

Haberdashers' School

Occasional Papers Series in the Humanities

Habs

HABERDASHERS'
BOYS' SCHOOL

Occasional Paper Number Fifty-Six

**Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* and the
Origins of World War One**

**Dr Ian St John
Stjohn_i@habsboys.org.uk**

May 2022

Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* and the Origins of World War One

Ian St John

Published in 2012, as the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak approached, Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* provides a comprehensive and sophisticated account of the diplomatic decisions that led to the beginning of World War One at the end of July 1914. Clark, a Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge, eschews a monocausal explanation of the war, or an attempt to hold up one state as primarily responsible. He does not seek to attribute guilt or blame, and he certainly breaks from the conventional narrative – established as soon as the war began, and later reaffirmed in the Fischer thesis – that Germany was chiefly to blame. If anything, in Clark's rendering Germany (together with the more tangential case of Great Britain) is the least culpable of the great states for the war, being dragged in by the actions of others and doing so reluctantly, clinging till the last minute to the hope that war might be avoided. This is not to say that Germany was not responsible. The point is that in Clark's analysis no *one* state was responsible, it was rather that all, by their actions, contrived to bring war about. Hence the 'Sleepwalkers' of the title. Each of the players, from Serbia to Austria to Germany to France to Britain, acted in ways that seemed necessary in view of their strategic interests without properly grasping that the scale and immensity of the war that they were to bring about would eclipse any particular goal they might have and would, in the end, sweep away most of the world they thought they were fighting for. In a way, although knowingly entering the war, they unthinkingly blundered into an existential crisis beyond what each of them could contemplate.

This paper seeks to distil the essence of Clark's argument. It does not critically engage with what is said. To do so with any authority would entail a degree of expertise far beyond that possessed by the author. But Clark's book is long, dense, and complex, and more bought, I suspect, than read. It is therefore hoped that a clear exposition of Clark's leading ideas will be of service to some. As an activity it has certainly been useful to me.

We start by reviewing the historical background to the outbreak of war from the perspective of each of the major players in turn. This is Clark's method and it immediately helps us to understand the logic that led each state to believe that war, while not the best outcome, was far from being the worst.



The Diplomatic Context for War

Serbia

The first thing one encounters in this book is the restless, scheming, and aggressive nationalism of Serbia. Most of us know, of course, that the war was precipitated by the assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Ferdinand, by a Serbian terrorist during a visit to Sarajevo in Austrian-controlled Bosnia. But we don't

generally, I think, realise how this act was part and parcel of a systematic programme of aggressive and violent nationalist assertion by the Serbian state. The Serbian state in question was founded in 1903 when the existing Serbian King, Alexander, and his wife Draga, were murdered in the royal palace by dissident members of the Serbian army and their butchered bodies thrown from the balcony. A new King, Petar Karadjordjevic, was installed, but from this point on effective power within the state lay with the officers who led the *coup*, most notably Dragutin Dimitrijevic - more usually known as Apis. These officers were strong Serbian patriots and saw it as their destiny to unite all Serbians, and all lands historically associated with the Serbian people, in one single Serbian state, and to make that state dominant in the Balkans. Having united in conspiracy to kill the King, the regicide networks continued to function conspiratorially within the state, with Apis sitting at the centre of a network of spies and terrorists, that would eventually include the Black Hand Gang, whose members killed Archduke Ferdinand. This Serbian state fought two wars in 1912 and 1913. The first was fought with the Balkan League states of Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro against Turkey, and the combined powers successfully drove the Ottomans out of most of Europe except Constantinople. Then in 1913 Serbia, Greece, Turkey, and Rumania fought a second war with Bulgaria over the spoils. Serbia emerged from these wars twice as big as it had been before. This is something to bear in mind: the Serbia that went to war with Austria in 1914 was, in effect, only one year old and was already in the process of incorporating a very large addition to its territories.

The dramatic expansion of Serbia in 1912-13 had profound implications for Great Power relations in the Balkans. First, both Bulgaria and Serbia had been patronised by their fellow Slav state, Russia, but as Serbia and Bulgaria went to war in 1913 Russia had to take sides and sided with Serbia. Russia now became much more closely connected to this aggressive, expansionist, Serbia. Second, the creation of the great Serb state was yet unfinished business, since another territory to which they laid claim and which contained a large number of Serbs was Bosnia-Herzegovina – and this was formally part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austria had annexed Bosnia in 1878, and in 1908 had formally incorporated it into its Empire. This, in retrospect, was a fatal decision, for Austria now gained a systemic Serb problem. The formal annexation of Bosnia angered the Russians and infuriated Serbian nationalists. The government in Belgrade was ready for war, but ultimately backed down as the Russians made it clear they were not ready to fight Austria over Bosnia. From this point the Serbian conspirators were determined to break Austrian power in the Balkans and add Bosnia to Serbia. To this end unrest and conspiracies were encouraged. One such group, Union or Death (otherwise known as the Black Hand Gang) was formed in Belgrade in 1911, with Apis (now Professor of Tactics at the Military Academy) one of the seven present at its foundation. Soon recruiting several thousand members, the Black Hand, writes Clark, ‘spread quickly into the structures of official Serbia, reaching out from their base within the military to infiltrate the

