

## The Sleepwalkers

*How Europe went to War in 1914*

*Ch. Clark*

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Who was ultimately responsible for the First World War? Of course as in all wars it is always the enemy. All wars are defensive, a deplorable but necessary reaction to the unprovoked aggressiveness of an enemy. The obvious problem is of course of the symmetry, you are the enemy of your enemy, and the whole argument collapses into nonsense. Nevertheless there is the notion of an objective judgement, of a non-partisan view from above. One may bring the case of a war to trial, to determine in an objective way who is to blame, and even if there is no single culprit, portion out the blame where it is due. The first such trial was the conference of Versailles which delivered its verdict in the peace treaty. One can hardly characterize it as non-partisan, and there are good reasons, reasons of principles if no other, to question its verdict. It was the verdict of the victors, and it is the prerogative of the victors to be able to dictate terms. This is what victory is all about. In particular a victory translates into acquisition of territories and the impositions of indemnities. Traditionally this was seen as the right of might, and the culpability of the loser consisted in simply that of having lost, an objective fact. What was basically new at Versailles was the gratuitous declaration of Germany as the sole aggressor and on whose shoulder the entire responsibility for the war should be laid. This did of course morally justify the highly punitive compensations which were imposed on Germany, as well as rubbing in the humiliation of its defeat. I write basically new, as I believe that it was not totally devoid of precedences. The peace imposed on France in the war of 1870-71 was indeed humiliating to the French (to say nothing about its hapless and farcical emperor) and did involve indemnities to be paid to the victors. As to the issue of war-guilt I am not so sure, but I would not be surprised if the French were to admit their culpability. Bismarck, who was a master of diplomacy, and only used war as temporary extensions of it, and supposedly indifferent to the glory of war, is said to have been overruled by the enthusiasm of the German military caused by their no doubt unexpected success. But of course the Franco-Prussian war, if the most brutal of Bismarck's wars, was far from being that total catastrophe that the First World War was to become, and the issue of guilt had not such momentous consequences.

The peace proceedings were dominated by three powers. That of the U.S. France and England. As we all know, the American President Wilson tried to play the dominant role, with deplorable consequences. It was the familiar case of well-meaning but naive American idealism coming to grief against the rocks of hard facts on the ground. The idea of national sovereignty, an old idea of the 19th century and liberal at its time, was to play a guiding role in the peace to end all wars (and hence herald the end of history). The irresponsible Balkan rough states, including in particular Rumania which did not even participate in the war, were rewarded, while Austria was denied unification with Germany. As with

most principles in politics, it could not be implemented consistently. Wilson were out of his depth and no match to somebody like Clemenceau, the driving force to impose harsh measures on the Germans, for no other apparent reason than simply to settle scores. In fact so unabashedly did the French pursue their objectives, that the English delegation headed by their prime minister Lloyd George, started to feel more and more sympathy for the German plight. Orwell writes that after the War, the English had learned to admire the Germans and despise the French<sup>1</sup>. As the English being reluctant actors to start out with, with no particular axe to grind, this might very well be true<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore the folly of punitive indemnities was pointed out by Keynes as being self-defeating, and in subsequent years renegotiations of the terms were successfully concluded by the Germans.

The war itself was a human catastrophe unequalled up to that day in Western Europe<sup>3</sup>, but one may argue that the consequences of the peace paved the way for an even bigger catastrophe, namely the sequel of the war. In the case of Germany it was not even clear that it had lost the war, let alone being the sole responsibility for it. At the time of the cease fire its army was still intact, no foreign troops were stationed on its soil. Of course had the war continued, the combined resources of the Entente, supplemented with fresh American troops, would eventually have prevailed. But how many years would that have taken, and how many casualties and in this case even civilian victims<sup>4</sup>? One should applaud the German high command for its foresight and deplore the fact that such wisdom was not reached bilaterally at a far earlier stage. Although the spirit of revenge is not a commendable one, as already noted above, it is still a very human one, and few things are sweeter than its satisfaction. The humiliation of a defeat, more on paper than on the ground, must have fed a powerful resentment among the Germans in most levels of society, the eventual if temporary satisfaction of which we are just too familiar with. The Second World War was a consequence of the First (in fact for obvious tautological reasons there cannot be a Second without the First) but not only that, one can in fact argue that they should be thought of as one war, with a brittle truce in the middle. Thus the question of German war guilt takes on a very strong retroactive aspect. Their culpability as to the second is hard to deny, and hence the culpability of the first is seen as proven. In fact the German culpability is so strongly felt that the most vocal proponents of German guilt are Germans themselves. Guilt produces self-pity whose expression is inevitably masochistic<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Jünger in his 'Stahlgewitter' likewise writes appreciatively about the courage of the English. Jünger was of course somewhat of a psychopath, as was Churchill, who similarly extolled military virtues.

