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Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War*. New York: Basic Books, 2013. Pp. xviii, 461. ISBN 978-0-465-03145-0.

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In his preliminary “Author’s Note,” historian Sean McMeekin (Koç Univ., Istanbul) credits Barbara Tuchman’s famous, riveting account of the opening month of the Great War, *The Guns of August*,¹ with spurring his interest in and scholarship on the topic (ix). He is especially grateful that Tuchman left much of the story of the previous month, July 1914, for future historians like himself to discuss.

The author is a gifted researcher and writer whose previous works on World War I² have added much to our understanding of the conflict and its unintended and catastrophic consequences. His arguments have not gone unchallenged,³ however, and he wisely cautions that “historians must make up their own minds about controversial matters such as responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War. An issue as explosive as this, as central to our understanding of modern history, can never be fully resolved by consensus” (435). He invites his readers to consult the sources and make up their own minds. This book will spur them to do just that.

July 1914 is mostly a straightforward diplomatic narrative of events as they unfolded after the murder of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian imperial throne, and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo, Bosnia, on 28 June 1914. He concentrates on the maneuvering at the highest levels of state, primarily by the foreign ministers and their associated ambassadors of Austria, Serbia, Germany, Russia, France, and Great Britain. He assists his readers by providing what might be termed “up front appendices” in the form of a roster of dramatis personae (xi) and a detailed chronology of events (xvii).

To his credit, McMeekin models his prose on that of Tuchman or, for example, Robert Massie⁴ in a narrative that reads like good fiction. He begins with the assassination of the Archduke and the well established complicity of Serbia’s military in it. He then turns to the aftermath of the murder and reactions (or lack thereof) to it throughout Europe. With the exception of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the author shows, most European diplomats and heads of state callously disregarded the human tragedy of the slaying of a man whom they knew well and his wife. McMeekin paints a picture of a smarmy, self-absorbed elite, too engaged in one-upmanship to be concerned about the brutal slaying of members of a neighboring ruling family by agents of another state.

Described in detail here is the critical miscalculation of issuing the infamous “blank check,” wherewith Germany encouraged harsh retaliation by the Austrians against Serbia, vowing to back them in whatever action they might take. The German intent was for Austria to respond quickly with a rapid mobilization and military strike against Serbia early in July, thus presenting a Europe distracted by summertime vacations and local politics with a *fait accompli*. This plan did not, however, survive the bungling ineptitude of the Austrian machinery of state and Foreign Minister Leopold von Berchtold. Consequently, in McMeekin’s apt metaphor, “The Austrian noose, rigged up by the Germans themselves, was slowly tightening around Germany’s neck” (144).

The author contrasts the blundering German and Austrian diplomats and leaders with their smooth, deceptive, cleverly manipulative French and Russian counterparts. Great Britain is cast as a disinterested

1. NY: Random House, 1962.

2. *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany’s Bid for World Power* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2010) and *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2011).

3. As he acknowledges in the extremely useful introduction to his bibliography (431-35). Scholars may wish to read this first to understand McMeekin’s somewhat controversial positions vis-à-vis the influential differing opinions of other historians.

4. *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (NY: Random House, 1991).

third party, ready to believe the worst of the Germans and the best of the French and Russians. One reads with dawning horror of the diplomats playing their same old game, and poorly at that, little realizing that their short-term gains would destroy European civilization. In fairness, they had little reason to believe the system would so fatally fail them this time around.⁵ The only leaders and statesmen alive to the potential consequences of their actions were the often-maligned Tsar Nicholas II, Kaiser Wilhelm II, French Premier René Viviani, and Hungarian Prime Minister István Tisza. On the other hand, for McMeekin, French President Raymond Poincaré was an outright revanchist, bent on reclaiming Alsace and Lorraine, while British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith was a distracted man who left the diplomatic tiller in the hands of his only slightly less distracted Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey.

The book climaxes with the secret Russian decision to mobilize on 29 July 1914, two days before France and Germany—an event shrouded in misinformation to this day. A partial Russian mobilization had commenced days earlier. These facts were kept hidden from the French as well as the Germans and, McMeekin claims, from many historians. He argues that the Tsar, realizing what the result of the mobilization would be, halted it shortly after authorizing it: “I will not become responsible for a monstrous slaughter” (273). Yet the next day, pressured by all his advisers, he ordered its resumption. Famously (or infamously), the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov “called [chief of the Russian General Staff] Yanushketvitch, and uttered the magic words: ‘Now you can smash your telephone’” (302)—that is, so the Tsar could not rescind the order should he have another change of heart.

After 381 pages of narrative, McMeekin executes a sleight of hand, treating what he has written as a kind of trial transcript for the prosecution. The reader-jurors having heard the testimony, prosecutor McMeekin presents his summation in “Epilogue: The Question of Responsibility,” specifically addressing the issue of war guilt. Methodically assigning their share of culpability to each nation, statesman, and leader in turn, he baldly states his damning conclusion that “The decision for European war was made by Russia on the night of 29 July 1914, when Tsar Nicholas II, advised unanimously by his advisers, signed the order for general mobilization” (398). All the belligerents played a role, as did contingency, but Russia (and to a lesser degree France) deserve the most blame, certainly more than they have often received. Both wanted a war they thought they could win and win fast—especially if they could enlist Britain on their side. Austria wanted war with Serbia, but no one else. Germany, fearing any war involving the Great Powers, ironically made the stupidest of opening moves and guaranteed Britain’s entry on the side of the French and Russians. What McMeekin fails to state explicitly is that the Germans’ great sin was that they did not lose the war in its first months, instead protracting it for four horrific years, in the process destroying both Imperial Russia and Germany’s ally Austria-Hungary.

Unlike most historians, McMeekin shows some sympathy for the Germans: “So far from ‘willing the war,’ the Germans went into it kicking and screaming as the Austrian noose snapped shut around their necks” (405). Thus, he downplays what he calls the consensus opinion that Germany deliberately started a “preventive war” to counter the growing Russian and French threats (393).

One serious weakness of this innovative book is the omission of so much of the historical context of July 1914. One must take on faith some of McMeekin’s judgments, for example, that the British had won the naval arms race and the Germans knew it. Scholars will no doubt find other things to dislike and dispute in *July 1914*, just as they have in *Guns of August*. But general readers will take from it a new appreciation of the complex events that precipitated the unfortunate and deadly conflict whose consequences still haunt us today.

5. See, e.g., Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (NY: Harper, 2012) xxx–xxxii.