

A CRITIC AT LARGE

The Big One

Historians rethink the war to end all wars.

by Adam Gopnik

The last century, through its great cataclysms, offers two clear, ringing, and, unfortunately, contradictory lessons. The First World War teaches that territorial compromise is better than full-scale war, that an “honor-bound” allegiance of the great powers to small nations is a recipe for mass killing, and that it is crazy to let the blind mechanism of armies and alliances trump common sense. The Second teaches that searching for an accommodation with tyranny by selling out small nations only encourages the tyrant, that refusing to fight now leads to a worse fight later on, and that only the steadfast rejection of compromise can prevent the natural tendency to rush to a bad peace with worse men. The First teaches us never to rush into a fight, the Second never to back down from a bully.

These two lessons are taught less as morals than as collective memory: the lore of the Second World War remains on the whole heroic, while the imagery of the First, which was fought by the same armies and even, on occasion, the same men, remains that of utter waste. (Compare Steven Spielberg’s “Saving Private Ryan” and Peter Weir’s “Gallipoli,” both accounts of Churchillian invasions.) Every time a Western politician with any historical sense faces a crisis, he has to decide whether he should back down and search for whatever compromise he can find, for fear of repeating 1914, or step up and slug somebody, for fear of repeating 1939. John Kennedy, at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, had Barbara Tuchman’s “The Guns of August” as a warning at his bedside, but he also had his generals around him muttering about Munich.

Yet, with the coming of the new century, and the ninetieth anniversary of the beginning of the Great War, it seems, at last, a thing that took place long ago. While waves of revisionism and refinement have come and gone, something larger is at work now, and that is a tendency to view the war not as the end of everything but as just one more thing that happened. This publishing season brings us an exceptional round of new books on the subject, and it is possible to scent the first cool injections of historical embalming fluid at the edges of their pages. David Fromkin’s “Europe’s Last Summer” (Knopf; \$26.95) offers revisionism of a kind already familiar to academic historians, placing the blame for the war not only on the international system but, especially, on a couple of nasty German soldier-statesmen. David Stevenson’s “Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy” (Basic; \$35), perhaps the best comprehensive one-volume history of the war yet written, implicates the politicians on all sides, who started it and kept it going. There are also more specialized works, most notably “The Kaiser’s Army” (Oxford; \$40), by Eric Dorn Brose, which sharply quizzes the idea of a monolithic German militarism of the sort that Fromkin proposes.

But the season, and the war, belongs to Hew Strachan, a professor at All Souls College, Oxford, who has published three books on the Great War in the past four years. Strachan is preparing a definitive, three-volume history of the war, and, though only the first volume, “The First World War: To Arms” (Oxford; \$24.95), has been completed, he has now condensed his research into a single-volume history, “The First World War” (Viking; \$27.95)—thereby giving us, with a slightly Borgesian note, the popular synopsis of a trilogy of books that does not, as yet, actually exist.

What Strachan offers is history as only the professionals can do it, and rarely enough even then. Every intricacy, political, military, and diplomatic, of the conflict is open for inspection: if you are curious about, say, the failed German effort to subvert British India by way of hidden subsidies to a small San Francisco-based Indian-nationalist movement,

this is the place to find out about it. But Strachan is no drudge; he has a point to make and a message to deliver. His desire is to take the cliché image of the war, particularly the English one—the war as Monty Python massacre, with idiot Graham Chapman generals sending gormless Michael Palin soldiers to a senseless death—and replace it with something more like the image that Americans have of our Civil War: a horrible, hard slog, certainly, but fought that way because no other was available, and fought for a cause in itself essentially good.

