

HERFRIED MÜNKLER, *DER GROSSE KRIEG. DIE WELT 1914–1918*.  
BERLIN: ROWOHLT, 2013, pp. 924.

*Reviewed by Dušan Fundić\**

*Der Große Krieg. Die Welt 1914–1918* (The Great War. The World 1914–1918) is the most recent book written by Herfried Münkler, German political scientist and Professor of Political Theory at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Previously known for his books “*New Wars*” (2005), “*Empires: The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States*” (2007),<sup>1</sup> and “*Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen*” (2008), Münkler has treated us with an extensive book about the First World War. Divided into nine parts the book aims to cover all of the aspects of the Great War, from its origins and causes to its consequences and parallels with the contemporary world. All the parts are titled after its main subject but also include a range of various themes. This review will focus on the questions of the origins and causes of the war and partly on its consequences, because the author offers some new interpretations of these issues.

The first part, “Long and short paths to the War”, deals with the questions of the origins and causes of the war as well as the guilt for the outbreak of the war. Münkler argues that there are two different approaches in researching the origins of the war. The “short way” approach is based on the assumption that the Sarajevo assassination was a starting point of the crisis and thus is usually focused on the period of less than five weeks prior to the outbreak of the war. On the other hand, the “long path” approach considers the event in Sarajevo as a mere spark that triggered the war; had it been absent, the war would have broken out due to any

other incident. This approach emphasizes the development of European politics from the birth of the Bismarck’s German Empire in 1871 onwards. It was then, Münkler claims, that the idea of a “feared powerful actor in the middle of the continent” was born. The fear of German Reich influenced the decisions of European politicians. “The French were afraid of their marginalization, the Russians were concerned about the loss of influence after having been defeated by Japan, Austria-Hungary feared for the loss of its great power status, the United Kingdom was overwhelmed with fear of decline and in Germany the encirclement obsession reigned”.

Münkler claims that the existing “grand narrative” interpretation created by the German historians Fritz Fischer and Immanuel Geiss and followed by Hans Ulrich Weller presents the Great War as “predetermined” and Germany as the troublemaker whose main goal was the world domination. Instead of the concept of “Griff nach der Weltmacht”, the author puts forward the idea of “the willingness to wage a pre-emptive war”. Münkler’s thesis of the preventive war is based on the claim that if one analyses socio-economic structures rather than international relations the responsibility for the war lay on all of the great powers. Germany was not the only active imperialist power in Europe. Münkler states that German leadership needed to have two conditions fulfilled in order to start a pre-emptive war. The first one was to ensure participation of its ally Austria-Hungary and the second condition, concerned the inter-

<sup>1</sup> Those are Münkler’s books translated into English so far, German editions are from 2004 and 2005 respectively.

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nal unity of the country. When the crisis broke out in the Balkans in 1914 the Dual Monarchy was willing to go to war, and the first condition was fulfilled. The second one, the internal unity of Germany, was met when the Social Democrats endorsed what the government termed the defence of the homeland from the Russian aggression.

Along with the blank-cheque given to Austria-Hungary by Germany, the unconditional support given to Serbia by Russia, and to Russia by France, were equally important for the outbreak of the war. Otherwise, Russia would have been more careful in her support of Serbia. Using counterfactual approach Münkler concludes that with the absence of Russian support the conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia would have been no more than the "Third Balkan war" easily won by Habsburg Monarchy. Serbia would continue its existence as an independent state and Austria-Hungary as a great power. On the other hand, there was a major difference in comparison with the great power diplomacy at the time of the Balkan Wars: Bethmann-Hollweg and the entire German leadership refused cooperate with Great Britain and restrain Austria-Hungary from its aggressive policy towards Serbia, despite the fact that the Serbian government had no responsibility for the assassination in Sarajevo. The decisions made in Vienna and Belgrade could not have had such fatal consequences if there had been a different approach from Berlin. Nevertheless, other great powers, should have better appreciated, according to Münkler, Germany's central position in Europe. Instead, they created a setting for the encirclement of Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Despite his notion of the shared responsibility Münkler's explanation of the July Crisis involves certain troublesome remarks concerning Russia. After concluding that Germany and Austria-Hungary

were surrounded by hostile alliances, the author does not take into consideration that Russia was also cornered by the Dual Alliance<sup>2</sup> and had already had its great power position challenged during the Annexation crisis and the Balkan Wars. The German position during the July Crisis was more provocative to Russia and her allies than the author would have us believe, and the blank cheque given to Austria-Hungary on 5 July was as much as aggressive as it was irresponsible.<sup>3</sup> Since Russia had backed down in 1908 and failed in her alleged role of the protector of Balkan Slavs was it really surprising for the German leadership that St. Petersburg was bound to stand its ground in 1914? Moreover, the situation in Russia was better than that in 1908 when the Romanov dynasty had been shaken after the recent defeat in the 1905 war against Japan. Also, France and Great Britain were expected to be more active and supportive in case of a conflict.<sup>4</sup> Münkler concludes that "the key for war" was in Russia and that without its intervention there would be no major conflagration. This proposition does not seem to be in keeping with the author's thesis of the shared war which is incompatible with singling out

<sup>2</sup> Dominic C. B. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1984), 26.

<sup>3</sup> "What is striking about the blank cheque is not that it was issued but that it was indeed blank.", in: Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. I: *To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 95.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Jacques Becker and Gerd Krumeich, 1914: *Outbreak*, in: *The Cambridge History of the First World War*. Volume I: *Global War*, edited by Jay Winter and Editorial Committee of the International Research Centre of the Historial de la Grande guerre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 53.

one great power as a sole keeper of “the key to war”. It rather shifts the responsibility from Germany onto Russia.

