1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Fata, Avan (2022) "Review of July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2022.120110

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol12/iss1/10>

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Review of *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914*

By T. G. Otte. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9781107064904

One of the most well-known questions in the history of the First World War concerns the events taking place between June 28 and August 4, 1914, the so-called “July Crisis,” which began with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and ended with the British declaration of war on Germany. More than a century after the war, there remains contention within the historiographical landscape.¹ Far from lying dormant after the Fischer controversies of the 1960’s and 70’s, the debate over the origins of the First World War remains a pertinent field in the historical academia, albeit no longer charged with the same political implications which haunted the “war-guilt” theses of Fischer and his contemporaries. The centenary of the war’s outbreak saw a flood of publications focusing solely on the question of why and how the war started, from Christopher Clark’s *Sleepwalkers*, with its renewed emphasis on the Balkan origins of the conflict, to Margaret MacMillan’s *The War That Ended Peace*, with its long exposition of the political developments in the long run-up to 1914; students seeking to learn more about the July Crisis are certainly spoilt when it comes to recent works.² Among those works which stand out is T. G. Otte’s *July Crisis: The World’s Descent into War, Summer 1914*, which on its own could stand as *the* book to read on the titular event. This review will analyze both the scholarly arguments and overall

¹ A good overview of the new areas of consensus and contention can be found in Annika Mombauer, “Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I,” *Central European History* 48, no. 4 (2015): 541-564.

² Both these works were admittedly published before the centennial proper (*Sleepwalkers* in 2012, *The War That Ended Peace* in 2013), but they nonetheless are indicative of the renewed interest in the First World War by the historical community in the recent decade

narrative in the author's writing, as well as evaluating where the work stands in relation to the larger historiography on the beginning of World War I.

Before even detailing the assassination which sparked the diplomatic crisis in Europe, Otte makes his overarching narrative clear: his research revolves around the role of individuals – specifically the diplomats and statesmen of the age—and how they came to make the ultimately fatal decisions of July 1914 which contributed both to the escalating crisis itself and to the catastrophe that followed. This focus on “the role of the individual decision-makers” (8) represents a larger shift within the historiography. The “impersonal forces” which were once proposed to have caused the war (e.g. the alliance systems, militarism, nationalism) have been rightly relegated to a secondary place in Otte's approach. Some may be wary of this new focus, since it appears to portray the story of the July Crisis as one of great men – dismissive of the structural forces and considerations which existed at the time. Yet Otte manages to balance both the personal and the impersonal in his analyses: he recognizes that the larger forces cannot explain the outbreak of war on their own, but is also cognizant of the fact that their influence on the mentalities of the decision-makers is helpful in understanding how the Great Powers acted in the way they did during the crisis. In defending an individual-centric approach, Otte states that “their [the decision-makers'] concerns about the present and fears for the future thus hold one of the keys to a deeper understanding of the events of the summer of 1914” (7). Seeing as other historians have emulated his approach, it would be prudent to deem this analytical synthesis of larger forces and individual agency the current norm.³

³ See, e.g. Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds., *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Penguin Books, 2012); Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (London: Icon Books, 2013).

From here, the book launches into the narrative proper, opening with the events of 28 July in Sarajevo and proceeding in a chronological manner, with chapters delineated by dates which Otte finds critical in the crisis' development. In each section, sub-headings help situate the reader in the larger diplomatic situation in Europe, later serving to identify where the narrative shifts from one of the Great Powers to another. This structure is certainly helpful for the overall comprehension of the work, and imparts a sense of complexity to the crisis which previous works may have avoided. By breaking up the periods of the crisis into various stages and then sub-dividing those dates to focus on a certain government, country, or even individual's actions, Otte makes the reader aware of the dynamism which was present throughout the summer of 1914. Far from being "dominoes falling," the decisions and deliberations of the bodies of statesmen took place often simultaneously or at least with an almost omnipresent sense of urgency – with one notable exception.

Following the assassination and the Austro-Hungarian decision to confront Serbia, Otte gives particular focus to analyzing the "calculated risk" taken by Germany's leaders in granting the "blank cheque" to their Habsburg allies (72-101). Far from echoing the Fischer-era assumption of German war-mongering and collective decision-making, Otte points out that the decision-making behind the blank cheque – as well as the overall responsibility for Germany's diplomatic actions – lay with Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow, aided by Under-State Secretary Arthur von Zimmerman and Political Director Wilhelm von Stumm (97). In reviewing the erratic and oftentimes fragmented policy-making processes which these German figures went through during the crisis, Otte concludes that "there was no proper strategic guidance in German foreign policy in July 1914" (101). Yet he does not go so far as to place all the blame with Berlin's decision-makers, boldly stating that although Germany was "a giant with a brain made of clay" (101), so too was its Habsburg ally.