This is a challenge to conventional thinking about the Great War which cannot be circumscribed by the usual left-right, hard-soft categories. The last military history of comparable intelligence and ambition, after all, came, only five years ago, from the matchlessly vivid pen of John Keegan, who, with remarkable ferocity, drew an opposite lesson. Keegan, a man of the right not readily critical of military men or methods, began his 1999 history, “The First World War” (Knopf; \$35), with the declaration that the war was “a tragic and unnecessary conflict” that “destroyed the benevolent and optimistic culture of the European continent”—a meaningless disaster, from which all the subsequent disasters of the century descend. The recent reading list is also haunted by the conservative Niall Ferguson’s fine, aggressively revisionist history “The Pity of War,” which grieves over the war less as a disaster of imperialism than as a disaster *for* imperialism. The war, for Ferguson, was a catastrophe because overrating the German threat prevented British imperialism from proceeding on its essentially benevolent and necessary worldwide mission. It was the wrong war fought in the wrong place for the wrong reasons in the wrong way: not the Civil War plus mustard gas but Vietnam to the power of ten.

All these historians find themselves contending with the issues of historical judgment: how much can you blame the people of the past for getting something wrong when they could not have known it was going to go so wrong? The question is what they knew, when they knew it, if there was any way for them to know more, given what anyone knew at the time, and how in God’s name we could ever know enough about our own time not to do the same thing all over again. Or, to put it another way, *are* there lessons in history, or just stories, mostly sad?

The origins of the war, which, in six weeks of the summer of 1914, took Europe from a long peace to mutual massacre, are exhausting to read about, in part because there is no real protagonist. There is no Lincoln or Napoleon, no Bismarck or Hitler. As happens in car wrecks, every actor reacts, and even those who are most at fault seem to be bystanders at the general catastrophe. The familiar facts remain largely unchallenged: a Bosnian Serb terrorist named Gavrilo Princip, probably with the help of some elements in the Serbian government, organized an assassination attempt against the Archduke Ferdinand and his wife when they were on an official visit to Sarajevo, the capital of the recently annexed Austro-Hungarian dependency of Bosnia, on June 28, 1914. Princip, a poet and spasmodic nationalist, memorably described by A. J. P. Taylor as a character out of Chekhov who unfortunately knew how to shoot, saw the “morning” plot, which involved a bowling-ball bomb-throwing right out of a Mack Sennett comedy, fail. He was standing around in a desultory state of disappointment later that afternoon when the Archduke’s car, in a horrible piece of fortuity, turned the corner directly in front of him.

The deaths were notably unmourned; Ferdinand, a difficult and unpopular figure, was no J.E.K. The only important personage who seemed really offended was Kaiser Wilhelm, of Germany, who had a class interest in protecting Germanic royalty from Slavic terrorists. Nonetheless, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy recognized that something had to be done, and decided to go after the Serbians, hard; the Germans, allies of long standing, offered to hold the Austrians’ coat while they did it. In mid-July, the Austrian government drew up an ultimatum, most of whose terms the Serbians accepted.

But the document was never seriously intended to be more than a preliminary to invasion. The Russians, who had recently rebuilt their Army, announced that they would defend their fellow-Slavs, and the French, who not long before had entered into an alliance with the Russians, felt compelled to mobilize, too.

As late as August 2nd, the British, though allied with France, were disinclined to take part in a continental war. But then it became plain that a German military response to France would violate the neutrality of Belgium, which had been guaranteed by the British, among others, in a nearly century-old treaty. Practically within a single day, the soft humanitarians and the hard imperialists within the British government found a common cause; the country reversed course, warned the Germans off, and went to war. In the first week of June, all of Europe was in a state of peace and prosperity that seemed likely to last forever; by the first week of August, the carnage had begun.

