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and legends about the battles of the eterists and Romanians against the Turks based on historical sources. The advance of the Turkish army into the Danube principalities and its banishment of the eterists were dynamically conveyed by the author, making the reader uneasy in anticipation of the outcome of these events. This is especially noticeable in the last chapter of the book, where the author describes how the rebels under the command of Mladen Milovanović, Iordache Olimpiotul, Iane Farmache and others used churches and monasteries as headquarters in their battles against the Turks after Ypsilantis escaped to the Austrian Empire.

The author enriched this book with his reconstruction of the route of Vladimirescu's and Ypsilantis's armies and photographs of more than 80 locations through which they passed, bringing the atmosphere of these events, which took place two centuries ago, closer to the readers. Dinu has painted colourful and three-dimensional portraits of not only Alexander Ypsilantis and Tudor Vladimirescu, the most famous participants of these events, but also other prominent individuals, such as Michael Soutzos, Iordache Olimpiotul, Gheorghe Cantacuzino, Sava Fochiano, etc. Dinu also manages to intertwine heroism, tragedy and, at times, humour, delivering a book that is well-researched and easy to follow.

PAUL MILLER-MELAMED, *MISFIRE: THE SARAJEVO ASSASSINATION AND THE WINDING ROAD TO WORLD WAR I*, NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2022, 280 p.

Reviewed by John Zametica*

In the introduction to his book, Paul Miller-Melamed makes the point, almost casually, that the debate over the origins of the First World War “will never be settled.” Quite. And this is not necessarily because the subject is so large, or because the available evidence is insufficient. Rather, given in retrospect the gravity of the events of 1914, and given also the tendency to conduct investigations into so-called “war guilt”, no narrative can hold pre-eminence for very long when robustly challenged by a contrasting one. This is not a subject that can even remotely be done to death: historians can pull it every which way. But there is another matter to be considered here. Mingling with, and often overshadowing contesting scholarly interpretations, popular and textbook accounts have presented a series of straightforward explanations for the war of 1914, especially with respect to its immediate, ostensible source in the Balkans: “secret” nationalist societies, “fanatic” Serb terrorists, Balkan “powder keg”, etc. The beauty of such brevity, writes Miller-Melamed, “is that

it is uncomplicated and reassuring, the very opposite of actual history.” Trouble is, many scholars have themselves strayed onto this easy path of simplicity and clarity. Thus, a significant part of the historical narrative about 1914 is actually taken for granted.

The real story of 1914, according to Miller-Melamed, is “highly ironic and hopelessly unsettling.” He makes the Sarajevo assassination the focal point of his relentless assault on the myriad of false but attractive constructs that are now part and parcel of the story regarding the outbreak of the war a few weeks later. This is what he calls the “Sarajevo myth”, a myth that looms large over the twentieth century and reverberates universally.

“By what means and to what effect”, he asks, “have Princip’s pistol shots become so fabled in the first place?” He blasts the notion that those shots on 28 June 1914 represent modern history’s defining “flashbulb”

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moment. In fact, the international impact of the assassination was short-lived and began to fade as issues such as the Ulster crisis in Britain or the Caillaux affair in France claimed much greater attention. At the same time financial markets stayed calm and “hardly anybody blinked.” Sarajevo, Miller-Melamed writes, “was more like a sad headline than a heart-stopping preview of the upcoming era.”

What the political murder did produce, however, was a diplomatic crisis that diplomats and statesmen failed to resolve peacefully. They were the real culprits in 1914: not the people from the “blood-soaked” Balkans, but rather the gentlemen who were the decision-makers in “civilized” Europe, in Vienna, Berlin, St Petersburg, Paris and London. The real “flashbulb” event was not what happened in Sarajevo on 28 June – it took place on 23 July when Austria-Hungary presented its ultimatum to Serbia. In emphasizing the vast disproportionality between the Sarajevo assassination (“this isolated incident”) and its global ramifications, Miller-Melamed does not ignore the destabilizing capacity of the southeast of Europe pre-1914. On the contrary. He points out the parallel processes of the decay of the Ottoman Empire and the growth of nationalism in the Balkans, accompanied by Great Power rivalries in the region. This, he suggests, was a “crucial, medium-term factor” for the origins of the World War. Yet again, however, the decisive input on the road to Armageddon came not so much from instability in the Balkans, but from the interested parties looking at the region – and also beyond it. Miller-Melamed is spot on when he draws attention to the fact “the Balkans was where imperialism played out on the compact continent itself.”

