



Ring Of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I

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An award-winning historian presents a groundbreaking new history of World War I from the perspective of the Central Powers, showing how wartime suffering led not only to the fall of an empire but also to a fundamental breakdown of society.

For Germany and Austria-Hungary the First World War started with high hopes for a rapid, decisive outcome. Convinced that right was on their side and fearful of the enemies that encircled them, they threw themselves resolutely into battle. Yet, despite the initial halting of a brutal Russian invasion, the Central Powers' war plans soon unravelled. Germany's attack on France failed. Austria-Hungary's armies suffered catastrophic losses at Russian and Serbian hands. Hopes of a quick victory lay in ruins.

For the Central Powers the war now became a siege on a monstrous scale. Britain's ruthless intervention cut sea routes to central Europe and mobilised the world against them. Germany and Austria-Hungary were to be strangled of war supplies and food, their soldiers overwhelmed by better armed enemies, and their civilians brought to the brink of starvation. Conquest and plunder, land offensives, and submarine warfare all proved powerless to counter or break the blockade. The Central Powers were trapped in the Allies' ever-tightening ring of steel.

Alexander Watson's compelling new history retells the war from the perspectives of its instigators and losers, the Germans and Austro-Hungarians. This is the story not just of their leaders in Berlin and Vienna, but above all of the people. Only through their unprecedented mobilisation could the conflict last so long and be so bitterly fought, and only with the waning of their commitment did it end. The war shattered their societies, destroyed their states and bequeathed to east-central Europe a poisonous legacy of unredeemed sacrifice, suffering, race hatred and violence. A major re-evaluation of the First World War, Ring of Steel is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the last century of European history.

Ring Of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I Details

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Alexander Watson**

From Reader Review Ring Of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I for online ebook

Kevin Cole says

Inside this giant of a tome is an average-sized book crying to be freed!

I'm fond of saying nobody cares about World War I. That's because it's true. Only strange people like me would first learn about the war at ten years old from a book in the school library. It all began with an assassination in Sarajevo. Hey, that sounds exotic. Exciting. I'm in! Now let's learn about propaganda and trench warfare and poison gas and the Red Baron. Awesome stuff for bookworm boys.

Little did I know I'd end up living in the city where the war officially began, Belgrade. Last year, a friend of mine visited and I took him to the place where the mighty Danube meets the equally excellent Sava. "Right there," I pointed across the confluence. "On that side of the river was the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And here, gunboats opened fire on the city." Later my wife told me I'd pointed at the wrong spot.

Even those who've heard of WWI know only the popular version, which goes something like this:

The evil Germans started the war in order to dominate Europe, if not the world.
Only America stopped them.

A hundred years later, this remains the gospel among those in the know. Last year, the inimitable mayor of London, Boris Johnson, went out of his way to write an editorial urging us not to be swayed by other historical facts. In the end, he said, Germany was to blame and Germany got what it had coming to them. Never mind that Germany, which did declare war on Russia and France - which did invade gallant little Belgium on its way to France - nevertheless never declared war on Britain. Britain sacrificed nearly a million of its own voluntarily.

What's been needed for a long time is a history of our Satanic enemies, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Ring of Steel provides that. Unfortunately, it provides far too much of it.

I have mixed impressions and really want to give this important work more stars, but the fact is every time I read it, I felt like I had to outrun an avalanche of information when really, a quarter would have sufficed.

This is a shame because the writing is clear. The writing is interesting. The writing is well-organized. The writing is fair, all of which I love about a good history. But there's too much to consume. It even got to the point where I'd read the first sentence of a paragraph only to skim the rest because I knew one interesting detail was inevitably going to be followed by ten more not-so interesting.

As I write this, though, I must admit I did read one section thoroughly. There must have been 20 pages or so dedicated to the Germans who served on the submarine fleet. I thought it was fascinating. And yet, the detail was no less than it was for other aspects of the war recorded in Ring of Steel. So perhaps I should say that this comprehensive history has something for everyone, depending on what that something is. Perhaps I should give it a future re-read.

Courtney says

I was really looking forward to reading this book and it did not disappoint. It's also, I think, quite an accessible history of the First World War from Germany and Austria-Hungary's perspective.