cadres of Serbian border guards and customs officers, especially along the Serbian-Bosnian frontier.’¹ It was the ideal vehicle for Apis’s anti-Austrian conspiracies, and in May 1914 it was decided to send three Bosnian-Serb teenagers from Belgrade into Bosnia to assassinate Franz Ferdinand on his scheduled 28 June visit to Sarajevo to inspect the Austrian army. One reason for targeting the Archduke was, ironically, his reputation as a moderate and a reformer: he planned, upon succeeding as Emperor, to grant devolved powers to the Serbian-dominated provinces of Bosnia and Serb nationalists feared this might compromise plans to win the territories for Serbia. The three young men were supplied with guns, bombs, and suicide capsules to take in case of capture. On 30 May they crossed the border into Bosnia to prepare their attack – and they were, as we know, all too tragically successful. The Austrians saw this killing for what it was – the fruit a conspiracy laid in Belgrade to challenge Austrian power in Bosnia and the Balkans. It was for this reason that they made aggressive demands upon Serbia in their ultimatum letter of 23 July, including the right to send their own security forces into Serbia to investigate the crime – demands which Serbia, proud, nationalist, militarily confident, and supported by Russia, felt able to reject and the result was war. Thus, we can say that one central reason for the outbreak of war in 1914 was Serbia’s aggressive determination to break Austrian power in the Balkans and add Bosnia to the territory of Serbia.

Austria-Hungary

A second key factor in making for war was the real and perceived weakness of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austria-Hungary was a state already bedevilled by nationalist tensions, being an empire compounded out of Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Croatians, and Rumanians, among others. To this ethnic mix they had, in 1878, added a large number of Serbians through the annexation of Bosnia. Such a large, multi-national, state found it hard to organise and pursue its objectives. Since the 1866 defeat to Prussia, a ‘dual monarchy’ of Austria and Hungary had been instituted and all key decisions had to be agreed by the governments of both Austria and Hungary. For such an empire to add large numbers of Serbians to its territories, Serbians amenable to the nationalist agitation of Serbia however well they fared under Austrian rule (and they actually did pretty well) was madness. It was Bosnia that drew Austria deeper into the febrile politics of the Balkans, and so into potential conflict with Serbia, Bulgaria, and Russia.

Irrespective of Austria’s actual weakness, its *perceived* weakness was just as important in generating the events leading to war. There was a widespread view in Europe that Austria was too riven by nationalist tensions to survive in the long run. It was, rather like Turkey had been, the Sick Man of Europe. Serbia, Russia, and France expected it to break up, and so also did many Austrians. This led to two contradictory consequences. First, it meant that Russia and Serbia did not expect Austria to assert its interests. Rather like an old family patriarch weakened by age, they expected it to

¹ C. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (Allen Lane, London, 2012), p. 40.

sit quietly in the corner, lacking the might or right to assert itself beyond its own borders. It had no future in the Balkans. Second, it also meant that Austrian policy makers feared the narrative of decay and wanted to reverse it. They were determined to re-invigorate the Austrian Empire and assert its interests. And one way to do this was through war. Were Austria to assert itself against Serbia, for example, it would rally the country, unify it around a common enemy, and eliminate the disruptive presence of Serbia upon its borders. Two rival narratives thus coexisted with potentially disastrous implications: while most powers thought that a war would dissolve the Austrian Empire and that the Austrians, for this reason, would dare not embark upon it, the Austrians themselves thought war was the only way to prevent their Empire from disintegrating. So in the internal politics of Austria and its relations with other powers in the region we have a second key reason for the war – since in 1914 it was the determination of the Austrians to avenge the killing of the heir to their throne at the hands of Serbians that led them to believe that the time had come for them to stand up for their interests and their status as a Great Power and declare war on Serbia.