As regards the Sarajevo assassination, Miller-Melamed is keen to “recalibrate” this act which has given rise to countless renderings – many of which are in fact misrepresentations or oversimplifications. Hence *Misfire* as the title of the book. Take the

location of the act to begin with. The author takes a dim view of the regularly stated, derogatory conceptions of Bosnia as some kind of dusty, oriental backwater of Austria-Hungary. After all, he reminds, the place had long been a rather important part of the Eastern Question. The Bosnian annexation episode of 1908-1909, moreover, gave rise to a first-class diplomatic upheaval in Europe. Nevertheless, there was nothing inevitable about the Sarajevo assassination leading to a war that was to produce so much carnage and carry such momentous, long-term consequences. The political murder did, inadvertently, trigger the July crisis, but it was the statesmen of Europe “who lit the illustrious powder keg.”

The irony of it, and indeed that which has made the assassination so mythical, is the “sickening” fact that it happened at all. Miller-Melamed skilfully paints a picture of 28 June 1914 which, looking back, makes its end result seem utterly incredible. For Franz Ferdinand fell victim not only to a hopelessly amateurish conspiracy against him, but also to what were criminally sloppy security arrangements for his visit. What is more, he had received warnings against making the trip to Bosnia and only went there reluctantly; towards midnight on 27 June he was on the verge of cancelling next morning’s visit to Sarajevo altogether; on 28 June having survived unscathed the first assassination attempt when a bomb was thrown at his car, he was persuaded to continue with the visit – albeit by an alternative route; but the alternative route suddenly became the old route when the driver took the famous “wrong turn”; Princip, the successful assassin, was not even aiming as he fired his shots; etc., etc. All of which represents great stuff for historians since it is grounded in historical fact, yet it mutates into mythology when accompanied by the counterfactual urge to imply “if only, if only ...” Yes, Miller-Melamed agrees that the assassination was an exceedingly close call. On the other hand, he notes, so too were many of

the battles that could have led to a different outcome of the war.

But where did the impetus for the conspiracy come from, and what was its political aim in the first place? There is a sense in which Miller-Melamed considers such questions superfluous. Thus he argues that Vienna was hell-bent on destroying Serbia already in early July, an attitude it maintained even after its own investigator declared that there was no evidence to link the Serbian government with the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. Is it really that important, he asks, to get to the bottom of this “basically criminal question”? To him, however, this political murder is not just “intrinsically interesting”, it is also “terrifically distorted”. There are two main schools of thought with regard to the roots of the conspiracy, and Miller-Melamed identifies some serious flaws in both of them. Those historians who support the view that it was instigated “from below”, i.e., by the Young Bosnians themselves, tend to romanticize the Sarajevo assassination as “tyrannicide”, a “desperate act” of an oppressed people. On the other hand, those who see it as having been organized “from above”, i.e., by the notorious “Black Hand” nationalist society, proceed on flimsy evidence as they explain the political murder in terms of the society’s Great Serbian aspirations to be pursued at the expense of Austria-Hungary.

Miller-Melamed actually comes down on the side of those who see *Young Bosnia as the* begetter of the conspiracy – as opposed to the majority of historians who ascribe it to the “secret” Black Hand crew that “recruited” young students and made them into “tools” of some Great Serbian plot. Nevertheless, he makes the important observation that the assassination was most plausibly “an egregious act of ordinary human recklessness.” In that light, both the “tyrannicide” and the “sinister” Black Hand theories look less persuasive. Herein lies the whole purpose of his book: to discredit standard explanations, of whatever variety, by challenging the smug