The book impressed me immediately. I feel like whenever you read any histories about the start of the war, you're always told about ethnic tensions and problems within Austria-Hungary, but it never goes much deeper than a surface-level, very general overview, and then all of a sudden the Archduke has been assassinated. Watson goes much further than this and repeatedly looks at the Empire's various ethnicities throughout the book.

I was expecting this to be much more battle-heavy than it is. The actual fighting is definitely not the focus of the book. This means that much more time can be devoted to other topics (interesting or, perhaps, slightly less interesting), which is great, but I was a little disappointed, I'll admit. I'm somebody who loves reading about combat and was sort of looking forward to getting a more detailed account from the other side with great first-hand accounts thrown in. Unfortunately this wasn't really the case. To be sure, the major battles are in there and Watson does cover them in an engaging way, but it tends to be quite brief.

We spend a lot of time on the home front and there's even a chapter devoted to the war at sea, particularly focusing on unrestricted submarine warfare. There's also lots of politics. And over the course of the book, it provides a very interesting examination at the two armies. I found that it didn't matter what Watson was writing about, he made it very easy to understand. It doesn't mean it was all interesting, but that's personal preference, really.

Being from the German and Austro-Hungarian perspective does not mean Watson continually lauds the two empires with praise and digs as hard as he can to pull up incidents to damn the Allies. Not at all. He spends a great deal of criticizing Germany and Austria-Hungary for the many ways they poorly managed the war at home, at the front and politically. For example, he calls the unrestricted U-boat campaign "the worst decision of the war" and asks, "how could Germany's leaders have been so extraordinarily stupid?" And even when German and Austro-Hungarian citizens were starving during the British naval blockade (which I loved that he included), Watson makes it clear that this partly was because neither country managed their food supply well.

This is a great history examining the war from the other side. Even though it's been a century, the way we look at the First World War seems to still be quite biased and we need accounts such as this to help balance this view. I think we've (mostly) moved away from the thought that the Germans and Austro-Hungarians were barbarous Huns raping, pillaging and committing war crimes throughout Europe, or that the Germans were essentially Nazis just in a different decade. However, misconceptions still exist and these can't always be corrected in works that largely focus on the Western armies.

Does this book attempt to do a complete 180 from what we know and cast the two empires in a different, positive light? Absolutely not. Does it perhaps provide convenient examples and maybe stretch or stress them to fit with what the author wants to show? At times, yes. However, it does offer a more balanced look, recognizing the wrongs they committed while challenging some misconceptions, and providing good coverage of the two empire's war experiences for both their citizens and armies. While not perfect, *Ring of Steel* is nonetheless a great read and, in my opinion, a very welcome addition to the study of the First World War.

Thomas says

I received this ARC free from the publisher through Net Galley.com. I give this book 3 stars. Two major defects: Promised maps are not there(Maps in Table of Contents says "to come") and about 1/2 of charts/tables do not load properly. Strengths: The author has done an impressive amount of research--120pp of footnotes, 60+pp bibliography--many of the sources are in the original German. The book reads well, w. the major focus on the home front,i.e, how the 2 governments harnessed the population to support the war. I posted this so the publisher could fix the defects and make it a 4 star book. My Kindle edition does not give page numbers, but the table of contents shows it to be 800pp, including footnotes, etc. In an interesting comment in the Epilogue, the author mentions that a high proportion of those who lost their homes/farms at the end of WWI participated in Holocaust crimes. The bibliography is excellent. A final puzzling note--the index is missing.

I have not received a corrected version of this ebook(7 months after above review) and therefore recommend that it should only be purchased in a print version.

Andrew says

Ring Of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I, by Alexander Watson, is just as it sounds. A gigantic tome of information on the life and times of the Central Powers (excluding Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire) as they fought in World War I. Germany and Austria-Hungary are often maligned as the evil empires that started WWI much of the Anglo-Saxon world, and as both powers lost the war, history continues to be written, mostly, by the victors. Watson takes the opposite approach, looking at the Central Powers perceptions of the war and its beginnings. To be sure, the Austro-Hungarian and German governments did wish a war to commence, especially against the alarmingly powerful Tsarist Russia. Germany also had a bit of a grudge against France, which had been ongoing for more than a century. Austria-Hungary had a beef with Serbia as well.