Two kinds of “inevitablism” have long held sway as explanations for the deeper sources of the catastrophe. One, made famous by Lenin, and still cited by some historians on the left, is that the war was the certain consequence of imperial overstretch and colonial rivalry: Germany’s *Weltpolitik*, its “world-policy,” put it into competition with the French and particularly the British for colonies and imperial power, and this drive for new markets and new resources turned an essentially economic rivalry into a military one. Of this hypothesis, nothing really remains. The German *Weltpolitik*, the new historians tell us, for the most part drew Germany away from the European heartland, into minor skirmishing on the periphery. The globalization of the world economy, in turn, which in the first decade of the last century had reached a peak to be equalled again only in our own time, depended on peace. The bankers and industrialists were the last people in Europe who wanted a war. Capital’s overwhelming desire was for peace and continued globalization. It was Lord Rothschild who entreated the *Times* of London to tone down the belligerence of its articles, and right up to the end the governor of the Bank of England was begging the Liberal cabinet minister Lloyd George, “with tears in his eyes,” to keep Britain out of war. What does survive of the leftist version is a smaller and more succinct point: in every European country, the center-right establishment, faced with some kind of social-democratic or socialist challenge, reasoned that a national call to arms would be the one sure antidote to internal division. In every case—even in France, where the lines of division ran deepest—this turned out to be true, and “class division melted like butter in the frying pan of nationalism,” as the historian John Lukacs puts it.

The other inevitablism, made famous by Barbara Tuchman in “The Guns of August” and later given a memorable name in her book “The March of Folly,” is that the war was made inescapable by a Laocoön-like entanglement of treaties and alliances and military mobilization plans. In addition, the workings of the German “Schlieffen” plan have long been thought to have swept everyone up into battle before anyone had entirely decided to go to war. The plans called for so many men to be mobilized in such specific stages that, once the trains began to roll (and the defensive troop trains began to roll in reaction), nothing could have been done to stop them. The rulers of Europe went away on absent-minded July holidays to their old familiar spas, but the troops and trains kept on rolling in the background. The serpents were around the throat of liberal civilization before anyone had clearly imagined what might happen.

This most famous inevitablism has been revised so thoroughly that it, too, is essentially defunct. In part, this is the result of a 1961 study by the great German historian Fritz Fischer, who, moved by a desire for Germans to face the hard facts of a militarism that did not begin in 1933, insisted that the directly guilty parties were the German chief of general staff, Helmuth von Moltke, and the Austro-Hungarian chief of general staff, Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf. They were determined to have the war, Fischer insisted, and deliberately manipulated the situation, including encouraging all those holidays, on the German side, to prevent anyone from acting decisively to stop them. Fromkin’s book is, essentially, Fischer’s view put into lively, popular English.

Strachan and Stevenson—a historian at the London School of Economics—complicate that view. The Germans may have wanted a war, but they surely didn't want *this* war. What Conrad had in mind was a much more limited war, a war with Serbia. Even if Moltke and Conrad were in favor of a war on German-Austrian terms, they did not control the crucial *casus belli*—the assassination of the Archduke—and they could not have forced the hands of so many players on their own. At the same time, the new scholars have exploded the idea that the Schlieffen plan was actually useful, let alone a well-oiled doomsday machine. It was an old academic, deskbound exercise, in case of a possible war with France, which specified almost nothing in practical terms, much less dressed troops and routed trains. The Germans were not blindly following a preset plan; they were making it up as they went along, sometimes in a state of panic produced by the absence of a plan.

So it was not a march of folly at all. It was a march of fools. That is, it was not a tragedy of errors and misunderstandings that carried the unknowing participants toward an end that they could not envision. It was the deliberate decision of individuals who thought they knew just what they were getting into. The causes of the First World War, the newer scholarship often implies, can be understood in classic game-theory terms, with all the players trying to maximize their own interests. Except that this was a game being played by terribly inept players.

Part of the problem was personal. You could not have chosen a worse bunch of guys to have the fate of Europe in their hands. There is Kaiser Wilhelm, the deformed lesser member of the dominant royal family of Europe, intensely jealous of his cousin Edward VII and his Francophile ways (although Edward had died by 1910, the icon still shone), and determined to act in a manly and warriorlike way, yet caught in a bizarre cycle of peevishness, belligerent insecurity, and a superstitious fatalism that he thought of as “religious.” There is Count Conrad, who genuinely seems to have acted in part because he was in love with a married woman and imagined that success in war would help his romance. Even Herbert Asquith, the British Prime Minister, who for some reason gets off very lightly in British histories, seems hopelessly inadequate to the occasion. Although he, of all people, should have had the brains and the presence of mind to grasp what was coming—and he did; he went for a solitary drive, “filled with sadness,” on the day the war began—he hewed to the customs of cabinet government, conceding the initiative to Lord Grey, his foreign secretary, and was remarkably passive throughout the crucial July days. (He paid the worst possible price for his failure, losing his eldest son in the war.)

