

Gordon Martel. *The Month that Changed the World: July 1914 and WWI*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017 [2014 hardback]. Pp. xxv, 484. £14.99.

Is there anything left for scholars to say on the origins of the First World War? Gordon Martel's book on the causes of the war, first published in hardback in 2014 and now available in paperback, does not advance any radical new thesis on the war but it both effectively synthesises existing thinking and brilliantly delivers a blow-by-blow account of the fateful days in July 1914 leading up to war. It also makes us consider the role of contingency and the impact that personalities can have on the course of history. Martel challenges *longue durée* grand narrative explanations of the cause of war. The 'story' of the events immediately before and after the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 may seem unnecessary – one that others have told many times before – but Martel's erudition brings immense life to the narrative, with incisive vignettes of the key personalities, personal in tone (and interesting) without being prurient. He also forms his empirical account into a wider argument on the origins of the Great War, one that has useful lessons for the study of history. To make this happen, Martel splits his book into four parts: firstly, the world as it was in 1914; secondly, how Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip and his fellow conspirators colluded to assassinate the Archduke Franz Ferdinand; thirdly, a forensic examination of the subsequent 'July days' leading to war and the 'guns of August'; finally, a summary of the later historiographical wars over who or what was responsible for the war. Martel's thesis laid bare is that war was not inevitable in 1914; indeed, the first part of the book under review makes the case for peace not war in 1914, with people and popular movements pushing pacifist agendas. Mobs only started clamouring for war once the various capitals of Europe mobilised after 28 June 1914. Martel usefully sets up here the interaction between high politics and popular sentiment. That war happened was contingent. This contingency runs through the book; nothing was pre-ordained but was the result of human agency that could have made different choices. This, of course, runs against some key thinking on the war's origins, not least Fritz Fischer's work from the 1960s that argued that Germany wanted a war to dominate Europe and that the assassination of the Archduke gave it the excuse that it needed to start a conflagration, one that it had been seeking since 1912. Martel's examination of high politics in July 1914 as he dissects the slow diplomatic moves through the month leading towards Austro-Hungary's invasion of Serbia is fascinating, and one that the key players could (and should) have arrested at many points. It was remarkable that Princip's motley group achieved what it did. Indeed, the actions of Princip and other Serbian nationalists could well have led to nothing, not least, as Martel shows, as the Archduke was not much liked within his own elite circles, partly because of his morganatic marriage. One reason that Princip and others could get close enough to Franz Ferdinand to throw a grenade and, eventually, shoot him and his wife was that there were very few police guards on the streets to protect his small convoy of cars.

Martel wonderfully combines the actions on the street of Sarajevo with those in the cabinet rooms of Europe after the shooting, moving from one capital to the next, one foreign minister and ambassador to another, none of whom was able (or willing) to stop the slide to war. The writing is suspenseful. One constant theme appears from Martel's text in the third part of his book: Austria's excessive claims for redress against Serbia, blamed for Princip's actions, that if not met would mean war. Serbia could not accept the demands as they amounted to a loss of sovereignty, despite which Belgrade went the distance to try and accommodate Austria-Hungary. Of course, Austria-Hungary could not go the distance and invade Serbia without backing from Germany if Russia came to Serbia's aid. It was Germany's support for Vienna's ultimatum that emboldened Austria-Hungary. It may be that Germany did not intend war, it may be that Russian and France played a poor hand, and it may be that Britain was guilty of weak signalling, but at the end of the day German diplomacy made war possible. Alliance structures gave the vital decision-making of July 1914 a character that pulled the Great Powers in unintended directions but had Berlin said no to Austria-Hungary in early July 1914, war would not have happened. Martel is aware of the impact of Austro-German relations, but he pulls the reader back to the chronology of events that drove Europe to war. He shapes alliances, popular sentiment and German guilt within the course of the detailed historical record, and not the other way around. This is a refreshing, interesting take on the war's origins, and one that puts history centre stage, but as he shows in the concluding section to the book the historiographical tendency is still to find deep-seated, over-arching explanations for the cataclysm that overwhelmed Europe in 1914.

Martel has written a book that will appeal to students looking for an overview of the causes of the Great War. But it will also be of use to historians more broadly in how it sets up the method of writing and understanding history. It certainly gives fresh insights into one of the key historical episode of modern history.

Matthew Hughes

Brunel University