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Sean McMeekin. *The Russian Origins of the First World War.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. 344 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-06210-8.

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Russia's Kriegsschuldfrage Revisited

The centennial anniversary of the First World War provides a fitting opportunity to review the literature devoted to the origins of the conflict. In his third book in four years, Sean McMeekin, an assistant professor of international relations at Bilkent University (Ankara, Turkey), rekindles interest in Russia's responsibility for unleashing the great catastrophe of 1914. Based on Russian, Turkish, French, German, Austrian, and British documentary repositories, including the Archive of Imperial Russian Foreign Policy (AVPRI) and the Russian State Military History Archive (RGVIA), the study forwards a courageous interpretation that stimulates interest in Russia's path to war. Focusing on political designs and military events in the eastern theater, the book argues that the constellation of circumstances in July 1914 triggered Russian plans to overthrow and expel the Turks from Constantinople, extend dominion into eastern Anatolia and Persian Azerbaijan, and secure predominance in the Black Sea. While not entirely new, the thesis is told with vigor and boldness, based on fresh AVPRI findings. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov appears center stage as the astute and charming, yet shallow and deceitful mastermind behind an intricate manipulation of British and French foreign policymakers to secure Russia's bid for world power.

Since Fritz Fischer and his school set the tone for studies of World War One origins, the theory about German responsibility for the conflict has become the keystone of history writing on the subject. Scholars have publicly or privately adjusted or altered the interpretation, and added additional factors or refined the perspective, but its directness and massive source-base render it as attractive today as it was when Fischer first formulated it. Now, some fifty years later, McMeekin brings the debate out of the "Deep Freeze," by shifting blame from Germany to Russia, where, he argues, the real source of unbridled aggression resided.

A booming economy, rising population, and large armed forces masked the fragility of Russia's strategic position, made more vulnerable by an expanding Turkish military trained by German specialists and equipped with state-of-the-art British technology. Russia, not Germany, had most to complain of "encirclement" by hostile powers, according to McMeekin, as strategic conundrums in Poland, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea dominated Russian war planning and diplomacy. Suspicions of the "German steamroller" obsessed the leading Russian military and diplomatic personnel, who formulated general plans for seizing Constantinople, dismembering Turkey, annexing Galicia, and reconstituting a larger satellite, Poland.

Downplaying the defensive attitude of the core group of tsarist advisors, McMeekin's fast paced, lively narrative recreates the urgency and fear–even panic–during Council of Ministers and General Staff meetings over intelligence briefs detailing Turkish armaments, sneak naval attacks, and the extension of German influence at the Porte. Students of the Great War's origins have long since argued that Russia's decision to mobilize first was the crucial, last step in the process leading to hostilities. If only the Russian government had realized the implications of such a decision, and forestalled its military preparations, a negotiated solution might have been found.

While unraveling the July crisis, McMeekin calls at-

tention to the pivotal meetings between French President Raymond Poincaré, the tsar, and their foreign ministers in St. Petersburg. An excursion into the "actors' " minds during this "French-Russian summit" enables the author to conclude that Sazonov knew perfectly well that the Russian Ministry of War's plans for partial mobilization were impossible to implement. He thus knowingly plunged Russia into war. The crucial decision took place before a Council of Ministers meeting on July 24, when the financial and military measures for war were prepared for the tsar's signature. As a result, Russia "began secretly mobilizing its armed forces on 25 July 1914," five days before the order for general mobilization (p. 63). Russian action triggered the engagement of Germany, as Sazonov's diplomatic wizardry deceived the Allies of Russia's peaceful intentions. The Russian Foreign Ministry used the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia as a "smokescreen to distract London from Russia's military preparations" (p. 71). According to McMeekin, Sazonov's brilliant "bamboozlement" arranged the enemy coalitions into an ideal war scenario for the Russian Empire to secure for itself a brighter place in the sun.

In evaluating the reasons that Russia opted for war, McMeekin diminishes the symbolic interest of the Bosnian Crisis of 1908. He dismisses its memory "in the minds" of Russian statesmen. He pays scant attention to Russia's fragile domestic morale and the influence of the popular press. Yet after Russia's ignominious bow to Austrian and German threats in 1909, Russia's political and military elite believed that Russia could not sustain yet another humiliation on that scale.

The absence of discussion about the archduke's assassination in a handful of diplomatic papers does not conceal the deep-seated concern for Balkan affairs. The matter in Serbia was not "some silly Balkan bagatelle" or "phantom issue" to the Russian Foreign Ministry (pp. 101, 232). If Russia remained passive in the face of the destruction of Serbia, it would be humiliated and its long-held prestige among the Slavic peoples of southeastern Europe would dwindle into insignificance. The Russian ministers feared that the domestic results of such a fiasco would be incalculable. Action entailing major sacrifices would be better than skulking away in shame. McMeekin's inspection of the July record rests on ample speculation over a few consular reports, incomplete diaries, and self-proclaimed insights into the "actors' " minds. Absent from the war plans and consular papers employed are the enormous, astoundingly complex details behind a descent on the Turkish capital and its effect on millions of people.