Another problem with the game was procedural. Keegan points out that there were no decisive conferences, no crucial cabinet meetings when soldiers and politicians met and brutally sorted through likely outcomes and risks. And, where the “game players” of the Cold War had the images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki directly in front of them, there was no comparable image of achieved destruction to make utterly clear what would happen if mass armies fought with machine guns in the heart of Europe. Moltke, it is true, had said in 1906 that a future war would be a “long wearisome struggle with a country that will not be overcome until its whole national force is broken.” Still, a mad military optimism reigned. As Brose writes, “Many commanders in Germany and Europe harbored stubborn ‘we will survive’ attitudes that enabled them to scoff at mounting arguments against attacking headlong into a rain of bullets.”

And in fact the previous century had been filled with wars, and none of them left behind much more than a scar and a memory of honor. The worst recent war in Europe, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, had made a deep imprint on the French psyche, but it was immediately followed by the decade that resides in our imagination—courtesy of the Impressionists, but courtesy of the facts, too—as idyllic. How bad could a war be? The Germans thought that, more or less, it would be like 1870; the French thought that, with the help of the English, it *wouldn't* be like 1870; the English thought that

it would be like a modernized 1814, a continental war with decisive interference by Britain's professional military; and the Russians thought that it couldn't be worse than just sitting there.

Above all, the tragedy was that their goal was not to look weak. Even in Strachan's dry and unemotional narrative, one wet and emotive word rings out again and again, and that word is "humiliation." The game was not to prevail—for all the players, save perhaps some of the Germans, knew that none of them could—but to avoid being seen as the loser. There are, in the recorded words, few references to rational war aims, even of the debased, acquisitive kind; instead, you find a relentless emphasis on shame and face, position and credibility, perception of weakness and fear of ridicule. "This time I shall not give in," Kaiser Wilhelm repeated robotically (to the arms manufacturer Krupp) in July of 1914. Lloyd George, on the British side, a key actor in favor of war, called for the mobilization of a million men lest Britain not be "taken seriously" in the councils of Europe. It was not runaway trains but a fear of being humbled, "reduced to a second-rate power," that drove the war forward. The keynote is insecurity, an insecurity that arose, above all, from the German paranoia about encirclement, matched by Britain's insecurity about its naval power. How a great power at the apex of its influence, with no obvious rivals in sight—the British didn't want a rival navy, but were more or less content with a minor German empire—grew convinced that it was beset by an overwhelming existential danger is difficult for a contemporary American to understand, of course, but somehow that is what happened.

It was common in the past century to see the war as a blunder into which the masses were herded like sheep while the poets and philosophers grieved in vain. The new histories suggest that the war was welcomed in 1914, and particularly by the literate classes, as a necessary act of hygiene, a chance to restore seriousness of purpose after the two trivial decades of the Edwardian Belle Époque. The bourgeois atomization of society—with its pursuit of private pleasures at the expense of common cause, its celebration of goods at the expense of honor—would be repaired by a unifying new national purpose. Chesterton and Sherlock Holmes, in different ways, recapture the mood of dissatisfaction with the bourgeois, the decadent, the trifling, and the petty. (In "His Last Bow," Holmes's last adventure, which is set in the summer of 1914, Holmes says to Watson, "It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it's God's own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared.") These were not words forced on a pliant population; they were words rising from a dynamic ideology. Even Thomas Mann used the vocabulary sympathetically: war was a moral necessity, "both a purging and a liberation." In England, particularly, any vestiges of the era of Wilde would be swept away at last, and the reign of Kipling secured. The intellectuals of 1914 didn't want the moral equivalent of war; they wanted war as a way of driving out moral equivalence—ending relativism and decadence and materialism and all the other familiar evils of a shopping and pleasure-seeking society. They exulted in the moral clarity of the coming confrontation after the debasing decades of bourgeois pleasures, and welcomed the end of their long holiday from history. The poet Rupert Brooke, on his way to war, wrote:

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping.

