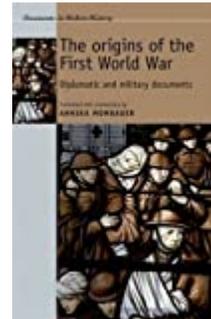


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Annika Mombauer. *The origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and military documents.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013. 592 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7190-7421-9; \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7420-2.



Reviewed by Jason Engle (University of Southern Mississippi)

Published on H-War (February, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Annika Mombauer's *The Origins of the First World War* is among the rash of volumes focusing on the outbreak of World War I that were published to coincide with the Great War's centennial. The volume, however, is a diverse collection of diplomatic and military documents of the Great Powers, beginning in 1911 and ending in August 1914. As Mombauer explains, its purpose is to enable its readers to draw their own conclusions, based on evidence, as to why war broke out in August 1914 (p. 30). The collection is broken into two sections. The first contextualizes the various international crises in the years leading up to 1914 and how diplomats were able to mitigate those tensions peacefully through mediation. The second section is comprised of documents dealing specifically with the July Crisis and demonstrate how diplomats were unable to avoid the outbreak of war over the murder of heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

In part 1, "The Period of Avoided Wars, 1911-1914," Mombauer provides crucial background for understanding the decision-making of European statesmen and military leaders during the final crisis in July 1914 (p. 31). The documents in this section are sectioned by year and deal with the unfolding of and the resolutions to the First and Second Moroccan Crises; British minister of war

Richard Haldane's unsuccessful visit to Berlin to discuss the reduction of Germany's naval build-up; as well as the European observations about the Balkan Wars, particularly the Second Balkan War and Serbia's territorial gains and increased influence in what Austria-Hungary perceived to be its primary sphere of influence. Serbia's victory and its provocative nationalist agitation of Habsburg Serbs intensified instability in the Balkans and was an important factor prompting German leadership to solidify its commitment to its Austro-Hungarian ally and its international position in December 1912. Additionally, the documents reveal how German war plans were exposed amid the failed effort of Wilhelm II to coerce King Albert to permit the German army to pass through Belgium in the event of war with France in November 1913. Simultaneously, the assignment of German officer Otto Limon von Sanders to serve as an advisor to Turkey for the reorganization of the Turkish army, caused Russian outrage and allegations of collusion between the two states against the Russian Empire. Nevertheless, as Mombauer emphasizes, these instances all managed to be resolved peacefully, but the degrees to which they contributed to the eventual outbreak of war in July 1918, remain points of debate.

The documents in this second section focus entirely

on the July Crisis of 1914 and provide evidence that it would indeed have been possible for some of these contingent factors to have played out differently (p. 156). The documents in this section are arranged chronologically and topically, beginning with the immediate responses to Franz Ferdinand's assassination, followed by those relating to Count Alexander Hoyo's mission to Berlin to attain reassurances of German support (resulting in the infamous 'blank check'). Documents pertaining to the planning of Austria-Hungary's ultimatum to Serbia as well as documents reflecting the concerns of the Entente powers over the same duration (July 13-22, 1914) are the focus of chapter 7. Chapter 8 contains documents covering the reactions of the Entente powers to Austria-Hungary's harsh ultimatum; while Sir Edward Grey immediately sought to mediate the rapidly escalating situation, France encouraged Russia to stand fast in its promise to support Serbia. The diplomatic chess match that ensued among the Great Powers over the mobilization of troops is the focus of the documents in the following two chapters. The aim of positioning the potential enemy as the aggressor became the focus for the governments in Paris, St. Petersburg, and Berlin and dictated the timing and extent of mobilization orders as a European war seemed increasingly likely. The group of documents gathered in the last chapter center on Britain's announcement of support for France and Belgium and the official declarations of war that thrust Europe into four years of unprecedented destruction and bloodshed, which cast a shadow on the rest of the twentieth century.

