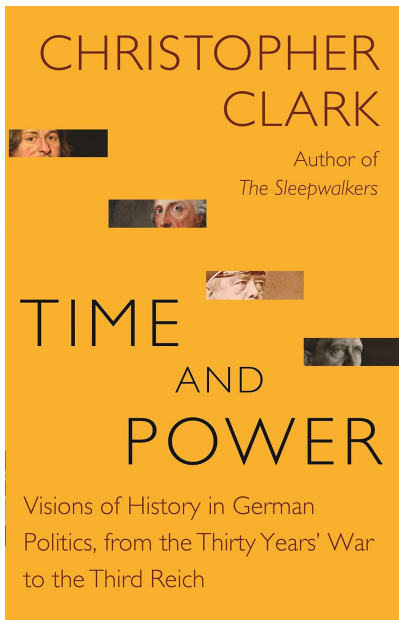


# Just in Time

by Michael Curtis



Nostalgia isn't what it used to be, and memories have been transformed over time in the longing for a desirable past by many in the present world of the internet, increase in the use of smart phones, impact of the social media, and global influence shifting from Europe and the United States to the East. Remembrance of things past are present in the Brexit movement, in President Donald Trump's MAGA, in rebel Catalans, European far-right parties, and in the "Chinese dream" of Xi Jinping, all implying a better past than present. Often it is accompanied by a concept of presentism, attitude to the past and interpretation of it by present day attitudes and experiences. Should "Rhodes fall" in Oriel College, Oxford? Should Woodrow Wilson no longer be honored in the United States?



An important contribution to discussion of the issue has now appeared in a new book by Christopher Clark, *Time and Power: Visions of History in German Politics from the Thirty Year's War to the Third Reich* (Princeton University Press, 2019) which stems from his conviction that the relationship between past, present, and future, has become a central preoccupation of political and public discourse.

Christopher Clark, Professor of History at University of Cambridge, England, is the well known author of *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. The period of the 37 days from the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo to outbreak of World War I has become one of most controversial few days in history. Discussion swirls around whether war could be avoided; around the decisions to go to war; the interactions among the political and military leaders of the countries involved; the vague and confused negotiations; the process by which exchanges between the governments of Austro-Hungary led to a transformation of a local political assassination into a bloodbath involving Indians in Mesopotamia, Americans in France, Australians in Gallipoli, the fall of four empires and their imperial dynasties; and military and civilian casualties the total number of which is often calculated at about 40 million.

Professor Clark has been influential in this discussion. He does not blame Germany or a single country or political ruler for the outbreak of war. His essential position is that no country really wanted to go to war, but that the countries sleepwalked into it, in a context of a Europe driven by multiple factors including the problems created by the growing power and impact of ethnic and nationalist groups.

Clark's new book, challenges the studies of "temporality" that focus on a continuous theory of modernization. Instead of a linear advance towards modernity, the historical reality is more oscillatory; changes in the intellectual climate fuse with a process of trans-generational reflection in which a set of assumptions about how the past, the present, and the future, are connected, is rejected, emulated, or modified according to the needs of the reigning power structure, thus resulting in varying concepts of historicity. Clark holds that history has been used to promote the power structure not only overtly but also in subtle ways. The power structure creates a specific view of history that can be related to the present and is useful to maintain power, and ignores what is not useful.

Time itself is not a neutral substance in which history exists, but a contingent cultural construction that has varied in shape, structure, and texture according to those assumptions. Historicity does not exist separate from time.

How time, "temporal awareness," is perceived by the power structure in any particular period must be studied in order to gain full understanding of a period. Clark cites several examples to show how various regimes have used concepts of time to increase power. The transition, a three century process, from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in Western Europe was always linked with power struggles. In Habsburg, Austria, Emperor Joseph II broke the traditional dominance of the liturgical cycle at court with the reduction of feast days even though that reduction resulted in unrest among his subjects. In France, October 1793, the Jacobins in control of power, adopted a new Republican calendar intended to make a radical break with the past, and to inaugurate a new era. Time became linked to power in the 19th century with the imposition of standardized regimes of clock discipline on labor and production processes, an indication of transition from pre-modern to modern temporalities.