<sup>2</sup> The sympathy for the Germans I have inferred from McMillan's book on the Versailles treaty, while Orwell's opinion I read many years ago, making a deep impression on me, as things tend to do, which you read in your youth.

<sup>3</sup> French war memorials are mainly devoted to the First World War during which the country suffered demographic consequences, the Second World War by contrast, had very little impact in comparison.

<sup>4</sup> One should not forget the embargo imposed on Germany, with the intention of starving the civilian population to submission. One should also not underestimate domestic unrest as a cause for the loss of will when it came to the German war machine

<sup>5</sup> One is reminded of the supposedly enthusiastic response of the German public to the accusations of Goldhagen as to being the willing executioners

Why are the Germans guilty? There is a short but apparently very persuasive answer: they are the modern Huns. Anti-German feeling was supposedly far more vicious at the onset of the First World War than during that of the Second, and once again I am referring to Orwell. During the First World War they unprovoked violated the neutrality of Belgium and concomitantly perpetrated a lot of atrocities, used poisonous gas, and embarked on uninhibited submarine warfare. When I watched documentaries on the First World War in my late childhood, the Germans were invariably portrayed as the bad guys, and Churchill concluded his memoirs of that war as of having finally wrenched the deadly weapon from that monster of a German Nation, or words to that effect. The effect on me was an instinctive sympathy for the Germans, which naturally will influence the reading of Clark's book and my writing of the essay on it.

The purpose of Clark's book is not to ask who was guilty, in fact to do away with the question altogether of why did the war start at all, as being misleading and unnecessarily restrictive. Instead one should ask how the war started. This is an attitude which has reaped huge benefits in natural science, and one may see the birth of modern science, and its liberation from the shackles imposed by Aristotle, in doing away with 'why' questions and the preoccupation with teleology, and instead concentrate on 'how' questions, preferably with a strong quantitative element. This obviously goes deeper than mere empiricism, which becomes a consequence of the philosophical shift, rather than its driving engine. Just compare the questions. 'Why are atoms small?' and 'How small are the atoms?'

However, in history it is not so easy to make a distinction between 'how' and 'why', especially if you strip the latter of any teleological ambitions. As Collingwood never tires of pointing out, history is driven by decisions of human actors, and it is the business of the historian to reconstruct the past into the present, and in particular to reconstruct the thoughts and motivations which lie behind the decisions and make them understandable. Of course it is not easy to reconstruct the inner thoughts of human beings, especially if they are long since dead, but the point of Collingwood is to emphasize the gulf between natural history and human history, as between nature and humans. To him history is the essential of philosophy and humanism, and as such to be contrasted to natural science. One may argue that with Darwinism, there is no longer any such division, the human mind is just one aspect of Nature among others, be it maybe the most sophisticated; yet given the primitive state of our epistemology, this ontology has few practical consequences. There is no way we can derive human thought from the interaction of elementary particles, complete materialism as an epistemological project may in fact forever be beyond the reach of humans<sup>6</sup>. Thus in spite of the ambitions of the author, the book will invariably lead to conclusions about guilt. As there is comparatively little on the machinations of the Germans in the book, the inevitable conclusion is that their role in bringing the war about is relatively secondary. This does in particular imply that they hardly can have been the guilty party, a conclusion that invariably will be viewed as controversial and in many quarters seen as being built on the flimsiest of arguments. Of course the point of Clark's book is not primarily to exonerate the Germans, but to show that it was a collective tragedy, in which no one exercised any control. Unlike previous accounts in which the