An emphasis on the drama of the Russian Revolution has diminished historians' appreciation for events directly connected to the eastern theater of the war. Building on the work of Norman Stone, the central chapters of *The Russian Origins of the First World War* provide a brief narrative of Russian military action in the eastern front, including the southern Caucasus, Anatolia, and Persian Azerbaijan. In the opening month of the war, Russia's infantry-divisional advantage coupled with Austria's botched mobilization enabled tsarist forces to score major victories in the Southwest. Combat in East Prussia was disastrous for Russian armies, yet advantageous for its diplomatic partnership with France. Turkey's entry into the conflict brought the Straits question, long the bête noir of Russian diplomats, to the forefront of foreign policy formulation.

A key player in Russian strategic designs was Nikolai Bazili, the grandson of Konstantin Bazili, one of Russia's great nineteenth-century experts on Near Eastern affairs. In November 1914, the thirty-one-year-old Bazili (portrayed as an "old Phanariot") presented a position paper to the Foreign Ministry outlining a plan to annex several Aegean islands, take control of the Straits, and extend Russian authority around Thrace and Adrianople. Since Russia lacked the means to achieve such a massive program of annexation, a British-French amphibious assault on Gallipoli would work perfectly to forward Russian designs. Inspired by such dreams, Sazonov and his adjutants began a "good cop/bad cop routine" to persuade the French and British ambassadors to involve themselves in the region (p. 121). Fortunately, for the Russians, their "imperial ventriloquism" and other magic tricks worked on Sir Edward Grey, King George V, and Winston Churchill, who eagerly volunteered to offer Constantinople to the tsar (after of course a successful conclusion to the war), in exchange for British rights in the Near East. The Allied campaign in the Dardanelles represented the culmination of these plans. Sazonov's manipulation of problems in the Caucasus provided him with added leverage, enabling Russia to abstain from participation in the assault on Gallipoli while shrouding its secret intent to conquer "Tsargrad" through "the favorable calculus of inter-Allied strategy in the Ottoman theater" (p. 140).

Of the multitude of controversies surrounding the Great War, the Armenian question stands out as one of the least susceptible to detached debate on the part of historians, politicians, or interested observers. The issue has tended to focus on whether the massacres constituted a genocide–itself a term whose very meaning is subject to

debate (McMeekin uses it in quotations). The tangle of argument and counterargument bedevils an objective understanding of history. McMeekin devotes thirty pages to the complex story of Russia's role in the Armenian tragedy. The record shows how Russian consuls provided aid to refugees, promised Ottoman Armenians protection, and recruited volunteers into the army. Although the degree to which tsarist assistance was humanitarian and the motivation behind the recruitment of Armenians of eastern Turkey ("Sazonov's favorite political football," p. 213) during wartime is open to interpretation, this is an important and understudied component of a very sensitive subject.

Events in neighboring Persian Azerbaijan constitute another aspect of Russia's Great War awaiting serious work by historians. Drawing on published reports from Russian consuls in Teheran and Tbilisi, the focus here is on the incredible success of Russian diplomacy in securing a broad "zone of interest" from the Allies through nonbinding pledges and vague promises. With a relatively small expeditionary force, the Russians were able to march deep into Persian territory, while forwarding plans to divvy up Asiatic Turkey. "Russian diplomatic bullying" was effective enough to justify renaming one of the key partition programs the "Sykes-Picot-Sazonov" agreement. In the event, one can hardly single out the Russian government for opportunism at a time of tremendous political and social upheaval.

The final chapter, "1917: The Tsarist Empire at Its Zenith," emphasizes the strength of the Russian economy, the rich world of its workers, and the reinvigorated prestige of the military, especially among soldiers in the Caucasus who received Order No. 1 "as if it had been sent from outer space" (p. 226). Russian plans for seizing Turkish territory gained focus, yet no real preparations resulted, and the diplomatic exchanges did not lead to action. The ascent of the Bolsheviks ended the problem and added credence to Lenin's theory of "imperialist war."

Effused with trendy expressions, the book makes grandiose claims based on position papers composed during wartime, the same genre that Russian policymakers had been crafting for at least two centuries. The author aims to challenge the work of Fischer, Dominic Lieven, William C. Fuller, and others based on a score or so of AVPRI files. Caricatures of key players are repetitive and counterfactual analysis bolsters the main points. The narrative constantly refers to "Russia's uncompromising war aims" (p. 86); "enormous imperial ambitions" (p. 159); "annexationist war aims" (p. 96); "*true* war aims" (pp. 76, 87, 100); "real war aims" (p. 107); the "ironclad consistency" (p. 228); "essential truth about Russian Imperial foreign policy" (p. 145); its "historic mission" (pp. 93, 94) in "primordially Russian" (pp. 87, 92, 93) lands; and so on, yet the evidence of how and when such designs would be implemented make the central argument appear rather shallow. Nevertheless, the book succeeds in encouraging interest in Russia and the Great War.

There is a tiny kernel of truth in McMeekin's analysis; since Sazonov's time, the Russian General Staff had maintained that mobilization was the equivalent of war. General mobilization was consequently a bellicose act directed at both German states. Yet time was a prized commodity and the Russian leadership had no reason to postpone the inevitable. Austria's declaration of hostilities against Serbia indicated that war was at hand. Most Russian leaders believed the war would be short, and key figures among the military and civilian elite were acutely aware of Russia's unpreparedness. Russia's strategies for war were dependent on incomplete, hastily conceived plans and tense cabinet meetings chaired by all too human actors, not a cohesive strategy for the Ottoman inheritance.

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