Russia

Turning to the role of Russia, it must be said that of all the powers discussed in Clark's book, it is probably Russia that played the most significant part in bringing about World War in August 1914. In 1905 Russia had been defeated in a Far Eastern war by Japan. This had two relevant consequences:

1. *It caused Russia to redirect its expansionist ambitions from the East to the South-West – to the Balkans, Dardanelles, and Constantinople.* This brought Russia into rivalry with Austria in the Balkans and with Germany in Constantinople. Initially, Russia sought to patronise both Serbia and Bulgaria in the Balkans, but following the war of 1912, in which Bulgaria pressed towards Russia's cherished object of Constantinople, when war broke out between Serbia and Bulgaria in 1913, Russia supported the Serbs and came close to ordering a partial mobilisation of its army to ensure that Austria did not intervene. In the wake of the war Russian policy became more strongly pro-Serb. When the Bulgarians appealed for international loans to help rebuild their country, it was the Germans not the Russians who responded – confirming Bulgaria's drift away from Russia and towards the Triple Alliance. At the same time, Russia encouraged Serbian nationalist aggression against Austria. Baron Nikolai Hartwig, the Russian minister to Serbia, continually pushed the Serbians to pursue a strong line expansionist programme in the Balkans, making no secret, says Clark, of his 'Austrophobe and pan-Slav views' and occupying 'a position of unrivalled influence in Belgrade's political life.'¹ Also active was the Russian military attache in Belgrade, who worked with Apis and helped to fund the Black Hand Gang, which was responsible for the death of

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

Franz Ferdinand. ‘Serbia was now’, writes Clark, ‘Russia’s salient in the Balkans’, and while the Russians might talk of acting on behalf of their orthodox Slavic children in the Balkans, this was really only a ‘populist justification for a policy designed to weaken Austria-Hungary, win popularity at home and secure hegemony on the Balkan hinterland to the Turkish Straits ... Russia’s commitment to Serbia was driven by power-politics, not by the diffuse energies of pan-Slavism.’¹

2. *In response to its defeat to Japan, Russia sought to strengthen its economic and military potential.* The Russian economy grew strongly in the ten years before the War, its growth furthered by large French loans. The result was an important contrast with Austria: while everyone thought the Austrian Empire was declining and facing dissolution, observers thought that Russia was getting stronger and would, in the future, be extremely strong. An example of this kind of thinking is provided by the banker de Verneuil, who wrote to the French Foreign Minister after a trip to Russia in 1913:

There is something truly fantastic in preparation, whose symptoms must strike the mind of even the most informed would observers. I have the very clear impression that in the next thirty years, we are going to see in Russia a prodigious economic growth which will equal – if it does not surpass it – the colossal movement that took place in the United States during the last quarter of the XIXth century.²

This perception of Russian strength shaped events as much as the perception of Austrian weakness. For with Russia expected to go from strength to strength, countries like France and Britain were evermore keen to ally with her, while it led Austria and Germany to fear Russia and believe that in the long-run Russia would prevail – so that, if there *was* going to be a war, it were better that it were fought sooner rather than later.

The Franco-Russian Alliance

By the early years of the twentieth century there were two great alliances in Europe: the German-Austrian Dual Alliance (technically, with Italy, the Triple Alliance) and the French-Russian Alliance. In terms of the origin of World War One, Clark emphasises the Franco-Russian Alliance, which came in time to include, in effect, Britain too (the Triple Entente). The French were very worried about German strength, and to offset this they looked to Russia, which offered, of course, the prospect of a two-front war against Germany. But Russia was also believed to be becoming ever stronger. This was an exaggeration: Russia was not as strong and developed as observers believed and the war was to reveal this. Yet at the time this was not

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 279. For one thing, the Bulgarians were also Slavs.

² Quoted *ibid.*, p. 312.

understood. Instead, the French, convinced of Russia's strength, were determined to deepen their alliance with Russia, being worried that an emboldened and confident Russia might simply abandon France and do their own thing. Clark summarises the French President Poincare's 'security credo' as follows: 'the alliance [with Russia] is our bedrock; it is the indispensable key to our military defence; it can only be maintained by intransigence in the face of demands from the opposing bloc. These were the axioms that would frame his interpretation of the crisis unfolding in the Balkans.'¹ This thinking caused the French to lend large sums of money to Russia which helped fuel the very development that so intimidated the other powers (France included!); to encourage Russia to build railway lines to their western front with Germany so as to speed up their mobilisation for war; and to give uncritical support to Russia's policies in the Balkans, despite the fact that that support was fuelling Serbian aggression and making a war with Austria more likely – a war that would probably include France too. This was the so-called 'Balkan inception scenario.' Rather than seeking to cool Russian actions in the Balkans, France egged them on as a means to strengthen the alliance between the two countries. Indeed, the French thought if there *was* to be a war it would be best if it started in the Balkans with a Russian conflict with Austria since this would ensure that Russia remained true to the alliance and attacked Germany as the French needed them to do.

