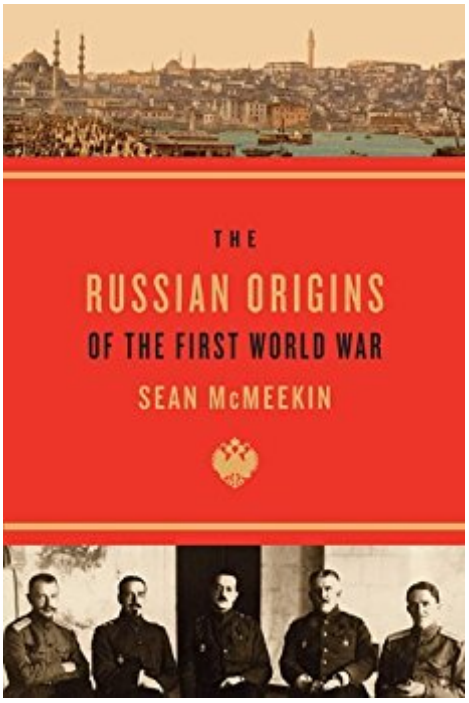
The Russian Origins Of The First World War



Synopsis

In a major reinterpretation, Sean McMeekin rejects the standard notion of the warâ ™s beginning as either a Germano-Austrian pre-emptive strike or a miscalculation. The key to the outbreak of violence, he argues, lies in St. Petersburg. Russian statesmen unleashed the war through policy decisions based on imperial ambitions in the Near East.

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Customer Reviews

In the arena of history of the First World War, Fritz Fischer has for decades stood above all other historians with his narrative, `Griff nach der Weltmacht' (or `Germany's Aims in the First World War' in English). This work, demonstrating a mastery of German and Austrian sources, for decades stood as THE overwhelming proof of Germany's bid to begin the Great War in order to secure its place as a world power. Numerous historians since its publication have delved into it and included it as an indispensible addition to the bibliographies of their own works.But what if Fischer's research was incomplete? What if that fact led to mistakes that made nearly all his conclusions only partially correct-or worse yet-outright wrong? That is precisely the argument that Professor Sean McMeekin lays out in compelling fashion in his new narrative `The Russian Origins of the First World War'. In

laying out the focus of this work he issues a broadside directed at the current state of the historiography of World War One. He writes, "Understanding of the First World War may be said to have regressed after the Fischer debate taught several generations of historians to pay serious attention only go Germany's war aims (3)". Thus, the focus on his current work is to rectify what he believes to be a serious deficiency in the historical record. In other words Russia's war aims must be examined every bit as exhaustively as those of Imperial Germany. McMeekin believes that "the current consensus about the First World War cannot survive serious scrutiny (5)".Indeed, the scrutiny that the author applies to the existing documents and historical record is withering in regards to the preconceived views of so many past historians.

In this book, author Sean McMeekin effectively fills a large gap in the historiography of the First World War. It is of course well known that control of the Straits of Constantinople (which led from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean) was the overriding objective of Russian foreign policy. Even a cursory glance at the map shows why this was so. The great industrial and manufacturing centers around the shores of the Black Sea needed an outlet to Europe and beyond. Czar Alexander III expressed this secret agenda quite succinctly in the Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki (Archive of Foreign Policy): â œIn my opinion we must have one main purpose: the taking possession of Constantinople, in order to establish ourselves once and for all on the Straits and to make sure that they remain permanently in our hands. This is in Russiaâ ™s interest; and it is to this that our efforts must be directed; everything else that happens on the Balkan peninsula is of secondary significance from our standpoint. We have had enough of seeking popularity at the expense of the interests of Russia. From now on, the Slavs must devote themselves to the service of Russia, not we to theirs.â • Virtually all of the Russo-Turkish wars, beginning in 1776 and ending in 1878, had been fought to loosen the Ottoman grip on Constantinople. For much the same reason, Russia had dabbled in the murky and complex affairs of the Balkans by supporting various intrigues in Bulgaria as well as Slavic independence movements in Bosnia-Herzegovinaâ ”then controlled (and finally annexed) by Austria-Hungary. Not so well known or appreciated is how very large the Straits loomed in Russian strategic planning.

Sean McMeekin's interesting and skillfully written study of The Russian Origins of the First World War offers a plausible array of evidence delineating the motives and long term ambitions of the Russian Imperial government for encouraging the onset of the First World War. Whereas the theories of Fritz Fischer and A. J. P. Taylor fixing the primary guilt for starting the slaughter on either

German/Austrian strategies for pre-emptive war (in Fischer's case) or on the military strategists on both sides for setting up a chain reaction of doomsday scenarios impelling civilian governments to mobilize or face destruction, McMeekin shows how the all consuming ambition of the Russian power structure for control of Constantinople and the Middle East impelled them towards a war in which their cynical calculation was to use France and Britain to assist in achieving these objectives. The evidence presented is impressive, but not terribly convincing. It was, after all, the Austrians who fired the first shots and pushed the matter of Sarajevo from incident to international crisis. While downplaying the motivation of Russian power brokers in protecting their Serb brothers from Austrian attack, McMeekin insists that the major concerns of Russian planners was the danger from Turkey in the Black Sea and the ultimate dream of controlling the Bosphorous with the opportunity of using British and French power to secure the prize. McMeekin's thesis fails to emphasize sufficiently the fact that Russian military forces on land and sea had suffered a catastrophic disaster only nine years before in the war with Japan and that the revolts in 1905 and subsequent strikes right up to 1914 could not have failed to cause hesitation on the part of the Tsar's government when it came to jumping into war.

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