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<sup>6</sup> One may be reminded of the issue of determinism. Even if true, it would have few consequences. In fact it could not have any consequences at all, if interpreted literally, beyond its literal ones.

follies of the actors have been emphasized, and the whole outcome the result of criminal stupidity, Clark goes to length to show the intricacies of the situation, with so many independent actors, and so many exploding cascades of contingencies, that the individual actors were so out of their depths, as to make any purely rational decisions impossible. It shows that the First World War was not something that could have been easily avoided, nor was it inevitable, at least not in the sense of there being a sequence of interlocking events which by the compulsion of a logical argument lead to a necessary conclusion, in particular there were no designed such chains, meaning the war was not planned. Yet, one may still argue that some kind of explosion may have been inevitable, that pressures were building up that could not be indefinitely defused. Had it not happened one way, it would have happened some other way. Such speculations may land us precariously close to the most sterile of all occupations, namely the counterfactual speculations pertaining to the march of history<sup>7</sup>.

I recall vividly a day in August 1964 when it was announced on the radio that on that day fifty years ago the First World War had started. I knew about it of course, the knowledge and the general course of it I must have acquired a few years earlier. I had just turned fourteen at the time, and my paternal grandmother was still alive, in fact sitting with us at the table outside in the garden. She had been twenty-two when the war started. It seemed to me to be very long ago, now fifty years later it still seems long ago, but in a sense not quite as long ago as back then. This is a paradox, that also is noticed by Clark himself<sup>8</sup>. The reason being that in many ways the political situation of today is closer to that epoch than it was fifty years ago. At that time, Clark explains, one may have been more focused on the quaintness of the times, today we share the globalization, the travel across European borders without passports, and a plethora of independent political players. As well as the awareness of franchised terrorism. Back in 1964 political life was frozen in the Cold War, and the First World War had very little significance as to the political problems of the time. It simply looked quaint. Nowadays, it gives us pause for thought.

What did I know about its origins at the time? The volatile situation on the Balkans, a peninsula of immature and irresponsible states. The murder of some Austrian royalty, but what that had to do with the war puzzled me, I recall morbid pictures of the murdered couple and the seizure of Princip. The latter picture was very confusing. Who was Princip among all those people wearing fezes? And what was going on? Then there was the idea of Germany, recently unified, wanting a place in the sun. The hidden message seemed to

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<sup>7</sup> If Hitler had not appeared and with him the Second World War, how would it have made us feel any relief? We would never have known what we were spared, just as we do not know what we have been spared, by history taking different paths in the past. On one general principle almost anything in the past has a bearing on the existence of anyone being born afterwards. This can be seen as the butterfly effect in chaos theory, elegantly presented already at the turn of the century by the prominent French mathematician Henri Poincare, incidentally cousin of the fateful French President Poincaré, who plays such a pivotal role in Clark's account.

<sup>8</sup> There is of course an obvious explanation. In 1964 I was fourteen, the event occurred 36 years before I was born. When you are fourteen, thirty-six years is indeed a very long time, much less so than when you are 64.

be that Germany was constrained and wanted more space. An expanding empire pressing on its neighbors, making the whole scene burst into war. Maybe this does not differ so much from what historians still believe?

Many years ago I read the popular work by Tuchman - *The Guns of August*<sup>9</sup>. It is pointedly partisan with an almost hysterical anti-German bias. However, as a dramatic presentation it is superior to that of Clark's, hardly surprising as those are the well-known advantages of a partisan point of view, it makes for clarity and economy of facts. More interesting was the work of Kennan - *The Fateful Alliance*<sup>10</sup>. It does not touch at all upon the drama of July 1914, but how the unlikely alignment of France with Russia came about, as the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria and Russia began to disintegrate. There were no natural interests shared between the two countries, except a common concern with the new powerful Germany. Kennan's account is focused, leisurely and thorough, and a pure delight to read. He takes the time to present the various actors and to analyze their motives and the intricacies of the diplomatic game, something he himself as an old diplomat was eminently qualified to do. Clark's canvas is much broader and within the constraints of a book intended for the extended market, does not have the space to present portraits in the same loving detail, as did Kennan. Thus, with few exceptions, most of the characters presented remain nothing but names, and it would almost have been useful to have a list of the cast in the appendix as to refer to occasionally.

