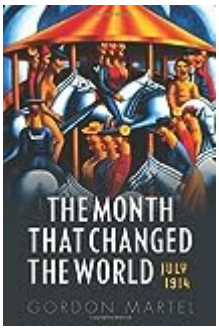
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gordon Martel. *The Month That Changed the World: July 1914.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Illustrations, maps. 512 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-966538-9.

Reviewed by Karl Hjembo (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-German (January, 2016)

Commissioned by Nathan N. Orgill

The Diplomatic Struggle and the Resulting Great War

The origins of the First World War have been a topic of great concern for historians, undertaken for various reasons throughout the last century. Over the years, historians have grasped at every scrap of paper and original correspondence to determine what was informing the decision makers who were involved in the greatest calamity of the twentieth century, which toppled empires and immersed the world in revolutionary movements that shaped global politics through the rest of the century and beyond. The literature on the origins of the First World War usually examines two aspects of this conflict: the context of European imperial politics since the Franco-Prussian War and the decisions taken immediately following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Some scholarship on the origins of the war blames one power in particular or places blame somewhat unevenly among them. Other writers tend to avoid blaming any of the powers and prefer to place more weight on the circumstances surrounding the July Crisis of 1914. Gordon Martel, in *The Month That Changed the World*, chooses the latter strategy but adds that leaders and ministers in government were responsible for the crisis in July. After all, he writes, âthe tragic era that followed can be explained only by their hubris, combined with chance and circumstanceâ (p. 431).

Martel divides his work into four parts: âThe Making of a Crisis,â âThe July Crisis,â âDays of Decision,â and âThe Aftermath.â These parts are preceded by a lengthy prologue; lists of characters, illustrations, and maps; and a diplomatic lexicon, all of which are very useful for the reader to follow, given the extensive detail and language used in this and other works on the origins of World War I. These guides set Martelâs work apart from other books on the subject, as previous authors generally rush into the material without providing contextual information. Given the extensive cast of characters involved in the crisis, it is impossible to keep all of the names straight, especially for readers further removed in time from these events. Furthermore, diplomatic terminology is useful for understanding the meaning of precise terms. To get the most out of the book, the reader should repeatedly visit these initial pages.

The organization of the book makes an extremely complex subject matter very readable. Martel breaks chapters into segments to present multiple events that happened simultaneously without disrupting the overall flow of the work. This is especially useful in the second and third parts of the book: âThe July Crisisâ and âDays of Decision.â Furthermore, Martelâs valuable resource is an easier read than most on the subject.

While some authors delve deeply into the diplomatic crises preceding the Sarajevo assassination (the period between 1871 and 1914), Martel only gives these events scant attention by limiting his remarks to his prologue. He views this period as a time of unprecedented peace in Europe: âThe last war [before 1914] fought between Great Powers on European soil had ended forty-three years before, in 1871â (p. 1). It is in this section that Martel examines the system of alliances, and he emphasizes the peaceful resolutions the system attained through wide-ranging agreements, despite moments of friction. For Martel, this meant that the system of alliances worked. âEurope had successfully weathered a number of storms by June 1914,â he argues, âand there was no reason to believe that future difficulties might present problems that could not be overcome by negotiationâ (p. 19). He also surveys pacifist movements that became popular during this time, which indicates that public opinion trended toward peace. Conversely, other historians who extensively cover the period 1871-1914 generally argue that Europe trended toward war during this time. On this point, Martel clarifies his perspective; he notes that one need look no further than the events immediately surrounding the July Crisis to understand the origins of World War I.

