

Williamson, Samuel R. Jr.: *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*.

Macmillan, London 1991, 272 S.

Samuel Williamson's well-written and very readable book on Austria-Hungary's internal and external policy in the years before 1914, belongs to a series of books on the origins of the first world war of which a number have already been published: Richard Bosworth on Italy, V.R. Berghahn on Germany, John Keiger on France, Dominic Lieven on Russia, and Zara Steiner on Britain. In many ways all these books owe their origin to the masterly survey by Fritz Fischer *Krieg der Illusionen: Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (1969).

This concentration on the individual responsibility of the prospective belligerents for war, differentiates them sharply from those books published in the immediate aftermath of the first world war, in which the emphasis was on the collapse of the international system.

Although the origins of major wars do not seem to me, to lend themselves easily to analysis of the action of individual powers and can easily descend to the level of *Schuldfrage*, Williamson's book is an exception. He has considerable sympathy for the Monarchy's leading statesmen. As he states at the beginning of the book, his three small children in Vienna with him, while researching in the archives, grew up thinking that "Franz Joseph was a friendly uncle and daddy's constant companion" (p. xi). The book is, however, totally free of any sentimentality for the Habsburg Monarchy.

In the weeks before 1914 the governmental institutions of Austria-Hungary were functioning effectively. The Monarchy's decision makers convinced themselves, however, that these institutions "could not function in the future if the threat posed by Serbia to the foreign and domestic policies of the monarchy was allowed to go unchecked (p. 15). As Williamson puts it towards the end of his book (p. 215), "The Germans and Magyars might control the chief levers of political power, but other nationality groups determined much of the domestic and foreign agendas."

In examining this intimate relationship between foreign and domestic policy, Williamson describes in detail the major decision makers and analyses their actions: men

such as Conrad, Berchtold, Aehrenthal, Tisza, the Emperor and the *Thronfolger*. Indeed, his description of Franz Ferdinand's attitude varies from some (but not all) previous accounts. Williamson shows that the *Thronfolger* was neither a warmonger nor as closely tied to Wilhelm II., as is sometimes believed.

Williamson then goes on to describe the perilous political situation in the Balkans made even more perilous by the two Balkan wars. Equally detailed are the descriptions of the Monarchy's real and potential allies and of its potential enemies. It is worth noting here that none of the potential enemies wanted the Monarchy to disappear, and only one of them, Russia, was an adversary in the Balkans. Neither Britain nor France, however much they might condemn Austro-Hungarian actions in the Balkans, particularly in 1908, were drawn into an anti-Austrian position by Balkan matters.

Williamson does not shirk Austria's responsibility for the war, "The steps that pushed Europe toward war were taken in Vienna," he writes on p.196, although he admits that without Germany's strong support Austria might not have acted. Such condemnation and such judgement is correct. On 25 July 1914 Berchtold informed his ambassador in St Petersburg that his country in going to war against Serbia, would "not even recoil from the possibility of European complications."

Looking at that part of Europe vacated by the Habsburg Monarchy three quarters of a century ago, one cannot help wondering whether, in the judgement of history, the leaders of the Monarchy cannot be accused of major war crimes. No doubt, in a world of nationalist aspirations Austria-Hungary was an anachronism, but without war in 1914 and its sequel in 1939, these aspirations might have been satisfied gradually and peacefully, without the holocaust unleashed on 28 July 1914 and with continues to the present day.