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ALEXANDER WATSON, *RING OF STEEL: GERMANY AND AUSTRIA-HUNGARY AT WAR, 1914–1918*. LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2015, xv + 788 p.

Reviewed by Dragan Bakic*

Alexander Watson (Goldsmith, University of London) has produced a lengthy and wide-ranging book on the Great War that received much acclaim as evidenced by a number of awards - the Wolfson History Prize and Guggenheim-Lehrman Prize in Military History in 2014 and the Distinguished Book Award from the Society for Military History in 2015. It thus secured a prominent place amongst a deluge of works that emerged on the centenary of the outbreak of the war and not without good reason. The author had already explored the topic of the 1914-1918 ordeal in his previous monograph.¹ Watson has described this book himself as “the first modern history to narrate the Great War from the perspective of the two major Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary” (p. 1). This is an exaggeration as Holger Herwig wrote such a study nearly two decades earlier.² But the two books are different in their approach: while Herwig explored traditional diplomatic and military history, Watson’s work, although by no means neglecting high politics, international relations and military campaigns, pays close attention to what the experience of war meant for the populations of the two Central Powers, reflecting a more recent innovative turn in historiography. His analysis thus belongs to the thriving genre of a “history from below” and herein lies its strength. More specifically, the author addresses three main themes: “how consent

for war was won and maintained”, “how extreme and escalating violence ... radicalized German and Austro-Hungarian war aims and actions, and ... the consequences of this radicalization” and “the tragic societal fragmentation caused by the First World War”, which carried on in interwar central Europe (pp. 4-5). And indeed, he delivers the goods. Watson’s thorough and thought-provoking analysis is supported by impressive array of the ever growing literature and, especially relevant to his approach, archival research conducted in five countries in which individual stories and local experiences feature prominently in diaries and letters.

In discussing the war’s origins, Watson comes down on the side of those who dismiss Frantz Fischer’s thesis of the main German culpability. He recognizes that it was the leadership of Austria-Hungary that single-mindedly wanted and planned for a war, albeit a local one with Serbia rather than a general European conflagration, but fully aware that the latter might easily spark from aggression against Serbia. He underscores, however, that it was fear for the survival of the Dual Monarchy rather than aggressive designs that prompted its leaders to embark on a war. This is no doubt true to a great extent, but the crux of the problem is that security concerns are often the breeding ground for plans of preventive wars and Serbia was too small a country to justify the excessive Austro-Hungarian dread of South Slav (Yugoslav) irredentism. Coupled with the conspicuous lack of understanding for the position of Imperial Russia, the author seems to be too much lenient to the role played by Central Powers in the run-up to the war. It is revealing in this respect that he

¹ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

² Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (London: Edward Arnold, 1997).

* Institute for Balkan Studies SASA

errs in claiming that Germany and Austria-Hungary sacrificed more than other belligerents, including Serbia which lost a quarter of her population.

But the central argument of the book is that popular consent was rallied solidly behind the Hohenzollern and Habsburg war efforts and made them possible. This was manifest in the smooth mobilization of their armies in the summer of 1914. For Germany, it was necessary to attain national consensus across the political spectrum, namely to ensure the consent of Social Democrats, and that was done in large measure due to skilful politics of the Kaiser and German government. In a multiethnic society such was the Habsburg Empire, in which the Slav part of population was politically subdued and discriminated in the south of the country, it appeared doubtful that national solidarity could be expected. But, contrary to expectations, both reservists and civil society at large readily responded to the call to arms. Watson explains this success as stemming from what he calls “double mobilization”, a congruity between loyalty to the Habsburg state idea, and especially to the venerable Franz Joseph, and national aspirations of different ethnic communities, which until the late stage in the war were content to realize their ambitions within the Habsburg framework. In this strain, Watson believes that the Austro-Hungarian authorities fell victim to “the illusory nature of the government’s fears that the South Slav lands were seriously tempted by a greater Serbia” (p. 60). If the suspicions of South Slavs’ fidelity were unfounded, as it has been claimed, then the suspicions of Czechs, for example, must have been paranoid. The author reinforces his argument by stressing that the extraordinary feature of the war was the enduring support of Habsburg nationalities, despite the horrendous casualties at battlefields and hardships at the home front. Although there is much to be said for this contention, its validity ultimately hinges on how we define “popular consent”, because that could

be interpreted in a way that encompasses a range of popular attitudes, from enthusiasm to listless compliance and obedience. And of course, popular attitudes in the Habsburg Monarchy varied from one nationality to the other. Contrary to the author, the present reviewer doubts that a propaganda campaign would have raised the morale of Czech troops leaving for the front (p. 251), who had good reasons to feel alienated from the Habsburg war effort.