So, when the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was assassinated by a terrorist group with either tacit or explicit support from the Serbian government, and the Russians began to mobilize a bit to much for their liking, the German and Austrian high command thought it a good opportunity to act. France and Russia themselves seemed to want a war, as each coveted territory held by Germany or Austria-Hungary. Britain became involved, as the narrative goes, after the implementation of the Schlieffen plan, a German offensive through neutral Belgium that would circumvent the massive fortifications on the German-France border. However, Britain seemed poised to attack Germany at any time as well, calling on their age-old policy of divide and conquer in Europe, to keep any one nation from getting to big.

This book follows these issues from the German and Austrian perspective. Serbia had a long history of antagonism toward Austria (and vice versa) and France had been looking for white hot revenge on Germany for the latters victories in 1871 and 1898. Russia had racially motivated claims on Austrian Galicia. Britain wanted to contain German power on the continent and expand its colonial holdings at both Germany and the Ottomans expanse. Clearly, the evil empire theory can be expanded to include all combatants.

Watson also examines the viewpoint of the German and Austro-Hungarian people at this time. The food

shortages that hit the Central Powers due to mismanagement, hostile blockade, and poor yields was devastating for most people. War fervour, loyalty and national hegemony are examined. This period also saw the rise of racially motivated cleansings perpetrated by the central powers (and a few of the Entente members as well) targeting those deemed disloyal. Predictably, Jews, Polish, Ruthenian and Czech subjects of both Empires were targeted with deportation, and sometimes martial violence, often unfairly. Watson notes that Jewish volunteers in both Empires came out in droves at the beginning of the conflict, and racial minorities in the Hapsburg domains often came out to try and curry favour for greater autonomy. This autonomy was suspect to the ruling German and Hungarian landed-gentry, and was often met with outright hostility later in the war.

The soldiers on the front-line and the war are also examined in detail. German soldiers faced the same hardships as those they fought, with terrifying artillery bombardments, suicidal charges into machine gun fire, and trench life dominating. Psychological strain and physical harm befell them everyday, and many fought bravely in a conflict that was deemed to be defensive by the citizens of the Central Powers. The war aims of the Central Powers are also examined. They originally started off as small, with Austria wishing to teach Serbia a lesson, and possibly set up a puppet government or even directly annex the state. German war aims were much more modest off the bat, however. Germany originally wanted France to destroy her border fortresses, and possibly set up a puppet state in Belgium. They also wanted to "move Russia as far away from our borders as possible" which was ambiguous enough, but probably entailed freeing the Baltic states and possibly creating a sovereign state of Russian controlled Congress Poland. However, as the war expanded, their war aims grew. Security became the watchword, and Germany wanted to dismember both France and Russia to ensure "security for all time."

Watson takes a look at all of these things using an unbiased lens and tone. He does not fall for the history of the victors, but looks at the Central Powers for what they were: European states that had their own aspirations, insecurities and social, racial and class issues. This can be said of all powers at the time, including Entente Russia (who collapsed in 1917 due to class strife) France (with its multi-ethnic colonial Empires and class issues) and Britain (ditto with France). Watson's take on this is refreshing.

The book itself is an interesting social history of the Central Powers during WWI. It is a side of the conflict that is rarely seen, and the deep examination of German and especially, Austro-Hungarian society is fascinating as it is rare in modern history books. A small criticism would be the lack of economic information on the Empires at this time. Although Watson examines the crop yields of Germany and Austria-Hungary, and comments briefly on the inflation experienced during the war, he does not go into detail on the economic background of these issues. Although some would find that dry, it would have tied the whole book together neatly, and would have helped to offer a background on some of the monetary issues faced by the Central Powers. Alas, another book maybe.

All in all, a great read and a refreshing take on WWI that is often unheard of in Western historical literature. Worth a read for WWI buffs and those interested in Germany and Eastern Europe.

Joseph says

“We began the war, not the Germans and still less the Entente -- I know that.”
~ Baron Leopold von Andrian- Westberg.

Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I by Alexander Watson is the history of World

War I from a German and Austrian setting. Watson holds a PhD from Oxford University. He lectures on the social, economic, military and political history of the First World War, the Second World War, and the Habsburg Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He currently teaches at Goldsmiths, University of London. Watson has published and has done extensive research on the history of World War I.