Britain

In the early years of the twentieth century the British developed closer ties with France and Russia to form the Triple Entente. This is usually seen as a response to the growing threat from Germany, pushing Britain towards France and Russia to avoid isolation. Clark disagrees. He sees these alliances as an attempt by Britain to improve relations with the powers concerned for essentially imperial reasons. To avoid conflict with France in North Africa and Egypt, Britain gave France a free-hand in Morocco in return for Britain having a free hand in Egypt. Still more important were improved relations with Russia to prevent conflict between the two countries in such territories as Persia and Afghanistan. Like other powers, Britain exaggerated Russian strength, and besides, Britain knew it would struggle to defend imperial interests in far distant places like Persia where Russia was much better geographically situated. As Sir Arthur Nicholson, the Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, wrote in May 1914:

It is absolutely essential to us to keep on the best terms with Russia, as were we to have unfriendly or even indifferent relations with Russia, we should find ourselves in great difficulties in certain localities where we are unfortunately not in a position to defend ourselves.²

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

² *Ibid.*, p. 324.

Britain's developing alliance with France and Russia was intended, therefore, not to contain Germany, but to contain France and Russia. However, although having sided with the Franco-Russian alliance for non-German reasons, the effect of allying with those powers was to push Britain into a more hostile position *vis-à-vis* Germany since that was the whole reason for the alliance for those countries. This chimed with important voices within the Foreign Office, led by the British Foreign Secretary Lord Grey, who were strongly anti-German, for reasons, thinks Clark, that were fallacious since the actual examples of Germany posing a threat to Britain were few and far between. Numerous complaints were made against Germany from within the Foreign Office, but little evidence was provided to back them up. Most notably, while Germany had been in rivalry with Britain in naval construction, by 1910 Britain had won this arms race and the German navy posed no threat to the British. So to restrain a power that Britain *did* have problems with, Russia, Britain made friendship with Russia to restrain a power, Germany, with which it did *not* have serious issues. Just as Russia's perceived growing strength caused France to want to ally with Russia, and Germany to think that an early war would be better than a late one, so did it cause Britain to want to back Russia – including in 1914 over Serbia, a war in which Britain had no real interest. Britain went to war in 1914, not to fight Germans or Austrians, but to remain on good terms with Russia.

Germany

Germany is conventionally seen as the European power that did most to bring about the war, and as everyone knows in 1919 the victorious allies forced Germany to acknowledge its war guilt. Although Clark downplays Germany's responsibility, he does acknowledge that several of Germany's actions before World War One were provocative. For example: the Kaiser's 1895 letter in support of the Boers against the British – though nothing came of it; Germany's intervention in China and Germany's protests over French actions in Morocco; the German naval expansion programme. Most significant was Germany's involvement in Turkey, where the Germans moved in to fill the void left by the withdrawal of British support for the Ottoman Empire and the defeat of Turkey at the hands of the Serbs and Bulgarians in 1912. The Germans invested heavily in Turkey and began building a railway line from Constantinople to Iraq (which the British saw as threatening their interests), and helping to rebuild the Turkish army. Germany's involvement with Turkey greatly alarmed the Russians: Russia had for long been eyeing up Constantinople and the Straits – the last thing they wanted was a strong Turkey allied with Germany! Thus when, in 1913, the Germans sent a sizeable military mission to Constantinople under Lieutenant General Liman, with plans for Liman to have an official command role within the Ottoman army and be responsible for all military training, and to take actually take control of the defence of the Straits and Constantinople, the Russians protested in vehement terms and discussed war plans. The Germans, taken aback by Russian hostility,

backed down and, though the German military mission went ahead, Liman was deprived of his commanding role within the Ottoman army.¹

Underlying German policy, says Clark, was fear of the future. Like all other powers, Germany exaggerated the strength of Russia. They saw Russia's growing population, her developing industry, and her French-backed railway lines running towards the German border, as signs of an inexorably growing existential threat to Germany. In 1904 the combined Franco-Russian army exceeded that of Germany and Austria by 261,000 men; by 1914 the excess was one million and expected to widen all the time.² In 1913-14 Russian naval spending exceeded that of Germany for the first time.³ German leaders were convinced that their chances of winning a war against France and Russia were steadily diminishing. Just as France and Russia thought time was on their side, the Germans (like the Austrians) thought time was against them. So again, perceptions of Russian power caused *both* sides to look favourably upon war: the French and Russians because they thought they would win, the Germans and Austrians because they thought if war was going to come, it had better come sooner than later. And that is what it did.

