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July 1914: Countdown To War



Synopsis

When an assassin gunned down Archduke Franz Ferdinand in late June 1914, no one could have imagined the shocking bloodshed that would soon follow. Indeed, as award-winning historian Sean McMeekin reveals in *July 1914*, World War I might indeed have been avoided entirely had it not been for the actions of a small group of statesmen in the month after the assassination. Whether they plotted for war or rode the whirlwind nearly blind, these men sought to capitalize on the fallout from Ferdinand's murder, unwittingly leading Europe toward the greatest cataclysm it had ever seen. A deeply-researched account of the genesis of World War I, *July 1914* tells the gripping story of the month that changed the course of the 20th century.

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Customer Reviews

On June 28, 1914, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, Heir to the Throne of Austria-Hungary, made a ceremonial visit to the city of Sarajevo with his morganatic wife Sophie. Members of a Serbian terrorist organization dedicated to wresting Austria-Hungary's south Slav provinces away from her lined the streets that day, determined to assassinate the Archduke. One succeeded, and the aftereffects of his fatal two bullets (Sophie was also shot and killed) reverberate through the next century. In a little over a month's time the major European powers were embroiled in conflict, and over the next four years the war expanded until it became a global affair which ended with the collapse of a European order which had lasted for a century, laying the groundwork for an even larger global war a generation later. It is a well known truism that history is written by the winners.

Because Germany and Austria-Hungary were defeated in World War I they were assigned the entirety of the blame for the war in the peace treaties, and most historians have tended to concur with it. Sean McMeekin's fine new history of the missteps that led to war at the end of July, 1914, does not entirely refute that judgement, but it does add in new layers of complexities. McMeekin's approach is to take the reader step by step through the diplomatic negotiations that began almost immediately after the news of the Sarajevo assassinations hit the European newspapers. Few in Austria-Hungary mourned the Archduke and his wife, but many were determined their country's fading international image be restored through a short, victorious little war of reprisal against Serbia. Serbia's traditional Russian protector also felt the need to regain prestige through conflict.

This work by historian Sean McMeekin shows in detail the one month leading up to the Great War after the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria while on a visit to Sarajevo, Bosnia. The author does a great job of taking the reader through the process day by day as foreign ministers and heads of state reacted to the event and formulated the responses that eventually led to world war by early August. This book attempts to blame Russia and France as the primary culprits responsible for the war. I have to admit that I read in detail and enjoyed his 2011 work *The Russian Origins of the First World War* which also placed the blame on the Russians and French. Rather than all of this being a "tragedy of miscalculation" as other historians have claimed, or totally the fault of Germany and Austria (losers do not get to write history), McMeekin in this work lays it squarely on, primarily Russia, claiming that her need for a warm water port and the need to access to the Mediterranean was vital to her economic well-being, and the need to bring allies like France and England was critical for her survival and progress ahead. And it is a major revisionist theory but one I found interesting, while others claimed he cherry picked documents. I don't know enough to make that call. The same theory translates into this book, although the author does not hit on it as hard (and so far the reviews have not hit on the author as some on the previous work) and he is going into much detail on who did what and when during the critical month before the firing began.

The title informs clearly the potential reader what he/she is about to read. As there are thousands of books on the origins of the First WW, the first question is why select this one. The answer is, in my opinion, because it is one of the better ones in describing the events and because it is very well written, with literary skill in modern but elegant prose. Also because it is bound to be controversial. The book is a blow by blow account of how, within one month, Europe went from peace and prosperity to a 20 million dead war that became global and turned the rest of the 20th century

into the biggest war century of all times. It is also very scholarly with a clear text. The reader should be cautioned that the author is judgmental. He does not consider that the responsibility for starting the war, normally assigned to Austria-Hungary and Germany by many historians, is an open and shut case. He points the responsibility for this strongly to Russia and France and, I consider, he tilts more than fair to that side. Yet, I consider that, in challenging the prevailing opinion on responsibility for the war, he provides a lot of arguments and food for thought, as certainly the responsibility for this war is not a clear cut case and there are a lot of responsible states, differing only by their degree of guilt. The three main causes of War, Militarism, Nationalism and Imperialism should taint all European Nations involved, because they transformed by their adoption the 20th century into a powder keg waiting for the spark. The only innocent Nations were Belgium and Luxembourg. I do not expand on this because I stated my views in my review of *The Sleepwalkers* and this review is about this book. The three profound causes that I mentioned are not adequately covered, but they are not the stated subject of the book either.

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