The story that Clark has to tell concerns from the very start the so called Balkan tinder-box. We are thrown *media res* into the cold-blooded murder of the Serbian King and his wife. We are being privy how the assassins drag him and his consort out of their hiding place, shoot them, and hack away at their dying bodies with a fury that bespeaks a blood thirsty passion gone rampant, only to toss them over a railing to fall to their final destruction. In so doing the hand of the king clutches the railing, is he still alive? has his flame not yet been completely extinguished? The assassins unceremoniously hack away his clutching fingers with a saber cut and the digits rattle down to the ground below along with the rest of the mutilated corpse. Our sympathies are wholly with the hapless King and his wife. Then we are being privy to the background, and our outrage is somewhat muted and mollified, yet the antics of such a nation hardly qualifies it as a civilized one. And in fact we are presented by the spectacle of the newly emerged nation of Serbia, fueled with hysterical nationalist phantasies, who later will join with its Balkan neighbors in a feeding frenzy on the decomposing body of the disintegrating Ottoman empire during a succession of Balkan wars, the second of which led to a fall-out between the competing hyenas over their spoils. Serbia extended its territory drastically, drunk on their success, their subsequent treatments of the population of their newly acquired acquisitions left much to be desired from a human rights point of view, although then as now, diplomatic protocol did not admit too blatant an account of the actual proceedings. The Serbs were obsessed by the vision of a liberated Slavic nation liberated from the oppression of the Austria-Hungarian empire. A new Slavic empire to be headed by the Serbs of course. This might seem to be in accordance with the general march of history, a destiny it had fallen on the lot of the proud Serbs to fulfill, and any power who had the temerity to try and

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<sup>9</sup> It must have been in the early 80's)

<sup>10</sup> This must have been read in the late 90's

get in the way surely deserved to be relegated to the dust-bin of history, to which the Austrian-Hungarian along with the Ottoman surely belonged. But of course Serbia had a rival, a fellow Slavic nation to boot, namely Bulgaria.

Serbia is presented as a rough state if small and ultimately insignificant, a small dog with a big-dog attitude. When the author compares it with its powerful adversary Austria-Hungary our sympathies inevitably drift to the latter, although we normally tend to instinctively route for the underdog. The Austria-Hungarian empire, somewhat hampered by Hungary, was a multi-ethnic empire, liberal in many ways <sup>11</sup>, with a benevolent emperor of long standing (the legendary Franz Joseph). Its capital - Vienna - was a cultural and scientific center. When Austria-Hungary formally annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908-09, something which caused great resentment among Slavophiles, although initially seconded by the Russian Foreign Minister Izvolsky, it took a most responsible and benevolent attitude towards the backwards country, improving its infrastructure upgrading its educational system. In all ways behaving like the good government we all crave for.

The drama of the assassination in Sarajevo is hard to resist in a popular work, and Clark makes the most of it, extending the narrative as much as possible keeping the suspense without sliding into tedium. The fact that it happened is of course of momentous importance, it was the proverbial flutter of the winged butterfly that caused the tornado of the First World War. How it happened, is of less importance, although our curiosity is whetted and demands to be satisfied. The choice of the victim, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was chosen with some care. For one thing he was the next in line of succession, more or less immediate in view of the advanced age of his uncle. Secondly, although not a popular man<sup>12</sup>, lacking the necessary political charisma that projects well publicly, he was nevertheless quite politically able with liberal views, especially when it came to the standing of ethnic minorities such as those of the Slavs, as well as toning down smouldering militarism. His ascendancy thus threatened to undercut the pan-Slavic movement, depriving it of the necessary resentment it needed. Terrorism in those days were inspired by the Russian model of the late 19th century. It meant aiming for the powerful, the Russian Tsar Alexander II being a case in point, not hapless innocent civilians as nowadays. One may in this see a certain extenuating factor, maybe even endowing the activity with a certain romanticism. Five assassins were sent to Sarajevo in anticipation of that fateful day<sup>13</sup>, the idea if one lost the nerve there would be others to step in. In other words this was a highly organized assignment, not nothing spontaneously arranged on the spot. There was a failed attempt in the morning, just as in the case of Alexander II, other assassins did lose their nerves as expected, but unexpectedly there was a second chance for the young Princip, after it had been decided that the program should nevertheless be continued after the morning attempt, be it with some minor changes. There were some confused orders, the driver took a wrong turn into a dead-end street and the car<sup>14</sup> having no reverse it had