How War Came

In a way, all Europe's powers were led into war by a theory of history. When they extrapolated the future based upon an understanding of the past and present, the logic of events seemed to point to war. The future would see two key trends: a steady decline towards disintegration of the Austrian Empire – a process weakening the Austro-German Alliance and strengthening and emboldening Serbia and Russia; and a steady rise in the power of Russia, a process strengthening the Franco-Russian alliance and drawing Britain in, whilst alarming the Austrians and the Germans. These were perceptions not realities – while Austria was probably going to weaken further, Russia did not necessarily command the future, and its army and economy were far weaker than they seemed to be. But by the time this was discovered the war was already underway.

It is within this context that we can see how the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand led to war. The Austrians knew that Serbia was behind the assassination and they believed that they *had* to be seen to stand up to Serbia. If they failed to do so, then Austria's remaining prestige would evaporate and the Empire was sure to dissolve, with the rapidly growing and aggressive Serbian state pressing ever-more threateningly on their southern border. A war against Serbia would, if anything, strengthen Austria, rallying the empire against a common enemy. We can, then, easily grasp why the Austrians issued a strongly worded ultimatum to Serbia on 23 July 1914,

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 338-345.

² *Ibid.*, p. 332.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 421.

demanding the right to send its own security forces into Serbia to track down the conspirators behind the assassination; and why Austria declared war on Serbia on 28 July when you no acquiescence to the Austrian demands was received.

The problem was that the Austrians never properly considered what this war would be like. Would Austria actually win a quick lightning-strike against Serbia? And what if that attack drew Austria into a war with Russia – and then quite possibly brought in France and Germany as well. The implications of this were simply not considered. In this way the Austrians sleepwalked into war and destruction. Clark sums up the blinkered Austrian reasoning as follows:

Perhaps the most striking defect of Austrian decision-making was the narrowness of the individual and collective fields of vision. The Austrians resembled hedgehogs scurrying across a highway with their eyes averted from the rushing traffic. The momentous possibility of a Russian general mobilisation and the general European war that would inevitably follow was certainly glimpsed by the Austrian decision-makers, who discussed it on several occasions. But it was never integrated into the process by which options are weighed up and assessed. No sustained attention was given to the question of whether Austria-Hungary was in any position to wage a war with one or more other European great powers The most important reason for the perplexing narrowness of the Austrian policy debate is surely that the Austrians were so convinced of the rectitude of their case and of their proposed remedy against Serbia that they could conceive of no alternative to it¹

The Germans were drawn into supporting Austria. For one thing, they sympathised with Austria's anger and thought the Serbs needed to be punished. If the Austrians sent threatening terms to the Serbians, the Serbians would probably back down. On 6 July Kaiser Wilhelm predicted to the Austrian Emperor that 'the situation would be cleared up within a week because of Serbia's backing down.'² If they didn't, then let the Austrians strike quickly and get it over with. Of course, the Germans saw the risk that Russia might come to Serbia's aid. But they considered it more likely that the Russians would also back down since they would not want to fight a war over Serbia. Surely, with Russia set to get stronger in the future, they would not risk a war so soon? This was the view that emerged from discussions among the Kaiser and his leading ministers in the afternoon of 5 July, and when the War Minister asked Wilhelm whether war preparations should begin, he said no.³ On 17 July it was still the view in Berlin that 'a localisation of the conflict is expected, since England is absolutely pacific and France as well as Russia likewise do not feel inclined towards war.'⁴ But if Serbia and Russia did *not* back down, so be it – better a war now than one in a few years when Russia's position would be relatively stronger and the Schlieffen Plan, which envisaged

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

² *Ibid.*, p. 515.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 416.

⁴ Reflections of the Saxon legation to Berlin, quoted *ibid.*, p. 515.

Germany being able to beat first France and then Russia, would no longer be feasible. Thus, the Austrian ambassador to Berlin, Szogyenyi, reported on the words of the German Foreign Minister Bethmann Hollweg on 6 July 1914:

In the matter of our [Austria's] relationship with Serbia, he [Hollweg] said that it was the view of the German government that we must judge what ought to be done to sort out this relationship; whatever our decision turned out to be, we could be confident that Germany as our ally and a friend of the Monarchy would stand behind us. In the further course of the conversation, I gathered that both the Chancellor and his Imperial master view an immediate intervention by us against Serbia as the best and most radical solution of our problems in the Balkans. From an international standpoint he views the present moment as more favourable than a later one.¹

