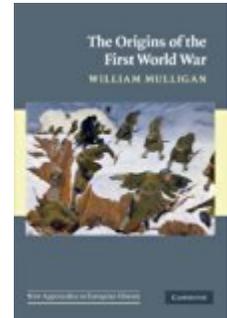




William Mulligan. *The Origins of the First World War.* New Approaches to European History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. viii + 256 pp. \$24.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-71394-8.



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William Mulligan's book *The Origins of the First World War* deals with the relations of the great European powers from the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 to Britain's declaration of war on the central powers on August 4, 1914. But Mulligan wants to do more than simply present a history of the origins of the First World War. "Viewing international relations before 1914 as the prelude to war places historical research into something of a teleological tunnel.... The history of international relations in this period is not simply an account of the origins of the war, but also of the maintenance of peace" (p. 227). Mulligan wants to explain why the assassination on July 28, 1914, of the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne Archduke Franz Ferdinand, rather than one of the earlier crises, caused the First World War. Mulligan's work is based on an excellent synthesis of the vast secondary literature rather than on original archival research, which in any event would scarcely have been feasible in view of the sheer size of the subject.

The book is divided into seven parts. The introduction is followed by a treatment of the diplomatic decisions of the great powers and their interests preceding the July crisis. The following three parts deal with the influence of special groups on foreign policy: the military, public opinion, and economic interests. The sixth part deals with the July crisis itself which is then followed by the conclusion. The main sections are divided into subchapters. Unfortunately their subtitles are not included in the table of contents.

The introduction reviews the history of research about the origins of the First World War. Mulligan makes clear that a new presentation of the origins of the war not only can be traced to his own wish "to write this book, to have my say, as it were," but is also particularly necessary today (p. viii). New research has undermined the former "Fischerite orthodoxy" without establishing "itself as the new orthodoxy" (pp. 14, 21). The inclusion of the new results into a general overview is undertaken by Mulligan and allows new perspec-

tives on the relations of the great powers before the First World War.

In the second part--which covers diplomatic history up to the July crisis--Mulligan enters his true subject. He divides the run-up to the war into five periods. In each, the fluctuating motivations of each European great power are explained. At the end of each subchapter the individual results are brought together in a general survey. Thereby Mulligan manages to explain convincingly how many crises could be overcome without a European war.

Beginning with the Second Moroccan crisis however, war became more and more accepted as a means of last resort to reach vital goals. Decisions made in Vienna, St. Petersburg, and Berlin after October 1913 made war inevitable. The chapters about the influence of military and public opinion are divided into thematic subsections. Mulligan again follows the practice of looking at country by country, adding the Balkan states (including the Ottoman Empire), and bringing together the results at the end. He concludes that neither the military nor public opinion had an impact on the foreign policy of the great powers. This is also his conclusion for economic and financial influence in the fifth part. Here Mulligan departs from his approach of presenting the developments of each great power first before coming to a general judgment. In this part, he analyzes the whole situation before dealing with some states as examples. He adopts a global point of view on the economy in showing the growth of international commercial and financial links. This pushes the individual state's policy into the background. The section about the July crisis from the assassination of Ferdinand on June 28 to the British declaration of war on the central powers on August 4, 1914, concludes that no European great power wanted a general European war, but all accepted it if vital interests were at stake. Due to the fact that Austria-Hungary and Russia directly and Germany and France indirectly through

their alliance partners saw interests as vital and mutually exclusive, a general continental European war had to break out. Given these circumstances, Britain could not stand aside and had to join the Franco-Russian Entente, thus converting Europe into a world war. The German occupation of Belgium was not the reason for entering the war; it was only the argument "to hold the radicals together within the [Liberal] party" (p. 225). Mulligan's conclusion is that Europe maneuvered itself involuntarily into the First World War. In his own words, "the history of international relations in this period ... is a history of achievements, as well as of ultimate failure" (pp. 227-228).