Münkler offers an extensive, interesting and vivid history of the war from its beginning until November 1918. His account of the war operations based on the writings and testimonies of the combatants create the sense of gruesome reality. At the outset of second chapter the author discusses the main idea behind the German strategy, the Schlieffen Plan. The plan assumed that Britain would remain neutral in the case of a European war. The first battles of the war were heavily influenced, besides military strategy, by prestige considerations. One of the assumptions of the Schlieffen Plan was that it was necessary to withdraw forces in the East to the strategically better positions within German territory in order to gain enough time to win the decisive battle against France. Such a plan discounted the fact that the ancestral lands of the Hohenzollern dynasty would be handed over to the enemy. Similar considerations were at work in Austria-Hungary where the decision to attack Serbia with the third of the Austro-Hungarian forces was based on the Chief of Staff, Conrad von Hötzendorf's, considered opinion that the defensive in the Balkans would be a blow at the Dual Monarchy's prestige. At the beginning of 1915, the Dual Monarchy lost much of its prestige because of the military disaster after the defeats in Serbia, and its great power status after the defeats at the hands of the Russians. For the remainder of the war Austria-Hungary was entirely dependent on German support.

Following his accounts of the Battles at Marne and Tannenberg Münkler argues that the decisions about the war aims resulted from the struggle between the moderate Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, on one hand, and the new Chief of Staff Falkenhayn and the Hindenburg-Lu-

dendorff duo which grew in importance — and eventually had dictatorial powers — after the victory at Tannenberg, on the other. Münkler emphasizes the importance of the ambiguous German war aims at the beginning of the war in comparison with other great powers. While most of the German population saw the French as the archenemy, the elites were divided on the score. After August 1914 the German society was soon transformed into something of a victimized and sacrificial community. For the Germans, the war was purely defensive. Münkler points out that the lack of defined policy at the beginning of the war made the German leadership pursue divergent war aims. The indecisive formulation of strategic goals paved the road for the increasing influence of military leaders especially Hindenburg and Ludendorff.

The narrative then turns to other war theatres: the Middle East, East Asia and the Gallipoli Campaign. The Balkan front is unfortunately discussed in just few sentences. The author deals with the trench warfare, the superiority of defence in military operations, the everyday experience of soldiers and the development of chemical warfare, an area dominated by Germany throughout the entire war. The Italian entrance into the war did not tip the scales. Contrary to expectations Austria-Hungary did not crumble under attack of this new enemy. Instead, Austro-Hungarian military reputation recovered, mainly due to the fact that the Monarchy's Slav soldiers bravely fought against their traditional enemy, and not against other Slavs. Münkler concludes his narrative of the events of 1916 with an explanation of psychological effect of the quick victory against Romania, and the strained relations between the German and Austro-Hungarian military commanders. The author also explains how it was possible for Hindenburg and Ludendorff to forge such striking careers in the First World

War. Their rise owed so much to the skilful praise of publicists and journalists as to the victories achieved against the tactically weaker opponent.

The next two chapters, "Extension of the struggle" and "The exhausting war" offer an extensive and detailed description of the air and sea warfare, the mythical battles of Verdun and Jutland and the development of the U-boat war, which brought about, according to Münkler, the entrance of the United States into the war. Some interesting German plans such as utilising the Jihad in order to turn the Allied Muslim subjects into rebels and creating, for example the anti-Russian Polish legion are also outlined. In the similar fashion, Germany supported the Bolsheviks in Russia and eventually provided them with several million Reichsmarks post-April 1917. Such support contributed to their seizure of power. Münkler professes that 1917 marked the end of the Eurocentric world order.

The last year of the war saw the formation of "Deutsch Ostimperium", based on the harsh terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk concluded with the Russian Bolshevik government. From the early summer of 1918 the idea of a "great battle" in the West emerged in Berlin despite the overstretching of German troops across Europe. The disintegration of the Russian army, the conquest of the Baltic States and the occupation of Ukraine opened the way for it. Ludendorff completely rejected all the suggestions for ceasefire or peace negotiations. The "Michael Offensive", envisaged as a decisive battle in the Western Front, failed to achieve any strategic goals. With the Germans no longer active in the West the Macedonian front proved to have been the "Achilles heel" of the Central Powers. In November 1918, Central Europe was shaken by revolutionary changes.

The last chapter of the book "The First World War as a political challenge" deals

with the legacies of the conflict. The author states that the collapse of the three great empires of the East, Romanov, Habsburg and Ottoman, meant the continuation of wars in Eastern Europe. The hostilities in the West were ended on November 11, 1918 but in Eastern Europe they were continued through the Russian Civil War, the Polish-Russian war, fighting in the Baltic States and Greek-Turkish war. The war also left the Balkan states, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania with the ambitions for the inclusion of their population outside of the state borders. Such problems, claims Münkler, still present the security challenge for the European Union. In addition to the Balkans, the political situation in the Middle East and the Caucasus region is also still dominated by the legacy of the Great War. Such thesis lacks a more critical approach to the imperial and colonial policies led before and after the First World War by the Great Powers. The contested borders among Balkan and Middle East countries have remained, to a large extent the legacy of those policies. Finally, Münkler makes an interesting comparison between the 21<sup>st</sup> century China and Wilhelmine Germany based on their similar economic and political rise and fears of their neighbours. Therefore, the greatest contemporary responsibility is placed in the hands of the United States leadership which have to make sure that its policies do not lead to the encirclement of China.

Apart from the previous remarks, the title of the book is entirely misleading: it is a detailed narrative about Germany in the First World War rather than a global history of the conflict. Nonetheless, the vivid, and smooth writing style and the interesting new assumptions make this book an excellent addition to the ever-growing literature on the First World War.