Conversely, historians who see 1871-1914 as a time trending toward war identify the diplomatic crises during this period as accumulating tension that would eventually make peace in Europe untenable. Sidney Bradshaw Fay maintained that the âsystem of secret alliances since the Franco-Prussian Warâ was one of the underlying causes of World War I.[1] Luigi Albertini assigned blame for the July Crisis to actions Austria-Hungary took in annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908.[2] Samuel R. Williamson Jr. also saw the events prior to July 1914 as inevitably leading to a confrontation. The assassination was just the latest in a list of crises for the Habsburg Empire. Of Austro-Hungarian leaders, he wrote, âBattered during the Balkan Wars by Serbian expansion, Russian activism and now by the loss of Franz Ferdinand, the Habsburg leaders desperately desired to shape their future, rather than let events destroy them. The fear of domestic disintegration made war an acceptable policy option. The Habsburg decision, backed by the Germans, gave the July crisis a momentum that rendered peace an early casualty.â[3] Vladimir Dedijer took a similar approach but with a different angle. While he too saw war as the result of a continuum of policy decisions before the July Crisis, he focused instead on how unachievable this course was in light of public discontent. Dedijer claimed that the assassins of Archduke Franz Ferdinand were part of a popular revolutionary movement justifying its use of terror to resist the allegedly anachronistic institutions of the Habsburg Empire, which they claimed were oppressing and retarding the development of society in Bosnia.[4] Finally, Fritz Fischer also viewed the system of alliances created during the long European peace as promoting an inevitable clash among the powers. He used the phrase âlong-awaited reckoningâ to describe Germanyâs hawkish desires with relation to France and Russia.[5]

What one chooses to believe about the role that preceding events played in World War I is a matter of perspective. When looking at the conflagration and returning to its causes, hindsight provides a clear picture of what happened and why. This can be, however, an unfair assessment when trying to understand what exactly was weighing on the minds of decision makers at the moment of crisis. By examining the exact moment of crisis before the war, Martel does justice to the human aspects of the crisis itself. The decision makers in July 1914 made serious errors, only some of which were beyond their control. While previous crises shaped leadersâ perspectives, they by no means gave them the luxury to predict the consequences of their actions in the summer of 1914. The strength of Martelâs work is exposing the mistakes and miscommunication that did more to cause the war than neatly premeditated plans and conspiracies. Nonetheless, due to the meager attention given to events before 1914, the reader will have to look to other sources, such the writings of Fay, Albertini, and Dedijer for a treatment of these events.[6]

Martel also gives sparse attention to the conspiracy behind the Sarajevo assassination itself in part 1, âThe Making of a Crisis.â Few historians give a comprehensive account of the assassination, as the interactions of the Great Powers in the diplomatic crisis overshadow this event. Very few powers were directly familiar with Balkan politicsâarguably, only Austria-Hungary and Russia were deeply involved in this part of the world, and the rise of nation-states, like Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria, lessened their involvement in the re-

gion. Nonetheless, this event is critical to the subsequent diplomatic struggle, and it is ironic that the Great Powers, most of whom were without a vested interest in this region, fought in response to an insurgent attack there. The assassination has an odd relationship to the diplomatic struggle. It is usually treated as the precursor to the main event, and there is nothing unusual about Martel glossing over it in order to move to diplomatic responses.

Throughout the book, Martel introduces key personalities and their roles in the crisis. He gives attention to biographical details that personalize each character and allow the reader to gain a basic understanding of what shaped each personâs worldview. Though there is little room to delve further, at least Martel provides the basic connection between the people and the decisions they made. His thesis relies on illuminating these personalities, and he does well to introduce the characters at appropriate times throughout the text. Most of Martelâs counterparts are not as organized as he is in providing background information about key people. Without such introductions, readers are left without perspective and have to guess what decisions people made by their function in government, which is not always a reliable guide.

Part 2, âThe July Crisis,â is the main focus of the book, and in this section, Martel organizes his information into chapters divided by each of the eight days in July following the Austria-Hungarian delivery of an ultimatum to Serbia (July 23). Each day is closely examined with correspondence, events, and other contextual facts designed to convey all that weighed on the minds of the leaders and states on the cusp of war. Martel further divides each chapter into sections designed to complete subplots within each day. He presents uninterrupted plot developments before moving to the next event. Nonetheless, he also shows where uncoordinated and disjointed events and communication eventually caused the powers to cease cooperating with one another.

Martel portrays the concerns of each of the Great Powers. He reveals the conflicts among them and demonstrates how important it was for each state to preserve what it deemed to be its prestige and honor. Elements of friction are exposed: Russiaâs desire to defend the Serbs, Austria-Hungaryâs will to crush the Serbian insurgency, Germanyâs unwillingness to trust Great Britainâs arbitration of the crisis, Italyâs demand for compensation from its allies, and Franceâs desire for solidarity within the Triple Entente. These were some of the contentious themes that adopted other forms and variations throughout the crisis. Martel integrates many internal and external factors to communicate the complexity of this crisis. Each of the powers had interests that conflicted with one another and could not be resolved without achieving a common understanding.