Ring of Steel holds the claim to be the first modern history of the war told from the Axis perspective. The Axis powers mobilized on an unprecedented scale. Germany mobilized almost 13.5 million men, 86% of the male population between the age of 18 and 50 passed through the armed forces between 1914-1918. Austria-Hungary mobilized 78% of its military aged men during the years of the conflict. Watson makes three main points with this work. First the call to war was not just a state command in Germany; support ran throughout the country and at all levels. Secondly, he attempts to explain the growing and escalating violence of a war that was thought to be defensive by all sides. The alliances put both sides on the defensive until the outbreak. The third theme concerns the break up of societies by the war.

Germany and Austria-Hungary were very different countries. Germany became a state in 1871 and accepted a national identity rather smoothly. Austria-Hungary was a dual monarchy with two separate parliaments and a centralized foreign policy, military, and finance under the Habsburg leadership. Austria Hungary was a collection of separate nationalities and eleven spoken languages. Although under a collective empire, there was no ethnic, language, or national unity as in Germany. A modern observer looking in at Austria-Hungary would be curious as to how it held together.

Watson brings a few new thoughts to light in his book. One event took me by surprise. Unrestricted submarine warfare has been debated and is usually regarded as ineffective in the long run. Despite the massive amounts of sunk cargo, it did not help Germany in the end. Watson makes another point, this is the first time I have heard it, that unrestricted submarine warfare was responsible for Germany's defeat. His argument is that England was going broke. The war was costing England 2 million pounds a day, and England would be bankrupt by March 1917 and out of the war. The United States was at odds with England over its strict contraband definitions and not respecting the rights of neutrals. England effectively prevented trade with Germany. Unrestricted submarine warfare changed the US position and doomed Germany.

Watson also concentrates on the social and economic effects of the war in Germany and Austria-Hungary. Jobs and food became scarce. People began their own gardens and even pets changed. Dogs and cats were replaced with edible pets: rabbits, ducks, and goats. Racial issues played a role in the war too. The Russians began persecution of Jews in conquered lands. The Entente propaganda created German atrocities that did not exist, and Russia's army actively prosecuted soldiers who raped women in occupied territory. The Austrian public attacked their Croat soldiers for wearing Croat colors on their uniforms -- nationalism was an attack on the empire. Inside Austria-Hungary extreme enforcement of sedition laws were well publicized.

Ring of Steel gives a detailed look inside both Germany and Austria during WWI. Military as well as civilian issues are covered in great detail. Watson goes through great lengths to document all his writing. Nearly one quarter of the book is bibliography and citations. *Ring of Steel* is more than a war history. It is a social history that not only describes the war, but the war's effect on the people.

Emmanuel Gustin says

This is, as histories of wars go, a somewhat unusual book. It focuses on the Central Powers of World War I, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, telling the story from the side of the losers. It is not a

military history, in the sense that it devotes relatively few of its 566 pages (not including notes and bibliography) to fighting and battles, although it does some. Instead, this is mostly a political history, a social history, and economic history: The history of people's and states under the enormous strain of the Great War.

Most accounts of the Great War focus on the Western Front, and perhaps Gallipoli in addition. This book gives ample space to Eastern Front, Central Europe, and the fate of the Habsburg empire, in to failing struggle to keep German-speaking Austrians, Magyars, Ruthenes, Poles, Slovenes, Croats, Jews, Italians, and numerous other ethnic groups together in the state in which they used to live, as Watson quotes one of their politicians, in well-tempered discontent. The war ripped apart the unstable edifice, creating tensions that are still with us today. It is an almost unknown history, obscure and forgotten at least by Western Europe, but important.

Alexander Watson is sympathetic to the people but unsparing in his criticism of the political and military leadership, which was often short-sighted and at odds with the aspirations and ideals of the people they ruled. The Great War ended with the defeat on the battlefield of the armies of the Central Powers, but with that defeat also the last support holding up the contested legitimacy of the regimes fell away. If Watson is sharply critical about the mismanagement of the German leadership, he is scathing about the startling incompetence of the Austrians and Hungarians, who embraced the war in the hope that it would unify their country, but then proceeded to take steps that could only antagonise national groups and worsen tensions. Some of them were literally willing to let members of other ethnic groups starve, to protect their own economic interests.

As an analysis of the course the Great War took, why it was fought and why it ended as it did, this makes a powerful impression.

Aaron says

Finally finished this tome on the German and Austro-Hungarian experience during WWI.

Western civilization shot itself in the head with the first World War. That's just about all I've got to say about that.

