

April 2015

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Robert (2015) "Book Review: Watson, Alexander. Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I. New York: Basic Books, 2014," *Saber and Scroll*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.apus.edu/saberandscroll/vol4/iss1/11>

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Watson, Alexander. *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I*. New York: Basic Books, 2014

Review by Robert Smith

Ring of Steel's sheer size, weight, and heft at 832 pages is remarkable in and of itself. Watson's writing and analysis is even more remarkable, however. In this centennial year of the First World War, there is a torrent of new books on the subject. Most books focus on the Western Front and generally seem to narrow their emphasis to the opening moves of the war. Watson instead wades into a subject that is far harder for the typical reader to understand as the average baseline of understanding World War One in the East, the Italian Front, and the Balkans is remote. In fact, what the astute reader will conclude is that the First World War that Watson covers is unlike the First World War we know and that this was really the harbinger of much of what has come to pass in the last one hundred years. This focus on the Central Powers is indeed a most welcome book.

Watson deftly notes for the reader that World War One Imperial Germany and Austria-Hungary unleashed a whirlwind. Watson explores a number of subjects in-depth without drowning in minutiae, such as ethnic cleansing, the ethnic tensions within both Empires and how their alliance with the Ottoman Empire destabilized the Middle East, perhaps leading to Al-Qaeda and ISIS. What Watson, though, seems to conclude early on was despite the fact that this was in many ways an avoidable war, unlike the American Civil War, the internal contradictions facing the Austro-Hungarian Empire were too vast to be easily solved. For a number of years leading up to World War One, the growing ethnic discontent in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, furthered by the regicide in Serbia, Serbian expansion, and the two Balkan Wars that removed the Ottoman buffer allowed for new nationalistic aspirations to arise—none of which benefitted the Empire. Further, Austro-Hungary's leading military figure, General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, Chief of the General Staff, wanted war not just to teach Serbia a lesson but to solve the internal divisions of the Empire by having the discontented

rally to the flag. No. He was in love with a married woman and hoped that a war would allow him to become a hero, thus allowing her to divorce and then marry him—millions died for one man's fantasy.

Watson's focus on several aspects is quite notable. His in-depth examination of the war as a prelude to World War Two's ethnic cleansing, and post-war population deportations is striking. The reader will learn that over 13,000 East Prussians were scooped up and simply removed from their homes by the Czarist Army, deported to the Volga region—and subsequently forgotten. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans living in the western regions of Czarist Russia were deported—all shades of the future under Stalin. Czarist officials upon "conquering" Galicia, set out to systematically alter the fundamental ethnic composition of Galicia as they again deported Germans as well as Jews to turn it into a Slavic province.

Watson notes that German and Austro-Hungarian policy was not that of the *Generalplan Ost* with the policy of deliberately starving millions to death, but we do see the antecedents of it here. The Austro-Hungarians and Russians were the worst in terms of savagery, whereas the Germans were generally restrained. He does note that the French removed almost 10,000 men of military age from Alsace-Lorraine during their brief recapture of it in August 1914. Watson gives us a panoramic view of the horror of hundreds of thousands of homeless refugees, again foreshadowing World War Two. In Vienna, swelled by Jewish refugees from Galicia, signs appeared warning them to return to occupy Galicia or face horrible consequences.

The second aspect that Watson speaks to astutely in a ballet of concise prose is the German decision to invoke "Total War" by the U-boat campaign. In part, the U-boat campaign was a byproduct of several failed military and political strategies. The British blockade meant Germany and Austro-Hungary were slowly starving. The German High Command did not want to risk the Imperial High Seas Fleet as intact; it was a future political bargaining chip, despite its lack of military value in terms of decision. Watson speaks to this as the beginning of the end for Germany's options, after the failure of the 1916 Hindenburg Armaments Program. Two areas Watson perhaps could have addressed better were the scope and failure of the Hindenburg rearmament program. He also talks of Brest-Litovsk in some depth but oddly does not examine how Lenin and the Bolsheviks were willing to make a deal with the Germans to attack the Allied expeditionary forces.

In a sense, *Ring of Steel* is a fascinating fusion of military, national psychological and social history. Watson looks at how Germany, France, and Britain's advantage was a more heterogeneous society, which allowed them to endure the strains of the war better. However, the Hapsburg Empire with its polyglot of races and ethnic groups was a different matter. Watson notes how each group interpreted the war within its own prism, leading to competing demands and problems as the war lengthened. The look at the failed efforts by the subjects of the Central Powers for political reform and the extension of the franchise is implied by Watson as one of the reasons for the eventual collapse of national will. The various populations that comprised the Hapsburg Empire wanted simply more autonomy—instead they were met with repression and the imposition of military courts.

Watson's *Ring of Steel* enters esteemed company with Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War* and Holger Herwig's *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* as a must read. Watson moves beyond the orthodox accounts and breaks new ground. In all, a gripping account that will surprise the reader with what he did not know.

LTC Robert G. Smith graduated from Juniata College with a BS in Poli Sci cum laude. LTC Smith attended the Pennsylvania State University, receiving his MA (cum laude) in American Military History in 1982, and a Juris Doctorate in 1992 from West Virginia University. LTC Smith has served in the capacity of an armor officer, logistician, military intelligence and engineer officer. He is a graduate of the Armor Basic Course, the Armor Advanced Course, Command and General Staff College and Army Combined Arms Staff College and the Advanced Joint Professional Military Course in Joint Warfare. (He is currently suffering through Air War College). After 9/11 he was recalled to active duty, serving as the lead Army military historian at the US Army Center of Military History for the attack on the Pentagon. He has subsequently served as the Vth Corps historian for the initial invasion of Iraq and in the Deputy Directorate of Special Operation (DDSO) on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While on the DDSO he wrote a highly classified study on SOF in the Global War on Terror. He was the CoS of the Army one man GWOT record collector, tasked to collect all the lost records. In 3 years he collected 7 1/2 TB of records. In addition he served as the Deputy Command Historian at CENTCOM. He was appointed as a Kentucky Colonel by the Governor of Kentucky in 2010. He currently is in the Army Wounded Warrior Program.

Among his awards are the Bronze Star, Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Global War on Terrorism Medal and Combat Action Badge. He is a frequent contributor to Military Review, Armor Magazine, Fire and Movement, Paper Wars, Line of Departure, Line of Fire and Panzer Digest, where he is the simulation game review editor and editor of the daily FaceBook page. Among his hobbies are coaching baseball, gardening, Stratomatic baseball, golden retrievers and toy trains. He is married to the lovely Katie A. Smith and has two sons, one an Infantryman at Ft Bliss TX, currently deployed to Afghanistan and the other in the ARNG where he is the CSM's driver. The Smiths have two Golden Retrievers (Grant and Sheridan), the Grand Dog Bandit (Aussie Shepard) and three cats.