This passage captures the essence of German thinking. A quick Austrian strike against Serbia would have German support, being the best way to solve the Serbian problem. If war came it would probably be a localised war between Austria and Serbia. And if Russia did intervene and Germany was drawn in too, it was better a European war now than later. Yet it is clear how far the Germans, too, were sleepwalking their way to disaster. They exaggerated the chances that Serbia and Russia would back down in the face of an Austrian ultimatum, just as they exaggerated Austria's ability to launch a quick, victorious, strike against Serbia. A 11 July diary entry by Hollweg's adviser, Kurt Riezler, reflects the emergence of doubts:

Apparently [the Austrians] need a horribly long time to mobilise. 16 days ... This is very dangerous. A quick *fait accompli* and then friendly to the Entente [Russia, France, and Britain] – that way the shock can be withstood.²

All this was delusional. There would not and could not be a quick *fait accompli* – the elaborate bureaucracy and constitutional system of the Austro-Hungarian Empire precluded that. Austria did not declare war for another 17 days and when it did the Entente did not stand by – there would be no chance to be friendly! But still the Germans stuck 'doggedly' to the localisation policy. Indeed, once the Russians began their partial mobilisation against Austria on 29 July the Kaiser panicked at the looming reality of war and wrote a personal message to the Tsar calling for negotiations between Austria and Russia and offering his services as a mediator. But by now it was too late: the next day Russia moved to a general mobilisation, and then Germany had no choice but to mobilise also.

Although Germany's eventual mobilisation for war was reactive, by their conduct since the assassination that had helped to bring about a state of affairs where European war was likely. As Clark writes, 'through their support for Austria-Hungary and through their blithe confidence in the feasibility of localisation, the German

¹ Szogyenyi to Berchtold, quoted *ibid.*, p. 414.

² Quoted *ibid.*, pp. 518-19.

leaders made their own contribution to the unfolding crisis.¹ They made other mistakes too. They misjudged completely Austria's chances of waging a quick, clean, war against Serbia; they discounted the possibility that Belgium would resist their invasion of their territory as they made for France; they mistakenly believed that Britain was likely to stay out of the war; and above all, like all the powers, they showed no real grasp of the immensity of the war they were about to help unleash – a war in which a solution of Austria's Balkan problems would be swept away into insignificance.

The French were keen to support Russia and their allies Serbia in the Balkans, believing that they were thereby solidifying the Franco-Russian alliance, which in turn underpinned their own national security. The problem with this strategy is that it linked the fate of France to the unstable politics of the Balkans, but here the French sleepwalked, because they believed the Austrians would not dare to risk a war with Russia over Serbia, and even if all else failed, 'there were worse things than war at the side of mighty Russia and ... the military, naval, commercial and industrial power of Great Britain.'² They assumed, too, that their army could repel any German attack and launch their own counter-attacks into Germany. The Belgian ambassador to France reported on 30 July that the French 'general staff desires war, because in its view the moment is favourable and the time has come to make an end of it.'³ Hence on 28 July, the day the Austrians declared war on Serbia, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Sazonov, was visited by the French Ambassador who assured him that the Russians could count on the 'the complete readiness of France to fulfil her obligations as an ally.'⁴ This French assurance, says Clark, was one factor in the Russian decision to move the next day to a partial and then a full mobilisation of its armies. France, in other words, was quite ready to countenance a general European war over the Austrian-Serbian Balkan crisis, and in this, too, they were sleepwalking, since France's exaggeration of Russia's strength and their underestimation of the Germans were to bring them to the brink of defeat and leave millions of their own citizens dead.

The Russians sleepwalked too. Since 1913 they had swung their support behind Serbia in the Balkans and their own minister in Belgrade urged the Serbians to pursue an aggressive line of conduct towards the apparently enfeebled Austria. The Russians had no wish to see Serbia accede to Austria's ultimatum since the result would render Serbia a subordinate state of Austria. As the Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov remarked as Russia formulated its response to the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, for Russia to stand back now from its 'historic mission' to secure the independence of the Slavic peoples would be to reduce it to the rank of a second-rate power and forfeit its

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 519.

² *Ibid.*, p. 450.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 482.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 511.

prestige in the Balkans.¹ With the French as their allies, and the British too, the Russians had no fear of war with Austria and they seemed to believe, first, that in response to Russia's support for Serbia, Austria would back down, and second, if war did go ahead, it would be possible for Russia to mobilise only its army in the south-west and fight a limited war with the Austrians, thereby keeping the Germans out. Hence they encouraged a wavering Serbia to stand firm against Austrian threats by informing the Serbs on 25 July that they were ready to mobilise their army in support of the Serbs and would take Serbia under their protection. It was this that caused the Serbians to reject the most stringent Austrian demands and which provoked Austria into declaring war on Serbia on 28 July. Russia announced a partial mobilisation of its army against Austria (but not Germany) the following day. Russia's immediate motive, then, was to rally behind Serbia, partly to advance their position as the leader of the Slavic people, and also to eclipse any claim of Austria to exert authority in the Balkans. But according to Clark, Russia had another motive: to use a Balkan war to break the power of Turkey also and gain control of the Straits separating the Black Sea from the Mediterranean.² War, if it came, appeared to offer only benefits to Russia and hence they were ready to begin mobilising their army.