Ton says

Very strong account of the First World War from the perspective of the Central Powers. Emphasis is on what the effects of the war were on the population, and how decisions by leadership affected those populations. The decisionmaking process is also examined, with powerful argumentation about intent and reasons given why intentions did not pan out (or did not pan out *as wished*).

Most impressive parts, for me, are the tragedy that the different nations goaded themselves and each other into going to war (pre-emptive or not) and when Watson details the precursors of the Nazi horrors which were to follow. Arbitrary and callous deportation of peoples and ruthless extraction of resources (including human) from conquered territories stand out most of all.

Assignment of guilt is kept reasonable, with Watson clearly pointing out the kind of actions which were against the law of the time (international law was still in its infancy), and comparing the relative "righteousness" of the Allies' and Central Powers' actions. Watson holds to a line of morality, but does not overdo it, nor does he become preachy, which are strong points in his favour. Another point in his favour is

the way he keeps bringing the central themes to the fore, be it starvation and attrition or focal points of the leadership's strategies.

Martin Samuels says

Histories of the First World War tend to fall into three categories: personal accounts, battle or campaign studies, and strategic narratives from the Entente perspective. In this extraordinary book, Alexander Watson has single-handedly opened a new category: a strategic narrative from the Central Powers perspective.

Ranging far and wide, drawing upon the accounts of leading politicians and individual soldiers and civilians, Watson paints a picture of the experience and course of the war from a viewpoint that is surprisingly unknown, even to those who have long studied the period. In so doing, not only does he give a vivid sense of how these tumultuous events were felt on the losing side, he also brings out a number of key events, such as the fear of the population in the face of the Russian invasion of East Prussia in 1914, the disasters and suffering resulting from the loss of Galicia by Austria-Hungary, and the impact of the food shortages brought about by the British naval blockade. But what comes out most strongly is the stunning incompetence of many of the Central Powers leaders. The way in which Conrad deployed the Austro-Hungarian Army so badly in August 1914 that he almost guaranteed its route, the manner in which he then proceeded to destroy the united support for the war and the Dual Monarchy that had characterised the empire in 1914, the open hostility between the Austrian and Hungarian halves of the empire, the fact that the much-vaunted Hindenburg Programme probably led to a reduction in German military production, and the way in which the German Navy persuaded the Kaiser to order the start of unrestricted submarine warfare, thereby bringing America into the war, based on completely erroneous analysis of data. That the Central Powers came so very near to securing victory despite these enormous errors perhaps serves to underline the extent to which the German operational military capability far exceeded that of any other power.

It is easy to see why this book won the Guggenheim-Lehrman Prize in Military History. Despite its considerable length and academic rigour in referencing, it remains highly readable and gripping. Very highly recommended.

Steven Peterson says

This is an outstanding work. It speaks of Germany and Austria Hungary as surrounded by a "ring of steel" in World War I--Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, (later) the United States, and some smaller countries. They were outnumbered.

This story is told from the perspective of Germany and Austria-Hungary. It is the story of government and the people. It is less of a military history. If you wish a detailed description of the masterful defeat of Russian forces at Tannenberg, you won't get it. There are only four pages out of a volume of 566 pages that even mention this battle. Of course, there are other volumes that focus on the battles and campaigns in great detail (e.g., *Collision of Empires: The War on the Eastern Front in 1914*), and one can refer to them for that aspect of the war.

The volume provides considerable information on how warfare affected the people back home. Over time, with the British blockade of sea lanes, which Germany depended upon for food and other key goods, there

was a slow strangulation of Germany. Austria-Hungary? Some of its bread basket was occupied by Russian forces for a time, creating great hardship at home. Indeed, there is much discussion in this book of the interrelation of military issues and what was occurring in the two home countries. There is also considerable discussion of the political consequences in both Germany and Austria-Hungary from the war.

We learn a great deal about major figures--in Germany, from Hindenburg and Ludendorff and the Kaiser and Western generals to key political leaders. The same with key players from Austria-Hungary. One immediate lesson: military leaders in the German military were much more able than their colleagues from Austria-Hungary.

This is a terrific book. Sometimes, reading becomes a bit tedious from the massively detailed discussion of various elements of the conflict. But persevering is very much well worth the effort.

Bfisher says

There isn't much popular history available which provides an internal view of the Central Powers during WW1, so this book is a worthwhile read on that basis. This is a survey history, so it necessarily covers a great deal of ground at a high level. However, the prose is readable, and Watson provides enough details to keep it interesting, for example, a sentence about a Steiff playset of a French POW transport.