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<sup>11</sup> not the least as to their attitudes to Jews, in fact even their notorious anti-semite Karl Luger, the one-time mayor of Vienna, was, according to Stefan Zweig, a very nice guy.

<sup>12</sup> Definitely not loved by his uncle, who never got over the tragic and romantic death of his own son

<sup>13</sup> Which was seen by Serbia as unnecessarily provocative, and there may even have been warnings to that effect, which it was in the interest of both parties to play down after the fact.

<sup>14</sup> Note a car, not a horse driven wagon, although the Royal couple was dressed up in what we now

to be pulled by hand. Princip was at the scene and the rest is history, as the plumed hat of the victim fell from its head.

This was the shot that started the First World War in the standard narrative, but it would be naive to lay all the blame on the narrow shoulders of this teenage boy of nineteen. In fact due to his age he got away with his life during a subsequent trial. The Austrian government showing magnanimity. The whole thing did of course cause quite an uproar and understandably setting off a crisis between Serbia and Austria. If the matter would have been properly investigated it would have revealed culpability high up in the Serbian government invariably leading to a crisis in the same. Not surprisingly the Serbians were reluctant to be accommodating, the Austrian as a result becoming frustrated, and the whole thing eventually ending up in a carefully worded ultimatum. Now was this such an outrageous demand after all, Clark asks. Considering the circumstances would this not in our age have been seen as a very reasonable step? Can a country remain passive when a neighboring state is sponsoring terrorism on its very territory. Nevertheless the ultimatum was seen as an outrage, an unpardonable insolence directed at a sovereign state. The Serbs were given 48 hours in which to respond. Their ministers were spread across the country due to the upcoming election and pleaded for an extension, not given on the not unreasonable grounds that the country was small<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless their frantic activity resulted eventually in a carefully worded reply that even generated the admiration of the Austrian officials. The reply managed to cede, in words so polite as to verge on obsequiousness, almost nothing of substance. It was of course aimed at depicting itself as the hapless victim of a superior power, and at the time it seemed to have succeeded. Contemporaries, as opposed to people of today, chastened by the disintegration of Yugoslavia, did indeed accord it underdog status.

Now what did the Austrian think they had to gain by a punitive military mission into Serbia, which would prove, as they had occasion to suspect, a most tenuous and enemy? And more importantly why was this conflict not localized? What interest did Germany and France have as regards to Serbia and the Balkans, and more to the point what was the issue at stake for England? The only possible explanation is the pre-existence of alliances.

Austria, Germany and Russia had for most of the 19th century been allied in the Triple Alliance. During a few fateful years at that end of that century, masterly presented by Kennan in his book already referred to, this Triple Alliance had been allowed to disperse, and Italy, as a most unreliable member, to succeed Russia. The Russian alignment with France was unprecedented, and as noted above, could serve no other purpose than to be directed against Germany. Now Russia did have some legitimate interests in the Balkans, having played a major role in the gradual disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Being essentially a landlocked country, its main naval outlet was the Black Sea and hence the Straits were of vital importance to it. In fact it would be in its longterm interests to take possession of Istanbul, and thus to see the total disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Austria was its only rival, and the emerging Slavic states their natural allies. In fact Bulgaria was strategically more important to it than Serbia, on the other hand Bulgaria could be a rival as far as Istanbul was concerned. Anyway the relations between Russia