assumptions behind them. And while tactfully stating that his book is not meant to censure historians, *Misfire* is really a systematic onslaught on all those interpretations of the assassination that unnecessarily mix facts with fiction in order to additionally dramatize an already dramatic event. He draws attention, for example, to the assassin Gavrilo Princip who is often presented as “the pivotal figure in world history” when in fact others played more direct roles in the events leading to war. Princip has also been variously portrayed as murderous terrorist, heroic freedom fighter, degenerate criminal, pop cultural icon, and what not. One might add that the most common description of Princip, in popular and serious accounts alike, is “Serb nationalist”, which could not be further from the truth. Miller-Melamed appropriately brings into focus the Yugoslav ideology of the *Young Bosnia* adherents, commenting that this is simply ignored by scholars given their “teleological tendency to Serbianize them”, something particularly apparent in the wake of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. But then, it is far easier and indeed more attractive to present the political murder as the work of “fanatic” Serbian terrorists controlled by some “nefarious” nationalist secret society than to look closely at the complex historical background to the whole event. Nothing beats a straightforward, compelling narrative.

The author notes that the trend to attribute the planning and organization of the assassination to Black Hand was in significant measure set by Luigi Albertini and Sidney Fay, two of the giants of the historiography concerning the origins of the Great War. Recently, those historians who have embraced this approach have also spiced it up by imagining modern parallels. Thus Miller-Melamed points out that Margaret MacMillan compares the Young Bosnians with “extreme groups” of Islamic fundamentalists such as Al Qaeda. Similarly, Christopher Clark detects in them what he calls “raw modernity” in that they formed a

“squad of suicide bombers” directed by “an avowedly terrorist organization”. Miller-Melamed rightly dismisses such balderdash by calling attention to the “acute difference” between a targeted political murder and indiscriminate mass murder. Now, Macmillan and Clark are highly respected historians in this domain. Macmillan’s 2013 book on the war’s origins is already standard reading, while Clark’s best-selling *Sleepwalkers* (2012) has arguably become the most influential work in the field since Fritz Fischer’s *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1961).¹ If the leading historians can peddle this kind of “loaded rhetoric”, as Miller-Melamed puts it, what can be expected of non-specialists?

Construing the Sarajevo assassination as “a ready analogy for present-day woes” is typical of the way interpretations of this event have turned it into a myth and thus hampered our historical understanding. Not to mention what Miller-Melamed calls “counterfactual fixations” that have overwhelmed the Sarajevo narratives. But most of all he draws special attention in his Sarajevo mythology catalogue to the “overinterpretation” of the supposedly “epic” conspiracy and its alleged “flashbulb” impact that epitomize the absence of complication characteristic of mythology. And then there are all those extravagant depictions (“the most critical moment in modern history”), banal explanations (“fate”, “chance”) and downright fabrications (“fanatic Serb terrorists”). Miller-Melamed’s favourite, as it were, Sarajevo 1914 “enticing invention” is the one which has Princip eating a “sandwich” just moments before firing his shots. “Today”, he writes, “my students regularly ask about it”.

Just as the broad debate about how and why the war broke out in 1914 “will never be settled”, neither will, it seems, the discussion

about the exact nature of the involvement in the Sarajevo assassination of the Black Hand organization and particularly its unofficial leader Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis. Miller-Melamed has unavoidably jumped into the murky depths of this controversy. Although he accepts that the conspiracy originated with the Young Bosnians, he allows - ever so guardedly - for the possibility that Apis had subsequently played a role in it. In this context, he speculates that Apis’s motive in arming the assassins may have been to create a crisis in Austro-Serb relations in order to “topple” the hated prime minister Nikola Pašić during the May 1914 governmental crisis. He also cautiously suggests that, aware of the danger that a successful assassination could provoke a war with Austria-Hungary, Apis sent some dilettante but eager young assassins merely to attempt something and thereby create a “diplomatic scandal”.