Clark supports his hypotheses on the interconnection of time and history and on time as not a neutral substance in which history unfolds, but also a cultural construction whose shape, structure, and texture have varied through an analysis of how four specific political leaders in a succession of particular periods view history, and how their exercise of power is shaped by different concepts of time. He shows how these leaders use their view of history and time to gain and retain power.

Clark asserts that Germany, because of its frequent political ruptures, is an especially interesting case study to discuss the relationship between temporality, historicity, and power. Thus all four come from Germany, three from the Brandenburg area. Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Prussia, 1640-1688, Frederick the Great, 1740-86, Otto von Bismarck, 1862-90, and Adolf Hitler, 1933-45.

With his activist understanding of history, Friedrich Wilhelm, the Great Elector, rejected continuity with the past and adherence to tradition. He was convinced that the state must be freed from adherence from the past in order to choose among possible futures. Frederick the Great, Frederick II, opposing the processes of social change, in his own writings revealed quite a different attitude towards history. His was a classical version of history in which sovereign and state transcend time. He imagined a condition of stasis and equilibrium in which motifs of timeliness and cyclical repetition predominated. The state was no longer an engine of historical change as it was for Frederick the Great Elector but a historically non specific fact and a logical necessity. Otto von Bismarck in a period of turbulence remained committed to the idea of an unchanging monarchical state based on his concept of inheritance from Frederick II.

Clark views the Nazi (National Socialist) regime as breaking with these German precedents, rejecting history as a series of real events composed of disruptions and contingencies that

had any relevance to the present. Hitler based Nazism on an evasion of history, He replaced historicity with a political vision in which the future was the unfulfilled promise of an ancient and legendary pre-history. Clark's analysis of Nazism and Adolf Hitler differs from other historians who conflate Nazism with Italian and other fascisms. Other fascist states worked to sustain and enhance the power of the state. Hitler rejected the elevation of the state as an end in itself; for him the state was a vehicle to restore Germany and the world to the pure race of the past. It was only a vessel to preserve and protect the race—a means to an end. Its true end was the preservation of pure racial stock and the promotion of a race of uniformly physically and psychically equal human beings. Nazism rejected history for a flight into the remote past of a mythological race and a future that would restore it. Hitler saw the de-ethnicization of the state as a disaster; its chief beneficiary was the Jew who Hitler stated was the cause of progress that would lead only to destruction of all that was good and valuable. The redemptive power of race would suspend the linearity of history. What was important is that the charisma and force of the race remain intact, and the blood be preserved in its purity.

Clark concludes with a short but illuminating analysis of some current events in the United Kingdom and the United States and how they reflect on historicity and temporality. He points out that the proponents of Brexit are looking to restore the prestige and privilege of a mythical British Empire, disregarding the globalism of the present world . Amusingly, he suggests that in his biography of Winston Churchill, Boris Johnson's portrait of Churchill bears an uncanny resemblance to Johnson himself. In regard to Trump, Clark declares that Trump rejects the notion that the United States occupies an exceptional and paradigmatic place at the vanguard of history. Rather the United States is a broken society and infrastructure. He sees his task as reaching back and restoring a past in which United States values were

uncontaminated. One of Clark's most interesting comments is on how Trump has opened a rift in the temporality of the present by using Twitter to communicate government affairs. The hyper-accelerated temporality of twitter has disrupted the slow deliberative processes that are usual in traditional democracies.

One of the ancillary useful aspects of this book, although not its primary intent is Clark's summary of previous studies that have been devoted to historicity and temporality. He makes the point that the study of time and history is particularly important at this moment when the western internationalist order is giving way to Chinese colonialism with a potential corresponding change in how history and time are regarded. The only regret one might have to this book is the circumstance that at times its language and theoretical exposition are sometimes unnecessarily oracular and occasionally expressed through arcane language. Nevertheless, Clark's book with its provocative and useful theoretical command of the concepts of time and history and its mastery of the details of German history over four centuries, is an erudite, challenging, and thought provoking work.