

Zitierhinweis

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Possibly the most hotly contested issue surrounding the First World War is the question of fault. What nation was responsible for forcing Europe into the nightmare that was to beset the continent and claim the lives of so many millions of its sons? Within that nation, what individual, or group of individuals, were so hard and heartless that they would not bend in order to save Europe from a general war? What factors caused these men to become so callous that they would risk civilization simply for honor? Did the victors get it right in 1919 by assigning blame solely to Germany? In »July Crisis«, author T. G. Otte focuses his attention on individuals and their decisions, actions, or lack of action in the latest attempt to answer these questions.

For far too long answers to the above questions revolved around the ideas of militarism, alliances, imperialism, and nationalism as key causes for the First World War. But in »July Crisis« Otte casts doubt on this long held axiom. Essentially a chronology of events, the author begins by explaining why the Serbians felt such animosity toward Austria-Hungary. The detailed description of the secret organizations such as the Black Hand and the less-well-known Narodna Odbrana (National Defence) is admirably done and gives the reader needed background. The detailed description of the Archduke's last day is particularly well done, giving enough details to debunk several myths about the assassination. In the process of laying out Serbia's involvement in the plot, Otte takes the time to discuss how much Serb leaders knew about the plot, and the truth behind the national government's role.

The book then proceeds to glide through the almost daily details of the diplomats, politicians, and minor governmental functionaries that are the machinery of nations. With the skill of a storyteller, Otte fashions the day-to-day pattern of diplomacy and internal politics into an engaging and enveloping story that is sure to grab the attention of scholars and lay readers alike. The author's use of original sources, and the attention paid to the details of the discussions between diplomats and politicians is extraordinary and the real strength of this book. Of equal importance is the decision to use footnotes rather than endnotes. The ability to quickly check a source or gain additional insight not found in the main text makes this book a major resource for academics and the general public alike. Organized into seven chapters, *July Crisis* breaks events into manageable amounts of time allowing readers the ability to digest the gravity of every

decision and action made during those five weeks. The 38 days between the Archduke's assassination and the beginning of the war are presented in a manner that allows the reader to gain an understanding of the decision-making process of each country involved.

As a work, »July Crisis« is an attack on the traditional position of incompetent men stumbling into war. It is, at base, an indictment of individuals. Otte includes no less than one-hundred sixty individuals as he fashions together the decision making process in all of the countries involved. In doing so, he allows individuals to indict themselves by virtue of their actions, or lack thereof. Chief among these are Austro-Hungarian Common Foreign Minister Leopold von Berchtold, German State Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow, and French Ambassador to Russia, Maurice Paléologue (the author seems particularly critical of Paléologue as he is singled out for criticism on five separate occasions). Others played a role, but according to Otte, these men were most responsible for allowing 'perceived opportunities and threats' and alleged signs of weakness to dictate decisions rather than developing a roadmap to isolating the war.

Otte's understanding of the internal politics and diplomatic objectives of each country is matched only by his outstanding interpretation of individual responsibility for events. He skillfully considers Jagow's decision to offer Austria-Hungary the now famous »blank cheque« not once but twice, and how it undermines Germany's position in dealing with the dual monarchy. The author's thorough scrutiny of Austro-Hungarian internal matters is both refreshing and critical. Berchtold's determination to punish Serbia even if 'such a policy might bring about a world war' combined with the glacial pace of Austro-Hungarian politics is an aspect of First World War history that is all too often left unconsidered as a major factor in turning a regional conflict into a general European war (p. 79). Of equal significance is the attention paid to the misleading notes and outright lies of Paléologue as he conferred with Russian leaders and communicated with his superiors in France.

»July Crisis« is an insightful and comprehensive analysis of the politics and diplomacy of every country involved Europe's descent into the madness that was the First World War. By placing the emphasis on individuals Thomas Otte has created a compelling portrait of the men at the center of causes of the First World War, and challenges readers to reassess the importance of the individual in the war's history. Without a doubt »July Crisis« will become the standard by which all other work on this time period will be judged.