Of course, the swimmers weren't leaping into clean water but wading into blood. The scale and suddenness of the killing that began that summer still has the power to amaze us. The war began on August 4th. By August 29th, there were two hundred and sixty thousand French dead. The first battles were as bad as the last. A German

lieutenant led his virgin division into battle in Lorraine that month and, coming under French fire for the first time, looked around after a minute “to see how many are still fit to fight. The bugler, who has remained by my side like a shadow, says to me sadly, ‘Herr Leutnant, there is nobody there any more!’” Almost the entire unit had been annihilated at first contact.

The means of annihilation are familiar. The machine gun, in particular, created a zone of death that would simply saw a soldier in two if he entered it. At Waterloo, an infantry soldier could fire twice a minute. The machine gun fired six hundred rounds a minute. Even the infantry rifle now could fire a dozen times a minute, and at a mile’s range.

Although the Battle of the Marne was a classic battle of maneuver, the Western Front that emerged in its wake in northern France was the largest and most terrible standoff in history. Both Strachan and Stevenson want to remind us that this really was a world war, not limited to the Somme and Verdun, and they make insistent tours of the war’s many other fronts, from Moscow to Gallipoli. Yet, as Paul Fussell observed many years ago in “The Great War and Modern Memory,” it is the Western Front that draws us back again and again: all the other fronts were, as the brutal logic of German military thinking recognized, peripheral. The Western Front was the lethal situation, the Wasteland, and something entirely new in human history: the years-long, two-sided siege of an entire civilization.

The front stretched for four hundred and seventy-five miles, with ten thousand soldiers per mile. There was no way to outflank it without encroaching on Swiss or Dutch neutrality. The front line actually consisted of three lines of trenches, and the trenches were as deep as thirty feet. The trench networks were sometimes separated by a no man’s land of only five or ten yards. The defensive edge offered by the machine gun and the trench system was overwhelming, and the only way to counter it was through infantry assaults, in which soldiers got up out of the trenches and walked toward the other side. In theory, these assaults were “prepared” by artillery barrages. But, in the first two years of the war, at least, the artillery was not sufficiently developed to do much more than break up the barbed wire on the other side. On one day during the Battle of the Somme, in the summer of 1916, more than fifty thousand British troops died walking directly into German fire, without advancing the front by a single foot. In fact, the entire front, which cost the lives of more than three million human beings, moved scarcely five miles in three years. The killing was ideologically catholic. Rudyard Kipling’s son John died on the Western Front in 1915; Oscar Wilde’s son Cyril died there nine months later.

Given the scale and pointlessness of the slaughter, the usual thing has been to blame the incompetence and stupidity of the generals, who carried on getting their own men killed even when they knew that the tactic was hopeless. The Conservative British politician Alan Clark wrote, in the nineteen-sixties, an eyebrow-raising book called “The Donkeys,” placing the blame for the slaughter squarely on the shoulders of the British commanders, and there is a generation for whom Douglas Haig’s stupid, shining smiling face seems like an eternal reproach. And yet the new historians of the Great War conclude that the generals did the best they could, in the face of the defensive advantage offered by the machine gun and the rapid-firing rifle, not to mention the more tactically inconclusive but still lethal gas and flamethrower. If a steering committee of Grant, Montgomery, Napoleon, and Agamemnon had been convened to lead the allies, the result would have been about the same. (And the generals turn out to have got killed in more than honorable numbers, too. Thirty-four British generals were killed by artillery, twenty-two by small-arms fire.) The same high-command recklessness, after all, had been active in our Civil War, where massed rifle fire had some of the effect, on a smaller scale, of machine-gun fire. Yet no one calls Grant a bad general for sending his men forward at the Wilderness or Cold Harbor; in fact, Grant’s greatness as a general

rested on his willingness to “face the arithmetic,” in Lincoln’s cold but accurate phrase. (One thing that made the arithmetic worse was, with no small irony, modern medicine. Where in the past the majority of fatalities in war had been from disease and infection, in this conflict wounded men could quickly be saved and sent back into the lines. That lesser miracle of modernity canned food meanwhile assured that there was no need for winter pauses or retreats.)

