, often after overcoming political opposition within their own governments. The most poignant moment in this entire convoluted story is when Tsar Nicholas II tries to call off the general mobilization: "I will not be responsible for a monstrous slaughter!" He has received a telegram from his cousin. The German Kaiser is not inclined to war if it can be avoided: "military measures on the part of Russia could be looked upon by Austria as threatening, would precipitate a calamity we both wish to avoid." A big "what-if" moment there, and a reflection on how real-life monarchs can be somewhat like chess kings -- weak pieces when it comes to aggressive combinations. The Tsar's order to cancel the mobilization lasted only 24 hours, he was prevailed upon by his government ministers and signed the fateful order.

Edmund Burke is credited with the quote, "Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it." Mark Twain amended that to, "History doesn't repeat, but it rhymes." If there's truth in this thought, it's a dismal prophecy for our future since our past is a litany of war, war, and more war. Our best hope for avoiding that dismal future is in books like *The Sleepwalkers* by Cambridge University based historian Christopher Clark. Clark is the most recent book to explain what happened to make the entire world go to war for the first time (but very regrettably, not the last). It's an ambitious goal.

As Clark writes in the first paragraph of the introduction, World War I "has spawned an historical literature of unparalleled size, sophistication and moral intensity." Clark notes that for the century that has passed since the war, both historians and the countries that fought the war have churned out thousands and thousands of pages of documents to answer that precise question. It is a major credit to Clark that he has turned this tsunami of words into a clear and convincing account. The first and most important lesson to be absorbed from Clark's book is that every nation and every leader involved before World War I are jointly responsible for starting the war. Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles that ended the war - the "War Guilt Clause" - gave total and exclusive blame to the German Empire. Clark utterly destroys that answer by documenting the buildup to the war from the point of view of each of the participants showing how every one of them played their own part in creating the circumstances that resulted in war. After documenting all this, the reader understands that the war was a result of seeing events strictly from a national point of view and the utter failure to understand that a world war was made possible for the first time because for the first time, mankind was now occupying a single world. The result of John Donne's insight, "No man is an island entire of itself" had made it impossible for a purely local war to be waged. And yet, we continue. In Serbia, the original flashpoint of World War I, a nationalist who defends the actions of ethnic Serb leaders during the 1992-95 war in Bosnia just won a convincing election victory and will lead that unhappy country into the future now. In Britain, they have rejected fellowship in common with the rest of Europe. I will avoid even commenting on what has happened here in America. Clark's excellent book won't get the attention it deserves. It will be digested and discussed by the same cast of characters while the vast, vast majority read the latest fiction on the bestseller list ... if they read at all. I don't like our chances of avoiding the dismal future that will result from not understanding why the world went to war in 1914.

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