Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read The Guns of August? -

“Amorphous and without limits, the concept of a long war could not be scientifically planned for as could the orthodox, predictable, and simple solution of decisive battle and a short war.” (p. 27)

Arguably, World War I (1914-1918) was an unnecessary war, yet it became one of the great epic conflicts of mankind with horrendous casualties and loss of empire, and terminated with a flawed peace conference that has had long-term consequences inciting conflicts that continue today. There were no great issues to resolve such as slavery, ideology, religion, or colonial empire, nor were there truly evil regimes to remove for world peace. How such a war started is a serious question. The Guns of August takes on that question with compelling research and analysis, finding senior political and military leaders guilty for allowing such an event to commence without an appropriate motive. Senior Leaders will benefit from the strategic nature of this book. The author intertwines the political and military issues and actions of the day in explaining the spin up to and execution of World War I.

The lessons of The Guns of August are profound for political and senior military leaders and their planners. President Kennedy read the book during the period of the Cuban Missile Crisis. He recommended it to other political leaders as a study on how political-military decision making could go wrong with disastrous consequences. For senior military leaders and planners, the principle lesson is that an obsessive focus on the operational-tactical level of war may miss the critical political-strategic dimension that should determine whether war is justified and necessary. For Germany, France, and Russia, military plans were spring-loaded in response to the mobilization of opposing armies, with war initiated without adequate political control. Political leaders attempted to slow the mobilization process and restrain the threat posed by each army, but their intentions were often dismissed by military leaders more concerned with starting war on the best possible terms, rather than avoiding war altogether. Based on quick mobilization and decisive action, each side anticipated a short decisive war. What they did not anticipate was comparable efforts by their adversaries, which led to a four-year stalemate.

The Guns of August focuses upon political policy and the military sphere of strategy and operations that led to war in August 1914 with no pretense of covering the tactical level of war. Germany was prepared to field large field armies to fight a two-front war against France and Russia. With the latter taking longer to mobilize, most of the German Army was initially aligned against France. Known as the Schlieffen Plan after the German General who developed the original version, that plan was to allow French forces (under the French Plan 17) to advance across the French-German border and away from Paris, while the larger component of the German forces made a wide sweep through neutral Belgium to turn about Paris and bring about French capitulation within a few weeks. After France was defeated German forces were to be shifted to the Russian front.