

Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914 by Christopher Clark

Review by Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.

Professor Christopher Clark teaches modern European history at the University of Cambridge. His book provides a comprehensive description of the polarization of the European continent prior to World War I. He recounts the causes and events that lead to one of this horrific event. Using newly obtained information, the author presents a fresh look World War I. He uses numerous primary sources, scientific papers, diary entries and diplomatic cables to analyze the political and social environment of the period preceding the war.

Sleepwalkers does not focus on the specific battles or the brutalities of the war. Clark's focus is on the relationships and the events that led some well-intentioned heads of government into the bloody conflict. He illustrates how failures to understand the fighting in the Balkans and the positions of others would put the nations of Europe on the path to war.

Clark uses the term 'sleepwalking' to explain the path nations took to war. He explains, "...the protagonists of 1914 were sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world. The more convincing and terrifying reality is that no nation really meant to wage war, but each sleepwalked into it." Clark shows how the rivalries, ethnic differences, and nationalistic tendencies contributed to the instability of pre-war Europe. He also argues that the elites of Europe were competing to prove their manliness in battle. Clark claims they were "suffering from a crisis of masculinity."

Clark organizes his argument into three parts: 'Roads to Sarajevo,' 'One Continent Divided,' and 'Crisis.' Clark's approach is guided by four questions: "1) why did Russia and France ally against Germany in 1890; 2) why did Britain support this alliance; 3) 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?"

In the Introduction Clark draws a correlation to present times. He calls World War I a "modern event." He writes, "Behind the outrage of Sarajevo was an avowedly terrorist organization with a cult of sacrifice, death and revenge; but this organization was extra-territorial, without a clear geographical or political location, it was scattered in cells across political borders, it was unaccountable, its links to any sovereign government were oblique, hidden and certainly very difficult to discern from outside the organization. Indeed, one could even say that July 1914 is less remote from us – less illegible – now than it was in the 1980s."

Clark's book looks at the Ottoman and Russian key players and the tensions that existed between the two empires. *Sleepwalkers* emphasizes that World War I was not inevitable. Instead it resulted from grave misinterpretation and mistake by the diplomatic and political leaders of the nations of Europe before and after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914.

The countries of Europe had formed alliance in the midst of mutual distrust to promote their causes. Common sense and diplomacy was replaced by inflexibility. There was a reckless disregard for the costs of war as leaders competed to prove their manliness. Volker R. Berghahn concluded, "Considering its political, economic and sociocultural consequences, it is no surprise that World War I has been called the 'primordial catastrophe' of the twentieth century." Christopher Clark explains how this primordial catastrophe came to be in *Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*.