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would consider quaint attire, the Arch Duke with a hat replete with a plume of ostrich feathers

<sup>15</sup> Of course this can be seen as rubbing it in further.

and Serbia were very tight, and especially the Russian envoy Hartwig<sup>16</sup> played a very important role to foster the tight Russo-Serbian ties, and thus to strengthen the resolve of that little state. Thus it became very clear that if Austria would attack Serbia, Russia would feel obligated to attack Austria. Thus a localization would be impossible. In a fight between Russia and Austria, clearly Russia would prevail, especially if Austria also had to deal with little Serbia, which would not be easy to subjugate. Following a successful war, Russia would have a free hand in the Balkans, along with its client states, and the final destruction of the Ottoman empire would surely follow, and Russia would finally have control over the Black Sea, earlier attempts foiled fifty years earlier at the Crimean war. But of course if Germany would, as expected enter on the Austrian side, the situation would be very different. The Russians would not singlehandedly be able to fight Germany alone, especially not with Austria to contend with as well, and who knows the Ottoman empire might also want to join. In this way the Franco-Russian alliance becomes crucial. And Clark spends much of the final account highlighting the visit of the French President Raimond Poincaré to St-Petersburg in the critical days of late July when Austria was about to launch its ultimatum (the fact of which had already been leaked and thus making it bereft of some of its power). According to Clark there were a lot of highly aggressive talks of remarkable bellicosity between the Russians and the French bolstering their respective morales. In short, if there was a cause of the First World War it was in the existence of that very alliance, formed to encircle the Germans. This of course begs the question why it was in the interest of the French to wage war with Germany. Were they trapped into a net of obligations they had lost control over? Only by affirming the Russians of military support could they have any chance of continuing the alliance whose longterm benefits they hardly could afford to relinquish. They were forced to put the cards on the table. However, in the account of Clark it was the French who urged the Russians on. Was it mere rhetorics, hoping that they would not have to make good on their promises? The Russians on their side were getting cold feet. They knew that they could handle Austria, but hardly Germany. In spite of the Crimean War and above all the debacle against Japan, the immensity of the empire suggested a huge strength, at least in quantitative terms, which in war seem to make a difference in the long run. Anyway the stakes were being raised. A mobilization was ordered, a full one, which however, was personally counter-ordered by the Czar into a partial one. The Czar actually had that power to act. However, the interference by the Czar had but a short duration, the logic of the whole thing demanded a full mobilization or none at all. There was no plan B, such as a partial mobilization, which had to be improvised on the spot, and could lead to nothing but complete confusion. The intervention of the Russian Czar may warrant a short digression on the roles of the heads of states in the conflict.

European Royalty was highly intermarried, one may say highly inbred. Main actors like Nicholas, Wilhelm and George were more or less cousins. One may think of the war as a family quarrel, just as many European wars in the past were waged against

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<sup>16</sup> Many of the Russian diplomats had German names, reflecting the importance in the modernization of the country, to some extent brought about by a Western, especially German influx. This is a bit confusing, not only as we do not associate German descendants with such Slavophilia, but also in keeping track of the nationalities of the involved ministers and diplomats.



cousins. They have sometimes been portrayed as indeed main actors, and the war indeed not unlike a family quarrel. When it came to George V in England, he certainly had no constitutional power. It was different with Nicholas II and Wilhelm III. The situation in which they were placed was ambiguous. They had constitutional rights, and could veto decisions. They also had unrestricted right of access to all papers including state secrets. They certainly could act decisively, would they have had the heads and the stomachs for it. The point is they had not. They were simply ineffectual because they were of limited intelligence, lazy and pampered, and with very little genuine interest in state affairs. Thus they were happy to relegate the tedious business of governing to the professionals. True they liked the pomp and they liked the idea of being in charge. Especially Wilhelm was prone to grandiose pronouncements causing more than once some minor crisis to the embarrassed and exasperated government. Wilhelm was liable to talk tough when there was no immediate danger, but as soon as a situation became hotter, he immediately lost his nerve and backed down. In other words he was more of a clown than a war-monger as he has often been depicted as. Between the Czar and the emperor there were of course familial ties, and in the middle of the crisis Wilhelm wrote a letter in English to his dear Cousin Nicky calling for caution and restraint, which provoked the abovementioned counter-order of the Czar. However, Clark is adamant, although much has been made of this correspondence as it was discovered shortly after the war, that this should not be seen as a high-level interaction between close relatives and sovereigns, but was masterminded by the respective government, as just one more diplomatic channel. The monarchs had no control over the actual events, which they were even less able to survey than their respective governments.