Yet Russia's leaders had made two key mistakes. First, it was not possible to mobilise their army in the region only of Austria. Their mobilisation plans had been drawn up in anticipation of a war with Germany (Mobilisation Schedule Number 19), and the French had especially encouraged this. Any attempt to mobilise only in the area around Galicia and the Ukraine would wreck the wider mobilisation required for a potential war with Germany. Hence, despite ordering only a partial mobilisation against Austria on 29 July, the next day the Tsar was forced to change this to a general mobilisation under pressure from his army command. The Russians thereby became the first power to order a general mobilisation.³ It was, says Clark, 'one of the momentous decisions of the July crisis.'⁴ At that point the Germans were yet to begin any mobilisations at all. Now they began their own mobilisation. Quite simply, it was the Russian *general* mobilisation of 30 July that made war pretty much inevitable, since once the Russians were mobilised along the border with Germany they could launch an invasion which would derail German war plans – Germany would be facing a defensive war against Russia and France and this they assumed they could not win. So if Russia mobilised, Germany had to as well and then the logic of the Schlieffen Plan was that Germany *had* to invade France. The Germans began mobilising on 31 July and sent an ultimatum to Russia that, unless its own mobilisation was stopped, Germany would declare war on Russia. When Russia refused to comply, Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August. Thus the Russians, while intending initially to

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 473.

² *Ibid.*, p. 486.

³ Austria's mobilisation was only partial, against Serbia.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 509.

mobilise against Austria, ended up mobilising against Germany as well and within two days a European war had begun.

Second, they were wrong to think that Germany might stay out of a war between Austria and Russia. This meant a European war with France too, and then Russia would actually have to fight chiefly in the west against Germany – not against the less intimidating Austrians. They now faced war against Germany and Austria and these combined forces were to prove too strong for Russia, bringing social unrest, defeat, and the destruction of the Tsarist Empire.

Britain's entry into the war was more fatalistic than that of the other powers. The British government had no love for the Serbs and no interest in the Balkans conflict. The British didn't judge war a worthwhile option in the way that the other powers all did. But the British were prisoners of their thinking just the same and in this, too, they were sleepwalkers – if only in stumbling after the others. The British Foreign Office under Grey had cultivated an anti-German attitude and membership of the Triple Entente had encouraged this bias within British thinking. What this meant by 1914 was that the tendency of British policy pointed towards joining with France and Russia against Germany – the alternative being a possible German victory, which was assuredly against British interests. Eyre Crowe of the Foreign Office expressed expounded this argument forcefully on 25 July:

Whatever we may think of the merits of the Austrian charges against Serbia, France and Russia consider that these are pretexts, and that the bigger cause of the Triple Alliance against the Triple Entente is definitely engaged ... Our interests are tied up with those of France and Russia in this struggle, which is not for the possession of Serbia, but one between Germany aiming at a political dictatorship in Europe and the Powers who desire to retain individual freedom.¹

Crowe's narrative is interesting in its attribution of responsibility for the looming war to Germany. Clark, of course, rejects this interpretation of events – but what is important is that it was such arguments that helped form British policy in the last crucial days before her own entry into the war. The war was a test of strength between Germany and France and Russia, and Britain's interests lay with France and Russia.

However, Clark again believes that it was Russia not Germany that shaped British policy. British governments had come to believe that the main threat to the country's imperial interests came from Russia, and this led them to seek to ally with Russia and with France. Once having made this decision, their options for free action greatly diminished. First, having developed defence-ties with France (for example in allowing the British navy to dominate the Channel, freeing the French navy for operations in the Mediterranean) they were drawn in to fighting with France once war began – the French justifiably claimed that they had entrusted their channel defences

¹ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 497.

to Britain and there was no easy way to abandon this commitment. Second, and more important, the British remained concerned about the strength of Russia. A German victory would be bad for Britain – but so too would be a French and Russian victory *without* Britain. Crowe summed up the dilemma on 25 July 1914:

Should the war come, and England stand aside, one of two things must happen. (a) Either Germany and Austria win, crush France, and humiliate Russia. What will be the position of a friendless Britain? (b) Or France and Russia win. What would then be their attitude towards England? What about India and the Mediterranean?¹

So, if Britain stood back and Germany won, then Britain would be friendless in Europe and left to face the might of Germany alone. But if the Russians and French won, then the British would have abandoned their allies and the Russians, now presumably dominant in Europe, could rip up imperial agreements with Britain and proceed to move against British interests in Persia, China, the middle east, and India. The only option left for Britain was to throw in its lot with France and Russia and hope to emerge on the winning side with these two powers as its friends and not its betrayed enemies. Thus, Britain found herself drawn into a war which was not in her immediate interest but which seemed the only feasible course to pursue.