It was not just friction among the powers that mattered; sometimes tensions were heightened within individual governments. Martel examines the correspondence among diplomats as each advocated for policy adjustments to suit their perspectives. For example, while the German ambassador to London urged his government to cooperate with Britainâs mediation efforts, the German foreign minister was disingenuous in agreeing to it. Ultimately, Germany had a negative impression of British mediation, perceiving it as placing Austria-Hungary under international judgment over a local affair. Other friction within governments included the conflicting viewpoints about mobilization and posturing between Czar Nicholas II and his ministers. These and other anecdotes are critical selections that support Martelâs thesis.

Martel also exposes ironic circumstances aiding the crisis. For example, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia but was unable to fire shots until days later. Throughout the text, he presents multiple occasions during which Germany attempted to cajole an unwilling Austria-Hungary to make concessions to Italy to attain its cooperation or, at the very least, to secure its neutrality in the event of war. He points to blunders in coordination and planning, leaving one wondering what would have happened if Russia had not mobilized before proposing direct negotiations with Austria-Hungary, if Austria-Hungary had not rushed to declare war without exhausting all diplomatic efforts, and even if Germany and Austria agreed to mutual mobilization along the Austro-Hungarian-Russian border without the intent to strike. Just when peace seemed possible, one ill-timed event or misunderstanding would upset plans for peace. Martel places each circumstance within the proper context, showing how each event undermined diplomatic initiatives.

Another theme that compounded the crisis was the absence of principal leaders. Martel periodically reminds the reader where principal leaders were when events demanded their attention. Even as the deadline for Serbiaâs response to the Austrian ultimatum passed, Kaiser Wilhelm II was still on his yachting cruise, British foreign minister Edward Grey was at his vacation cottage, Habsburg emperor Franz Joseph was on vacation at Bad Ischl, both the French president and prime minister were

in Stockholm on their way back to France, the Italian foreign minister was on medical leave, the Austrian war minister was on vacation, and the chief of staff of Serbia was on leave in Austria! This gives the impression that leaders around Europe were merely posturing and expected the crisis to diffuse on its own. Even when official response was required for a direct inquiry, the responsible ministers were not in the proper place to act. When Russian foreign minister Sergei Sazonov attempted to ask the Austro-Hungarian government for an extension for a Serbian response to the ultimatum, Austria-Hungaryâs foreign minister Leopold Berchtold was traveling! These examples build on Martelâs thesis about the circumstances combined with the leadersâ hubris that made this situation irreconcilable. In too many cases, words did not match actions, and this trend leaves the reader wondering if indeed ministers and leaders in government were even aware of the consequences of their actions. They were treading into unknown territory, and on this point, most other historians who recognize the complexity of the July Crisis share this concern.

Martel enhances his work by reporting on the domestic events that occurred outside of the diplomatic crisis that weighed on public opinion. Such events included the Ulster political crisis in Britain and the Caillaux murder trial in France. For a long time, the public was distracted by other concerns and unaware of the catastrophe that was brewing. Some were aware of the imminent danger approaching; Martel mentions international societies (usually pacifist and/or socialist in nature) at various parts of the text to acknowledge the role nongovernmental bodies assumed in their attempts to preserve peace.

Martelâs attention to all details affecting decision making, public perception, and actions are well selected, carefully organized, and solidly characterized in relation to the diplomatic crisis. This gives some clarity regarding an otherwise complex subject. The details unraveled in other literature are so extensive and disorganized that one can be lost in following the many twists and turns, unable to follow the main storylines connected to the warâs origins. Albertini, for example, quoted many primary sources extensively. It is not uncommon for quotations in Albertiniâs work to take up more than one page. The fact that Martel is more concise with the available mountain of information is an accomplishment. Martel is very selective in the quotations he uses, carefully choosing passages from key documents, such as the text of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum and keynote speeches on the reasons for war presented to the governments of France, Germany, Russia, and Britain. These are arguably essential documents; however, readers must note that if they want to broaden their investigation of primary sources, there is much more material available, and they will have to look elsewhere.

