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Tracing the roots of World War 1: New book documents the origins of the Great War

Edmonton—With a healthy dose of sex, politics and scandal, Ian Armour’s new book, Apple of Discord: The “Hungarian Factor” in Austro-Serbian Relations 1867-1881, takes a fresh look at how political maneuverings at the time eventually led to a war 50 years later that claimed millions of lives.

“The connection between the constitutional reordering of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1867 and the start of World War 1 isn’t obvious to most people – even historians,” says Armour, an associate professor of history at MacEwan University. “But the origins of the catastrophe that overtook the Habsburg Monarchy and Serbia in 1914 can be found in decisions made in the 1860s and 1870s.”

One of Armour’s major sources for the book was the diary of a young Hungarian politician, Benjamin Kallay, who was appointed a representative to Belgrade in 1868. Kallay’s personal notes not only tell the story of how Hungary got involved in foreign policy, but also detail the seriously deteriorating relations with Serbia that would poison relations for the next couple of generations.

“When you get into people’s private papers, it’s like rummaging around in their dirty linen,” said Armour. “Kalay slept with the wives of Serbian ministers to get information out of them, ran a spy network, and even considered killing a Serbian politician on the Hungarian side for being a nuisance to the government.”

“As historians, we’re often wary about talking about the lessons of history, but one of the lessons in this era is clearly that some crises – like the present crisis in Ukraine or the Yugoslav war in the 1990s – have roots going back decades, maybe generations,” says Armour.

By 1903, the relationship between Serbia, Hungary and the Monarchy as a whole were on the downslope, culminating in 1914, when the heir to the Habsburg throne was assassinated and set in motion the events leading to World War 1.

Apple of Discord: The “Hungarian Factor” in Austro-Serbian Relations 1867-1881, can be ordered from both Amazon and direct from the Purdue University Press. It’s also available as an e-Book.