Conclusion

Why, then, did World War One occur? And was anyone power peculiarly to blame? The basic answer Clark provides is that the war happened because a series of powers took decisions which, while apparently logical, were based on mistaken assumptions and which failed to fully grasp the immensity of the outcomes. None of the powers involved really comprehended the risks of what they were doing. One might think of them as a group of people playing a football game on the edge of a precipice without looking down into the void. Any given move in the game made sense to each player, but the rationality of all was utterly compromised by the failure to comprehend that the cliff edge might give way at any moment, casting the entire game into oblivion. The Austrians saw the assassination of the heir to their throne as an existential threat to their entire Empire. Given this, they had to be seen to be standing up to Serbia. Were they to fail to do so, their Empire would gradually dissolve into nothingness and the Serbs would dominate the Balkans and press ever-more aggressively on their southern border. They therefore resolved to act. The Germans were drawn into supporting Austria, believing that if they sided with Austria, Serbia and their Russian allies would back down. But if they did not back down the risk was worth taking – better a war now than one in the future when Russia would be even stronger. The French, meanwhile, were keen to support Russia and Serbia in the Balkans, believing

¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 547.

that they were thereby solidifying the Franco-Russian alliance. And if war resulted then this was an acceptable outcome since with the Russians as their allies (and most likely the British too) the French would prevail against their old German rivals. With the French firm in their support, and the Serbians keen to assert their credentials as a newly-expanded nation state, any Russian doubts were set aside as they were emboldened to encourage the Serbs to stand up to Austria's ultimatum – believing that, if war followed, Russia would break Austrian power in the Balkans and possibly open the way for Russia to take Constantinople and dominate the Straits. And once France and Russia plumped for war, Britain had little choice but to follow suit since to stay on the sidelines would risk either a Europe dominated by Germany or by an angry France and Russia – and neither prospect was in British interests.

In this way every country came to believe that war was an acceptable outcome since by its means they could expect to realise strategic goals. The problem was that none of the powers really saw the big picture – they simply didn't stop to properly consider what a mass European war fought with devastating new weapons would be like. The Austrians, for example, reasoned in terms of a punitive strike against Serbia. But it was always in the nature of an emotional impulse to assert their status as a Great Power. They never seriously asked themselves what would be the outcome. Would they annex Serbia? Change its government? Given that their occupation of a Bosnia inhabited by significant numbers of Serbs had created the crisis in the first place, it is hard to see how expanding Austria's borders still deeper into Serbian lands could end anything other than badly for an already overstretched multi-ethnic Empire. Neither did they properly consider what would happen if Russia *did* attack. Could Austria fight both Serbia *and* Russia? Surely not: hence the need for German support. And once Germany joined the fray, France would follow and a European war with it. How would Austria emerge from that? No one could know and no one thought about it. Yet it was a highly likely consequence of their decision to send an aggressive ultimatum to Serbia. The whole thing was an irrational gamble since their chain of thinking extended little more than a few weeks into the future and there was no attempt to assess the probable payoffs. Similar reflections apply to the other powers: was France really capable of bearing the brunt of a German offensive? Could the Germans reasonably expect to beat Russia, France, and Britain combined? And what would victory or defeat look like in twentieth century war? These were the wider contexts that were not considered in 1914: the focus was narrowly on the Balkans when the result of any commencement of hostilities would probably be a world war. And this none of the protagonists seriously stopped to think about. Only for a few brief hours on the 29 July did the Russian Tsar hesitate to order a general mobilisation, saying 'I will not be responsible for a monstrous slaughter'.¹ But by now the momentum to war could not be arrested. The following day he gave way and agreed to a general mobilisation of the Russian army. Within five days fighting had begun. By the time it ended, four years later, nine million people had died and the three great Empires of Austria, Russia, and Germany

¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 512.

had been destroyed, with consequences we still feel today. The outbreak of war, concludes Clark, was not a crime, in the sense that no one power was responsible; but it was assuredly a tragedy.¹

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 561.