The German response to the Russian mobilization was one of their own. This was more or less inevitable, as a general mobilization was tantamount to a declaration of war. Once the wheels started to roll, there was no calling back. No stopping either. The German mobilization following the so called Schlieffen plan, was intricate and involved a two front mobilization, it being impossible to just mobilize against the Russians. Any attempts at halting it, drove the Field Marshal Moltke <sup>17</sup> to tears. It just would not make sense. Any attempt of reversing would mean that the German Army would fall into total disarray. Or so at least it was felt. Crucial at the time was how the English would react. For one thing they had no interest at all in the Balkans, although they may have had some sentimental regard for the operetta like entity of Serbia, or Servia as it was usually referred to. Their natural instincts would have been to stay neutral. Their suspicion of Russia was great, as they were rivals in Central Asia, their alliance to France was stronger but not compulsively so. Most of the ministers in the cabinet was against any taking of an active stand, except for a few exemptions, notably that of Churchill, who advocated an active course of action. Nevertheless in a few days the dissenting activists managed to convince the rest of their colleagues who were more vacillating in their stand and thus more vulnerable under pressure. Once a course of action has been decided upon, it is easy to retroactively motivate it. The ostensible reasons thus play very little role in a decision process. One such reason was that the French Atlantic coast was undefended their navy

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<sup>17</sup> Not to be confused with his elder relative Moltke from Parchim, who had been a hero during Bismarck's wars

being concentrated in the Mediterranean, and thus that the English had a moral obligation to defend it against the Germans. It is doubtful whether such a formal agreement did exist between the two countries. Another reason was that the outrage of Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality was a cause for action. There existed no such obligation, in fact most ministers in the cabinet, including people like Churchill, had some understanding for its necessity as a military contingency. The moral outrage that was later exhibited was thus quite hypocritical. and played to the galleries

The invasion of Belgium was in fact an integral part of the Schlieffen plan, furthermore showing that there was no clear demarcation between mobilization and war, the declaration of the latter being after the fact. But the Germans made the mistake of trying to be fair-minded and presented a request to the Belgians in the form of an ultimatum. As in the case of the Serbians, the Belgians could not with any semblance of national dignity accept it. National dignity counted for a lot in these days. Had the Germans simply passed through Belgium making up for the inconvenience later, there would have been much less loss of blood and affronted dignity, to say nothing about a loss of momentum. Clearly Clark regrets the German mistake.

Now, it is possible to put the blame on the English entry into the War. Certainly Churchill and his gang have a lot to answer to. Although patriotic fervor was easily whipped up, there was some opposition to the War. Russell, my teenage hero, famously opposed it, and had to spend time in jail<sup>18</sup>. While many other opponents risked the death penalty for desertion, although there was no conscription everything done on a voluntary basis. The argument against the war being that the Germans were in effect the good guys, at least compared to the Russians.

Now the English entering the war scene, how much did it really matter? Did they tip the scales? After all it was a naval country not prepared to bring large armies onto continental soil. Yet the English continental involvement in the First World War turned out to be much bigger than in the Second, although initially it could only muster an expeditionary force. As noted, counter-factual speculations is a risky business, but it does not seem unreasonable to assume that without the English the Germans may have won, and maybe even swiftly so. Had their initial momentum held, especially if they had not allowed themselves to dither on the Belgian issue, they may have come to a decisive victory, before being bogged down in a trench war. The war would have been much shorter, there would have been much less destruction and loss of life. And the war might have turned out as it had been initially envisioned, as a brief affair and a showing of strength.