It's greatest value lies in its description of how the multi-ethnic communities of pre-war Central Europe became, over the course of 1914-1918, a preview of the bloodlands of WW2, and of how the slave labour economy of the WW2 Third Reich was rehearsed in 1914-1918. They did not spring ex nihilo from the mind of Adolf Hitler. It may in some ways explain why Ludendorff found Hitler's ideas congenial enough to join him in the failed beer-hall putsch of 1923, and why Hindenburg accepted Hitler as the Chancellor of Germany in 1933. In that regard, there is a lamentably short discussion of how the German army developed skills in propaganda and indoctrination in the latter stage of WW1. Hitler was a great beneficiary of this in his transition from army indoctrination cadre to Bavarian politics in 1919.

We are still seeing aftershocks of this today in the Eastern Ukraine.

Manchester Military History Society (MMHS) says

I thought this would be a slog at 800+ pages, but found it a surprisingly readable and a thought provoking book.

Ring of Steel tells the story of World War 1 from the "other side of the hill" and claims to be the first modern history from this viewpoint.

Being a World War 2 devotee this book really opened my eyes to the German/Austro Hungarian viewpoint and decision making in World War 1. It really is a fascinating read telling the story of how Germany and Austria-Hungary initially mobilised the support of their populations to but as military losses mounted, and Allied blockades caused hunger and hardship on the homefront, doubts set in.

Whilst politics are key to understanding the German/Austro-Hungarian position social and economic effects

of the war are covered extensively too.

Some nuggets from the book that I hadn't necessarily realised:

Russia mobilised before Germany, sparking German fears of invasion from the East that unified support across all political divides of the German and most of the Austro-Hungarian populace.

The general belief in Germany and Austro-Hungary that the war was purely a defensive reaction contrary to the Allies view of Germany/Austro-Hungary as the aggressor.

How complex the Austro Hungarian Empire was with its collection of separate nationalities and eleven spoken languages creating no ethnic, language, or national unity as in Germany.

There's many more, but I'd recommend buying the book for those.

Whilst a lot of books are currently being produced from the Allies point of view Alexander Watson has filled a vacant space in our knowledge of the German and Austro-Hungarian viewpoint. Highly recommended.

Jerome says

An excellent and comprehensive history of the Austrian and German war effort during the First World War. One of Watson's main arguments is that the history of these nations from 1914-1918 played a major role in Europe's later catastrophe in the 1930s and 1940s. "The great material and emotional investment," of Germany and Austria-Hungary, he writes, "ensured that defeat, when it came, would have a catastrophic impact on their societies." Germany's defeat was to a large degree psychological.

Watson describes all of the ill-formulated decisions made by the governments in Berlin and Vienna, governments that, Watson argues, knew little about their society's suitability for total war, or lack thereof. For example, the crisis atmosphere in Vienna before the war was to some degree justified by problems related to its ethnic diversity, but most of these ethnic groups simply wanted more autonomy, rather than full independence, and were willing to compromise, one of many distinctions that Vienna failed to appreciate. At the same time, the disconnect between German diplomacy and military strategy was one of the causes for the war's outbreak, and one of the causes for America's entry into the war.

Watson does a great job showing these two powers at war, from their initial victories to their eventual defeat. He describes the ebb and flow of the Central Powers' fortunes and the impact it had on the civilian population. His depiction of Germany, a powerful, modern nation-state, and Austria-Hungary, a backward multi-ethnic melting pot held together by flimsy compromises was very interesting. He also explores many related issues that other histories tend to overlook, like how the people of both nations reacted to inept leadership, and how the war prompted invasions and forced migrations that led to considerable ethnic tensions later. The Central Powers' administration of the territory they conquered is also given good treatment.

Watson shows how both powers were surrounded on all sides by hostile nations with superior forces and stronger economies, and how this influenced their decision to try for a quick victory in the west before bringing overwhelming strength to bear on the east. But, of course, 1914 turned out to be disappointment,

and they were stuck with a costly eastern front and the eventual intervention of the US (forced by German ham-handedness into a war it wanted to avoid), which blocked any hopes of any kind of victory on the western front. They were able to keep fighting for so long more or less because they simply had no choice, and because they were successful in stirring up their populations against the enemy, although this was easier done in Germany than in Austria-Hungary.

