

Book Review: The War That Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War by Margaret MacMillan

Beginning in the early nineteenth century and ending with the assassination of Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand, historian **Margaret MacMillan** sets out to uncover the huge political and technological changes, national decisions and the small moments of human muddle and weakness that led Europe to the First World War. **Christopher Prior** finds this book effective in providing the reader with a sense of some of the complexities of topics less frequently visited by Anglophone historiography.

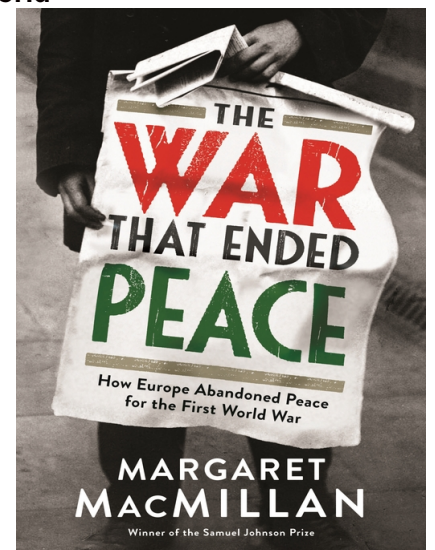


The War That Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War. Margaret MacMillan. Profile Books. October 2013.

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In a year when commentators and Cabinet ministers will continue to offer two-dimensional explanations for the start of the First World War, a book on the topic by someone with a proven track record of delivering popular works about complex narratives is in order. In *The War That Ended Peace*, [Margaret MacMillan](#), the author of the much-admired *Peacemakers* (2001), has delivered an enjoyable romp through a decade and a half of European history.

That it feels curious to use the word 'romp' about a work that clocks in at over 600 pages is only further testament to MacMillan's achievement in this regard. If one principally reads academic history, one tends to be unused to frequent asides and brief digressions, but here they are a delight. Logistically, too, this is impressive, keeping an awful lot of plates spinning while building a composite picture of the tangled mass of European diplomacy in a way that feels logical.



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MacMillan's focus is predominantly upon Europe's military and political leaders (although there is also space for broader, though briefer, discussions of European culture and society), and she delivers a clear account of the roles of these leaders at the heart of the gradual coalescence of the Triple Alliance of Austria-Hungary, Italy and Germany on one hand, and the Triple Entente of Britain, France and Russia on the other.

While this world of the *Entente Cordiale* and Agadir will hardly be unfamiliar to those with a passing interest in modern history, the book is effective in providing the reader with a sense of some of the complexities of topics less frequently visited by Anglophone historiography, such as the inner workings of Austria-Hungary. There are some marvellous brief portraits of the key players, such as the wicked likening of Kaiser Wilhelm to Toad from *The Wind in the Willows* (although it isn't quite clear how rendering HMS *Dreadnought* analogous to Muhammad Ali helps elucidate matters).

In her introduction, MacMillan is keen to stress that the war wasn't inevitable, but that a host of forces were in fact working towards the maintenance of peace, from labour movements and key individuals to an enduring confidence in the capacity of Europe to avoid conflict. 'Why', MacMillan asks, 'did the forces pushing towards peace – and they were strong ones – not prevail?' This is slightly at odds with the world painted in the chapters that follow, which is one of perpetually furrow-browed leaders and angry populaces. To be sure, MacMillan does give over some pages to pacifists and critics of jingoism but, for instance, she suggests that the voices for reconciliation between Britain and Germany were 'drowned out' by hostility, the majority hyped up with a bravado that masked profound anxiety as to the state of a supposedly decadent, degenerate Western modernity.



Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand before his assassination. Credit: [JoesSistah](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

At any rate, by chapter 17 MacMillan is arguing that, for all that had preceded it, most Europeans didn't feel that conflict between the great powers was any more likely than it had been for the previous decade. Military alliances and preparedness, it was felt, were actually deterrents, much like the better-known Mutually Assured Destruction of the Cold War. In its own way, this is an endorsement of some of the most exciting historical work of recent years in this field, most notably that by Holger Afflerbach and William Mulligan, who ascribe to a revisionism that rejects the teleological argument that the Great War was an inevitable outcome of an increasingly overheating Europe.

Taking this line, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo wasn't merely an event that uncorked pent up tensions, but an important cause of the war in its own right. While MacMillan takes the common stance that the July crisis was 'initially created by the recklessness of Serbia, the vengefulness of Austria-Hungary and the blank cheque from Germany', she is careful not to rest the blame solely on such shoulders. MacMillan is as willing to lay emphasis upon uncertainties and crossed wires as she is upon finely honed offensive strategies, and highlights where imprecision within the historical record sometimes make certainties hard to come by. On 23 July 1914, with Austria-Hungary just about to issue its punitive ultimatum to Serbia, Viscount Haldane and Edward Grey met the German industrialist Albert Ballin, who had been sent by Berlin to ascertain Britain's likely reactions were war to break out. MacMillan notes how Haldane later recalled that he and Grey had warned Ballin that Britain could not be relied upon to remain neutral in the event that Germany attacked France. By contrast, Ballin left feeling that Britain wouldn't intervene as long as Germany went easy on France in the event of any invasion. In this case and many others, MacMillan is unwilling to speculate as to what really transpired. This is a book that defies easy conclusions, and is all the better for it.

But, as already noted, such complexity never comes at the expense of ready comprehension. Some have suggested that *The War That Ended Peace* is for specialists only, but the present reviewer would argue otherwise. It may be that this book will not bring up much new detail for those already interested in the topic, but it will do a thoroughly Reithian job of educating, informing and entertaining everyone else.

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Colonial Officials and the Construction of the Imperial State, c.1900-39 (2013). [Read more reviews by Christopher.](#)

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