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The savvy reader may do a double take upon seeing Annika Mombauer’s new book with Longman Press, *The Origins of the First World War.* After all, James Joll has published a successful volume of the same title with Longman for years now.[1] Mombauer has written a book that is very different from Joll’s, however, and one that is a welcome addition to the Longman family.

Mombauer’s *Origins* focuses on the development of the scholarship concerning responsibility for the origins of the First World War. Mombauer, the book jacket tells us, is a lecturer in European history at the Open University and author of a book on Helmuth von Moltke. Her expertise is apparent as her book demonstrates command of the literature she seeks to cover. The book is clear, concise, and extremely well-focused.

The volume is organized chronologically; chapters focus on the origins of the debate during the war and the Versailles peace conference, the interwar period, the scholarship of Fritz Fischer, and post-Fischer debates. Mombauer is particularly interested in the effects of political context on “war-guilt” historiography. By focusing on the effects of context on scholarship, Mombauer has written a volume that would be appropriate for an undergraduate course on historiography or methods, as well as more substantive courses on European history.

Mombauer presents two issues to the reader: the importance of political context for the writing of history and responsibility for war origins. In both cases I found her book a useful heuristic.

Mombauer provides several excellent examples of the influence of political context on the scholarship concerning responsibility for the war. Almost immediately after the war began, the combatant countries began issuing their respective “colored books” (e.g., the German "White Book") in an effort to demonstrate their innocence in the war’s origins (pp. 23-24). British citizen Edmund D. Morel served a prison sentence during the war for attempting to send copies of his treatise on British war guilt abroad (p. 92). Mombauer explains that governments had to mobilize their people to fight such a brutal and costly war. After the war the Allied governments had to justify the harsh peace they planned to impose on Germany.
Mombauer does an excellent job of describing how governments' desire to convey their own innocence and others' guilt affected the compilation of official document collections (pp. 57-69). Germany's foreign office even created a "War Guilt Section" to deal specifically with the issue (p. 51). By the 1960s, German elites wanted Germans to believe that Hitler's aggression had been an aberration, not a pattern deeply ingrained in the German psyche. When faced with Fischer's arguments that Germany's aggressive war aims drove it to force war in 1914 the German government sponsored the publication of a pamphlet (intended for use in schools) to refute Fischer's arguments (pp. 138).

Mombauer does not support all of her assertions regarding the effects of context on scholarship. She argues, for example, that interwar British elites wanted to rehabilitate Germany in the eyes of their country so that the British public would accept German entry into the League of Nations. While this argument is plausible, she fails to present any evidence that the conciliatory attitude of British elites influenced the more benign scholarly consensus on German war guilt that emerged during the period (p. 97).[2] Perhaps Mombauer fails to support these assertions because the proposed links between context and scholarship are different from the cases outlined above. Context may influence scholarship directly through government action or indirectly through a public or scholarly community reluctant to consider new or dangerous ideas. While not explicitly addressing this question, Mombauer's book points toward the diverse avenues of influence between context and scholarship.

Mombauer's *Origins* also raises the issue of what her narrative means for the study of history. In her very brief conclusion, she states that "[h]istory is not an objective, factual account of events as they occurred, and historical accounts have to be read with a clear understanding of their provenance" (p. 223). Does this mean that all accounts are equally valid and just different because they have different origins? Can we expect scholarship on a particular topic to move closer to a "factual account of events as they occurred" over time? Mombauer's book poses these important questions but fails to answer them or to refer the reader to others who might help.[3]

Responsibility for the war is the other thought-provoking theme of Mombauer's *Origins*. Mombauer's book is narrower than her title would lead us to believe. It focuses almost exclusively on the question of responsibility for the war, ignoring, for example, the recent literature on the "cult of the offensive" or alliance explanations for the war.[4] Mombauer also clearly believes Germany was primarily responsible for the war's origins and she makes this clear throughout the book.[5] Mombauer's perspective on this issue provokes the reader to pose some questions. Should responsibility be assessed on the relative importance of a state's actions in causing the war? Certainly Germany's support of Austria and its declaration of war were important, but Russian support for Serbia and French support for Russia seem to have been crucial in bringing about the world war that ensued. Should responsibility be assessed on the motives of the governments? Mombauer recognizes that there is no consensus that Germany wanted to provoke a world war in 1914 (p. 212), so this seems to be a weak basis for German war guilt. Mombauer's book raises the important issue of how we know when a country was responsible for causing a war.

I enjoyed reading this book and recommend it. I do hope, however, that in the future Mombauer will consider expanding this volume to say more about political context and responsibility.

Notes


[2]. Another example is Mombauer's link between the post-World War II German government's desire for a better self image and the schol-
Early consensus that Germany did not deserve primary responsibility for causing World War I (pp. 123-24).


[4]. See, for example, Steven Miller, ed., *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Note that Mombauer's focus on the war-guilt literature poses the question as to whether this other literature has also been driven by political context.

[5]. For example, while most defenders of Germany are derisively dismissed by reference to their political context, Mombauer's discussion of Fritz Fischer leaves us thinking that he was the only historian in the twentieth century to approach this issue without political perspective or motive (p. 127).

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