This, of course, is not a new hypothesis. Without going into the fine detail, this reviewer wishes to point out one glaring inconsistency in all such conjecture. It has to do with dates. The news that Franz Ferdinand was to attend military manoeuvres in Bosnia was first announced on 16 March in *Bosnische Post*, the Sarajevo German-language daily. The paper gave the time of the visit as the end of June. This news was then carried in other papers of the Monarchy. If Apis had intended to utilize the Young Bosnians he only had the end of June as the date after which he could hope to topple Pašić because the assassins could simply not act before then. And yet, as is well-documented, throughout May and early June Apis was busy organizing a military coup against the Pašić government. He actually sent instructions to his fellow officers in Macedonia to start the coup, but they replied on 10 June that they would do no such thing. Nevertheless, this shows that he had acted to get rid of Pašić well before the date he knew Franz Ferdinand would set foot in Bosnia. If he thought that he would control Serbia

¹ M. Macmillan, *The War That Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War* (London: Profile Books, 2013); C. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

by mid-June, did he need a “diplomatic scandal” with the mighty Austria-Hungary already in early July? The fact, moreover, that in the course of June he repeatedly attempted to stop the assassins hardly supports this theory linking 28 June to Serbia’s internal struggles.

One might differ from Miller-Melamed on a number of other points. He writes, for example, that before Sarajevo most Habsburg leaders displayed little readiness for war with Serbia. Vienna’s mobilization effort from Autumn 1912 to Spring 1913 alone suggests otherwise. This effort, incidentally, was meant to thwart Serbian ambitions in Albania, having thus nothing to do with any “self-interested overreach” by Belgrade in the direction of Austria-Hungary. One of the Habsburg leaders advocating a war with Serbia during this period was no less a person than Franz Ferdinand. And when Miller-Melamed contends that Austro-Serb relations were reaching “grave proportions” over “the increasingly independence-minded” South Slavs of the Monarchy he does not persuade. Serious tensions in those relations certainly existed, although with the sole exception of the Bosnian annexation crisis which had already ended in 1909 they did not relate to any specifically South Slav issues. Besides, not one South Slav nation ruled by the Habsburgs was advocating independence. As for Miller-Melamed’s claim that Franz Ferdinand intended to realign his empire with Russia, this was true for a long time, but there is credible evidence that it was no longer the case by 1914. One could also question his endorsement of the old idea of Franz Ferdinand as a supposedly reform-minded future emperor. Or his view that the Matscheko Memorandum was “pragmatic and pacific”. Or his blithe certainty that the Konopischt meeting between Franz Ferdinand and Wilhelm II was “prosaic and humdrum”. It goes without saying, however, that all these subjects can be legitimately debated.

So what happened in 1914? Why did “civilized” Europe opt for a brutal, barbaric conflict that did so much to destroy its civilization? Certainly, as Miller-Melamed observes, the war was not waged in order to avenge Franz Ferdinand. “Monarchies”, Karl Marx wrote in 1854, “never or seldom go to war for principles, or even to avert distant or contingent dangers; but they do it for immediate interests and for immediate advantages.”² The assassination in Sarajevo merely created a situation in which the Great Powers could entertain the war option. Several such situations had arisen before 1914, and even had Franz Ferdinand lived there is no reason to suppose that major crises would not pop up again. In that sense, the “Sarajevo myth” has clouded the broader historical setting for 1914. Sarajevo was really “nothing” – as Miller-Melamed is keen to emphasize, employing the term that was ironically uttered by a dying Franz Ferdinand to describe his pistol wound.

Misfire is without doubt a tremendously important addition to the 1914 literature. It is also, it has to be said, a stylishly written, absolutely entrancing work. In it, Miller-Melamed combines his agnosticism with massive erudition to demonstrate how the explanatory constructs in the narratives about the Sarajevo assassination in fact turn out to be, on closer inspection, no more than “neat explanatory fiction”. This makes his book uniquely original in a sea of studies detailing the road to war. Despite its subtitle, therefore, *Misfire* is certainly not just yet another account of how the war began. It is much, much more appealing and engaging than that: in showing how history can be so easily misconstrued and then widely transmitted, it is a striking reminder, and something of a reprimand, about how we end up processing the past through a mythological prism.

² K. Marx, *The Eastern Question* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1897), 356.

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