The rational expectation might have been for the horror and the futility of the war, which were evident as early as the winter of 1914, to lead to a negotiated settlement. But, with the bloody human logic of wartime, the stalemate of 1914 only helped seal in place an ideological justification. At the moment for remorse and repentance, all that appeared were new and higher-minded rationalizations. The more men died, the more urgently a cause had to be found for them to die for. The obvious absurdity of the original moral calculations—that a quick result would teach the German militarists a lesson or, on the other side, put the French empire out of business—led people to make new, desperate ones. In Britain, it was only after the first battles of the trenches that this became “the war to end all wars,” a war for liberal freedoms against authoritarianism and militarism. In Germany, it became a war not for French territory but for organic *Kultur* against cosmopolitan *civilisation*.

It’s not surprising that intellectuals could find rationalizations for a war that their own book-bound bloodlust had helped produce. But why did the soldiers keep going back? Partly, it was selective amnesia and the adhesion of affection. Very few soldiers or officers calculated their own odds as fatal; as Siegfried Sassoon documents beautifully in his great memoir, “Memories of an Infantry Officer,” the rotation between the trenches and the rear, the dugout and Paris, created a kind of dream space, a disorienting succession of fear and reassurance. Stronger still was the primate bonding that took place among the members of a unit and passed, in defiance of all social logic, back and forth, up and down the ranks.

Another part of the explanation is that the odds of being shot by your own officers if you didn’t stand there were higher than the odds of being killed if you did. From the beginning of the war, the shooting of deserters or “cowards” was severely enforced: the French condemned about eighteen hundred soldiers, and shot six hundred, and the British shot around four hundred. And, once it became plain that all hope was chimerical, the armies *did* break. In 1917, when the casualty rate became insupportable, elements of the French Army mutinied at last, the residual intelligence of the French *poilu* overcoming even his hatred of the Boche.

Popular historians, searching for a neat resolution of a messy conflict, like to give the war the usual structure of a battle narrative, complete with decisive moments and turning points. The turning points in the Great War are traditionally said to be the arrival of the American Army, in 1917, and the British invention of the tank, which was first used on a large scale in the Battle of Cambrai, later that year. But, painful as it may be, both Strachan and Stevenson are unimpressed by the American contribution, and these early tanks, it seems, were too prone to break down to be truly effective. In reality, the war did not rise to a climax in blood but, rather, wound down from exhaustion. Throughout 1917 and 1918, each front seemed on the brink of collapse, each nation seemed about to break, and each army seemed primed to break through. “The First World War was eventually resolved not by any discovery or application of new military technique by the high commands but by the relentless attrition of manpower by industrial output,” Keegan writes. “The fact that it was Germany which went down to defeat in this *Materialschlacht* was almost fortuitous; it might as well have been any of her enemies.” When the end came, with the Kaiser expelled from Berlin by an internal coup, and the Bolsheviks in power in Russia, it was greeted with weary gratitude. None of the big countries, as the British would say, believed that they had got a “result.”

Nonetheless, both Strachan and Stevenson emphasize that the standard images of the war, and of the verdict that Keegan seconds even today—that it was an utter and futile massacre, with an additional note of industrialized absurdity that indicted the entire civilization that had allowed it—were late in coming. Memorable antiwar literature and theatre—Remarque’s “All Quiet on the Western Front,” R. C. Sherriff’s “Journey’s End,” and the war memoirs of Sassoon and Robert Graves, to which one could add Renoir’s “Grand Illusion” and Hemingway’s “A Farewell to Arms”—were written only in the late nineteen-twenties. Strachan insists that this literature reflects the war seen through the prism of the twenties and not as it was understood in its time—as, in large part, a tragic necessity, the noble struggle of liberal civilization to save itself.