Following are some critical remarks about the fifth part entitled "The World Economy and International Politics before 1914," especially the subchapters "Free Trade, Protectionism, and International Politics" and "Capital, Financiers, and International Relations." As noted, Mulligan alters his order of argument in this section from analyzing the results of each power's policy and then giving a general overview to laying out the general result and then explaining the policy of selected great powers. This change is explained by Mulligan's take on the economy at this time as "globalization," particularly of international commercial links. The single state as the main stage for businessmen and bankers receded more and more into the background and was replaced by a holistic view of the European and world economy, according to Mulligan. Therefore, not war but peace became the overriding interest of businessmen and bankers. "Indeed, commercial rivalry had replaced war," Mulligan writes (p. 193). In both subsections, he supports his analysis with statements of businessmen, bankers, and politicians. But only in the very last pages of the conclusion does his main argument become clear: "While great power wars occurred frequently after the Peace of Westphalia, the eighteenth century was characterised by increasingly lengthy periods of great power peace. Of course, this was an uneven process, but the trend towards the maintenance of peace and

the absence of great power wars has been one of the most significant developments in modern European history” (p. 234). However, the thesis that the strength of commercial links influences the frequency of wars has still not been conclusively answered by the academic community nor is it proved in this book. Indeed, it is beyond the book’s scope. The length of peace could, for example, also be influenced by the costs of war; the more expensive armed conflict became, the harder the decision for war. Mulligan’s conclusion is: “Economic issues hardly contributed to great power tensions in the years before the war” (p. 234). Looking at this result, his argument appears weak as it excludes many of the common roots of both economic and financial interests on the one hand, and the growing tension among great powers generated by arms races, for example, on the other hand. Even if these interests called for peace in general, special interests—such as making money—could support a violent policy. In German there is the proverb: “If one says A one also has to say B.” If one profits by the great powers’ arms race, one has to accept the possibility of a more aggressive policy risking war, even if one wants peace. The one cannot be separated from the other. In addition there were in fact wars including the European great powers and there were serious crises among them. Even if commercial and financial links grew stronger, most of them (if not all) were based on economic interests too. If we divide the time from 1878 to 1914 into two periods of fifteen to twenty years in which one is dominated by a foreign trade policy of protectionism (1878-1900) and the other by a policy of free trade (1900-14), we will see that the time of free trade was much more violent than that of protectionism. This is not to say that free trade made conflicts and war more likely in view of inter-European great power politics. But it poses the following question: if growing international economic inter-linkages are said to make war less likely, why would a time in which foreign policy hindered these links be more peaceful than a time

in which this was not the case? This question is neither asked nor answered by Mulligan. In fact, Mulligan’s only conclusion—that “economic issues hardly contributed to great power tensions”—is difficult to follow (p. 234).

With respect to the Habsburg Monarchy, there are a few errors. Some examples: The name of the village is Mürzsteg not Mürzteg, Franz Joseph is written with “ph” not “f” (pp. 44, 64, 123). He also is not included in the index. Mulligan states that there were two ministers of war, one Austrian and one Hungarian (p. 123). This is not true. There was only one (common) minister of war, but there were also an Austrian and a Hungarian minister of home defense (Landesverteidigung). Partly these mistakes are rooted in the extremely complex dual organization of Austria-Hungary and are of no particular importance for this book. More relevant is the fact that when it is not the explicit focus of interest, the Dual Monarchy receives little attention, sometimes even less than Italy. This is a real handicap for the time between the Bosnian crisis and the Austro-Hungarian decision of October 3, 1913, to leave the Concert of Europe by threatening Belgrade unilaterally and to see war with Serbia as inevitable. This decision, Mulligan clearly shows, was one of the main reasons why in July 1914—in contrast to earlier crises—the path to war was chosen. Due to the short exposition of Austro-Hungarian interests in the prewar years, the reasons for this fundamental decision are not made clear nor its consequences within the European context. But this missing link is not the author’s failure: it points to a gap in the research of the relevant politics for Austro-Hungarian foreign affairs in the years 1908-13, one that historians have started to close only quite recently.

Unfortunately, a few criticisms often distort positive reviews. On 235 pages of text, Mulligan explains convincingly and readably the foreign political development of all European great powers across forty-four years in all the complexity of

international and social relations. This has to be stressed especially given his argument that, at least until the end of the Second Balkan War, the development was by no means a “teleological tunnel” leading unavoidably and inevitably to the First World War. One must congratulate the author for this excellent work.

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