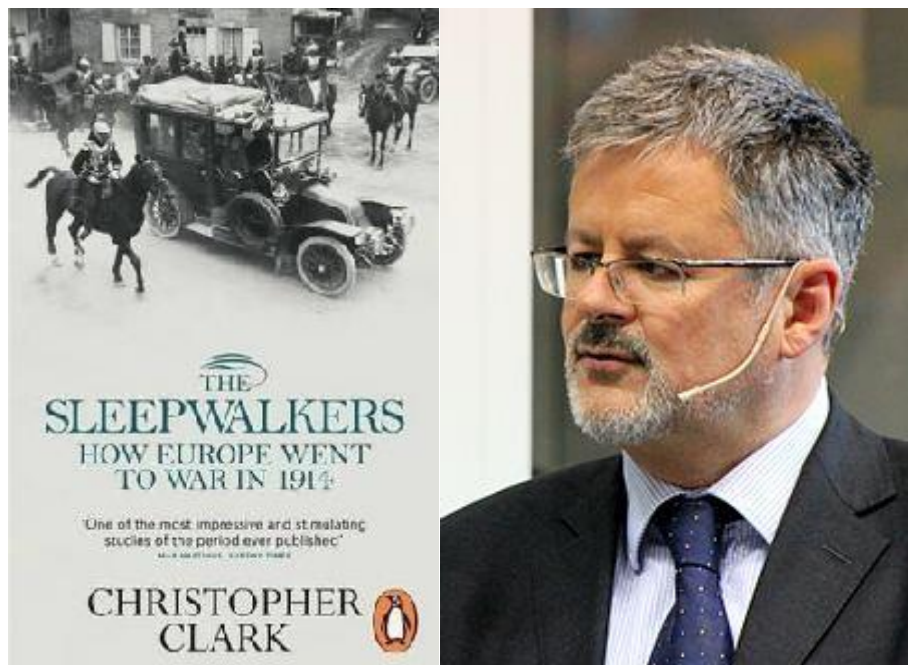


Historians' war

Glenda Sluga

The memory of World War I now seems unavoidably political. [In Australia](#), there is discussion about the extent of federal government interest in the memorialisation of the Anzac past (or specific versions of it). [In Britain](#), controversy has been stirred up by the government's emphasis on a moral imperative that drew the empire into war.

There has been less discussion, however, about the 'history wars' that have appeared elsewhere, outside Australia and Britain, on a transnational and even international scale. Yet expatriate Australian and Cambridge historian Chris Clark's blockbuster [The Sleepwalkers](#) has rarely been off the op-ed pages of the European press.



(source: [Guardianbookshop](#); [Wikipedia](#))

The reason? Clark has drawn out of the historical evidence a convincing argument about the mutual culpability of all the great powers. Clark's book has been discussed widely in the [German press](#) and in an [article co-authored](#) by four German historians on the question of war guilt. Regardless of Clark's scholarly intentions, his thesis has not only been welcomed in Germany, but also become a central preoccupation of foreign policy makers.

Recently [The Economist](#) noted that German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in reacting to Russian actions in Ukraine, was 'looking to history for precedents. But she concentrates on the events leading up to the first world war, not the second.' Dr Merkel's foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his mentor, former chancellor Gerhard Schröder, 'are fascinated, if not haunted, by history'.

Having recently read Clark's book, these statesmen 'are determined not to repeat the mistakes of 1914'.

Mr Clark's protagonists are sleepwalkers [says *The Economist*] because, in the weeks following the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, they failed to communicate or change course, trapping themselves in seemingly inevitable cycles of escalation and mobilisation until disaster struck. On March 14th, in the Baroque atrium of Berlin's German Historical Museum, Mr Steinmeier hosted a debate between Mr Clark and a German historian, Gerd Krumeich, about the lessons of 1914 for today. The most relevant one, said Mr Steinmeier, is what can happen when dialogue stops and diplomacy fails. It is crucial not to drive into "dead ends", Mr Steinmeier went on, but to create "exits".

Clark's book is more controversial in France and Serbia, however, and the Serbian president and prime minister have both denounced *The Sleepwalkers*. 'Serbia will neither allow a revision of history, nor it will forget who are the main culprits in World War I', [said prime minister, Ivica Dacic](#). [A conference marking the centenary](#) (to be held in Sarajevo in June 2014) is to be boycotted by Serbian academics who are staging their own war conference in Belgrade, although Bosnian Serbs are [currently 'reconsidering' their participation](#). You might be excused for thinking the Balkan wars (rather than World War I) were being replayed.

The fear of national(ist) historians [[writes Florian Bieber](#) from the University of Graz in Austria] is that new historiography might shift the blame to Serbia for the outbreak of the war and the figure of [[Gavrilo Princip](#)] [assassin of [Franz Ferdinand](#)]. Indeed, recent books on World War One [such as Clark's] move away from the long dominant thesis of Fritz Fischer that Germany's quest for global power was the prime cause of the war.



The car in which Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Princess Sophie, were assassinated by Gavrilo Princip, Sarajevo, 28 June 1914 (source: Flickr Commons; photo: Al S) The car is a 1911 Gräf & Stift Bois de Boulogne phaeton and it is displayed in the Museum of Military History in Vienna.

Bieber also notes the views of some critical commentators that Clark carelessly links his interpretation of World War I to Serb nationalism in the 1990s. To Bieber's useful personal commentary may be added the observations of Queen Mary (University of London) doctoral student, [Giorgos Giannakopoulos](#), who is keeping his finger on the pulse of this multilingual debate, and a useful English translation of [an interview originally published in Serbian](#) which also deals at length with Clark's book.

Giannakopoulos refers to a 'paradigm shift' led by Clark which contends that to blame Germany for starting World War I is 'not only wrong, but politically dangerous in today's European context'. The intense interest in Chris Clark's work is illustrative of the transnational setting of the history wars (in more ways than one); it is also further proof of the extent to which history matters, particularly the history of war. This should be a good thing – that we care about the past and perhaps even want to learn from it.

However, given the unavoidable politicisation of that past in the interest of nationalist ambitions and historiographies, historians should be asking themselves: how do we rise above complacent clichés? What *other* memories of the war and its lessons or legacies might we extract from the historical evidence?

By the time we arrive at the centenary of the war's end will we remember the 'architecture of internationalism' that was of such concern before and during the Great War, which led to the creation of that unprecedented intergovernmental institution, [the League of Nations](#), and shaped the ways in which the world dealt with conflict, for better and for worse, during the twentieth century?

Remembering that past might force us to recharge our investment in international history; to reflect not only on the limited view that national 'takes' on the past give us, but also on the relative weakness of international mechanisms for peacemaking in our own post 9/11 world.

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