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The Russian Origins of the First World War, By Sean McMeekin. Review by Jesse Kauffman, Eastern Michigan University

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Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. xii, 324. ISBN 978-0-674-06210-8.

Review by Jesse Kauffman, Eastern Michigan University (jesse.kauffman@emich.edu).

To judge by the passionate intensity of his writing, Sean McMeekin means not only to restore analytical balance to the long-neglected question of Russia's role in the First World War, but also to remedy what he sees as a moral outrage—namely, the historical free pass given the Russian statesmen who (as he sees it) unleashed the violence of the war, the brutalities of the Russian Revolution, and the heavy historical shadow cast by Nazi Germany having led generations of indulgent historians to overlook the blood on Russian hands. Though prone to overstating his case, McMeekin has produced a beautifully written book based on an extraordinary range of sources in several languages. It deserves a wide readership.

The book's title belies its ambitious scope. *The Russian Origins of the First World War* is actually about the role of Russian imperial aspirations not only in causing the Great War, but also in shaping its course in theaters like Galicia, the Caucasus, and the Near East. More specifically, McMeekin argues that a single Russian ambition tempted its statesmen to risk war and remained the prize to which all else was subordinated: control over Constantinople and the Straits. One of these statesmen, McMeekin argues, lied, schemed, and connived to plunge Europe into the abyss of the July Crisis in order to realize this goal, to which he remained fanatically devoted: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov, the book's *bête noire*, whose malign, grasping hand McMeekin detects behind many of the Great War's key events outside the Western Front. Questions of Sazonov's personal culpability aside, McMeekin does rightfully restore Tsarist Russia to its place as an actor that, in pursuit of its own interests, influenced the course of events from July 1914 onward. This should provoke a much-needed reassessment of several critical events: in particular, the outbreak of the war and the murder of the Armenians by the Ottoman Turks and their sometime Kurdish allies.

The second chapter, "It Takes Two to Tango: The July Crisis," is the one most concerned with the theme of the book's title. Seeking to establish that the Germans were not solely responsible for the war's outbreak, McMeekin narrates the crucial events of the July Crisis from the perspective not of Berlin, as has become customary, but of St. Petersburg. Displaying an absolute mastery of the major personalities, events, and dates (no mean feat when juggling three separate calendars: Julian, Gregorian, and Islamic), his fluid account of those fateful weeks reads like a John Buchan novel (*Greenmantle* in fact surfaces in a later chapter). The picture of Russia that emerges is not flattering. At several points, McMeekin argues, the Russians, and their allies, made decisions they knew would make a general European war likely. For example, the French state visit to Russia in the days just before Austria's ultimatum to Serbia resulted in a decision that the responsible statesmen knew might well spark a general war. McMeekin notes that, strangely, there is little record of the discussions during Poincaré's visit. Yet, in the immediate aftermath of the visit, both French and Russian diplomats resolved to stand firm in the face of an Austrian ultimatum to Serbia—*any* ultimatum—come what may. This resolve was communicated through various official channels *before* the ultimatum was issued. (Here McMeekin's control of the pertinent dates certifies the critically important chronological thread.) Flipping the well-worn story of Germany's "blank check" to Austria on its head, he argues persuasively that, on the state visit, France had issued its own blank check to an ally already resolved on war.

Another fateful move was Russia's troop mobilization in late July. The claim that the mobilization was partial and meant only to support Serbia against Austria was repeated in Sazonov's memoirs and subsequently by countless historians. It was the Germans, according to received opinion, who triggered the disastrous general war by ordering full mobilization. McMeekin so thoroughly rubbishes this claim that it should

never again be accepted by serious historians. He shows, for instance, that Sazonov was present at a meeting in November 1912, as Russia was trying to formulate its policy during the First Balkan War; there it was quite firmly established that even limited mobilization against Austria would inevitably bring on German mobilization and a consequent general war (56).

Thus Sazonov (and most other Russian political and military leaders) knew full well what the likely consequences of “limited mobilization” would be. Still more damningly, as McMeekin shows, Russia’s partial mobilization in July 1914 was preceded by a “Period Preparatory to War,” which, according to official Russian regulations, meant “the period of diplomatic complications preceding the opening of hostilities, in the course of which all Boards must take the necessary measures of preparation for security and success at the mobilization of the Army, the Fleet, and the Fortresses, as well as for the march of the Army to the threatened frontier” (61). And so it was: from Warsaw to the Caucasus, beginning on 25 July, frontier units were reinforced, leaves were canceled, and heavy transport equipment was assembled. “The closer we look at Russia’s so-called Period Preparatory to War, the more it looks like, well, mobilization” (62). Far from plotting unwonted aggression, therefore, Germany was struggling to make sense of a great deal of conflicting information emanating from Russia, some of it plainly alarming. In the end, Germany correctly realized that the vast Russian war machine had begun to stir to life. Thus, when Wilhelm II exclaimed at the end of July that “the Tsar ... has been secretly mobilizing behind my back” (74), this was, more or less, actually the case.