In the final chapter, âMaking Sense of the Madness,â Martel analyzes other works on the warâs origins, qualifying them in light of popular perception and academic advancement on the issue. Even before the first shots were fired, all the nationsâ leaders blamed each other for the reckless policies they pursued. Martel notes that each power defended its role in the crisis, producing the so-called colored books to explain its side of the story while the war was being fought. He also incorporates arguments from political opponents, such as the political Left, who by the time of the crisis had become entrenched in criticizing capitalism, imperialism, and militarism for leading Europe to ruin. His examination of the scholarship on the subject in subsequent decades is marked by key personalities and attitudes toward the war. What began as accusations leveled against the powers receded in favor of a neutral view sympathetic to the difficult circumstances of the time. By the late 1920s, Fay wrote, âNone of the Powers wanted a European War.â[7] Martel identifies decades where there was a lull in writing on the subject; Fischer reignited debate on war guilt in the 1960s. Martel acknowledges the major authors without glaring omissions and provides a fair assessment of their contributions.

He then concludes this chapter by acknowledging that there isnât âa neat explanation that ties up all the loose endsâ; however, he asserts confidently that one need not look further than the responsible statesmen in positions of authority and the views they adopted to understand who was responsible for the war (pp. 430-431). The human element behind a crisis involved mistakes, arrogance, and misunderstandings that are discomforting to the reader. Martel does well to uphold these basic truths and is not tempted to assign blame for the crisis to anyone in particular, nor is he tempted to drag readers along the downward spiral of conspiracy theories that often muddle scholarship on this subject.

Though Martel presents an extensive depiction of the diplomatic crisis, he misses an opportunity to expand scholarship on the origins of World War I by marginalizing the role of the Sarajevo assassination. While several authors, such as Joachim Remak, Dedijer, and Albertini, covered the assassination thoroughly, this event should be updated in accordance with scholarship in national security studies.[8] Perhaps the greatest tragedy

for Austria-Hungary was its failure (during the assassinsâ trial) to expose the insurgency behind the assassination and its connections to the Belgrade government. The web of tangled secret societies only became known well after the war and would have lent credence to Austria-Hungaryâs claim that the assassination represented a threat to the current world order, which may have secured greater international sympathy in reckoning with Serbia. Even Fay recognized the insurgent problem as he wrote, âBut it is very doubtful whether all these dangerous tendencies [that is, of the possible confrontation between competing alliances] would have actually led to war, had it not been for the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. That was the factor which consolidated the elements of hostility and started the rapid and complicated succession of events which culminated in a World War, and for that factor Serbian nationalism was primarily responsible.â[9] Todayâs governments are well aware of the threat insurgencies pose to them, which makes counterinsurgency an important discipline in strategic studies. Austria-Hungary did not have this support, and scholarship on the origins of World War I would benefit from examining the Sarajevo assassination as a case in counterinsurgency.

Nonetheless, Martelâs book is a great work and provides a readable and engaging account of a notoriously complex subject. This allows a greater reader base to achieve a nuanced level of understanding about this seminal event of the twentieth century.

Notes

[1]. Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, vol. 1, *Before Sarajevo: Underlying Causes of the War* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1928), 34.

[2]. Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1, trans. Isabella M. Massey (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 300.

[3]. Samuel R. Williamson Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: St. Martinâs Press, 1991), 215.

[4]. Vladimir Dedijer, *The Road to Sarajevo* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 446.

[5]. Fritz Fischer, *World Power or Decline: The Controversy over Germanyâs Aims in the First World War*, trans. Lancelot L. Farrar, Robert Kimber, and Rita Kimber (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1974), 20.

[6]. Fay and Albertini offer the most comprehensive accounts of the formation of competing alliances and the diplomatic crises in which they engaged. Dedijerâs work is most useful in understanding the evolution of the Balkan crises from an indigenous perspective during this same time period. He focuses on the evolution of revolutionary movements like the Young Bosnians (*Mlada Bosna*) but also gives attention to Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Austro-Hungarian politics. The Sarajevo assassination is the focus of his book, so the geopolitical context is geared toward this event and not the diplomatic crisis. Furthermore, his perspective is valuable for understanding the revolutionary movements and their contribution to the war.

[7]. Fay, *Origins of the World War*, 547.

[8]. Joachim Remak, *Sarajevo: The Story of a Political Murder* (New York: Criterion Books, 1959); Dedijer, *Road to Sarajevo*; and Albertini, *Origins of the War of 1914.*

[9]. Fay, *Origins of the World War,* 558.

Citation: Karl Hjembo. Review of Martel, Gordon, *The Month That Changed the World: July 1914.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42971