The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914

by Margaret MacMillan
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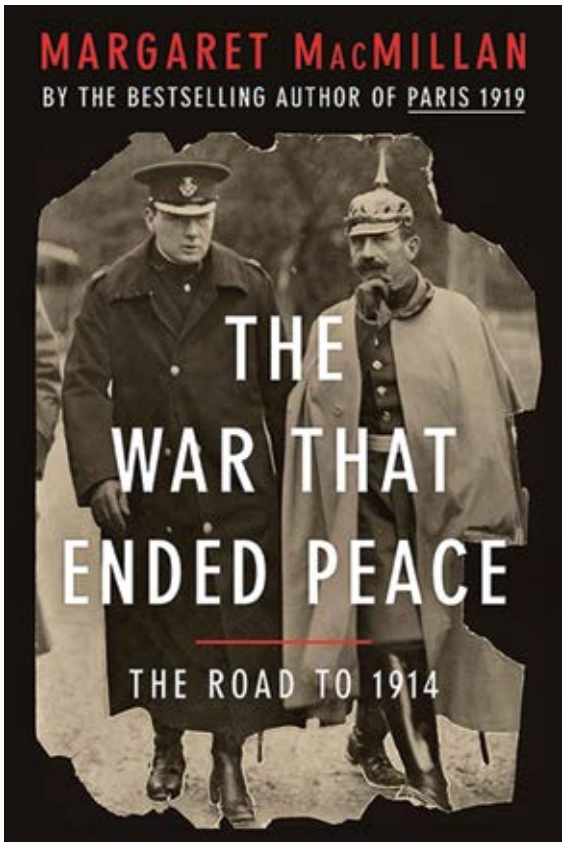

The spiritual successor to her 2003 success, *Paris 1919*, *The War that Ended Peace* is Margaret MacMillan's description of the characters, events, and forces which led to the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. Written with a smooth, readable style, MacMillan tracks the rise in international tensions which precipitated the conflict by loosely following a number of key actors, such as Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, Edward Grey, the British Foreign Minister, and the French socialist leader Jean Jaurès, as part of a general narrative about social, economic, political and technological developments occurring in the early-20th Century. Although her work is primarily descriptive, she does note early on that she holds Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia primarily responsible for the war. She is ultimately more interested with how the flammable material built up in the first place than in determining who lit the spark.

MacMillan begins with a general overview of Europe in 1900, starting with a description of the Paris Exhibition of that year. This is an interesting but fitting point of departure, showcasing the rival national exhibitions alongside the general themes of the optimism, self-assurance, and positivism that guided them. Moreover, the peaceful and progressive nature of the rivalries on display at Paris makes an interesting backdrop for the rise in tensions over the next decade. She then spends the next three chapters describing the complex, intertwined, and evolving policies of two world powers: an ascendant Britain, and a rising Germany. With perhaps a tinge of Anglocentrism, MacMillan chooses to describe these powers in their own chapters early on, with France, Russia, and Austria-Hungary getting further treatment in later chapters, usually as part of describing the evolving great power blocs.

As the narrative narrows down in theme and detail, MacMillan uses biographical sketches to form the core of her description of the issues. The naval arms race between Britain and Germany, for example, is given grounding and context by a close look at the chief engineers of Germany's blue-water navy, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Admiral Tirpitz. The increasingly close alliance of France and the United Kingdom is described partly though a look into the policies and priorities of Théophile Delcassé, the French Foreign Minister, who largely engineered the *entente cordiale* between those two countries. The famous Schlieffen Plan is introduced through a biographical sketch of Schlieffen himself, followed by an in-depth look at the man who would carry out the modified in plan in 1914, von Moltke the Younger.

Although the biographically-centred approach has some shortcomings, it makes for compelling reading as the book gets into a more specific description of events, namely, the Moroccan crises of 1905-1906 and 1911, the First and Second Balkan Wars. MacMillan, by introducing some of the key players and the contexts in which they were functioning, makes complex events relatable and the story more engaging than a simple chronology. This being noted, she occasionally goes too far in trying to maintain the interest and understanding of the modern-day reader by drawing parallels between historical events and recent occurrences, often leading to comparisons which are not quite parallel or warranted. In one example, she explains Wilhelm II's bellicosity as tied into his wish to differentiate himself from his relatively passive father. This is then made relatable by holding it next to George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003, on the premise his disdain for his father's inability to "finish the job" in the 1991 Gulf War encouraged him to launch a war of his own. Besides both of these claims being difficult to verify independently, the 'loaded' examples create more problems than they solve in explaining the intricacies of early-20th Century European power politics to the modern reader.

Overall, the book is a detailed and readable account of the lead-up to the Great War. MacMillan provides a relatable and interesting narrative which is focussed upon human decision, and holds firm to her thesis that the war was not inevitable, but was sparked by the actions of distinct and autonomous actors who either precipitated crises or failed to stop events from overtaking human agency. While this is a refreshing refrain from the historiographical current which seeks to attribute the outbreak of war to unaccountable 'forces,' the very humanity of the characters and MacMillan's efforts to make them relatable leads to some academically difficult parallels. This is, above all, an excellent introductory text to a large and expanding body of literature dealing with the outbreak of the First World War, but it can also be a pleasurable read for those more well-versed on the topic.

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