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REVIEW

OF THE BOOK: THE WAR THAT ENDED PEACE. HOW EUROPE ABANDONED PEACE FOR THE FIRST WORLD WAR

By: Margaret MacMillan

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We can expect a bumper crop this year on account of the centenary. Doubtless there will be many books for us to enjoy about the Great War, dubbed the first war of the modern era, a war on an industrial scale, with which the so-called “short 20th

Century” began. However, amidst the broad range of offerings, one title stands out on account of its particular focus. Margaret MacMillan, professor of history at the University of Oxford and great-grandchild of Prime Minister Lloyd George, offers us: “The War that ended Peace. The road to 1914”, edited in Spain by Turner.

This is not a book for those looking for insight into the war itself, the scenarios at the fronts, the great military offensives, the kilometres of liquid mud in the trenches and the appearance of the first tanks in Europe. These “storms of steel” are not what readers will find here. On the contrary, and I feel that readers will be grateful for it, they will be presented with the history of Europe in the preceding decades; the book could even have been titled “Europe *fin de siècle*”, because this is the real issue the

author develops with precision and rigour, and at the same time with the elegance and lively expression of a literary work, entertaining in its plot and its fine introspection in its descriptions of the main characters: emperors, kings, prime ministers, chancellors, generals and admirals and a varying spectrum of politicians. A unique portrait gallery that allows us to understand their feelings and share their weaknesses, without entering into arguments or explanations of a personal nature. Because the real protagonist of her work is not the conflict itself, or the numerous factions responsible, but the destruction of peace. What she investigates are the reasons why peace was not possible. The book gradually reveals, with the meticulous care of an archaeologist working away at her site, the various factors that would lead to war. In essence how and why peace that had survived a multitude of crises was eventually broken.

The summer of 1914 was a good one and as readers we will breathe this summer ambience, Europe's "last summer", before becoming locked in European civil war which, except for brief intervals, was to occupy the next thirty years. We will be witnesses to those intense weeks stretching from 28th June to the first week in July, but we will not hear the "guns of August".

On the contrary, as in a retrospective tale, the author looks back onto the preceding decades, because it is there that the deeply committed historian searches for, and finds, the policies pursued, the military plans laid down, the alliances forged and the nationalist impulses that together converge into the shock of August. In the middle of the summer holidays of the major political and military leaders of the day we switched "from peace to war". It could have been a minor conflict or just another Balkan war as in previous years, but this time history was going to be different: beginning so enthusiastically with cheers and farewell kisses on railway station platforms and later the resounding horror of destruction and death.

MacMillan explores the entrails of war, not the external sounds. She is interested by war but she broaches it from a very personal viewpoint. War for her, in this case the Great War, is not an accident however dramatic, nor an occurrence however transcendental; no, war is always a result. And as a historian she wants to guide us, and she does so with rigour, leading us to discover the broad catalogue of underlying causes, circumstances and people who brought about that transition from peace to war, that result that goes back such a long way back in history.

She takes us on a guided tour across Europe from Czarist Russia to Great Britain; with her we visit Germany where in one year, 1888, three generations coincide with the title of Emperor; and it is the grandson, the young Wilhelm II, who with great ardour and excessive enthusiasm, makes the first steps towards the risky "Weltpolitik", while at the same time moving away from Chancellor Bismarck's skilful policies which for decades had prevented Germany from isolation.

We become witnesses to the escalation in rivalries between Germany and Britain over which of them has the better and larger fleet in the North Atlantic, an effort

which in the long run turned out to be irrelevant in the events of the war; we learn the details of the sophisticated international relations of the period, the system of alliances and its fluctuations, the intense diplomatic activity, as well as the painstaking military plans designed to ensure the earliest possible mobilisation of their troops.

Yet we shall also hear the voices that are demanding peace and we shall see the launch of the first pacifist movements, alongside the failure of the international Socialist anti-war movement.

It is therefore a history of diplomacy, of militia, of world geopolitics, of an emerging mass society, of explosive European nationalist movements, among them the Serb organisation “Young Bosnia”, with which Gavrilo Princip, the assassin, was involved, who, after a failed plot with bombs, by happenstance fired his Browning shotgun at Archduke Franz Ferdinand, killing him and his wife in Sarajevo.

Undoubtedly these were the shots that lit the fuse. Nevertheless, without going on the guided tour that we as readers are invited to, one would not readily understand the impact of an assassination that could have merely resulted in the long list of killings of the period. On June 28, 1914 war was not inevitable. What MacMillan ultimately conveys is the prevailing climate of those warm summer months: war as a way out, the yearning to clean out in one fell swoop an atmosphere so heavily charged that it became stifling.

A book that throws light on our present-day world by providing parallels that constitute food for thought on the underlying theme of war, not as a happening but as a result.