Very early on in the First World War, the Great Powers began publishing the confidential diplomatic documents in an effort to deflect and shift blame over the outbreak of the war. These simultaneous efforts took the form of Germany's White Book, Britain's White Papers, Russia's Orange Book, France's Yellow Book, Serbia's Blue Book, and Austria-Hungary's Red Book, all published throughout 1914-15. The motives and chronological manipulation of the documents made the 'Coloured Books' rather dubious as sources for historical research (pp. 3-4). While perhaps more academically trustworthy, the publication of postwar document collections was motivated by ulterior agendas. As Mombauer points out, for example, the Soviet government published *International Relations in the Age of Imperialism: Documents from the Archives of the Tsarist and Provisional Governments*, aimed at demonstrating the faults of Nicholas II's government in the outbreak of war. On the flip side, the Weimar government published two separate col-

lections, *Die Deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch* and *Die Grosse Politik der Europaischen Kabinette, 1871-1914. Sammlung der Diplomatischen Aktenstücke des Auswartigen Amtes*, with the hopes demonstrating German complicity—beside the rest of the Great Powers—and not its responsibility. Collections published by the other major belligerents followed and documents from all of these collections are included in this volume. As Mombauer points out, in the interwar period, publishing secret records was a matter of self-defense and the documents themselves were the 'sharpest of weapons' (p. 11).

The unearthing of new documentary sources upset the agreement that historians had reached by the 1930s, which found that all of the Great Powers had had a role to play in the war's outbreak. Fritz Fischer most emphatically challenged this orthodoxy, contending that German and Austro-Hungarian leadership had indeed orchestrated the declaration of war against Serbia, fully aware of the potential global conflict—part and parcel of Germany's 'aggressive foreign-policy aims' (pp. 16-17). In the decades after Fischer's controversial conclusions, historians, utilizing emerging new evidence, focused on the involvement of the other Great Powers in the July Crisis and largely concluded that there were diplomatic mistakes and negligence on all sides. The most recent acclaimed work echoing this consensus is Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (2012). Like Clark, Mombauer makes no assertions as to war guilt, but stresses seven important 'threads' apparent in the documents surrounding the July Crisis. First, it is clear through the documents that the assassination of Franz Ferdinand gave Vienna a long-desired excuse to go to war with Serbia and put an end to its growing influence on Austro-Hungarian Serbs. Second, the evidence indicates that the Entente powers, especially Britain, were markedly more interested in mediating a peace than was Germany or Austria-Hungary. Third, the sources expose the reluctance of Britain to commit to either side or to neutrality and how both sides pressured its government to divulge her intentions. The fourth thread pertains to Germany's expectation of British neutrality; this assertion guided its policy and dismayed Wilhelm II when Cousin George (V) 'betrayed' him with Britain's declaration of war on Germany. French involvement in the July Crisis represents the fifth main theme Mombauer identifies; the documents provide further clarification in the long-debated role of France in the diplomatic events leading to war. Sixth, the collection provides evidence concerning the chronology of Russian mobilization and

whether or not it played a part in pushing Europe to war. Lastly, the documents in this collection accentuate the similar tensions between civilian and military leaders throughout Europe's capitals; military leaders consistently pressured diplomats to commit to a course of action in order to not fall behind the enemy in terms of military preparations.

With the current orthodoxy having firmly established varying degrees of guilt for all of the Great Powers, the assessment of who played what role in the war's outbreak has emerged as a new point of scholarly focus in teasing out the complex course of events in July and August 1914. In this volume, readers find an unrelenting Austro-Hungarian commitment to war with Serbia, the consequences be damned; the purposefully unacceptable ultimatum and abject dismissal of any attempts to mediate an agreement were all decisions made in Vienna. At the same time, Germany's unconditional support of Austria-Hungary's war aims allowed for Vienna's intransigence in the face of a potential Europe-wide conflict. As Mombauer points out, the Entente powers played virtually no role in the July Crisis until July 23, 1914, when Ambassador Baron Giesl von Gieslingun delivered the ultimatum to Serbia (p. 238). For France's part, their encouragement and support of unyielding

Russian opposition to potential Austro-Hungarian aggression toward Serbia exacerbated the quickly escalating situation. French president Raymond Poincaré concluded quickly that war appeared unavoidable and pressed for immediate preparations for that course of action. With the apparent vacillation of Tsar Nicholas II, French pressure appears to have been crucial in pushing Russia toward general mobilization. The part Britain played, as these events unfolded, was one of chief mediator between the continental powers, as its government was split as to its involvement in the potential European war. Although the violation of Belgian neutrality was not the driving force of Britain's entrance into the fray, as has been the traditional narrative, it provided a crucial vehicle through which the government could gain popular support for war.

There are many more levels of detail fleshed out in this collection that cannot be adequately covered here. Suffice it to say, Mombauer's expertise and skillful annotation makes this diverse, translated collection a valuable contribution to the historiography and an essential volume for Great War specialists. Features such as a glossary of names provide information on the roles of the key figures writing and receiving the documents and make the collection more accessible for nonspecialists as well.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Jason Engle. Review of Mombauer, Annika, *The origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and military documents*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40142>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.