The real gems of this book, however, relate to the experiences of ordinary German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers, their conduct on the front and especially towards populace in the enemy territory, and civilians who did their best to cope with notorious food shortages caused by the British naval blockade and support their loved ones in the army. Especially engaging is Watson’s discussion of the war crimes committed against civilians in Belgium, East Prussia, Austrian Galicia and Serbia. He shows that much of atrocities did not result from any premeditated action, but rather sprung from the affects that a new combat situation had on the still untried soldiers. For example, grossly exaggerated fears of spying and civilian irregulars prompted the occupying forces to resort to summary and brutal reprisals in breach of international law. This is in line with Gumz’s account of the Habsburg troops’ massacres of Serbian civilians in 1914 on which Watson heavily relies.³ The similarities of such atrocities on both sides of the front and in different regions populated by different peoples are striking and offer considerable evidence for the author’s contention. Much more controversial is Watson’s interpretation of the atrocities against civilians in the eastern “bloodlands”⁴ of the

³ Jonathan Gumz, *The Resurrection and Collapse of Empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴ A reference to Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

continent in 1914-1918 as antecedents of the Nazi campaigns of extermination in the Second World War. He singles out Russian atrocities from the opening phase of the war in East Prussia and Galicia as "the closest link between the campaigns of 1914 and the genocidal horrors of the mid-twentieth century" (p. 205). Apart from geography, it remains unclear why that would be a case given that the author concedes that the scale of violence committed by "Tsarist troops" was "no different than that of the more famous contemporaneous German atrocities in Belgium and France" (p. 171). In terms of their scale and savagery proportionately to the size of and the number of population in the invaded territory, Austro-Hungarian crimes in the north-west of Serbia were probably the worst of all during the Great War. Those also owed much to the vicious pre-war propaganda which dehumanized the "culturally inferior" Serbs, as another recent study shows and, incidentally, refutes Gumz's and Watson's insistence on the purely reactive nature of war crimes generated by fear of *comitadji* irregulars.⁵ Watson seems to waver himself in his appreciation of Nazi antecedents, especially when he assesses the German occupation regime in the Baltic (Ober Ost) and the part of Polish land designated for annexation to the Reich; he finds that German plans for colonization "appear to point towards the larger, genocidal racial organization of the east desired a quarter of a century later by the Nazis" (p. 398). Further research might test the argument that the impetus for German war plans, which increasingly included radical schemes for annexation and settlement, based on racial precepts can be reduced to the trauma of experiencing Russian invasion in 1914 (p. 266).

⁵ See Hannes Leidinger's chapter on the escalation of violence in Hannes Leidinger et al., eds., *Habsburgs schmutziger Krieg* (Vienna: Residenz Verlag, 2014); this edited volume is published in Serbian: *Prljavi rat Habsburga* (Novi Sad: Prometej, 2016).

In the way of an epilogue, Watson discusses the woeful legacy of the ordeal that more than four years of bitter fighting left to Europe, rearranged at the end of the conflict and at the Versailles peace conference. His remark that "the old continent of empires was giving way to one of imperfect nation states" (p. 535) is instructive of his lack of sympathy for the new international order. He shares this view with Margaret MacMillan, whose work he deems engaging,⁶ and some other historians, but many would strongly disagree. Still, returning to his theme of social fragmentation, Watson is right in pointing out that class and racial differences, so dramatically inflamed during the war, remained to plague most societies after 1918, both in the old and successor states. It is important to remember that the existential threats of war, including hunger, crushed inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance within communities, such as that of Cracow for instance, with Jews being particularly exposed to violence.

Overall, Watson's painstakingly researched and highly readable book contributes most to our understanding of human suffering and day-to-day experience of the Great War with its richness in detail to which the constraints of a space in a review do little justice. A Balkan specialist should bear in mind that the discussion of Balkan and South Slav matters does not match the detailed treatment of Galicia, which is, to a great extent, conditioned by the author's research in Polish archives. With its many admirable qualities, this study is certain to generate much interest both among scholars and general readership.

⁶ Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: Six Months that Changed the World* (London: John Murray, 2009).