This chapter alone should permanently affect the discussion of the war’s origins (whether it will is another matter). It is, however, weakened by one of the book’s primary vices—McMeekin’s repetition of some of the mistakes of his historiographical foil, Fritz Fischer, who argued in his enormously influential book *Griff nach der Weltmacht*¹ that German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg was part of a German plot to hazard a general European war in pursuit of unsavory goals of imperial conquest. On this interpretation, Sazonov was a mirror image of Bethmann Hollweg: a manipulative schemer who deliberately plunged Europe into war to expand Russia’s empire. Perhaps. McMeekin demonstrates that Sazonov knew he was risking war in the summer of 1914 and was sympathetic to Russian imperial aims. But his contention that Sazonov, from the July Crisis onward, really pursued a premeditated “strategy” of warmongering and imperial conquest is unconvincing; it relies too much on a presentation of Imperial British statesmen—rulers of much of the world in 1914—as genial dupes whom Sazonov “bamboozled” into doing Russia’s bidding (241).

As far as the war’s outbreak is concerned, McMeekin should have contented himself with the conclusion he offers at the end of the book: “There were at least as many men in St. Petersburg who wanted war in 1914 as there were in Berlin—and the men in Petersburg mobilized first” (239). This is damning enough as well as amply supported by the evidence. If the belief in German war guilt persists, then it will do so as an article of faith.

In addition to the general tragedy of the war’s genesis, McMeekin ties the Russians to a more specific horror: the massacre of the Armenians by the Ottomans and Kurds. He is not particularly interested in arguing over the labeling of the forced resettlement and killing (he prefers “massacre” or “ethnic cleansing”). Rather, he lets readers decide for themselves how to think of it, though some may dislike his casting of the Armenian nationalists as the primary aggressors and instigators, while interpreting Ottoman actions since the late nineteenth century as defensive. (It should be borne in mind that McMeekin teaches at Bilkent University in Ankara.) However, in highlighting Russia’s long-ignored role in stoking the tensions that culminated in the 1915 genocide, he is on very solid ground. He first sketches the long history of Armenian nationalists’ links with outside powers, including Russia, who demanded the right to intervene in the Ottoman Empire on their behalf. The Ottomans, not surprisingly, saw this as a thinly-veiled attempt to further erode their sovereignty and strengthen foreign influence within their lands. Thus, within the Armenian territories of Anatolia, a tense situation, marked by periodic outbursts of murderous violence, festered for

1. Subtitle: *Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland, 1914/18*, 3rd ed. (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1967).

years before the war arrived to act as an accelerant. Between summer 1914 and the massacres of spring 1915, the Russians gave arms to Armenian nationalist guerrillas, welcomed Armenian deserters from the Ottoman army, and planned to support a general Armenian uprising within Anatolia as part of their Caucasian strategy.

In the end, McMeekin believes, Russian scheming in the Armenian territories fostered the fear, hostility, and violence that sparked the wave of deportations and murders. He is sympathetic to the innocents—Muslim and Christian—who suffered. His outrage here is, as usual, reserved for the Russians, who did nothing as Ottomans and Kurdish irregulars crushed their Armenian clients (172). Worse yet, once the Russians invaded and occupied parts of these territories, they showed little interest in the Armenians, and their plans for the annexation of the area suggest the Armenians would have gained nothing by trading Ottoman for Russian overlords.

McMeekin grudgingly concedes that the Russians could not aid Armenians in 1915 because, at the time of the deportations and murders, they were being driven out of Central Europe in the “Great Retreat.” But this fits his broader indictment of Russia’s behavior in the Great War: ultimately, the Armenians died because of “Russia’s peculiar mixture of imperial greed and impotence” (174). This characterization of the weak but avaricious heart of Russia’s foreign policy ties together most of the rest of the book, as McMeekin argues that Russia consistently maneuvered other states into doing what it could not accomplish itself. Thus, for example, Russia’s initial strategy regarding the western front was calculated to expose France to the brunt of the German offensive so that Russia could pursue land it coveted in Galicia; and, too, the Russians orchestrated the Gallipoli campaign to try to ensure that the British did the dying so the Russian army could ride in and occupy Constantinople once the Turks had been beaten; and so on. Readers may decide for themselves the extent to which Russia (read Sazonov) stage-managed these events. But McMeekin has undeniably restored Russia to its proper status as an autonomous actor in the war, exerting its will and its influence, rather than a pathetic giant with feet of clay, stumbling inexorably toward collapse and revolution.

McMeekin adopts a nowadays unfashionable top-down approach—this is a story of high politics, of diplomats and emperors and ministers negotiating and scheming. But he is fully aware that the fates of millions depended on the decisions of these elites. Commendably, he does not engage in any lengthy defense of his methodology, instead trusting his readers to know why his story is important. Though some may judge its arguments overreaching and its tone too strident, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* is both a delight to read and a source of insights even for readers well acquainted with the history and historiography of the Great War. Some credit is also due to the Harvard University Press. In an era of rapaciously priced, badly edited monographs, this well-produced book, replete with excellent maps and pictures, is affordable enough² to ensure the wide adoption in European and Russian history courses that it deserves.

2. Listing for \$29.95 (\$19.77 at Amazon.com) hardbound or \$16.47 for the e-book.