

Book Review by Nick Watts, Deputy Director, U K Defence Forum

Collision of Empires; the war on the Eastern Front 1914. By Dr Prit Buttar. Published by Osprey

The recent marking of the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War took place amidst much media coverage of the British experiences in Flanders. Many forget that the origins of the war, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, was part of a rumbling dispute among the Eastern European powers, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany.

In this book 'Collision of Empires' Prit Buttar gives the reader a comprehensive examination of the origins of the dispute between Austria-Hungary and Serbia; examines the military philosophy of the three main protagonists, and details the manoeuvres and actions on the Eastern Front in 1914. It serves to balance the predominance of attention given to the Western Front, while drawing useful parallels in terms of some of the lessons which military commanders had to learn as they began to understand the impact of modern technology on what had hitherto been considered the glorious and dashing business of war. The author served as a doctor in the British Army, so his approach is to examine in detail. The book balances the detail with a military analysis of the actions.

In studying the First World War, many British readers will be familiar with the campaign in Flanders. They will also be aware of the Gallipoli campaign in 1915. They may also be aware of the 'Lawrence of Arabia' campaign in the Middle East. They may also be conscious of the campaign in east Africa. Any awareness of the Eastern Front may have come through reading Alexander Solzhenitsyn's 'August 1914'. This book presents the reader with the broad canvas of events as they unfolded on the Eastern Front. As in the Second World War, this front saw fighting on an epic scale both in terms of the numbers involved, but also distances.

The author has researched this campaign thoroughly and unearths the early appearance of a German cavalry officer named Manfred von Richthofen, who later found fame in the air. The distances involved meant that commanders had to rely on wireless to pass instructions, leading to some early examples of code breaking to deduce the enemy's intentions. Aerial reconnaissance patrols began shooting at each other giving rise to air to air combat.

Above all the author does the reader a service by placing the outbreak of World War One in context. The evolution of tensions between Austria-Hungary and Serbia; and the astonishing sequence of events that led to the fateful day in Sarajevo. Britain avoided European wars in the second half of the 19th Century. In part this was by dint of skilful diplomacy. It was also by dint of skilful alliance building as tensions in Europe began to encroach upon Britain's imperial interests. But it meant that whilst European commanders were gaining experience at modern warfare their British contemporaries were fighting bush wars against poorly armed tribesmen.

The author reminds readers that prior to German unification in 1871 the Prussian army fought short sharp and victorious wars against Austria, Denmark and France. Russia had fought wars against Turkey in 1877-78 and notoriously against Japan in 1904-05 where a European military power was defeated by an Asian power. This defeat helped to trigger the 1905 Revolution in Russia bringing limited reforms to the way Russia was ruled. Austria-Hungary had also undergone internal upheavals following the civil uprising in 1848 and the Austro-Prussian war of 1866. The multicultural make-up of the empire created tensions between the various peoples and their rulers. The first and second Balkan wars of 1912-13 primed the trigger which was set off at Sarajevo on 28th June 1914.

As a result of these experiences each of the three militaries took differing lessons on the relative merits of how best to use their forces; Germany in particular took the view that a short knock-out blow was the best way to achieve the ends deemed by the politicians. Despite the mounting evidence of the accuracy of modern rifle fire the attack was the

predominant motif of all commanders of this era. Wars are not won by resting on the defensive, it was felt. The use of the infantry, cavalry and artillery was debated in learned journals throughout the latter half of the 19th century. The use of artillery in the old Napoleonic era style, of direct fire at approaching troops was being replaced by the more modern method of indirect fire. This debate was only settled in 1914. Similarly the use of cavalry on the battle field was much discussed. The opening months of the Eastern Front campaign saw cavalry undertaking its traditional role of scouting and screening, as well as attacking.

The author outlines how the senior commanders' experiences of these campaigns and debates shaped their approaches to campaign planning. A quick knockout blow required rapid mobilisation. Armies would need reserves to supplement their regular manpower. Commanders and politicians were at odds as to how rapidly mobilisation could occur. The development of railways was a critical factor in the planning of high commands. As became apparent in the summer months of 1914, mobilisation itself became the casus belli as much as the convoluted alliance structures.

In the event Germany found itself facing a two front war. Because of its political calculations to defeat Russia, Germany must first defeat France. In doing this it would have to concede ground in the east to a Russian advance, before forces were switched from the west to confront 'the Russian steamroller'. But crucially the plan to defeat France called for more forces than were made available. The fear of Russia meant that more forces went east, weakening the right wing of the 'Schlieffen' plan in the west.

Dr Buttar lays out the chronology of the campaigns and the various actions in a way that takes the reader from the strategic level, through the operational level down to the battle field. In doing so he ably captures the sense of confusion and chaos which prevailed in wide ranging actions where the commanders were out of touch with front line units. Whilst British readers may be familiar with the opening moves on the western front and the battles of the Marne and actions fought around Mons and Ypres, the reader is introduced to Stalluponen, Gumbinnen, Tannenberg and the Masurian lakes.

The lessons learnt in the Eastern Front resonate with those that are familiar to students of the Western Front. The casualty rates which rapidly pass into the thousands; the shortage of artillery ammunition, which arose because commanders planned on a short war. The distances involved are on a larger scale than many readers will be familiar with, which created difficulties for commanders. The early actions saw German and Russian officers fighting with swords, and colours being captured in a manner reminiscent of previous eras. But the logic of the machine gun and artillery gradually imposes the discipline of trench warfare.

The reader cannot help but be conscious of the fate which befell this region in later years. The same ground was fought over again in 1941, and later in 1944. It also saw some of the most notorious episodes of the Holocaust. The establishment of Poland following the end of the war and its subsequent dismantlement in the Molotov Ribbentrop pact is prefigured by Russia's attempts to mobilise Poles to fight against Germany in 1914. The fighting in Serbia which is referred to as a 'bloody side show' finds an echo in the partisan campaign led by Tito.

No student of the First World War can consider themselves well informed until they have read this book. It is accessible and well researched. The author has written other books about military campaigns in this region in the Second World War, but he done a great service by putting the 1914 Eastern Front campaign into its proper context as part of the Great War.

Dr Prit Buttar addressed the U K Defence Forum on this topic earlier this year.