This puts the question of whether a German victory would have been such a good thing. Russell thought so, and strong arguments, if necessarily counter-factual can be harnessed, to buttress the case. And on Germany Clark does not have too much to say. German considerations, although not neglected, do get far less attention, than Serbia, Austria on one hand and Russia France on the other. There are references to the Germans become conscious of their new political and military strength, that they too wanted a place in the sun, as noted above, not to squeeze anyone else out, but also being conscious of their

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<sup>18</sup> Which was not such an unpleasant experience after all. When reading Stratchey's 'Eminent Victorians' he supposedly laughed so much, as to be upbraided by the jailer to the effect that one was not allowed to have so much fun in a prison.

precarious geographical position, possibly facing the worst nightmare, that of a war on two widely separated fronts. The threat of France was real enough, as a reaction against the French debacle in 1870 and its loss of Alsace-Lorraine. But even more threatening was the case of Russia, whose vast geographical extension easily provoked paranoid phantasies, in spite of recent debacles, already referred to. There were talks about having to strike soon, before it would be too late. In other words to launch a pre-emptive war. In fact peace and avoidance of war are the strongest incitements to wage them. Similar worries were present among the French and the Russians, in fact the only basis for their alliance. But one should never confuse contingency plans and worst scenarios with actual intentions and plans, Clark warns the reader. It is rather hard to prove, as anything in history, that one part actually deliberately strove for war. Clark's contention is that one cannot prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that Germany was the sole perpetrator of the war, as had been decided on during the Versailles conference. If anyone should be blamed, it would be the irresponsible policy of the French, if one interprets the sympathies of Clark correctly. The problem with any historical analysis, is that it is very hard not to take sides, to have sympathies and antipathies. On the other hand an account that would manage to remove all such human reactions would be of no interest. As Collingwood reminds us over and over again, history is about reconstructing the motives and thoughts of the historical actors. And all such human motives and thoughts invariably provoke human emotions and reactions.

The title of the book is 'The Sleepwalkers' strongly suggesting that the responsible actors were confused and felt themselves powerless. They did not act as much as react, they had to contend with a sequence of *fait accompli*. In short it was a matter of impersonal Fate beyond human reach and control. Europe was locked in an inevitable conflict of interests, tied by alliances. The conflict had no peaceful resolution and as in a game of dominoes one thing led to another. What could possibly have broken this spiral?

More international co-operation? The world was already quite globalized at the time, and it would take almost a century before the same level would be achieved again. People travelled through Europe unencumbered by passports, something that to someone growing up in the 50's and 60's seemed simply incredible. But of course there were mutual mistrust and rearmaments, a sequence of affairs, which ruffled feathers, but were diverted before going too far. Maybe Sarajevo might have been added to that list, only for something else to occur subsequently. Rather than bemoaning the madness of the First World War, one may think of ways in which it could have been avoided. Of course the problem is easy to resolve retroactively, when there is no way to do any testing. But in a world where everybody seem to intent upon being more and more powerful at the expense of its neighbors, a solution is only possible if some concede powers to others. If either Austria-Hungary voluntarily lets itself disintegrate, or Serbian Nationalism is squashed once and for all. Now in retrospect any solution seems better than the one that was given - namely that of War. In a peaceful Europe, it would have been inevitable that Germany would have accrued more and more economical and hence political power. This is admittedly not a prospect that would appeal to many people, but given the alternatives, what would we have preferred? We may live with it, but for the people at the time, they would have been less inclined to concede. And once again we are forced into the contradictions of counter-

factual speculations. Had there been no First World War, we would not have known what we had been spared, and would counterfactually speculate in this counterfactual world, that it would have been indeed a good thing to have had a war at the time, a war which of course would have been short and swift and a refreshing show of strength, and put things on the right path.

And at the time there was a lot of patriotic feeling and a sense of invigoration. There had been too long a period of peace, there was a need to strengthen the spirit. If so, maybe it was inevitable in the same sense that lemmings run to their extinction, pressed on across steep precipices.

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