With great clarity and insight, Otte then tackles the unusual lull in the crisis from July 6-21, a period which he believes widened the scope of the crisis and escalated it from a regional matter into a continental one. With the “blank cheque,” Germany had “surrendered her ability to restrain Austria-Hungary” (103), and Vienna’s delay in forcing a confrontation with Belgrade served to widen the circle of the crisis and alerted the other Great Powers that the “Balkan powder keg” was on the verge of being lit once more. Here, Otte focuses on the initial reactions of the governments of the Entente Powers (Russia, France, and Great Britain), analyzing how their respective domestic situations and previous crises management policies established the “interpretative framework” (122) for the decisions of 1914. In London, St. Petersburg, and Paris, he is quick to identify the key personalities whose centrality to the decision-making was critical: Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov, and President Poincare. Though Otte also illustrates the various degrees of plurality within the decision-making bodies, ministerial councils, and government cabinets. Further, his command of the primary source work is magisterial: synthesising statements and contemporary observations from ambassadors, statesmen, and diplomats as the crisis unfolded and politicians sought options for their next course of action.

Whilst Otte’s passages on the French and Russian decisions are commendable for their detail and analytic sharpness, it is with the British government that his expertise truly shines through.⁴ Here, Otte draws on the communiques and correspondence of the British ambassadors and ministers to challenge the post-war consensus that Grey was a man of inaction in the July Crisis, pointing out that “there was nothing half-hearted or meandering

⁴ Otte’s other works lend himself to this natural aptitude for British foreign policy, and in particular the Foreign Office under Grey; see e.g. T. G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy, 1865-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); T. G. Otte, “‘Almost a law of nature’? Sir Edward Grey, the foreign office, and the balance of power in Europe, 1905-12,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 14, no. 2 (2003): 77-118. More recently, Otte has also written an entire biography of the Foreign Secretary, with a significant section dedicated to his actions during the July Crisis; T. G. Otte, *Statesman of Europe: A Life of Sir Edward Grey* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).

about his policy” (520). Instead, he argues, British involvement in the First World War was predicated on the assumption that strict neutrality would diminish her position as a Great Power, regardless of whether the Central Powers or Franco-Russian Entente triumphed (521).

As is often the case when writing about the July Crisis, historians are tempted to point fingers and name those who appear – at least in their investigations – culpable for contributing the most to the final continental conflagration. Otte is aware of this temptation, and his conclusion certainly appears to endorse such proclamations of war-guilt: “the three eastern monarchies were all giants with double heads of clay” (513). Yet, as with the rest of the work, balance is achieved by analysing each of the Great Powers’ responsibility for the war’s outbreak in turn, avoiding any definitive statements shouldering the blame for the tragedy on any one person or government (516-521).

Perhaps inevitably for a work of remarkable concision, there are rabbit-holes that Otte chooses to leave half-explored – though certainly none that he dismisses outright. One such example is the still-contentious question of explaining Count Tisza’s abrupt “u-turn” (155) on an aggressive policy vis-à-vis Serbia, and the narrative consistently makes references to pre-1914 crises without expanding on them to the degree that Clark did in his book; a shame given how Otte admits from the beginning that “what historians ought to ask themselves is, what made the summer of 1914 so different?” (7) Nevertheless, *July Crisis* is a comprehensive and masterful narrative of the decision-making processes and persons of 1914, simultaneously offering sharp takeaways and an engaging yet all too true tale of statesmanship. The men of 1914 may have watched in horror as their world came to pass with the death and destruction of the Great War, but Otte clearly demonstrates how we in the twenty-first century have yet to come to terms with the war’s origins. It may very well be the case that the bicentennial will see another “new” wave of historiography with new debates

and even more theses, but for the current state of things Otte's book is a must-read for those interested—in any capacity—with the First World War.

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Avan Fata is a first-year undergraduate student reading History at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Due to graduate in 2024, his main research interest is late 19th- and early 20th-century European diplomacy.