

MÜNKLER, Herfried : *Der Große Krieg. Die Welt 1914 bis 1918*, Berlin, Rowohlt, 2013. 924 pp.

Axel Weipert

An overview of the Great War with some gaps.

The centenary of the outbreak of World War I led to a wide range of publications. Herfried Münklers voluminous book attracted a great deal of attention in Germany, next to Christopher Clarks “sleepwalkers” the best-selling work on this topic.²² Münkler, professor of politics at Humboldt University Berlin, earned fame due to his publications concerning the new, i.e. asymmetric wars and the history of ideas.²³

A lot of attention in this work is dedicated to the question of responsibility for the war’s outbreak, since the Versailles treaty has always been a major aspect for German historians. Münkler argues that many politicians and diplomats of all countries took part in the fatal decisions during the July crisis. He further claims that influential men of all great powers substantially lacked appropriate judgement (p. 14). The author stresses the irrationality fostered by military and economic fears. The Germans dreaded encirclement and others, such as the Russians, French and Austrians felt threatened by future marginalization. What is more, significant interventions by senior officers pushed the politicians even closer towards war. The maxim being, Europe went to war although nobody really wanted it. This “revisionist” approach means that Münkler, along with other historians like Clark, denies the sole or main responsibility of Germany and her allies.



But Münkler adds another aspect: the influence of the masses in the process (p. 778). Their nationalist fervour allegedly obliterated any chance of a peaceful settlement of the July crisis and prevented the elites from launching peace talks at a later stage. This statement is both surprising and wrong. As a matter of fact, in recent years many historians have pointed out that the enthusiasm was limited to a relatively small group of the populations. Oliver Janz recently wrote that a general war enthusiasm is one of the most persistent historical myths of the 20th century.²⁴ On the contrary, many protested publicly against the war, especially supporters of the labour movement.²⁵ During the final stages of the July crisis, around one million

²² Christopher CLARK: *The sleepwalkers. How Europe went to war in 1914*, London, Allen Lane, 2012.

²³ Among others: *Die neuen Kriege*, Berlin, Rowohlt, 2002.

²⁴ Oliver JANZ: *14 Der Große Krieg*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2013, p. 179.

²⁵ Jörn WEGNER: „Die Antikriegsproteste der deutschen Arbeiter am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges und ihre Entwaffnung durch die SPD-Führung“. In: *Jahrbuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung*, Vol. 2/2014, p. 39-52.

demonstrators assembled in Germany alone and similar events took place in other countries like Austria-Hungary.

The discussion of responsibility for the war in this book is furthermore quite insufficient because Münkler focuses too much on Germany. That problem goes for the book as a whole, although the subheading (“The world 1914 to 1918”) suggests a much broader perspective. The colonial war and the global naval battles are quite neglected. The important political and social developments of the Entente powers are only a bypath for Münkler, even more so these of the neutral countries.

The discussion of the aims of the war is limited as well, as the chapter about this topic is almost entirely focused on the German discourse. Münkler denies – explicitly against the profound research of Fritz Fischer²⁶ – its key importance as a reason to start and prolong the war. Furthermore, he stresses that the contents of this discussion were rather coincidental. Nevertheless, he scrutinizes this debate in great detail, although primarily confined to the comments of academics and artists. The influential petitions of economic leaders and associations are almost completely left out.

The reader’s expectations regarding the role of the labour movements are not fulfilled either. Münkler only points out that the German diplomats ably acted to blame Russia for the outbreak of the war. Thus, the German government could integrate the strong Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the socialist trade unions in the war efforts – known as the “Burgfrieden” and equivalent to the French “Union sacrée”.

The social and economic difficulties during the war are part of the picture, but the resistance emerging out of them is ignored. The mass strikes against the war and its repercussions in April 1917 in Germany and Austria, for example, are mentioned in one phrase only – regardless of the fact that they mobilized hundreds of thousands of workers in the armament industry. However, Münkler accurately states that the Russian mutinies of 1917 differed in a significant way from those in the Italian and French armies during the same year: The Russian soldiers connected their actions with the workers at home and therefore transformed their limited mutinies into a political revolution.

Are food riots an integral part of the resistance movement against the war? Münkler denies that and sees them only as a downfall of the standards of civilization (p. 564). But other scholars mentioned that these actions, carried out mainly by women and young workers, were in fact clearly political.²⁷ The participants publicly demanded more food supplies and often marched to local authorities to present their claims.

The depiction and analysis of military operations are by far more convincing, for example the last large-scale German offensive during spring 1918 on the Western front. The reader is not only informed of the various options discussed by the general staff (OHL). He also goes to great detail regarding tactical innovations like the *Sturmtruppen* (storm troops) or the new

²⁶ Fritz FISCHER: *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/1918*, Düsseldorf, Droste, 1961.

²⁷ Belinda DAVIS: *Home fires burning. Food, politics and everyday life in World War I Berlin*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000; Maureen HEALY: *Vienna and the fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total war and everyday life in World War I*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

doctrine for the use of artillery. Münkler analyses this final attack as a tactical success but strategic failure. Similarly worth reading are the explanations of the submarine warfare or the chapter “Entscheidungsschlachten ohne Entscheidung” (decisive battles without decision) during 1916, i.e. the battles of the Somme and Verdun.

It is obvious that Münkler is in general primarily focused on the history of ideas and social elites. Therefore, he struggles to get a grip on social and economic structures or political movements from below. This is true even with regard to the literary treatment of the war. Ernst Jüngers famous book “In Stahlgewittern” (Storm of Steel) which portrays his experiences as an officer on the Western front is explained in full detail – although it is in many ways a problematic source. On the other hand, many available letters of ordinary soldiers are apparently of much less importance for the author. The same goes for the overemphasized role of the notorious military leaders Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, key figures of the German general staff. There is no doubt that they were influential, especially during the second half of the war. But in many ways they were only a part of a bigger picture, i.e. the important role of officers and the military as a whole in the German pre-war society and the authoritarian rule throughout the German Empire. In some way, Münkler adheres here too closely to the picture of the mighty war heroes created by the contemporary German propaganda.

Some chapters treat topics of ostensibly little importance. But they are really fascinating, e.g. the aspects of everyday life in the trenches, questions of hygiene and prostitution. The latter was directly organized and supervised by the armies to prevent the outbreak of sexually-transmitted diseases. Even that aspect was marked by social stratification. The officers got their own, and of course better, brothels.

Altogether, a mixed impression of this book remains. On the one hand, there are partially convincing and often detailed depictions and many informative photos and maps together with a good writing style. Nevertheless, some important flaws have to be mentioned as well. Some key aspects like the international and social developments are neglected and the analysis sometimes evokes criticism. Therefore, I cannot consent to the opinion expressed by several other reviewers who consider this book a new standard publication on World War I.