A great history of these nations' war efforts. Much of the book's perspective deals with the Central Powers' military and population, meaning we get little regarding their intellectuals, or the German politics of the war; still, Watson does an admirable job explaining this from Austria-Hungary's perspective, since that side of the issue is so much more complicated.

Matt says

If you've run across any of my other reviews of World War I-related books, you will know that I have spent approximately the last three-and-a-half years trying to learn everything I can about the Great War. I can pinpoint the date because this was a conscious decision I made when I learned that my wife was pregnant with our first kid. I thought to myself, "Self, you're about to lose a bunch of your free time. You better choose one thing – besides wine – as a hobby, and go with it." I chose WWI for a couple reasons. One, the centenary was coming up (now, of course, we're in the midst of it); and two, I didn't know anything about it. (Also, I had been told that World War I pairs well with Yellow Tail chardonnay).

Things I knew about WWI three-and-a-half years ago: (1) It started because one guy shot another guy in Sarajevo; (2) Snoopy shot down the Red Baron, thereby assuring Allied supremacy of the blue yonder; and (3) The Americans won it, because AMERICA! (You're welcome as always, Europe).

It's taken awhile, and a lot of books, a lot of wine, a lot of money spent on books and wine, and a lot of time reading those books and drinking that wine, but I've just started to grasp how that Sarajevo assassination precipitated a world crisis, and a bit about how that crisis played out.

As we all know, a little bit of knowledge – and that's what I have, a little bit of knowledge – is a dangerous thing. It has me putting on airs. I now have strong opinions on things that I never knew existed only a short while ago. It has given me a bit of a contrarian streak. And in that spirit, I purchased Alexander Watson's *Ring of Steel*.

This small-child-of-a book (566 pages of text, another hundred plus pages of notes - this book is nothing if not well-cited) not only tells the story of the First World War from the perspective of Germany and Austria-Hungary, but it dares to take an apologist's stand. At every point where Germany and Austria-Hungary are to blame, Watson offers up a defense. (Well, at just about every point. There is no one on earth who can logically defend Austria-Hungary's bungled diplomacy following Franz Ferdinand's assassination. It was just so bad. This is one of the strong – and obvious! – opinions I have formed).

Ring of Steel starts where every WWI book is legally obligated to begin, with the July Crisis. Austria-Hungary attempted to use the death of its unloved heir as a pretext for going to war with Serbia, which had been fomenting a dangerous pan-Serbian nationalism that threatened the integrity of the Habsburg Empire. But instead of just going to war, Austria-Hungary tripped over its untied shoelaces and fell flat on its face. Germany, needing to prop up its main ally, gave Austria the infamous "blank check," a historical moment that feels more like one frat boy accepting a dare from another frat boy than it resembles dead-serious

international diplomacy. In any event, Austria-Hungary proceeded with extreme, self-defeating slowness, assured of Germany's support, while Germany's bellicose, bipolar Kaiser tried to shove all the toothpaste back into the tube. The end result – obviously! – was Germany invading France via Belgium.

After the July Crisis, *Ring of Steel* moves onto the war itself. But it does this in a unique way. It does not present a chronology of battles, battlefields, and overmatched generals. It is not interested in the positioning of Army A vis-à-vis Army B. Instead, *Ring of Steel* tackles the war using a topical, thematic approach. The chapters present a series of discussions, rather than a series of sequential events.

The chapter on the opening stages of the war, for instance, does not present the usual narrative. It does not move methodically from the siege of Liege to the Battles of the Frontier to the climactic conflict on the Marne. Instead, it devotes a great deal of time to examining claims of German atrocities. Contemporary Allied propaganda depicted the Germans as Huns bent on rape, murder, and the bayoneting of infants. Directly after the war, many of these claims were debunked, and thus, German brutality came to be seen as mostly myth. Recently, there has been a pushback against this position, with certain historians – I'm thinking of Max Hastings, here – treating the Imperial German Army as proto-Nazis engaged in a dry run of World War II war crimes. Watson pushes back against the pushback, in a (somewhat, but not entirely) successful effort to re-contextualize alleged atrocities.

Similarly, in the chapter on the war on the Eastern Front, Watson steers clear of recapitulating the mistakes and movements that led to the crushing defeat of the Russians at the Battle of Tannenberg. Instead, Watson focuses on the invasion of Prussia by Russian troops. I thought this was a neat inversion of the typical WWI narrative, which focuses on the victimization of Russian and French civilians. Here, you see things from the point of view of a German civilian, just as innocent and shabbily treated as their Allied counterparts. (Later sections of the book detail the plight of German civilians as a result of the Allied blockade – a blockade that considered food to be “contraband”).

One of the most interesting chapters takes on the notion of German plans for Europe following victory against the Allies. As Watson writes, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's war aims program:

[S]tated boldly that ‘the general aim of the war’ was ‘security...for all imaginable time.’ This disarmingly simple aim was to be the basis of German policy throughout hostilities. While it was defensive in conception, the intention to achieve everlasting security was extraordinarily ambitious. When combined with a world view that regarded security as a zero-sum game to be won through domination not cooperation, it soon slid into aggression. To secure Germany ‘for all imaginable time’ could not, even in Bethmann’s mind and certainly not for the more hawkish elites around him, mean merely a return to the unstable status quo of the last peacetime years. Instead it required permanent control of invasion routes and the subjection of dangerous neighbors: ‘France must be so weakened as to make her revival as a great power impossible for all time. Russia must be thrust as far as possible from Germany’s eastern frontier and her domination over the non-Russian vassal peoples broken.’

Watson notes, rightly, that German war aims were not the *cause* of the war. That is, Germany did not go to war in 1914 to secure these goals. Rather, they developed quickly as the war progressed. It is also worth noting that while Germany's goals seem, on paper, to be the working paper of a DC Comics supervillain, they are exactly what the Allies did to Germany, once they won the war. What the Germans planned, the Allies did, with only an arguable difference in magnitude. (Redrawing of national frontiers? Check. Creation

of demilitarized buffer zones? Check. People forced from their homes, or forced to get a new passport? Check. Reduction to a non-great power? Checkmate).

In all my reviews of WWI books, I make reference to the fact that I'm on a literary journey. It's my way of leaving bread crumbs for those who are also interested in this mammoth subject, and want some ideas about where to start, or where to go next. To that end, I should note that this is second or third level reading. It operates under the assumption that you have some structural framework in your mind that outlines the broad parameters of the war. Watson does not take any time to catch you up to speed. He writes as though you already know the general history of WWI, and proceeds to give you the German/Austria-Hungarian version of it.

This is a dense book. Watson imparts of a lot of information. Fortunately, Watson is a decent writer. For the most part, he clearly expresses his thoughts and ideas, and he never bogs down in subjects that are objectively uninteresting (I'm thinking of the chapter in Hew Strachan's book *To Arms* that is devoted to financing the war, and spends more time on bond yields than I'm comfortable with). He's a PhD, but I never felt like he was trying to keep me at arm's length as a reader. Every once in awhile, Watson will write one of those quintessentially British sentences that go on for a paragraph, are dreadfully passive, and are studded with clauses. But for the most part, I have no strong comments about the style, which means that it imparted information without either frustrating me, or causing my heart to soar at the poetry of its prose. I think the highest accolade I can give is that a book with such complex arguments and nuance was such a breeze to get through.

A book like this – with such a clear point of view – can't help but go too far. Does Watson oversell the Germans and Austro-Hungarians? Sure. This would be a problem if it was the only book on World War I that existed. It's not, though, and so it is an excellent way to balance the scales. The Triple Alliance was not comprised solely of saints, martyrs, and lovers of small animals. But neither was it the second coming of a barbarian horde. It was a collection of people – and Watson gives them their due as people.

Sotiris Karaiskos says

Most books about the First World War are in one thing clear: Germany and Austro-Hungarians were the bad guys and their opponents were the good ones. This is why we often see things from the side of these good people, often overlooking what happened on the other side. This lack is trying to supplement this book and I think it does in an impressive and historically correct way. It does not, of course, take their place, nor the writer try to overlook their responsibility for the start of the war and the very great crimes they have done during the war, what it does is to show us their own perspective, the suffering of their peoples, but also the crimes of their opponents who shaped their thoughts to a certain extent. He does this by presenting us a comprehensive chronicle of the participation of these two countries in the first World War, the causes that made them engage in this armed conflict, until the causes of their final defeat. After reading, I can say that I feel that I have a more complete picture of the First World War, so that is a book that I recommend to those who are interested in this issue.