How impressive is this consideration? It always takes a while to look back and see on what point the significant lines of history converge—that’s why they call it perspective. The Holocaust and the death camps did not come into focus as the uniquely diabolic invention of the Second World War until the nineteen-sixties. And, in any case, the sense of the First World War as meaningless horror *was* the lived experience of the participants, which became louder and clearer only after the first enforced chorus of regimented rhetoric faded. Stevenson, at least, ends with the emphatic certainty that the war was not worth the fight. Strachan is not prepared to go quite that far; he still feels that the war “was emphatically not a war without meaning or purpose.” At moments, one feels that, for all Strachan’s extraordinary scholarship, a certain *déformation professionnelle* has entered into his work. He has stared into the trenches so long that the trenches have begun to stare into him. He is not pro-war, exactly; rather, the Western Front has become, for him, a varied, human fabric of collisions and good and noble purposes. The trouble is not that what he reports is in any way false; the trouble is that anything can become “normalized” if given a detailed enough historical treatment. The Devil draws straight with crooked lines, too.

And so the question remains: Were they right to fight? What would have happened if the British neutrals had held fast on August 3rd and not gone in? A Europe overrun by a triumphant German militarism is only one possibility. A Communist revolution in France is a secondary possibility, with unknowable consequences. Another is that the end of 1914 would have produced the exact same situation without the British that it did with them: a quick bloody stalemate, and the possibility of an intervention and an early armistice.

Yet it is hard to see even a victorious German Reich costing liberal civilization quite as much as its defeat did. Wilhelmine Germany was, if not liberal, at least plural: the internal forces pulling at German militarism—democratic and liberal and socialist and, particularly, scientific—were extremely strong. The logic of German militarism may have meant that there would be a war sooner or later. But, just conceivably, the force of German civil society—of science and reason, in that age of Einstein and Freud and Planck and Warburg—would have tempered the force of militarism. The experiment never had a chance. What is hard to imagine is a worse consequence: Britain and France demoralized and depleted, Germany humiliated but not vanquished, Russia robbed of any chance of liberal reform and turned over to a gang of psychopathic fanatics. What exactly would have been worse than that?

And this is, of course, to speak only in the grand, indifferent language of Hegelian mega-history. It may be that no one can write military history without the language of mandarin euphemism; when Shelby Foote writes of “hard fighting” on Stonewall Jackson’s flank, or Strachan of a “sanguinary engagement,” it requires a determined mental act to recall that what happened was not an entry on a tally sheet but the violent death of a human being, loved and cared for by a mother and father, and full of hope and possibility, torn apart by lead balls or shreds of sharp metal, his intestines hanging open, or his mouth coughing blood, in a last paroxysm of pain and fear. And then to recall that any justification for a war has to be a justification for this reality. Any other calculation

about German militarism or the possible fate of French colonies has to incorporate this image into its nucleus and accept it as justified.

History does not offer lessons; its unique constellations of contingencies never repeat. But life does offer the same points, over and over again. A lesson is many-edged; a point has only one, but that one sharp. And the point we might still take from the First World War is the old one that wars are always, in Lincoln's perfectly chosen word, astounding. They produce results that we can hardly imagine when they start. It is not that wars are always wrong. It is that wars are always wars, good for destroying things that must be destroyed, as in 1864 or 1944, but useless for doing anything more, and no good at all for doing cultural work: saving the national honor, proving that we're not a second-rate power, avenging old humiliations, demonstrating resolve, or any of the rest of the empty vocabulary of self-improvement through mutual slaughter.

Kipling learned this, if the Kiplingites still haven't. Niall Ferguson ends his recent neo-imperialist polemic "Colossus" with a mention of Kipling on the White Man's Burden (which he rejects), and then a quote from Kipling on the fragility of empire (which he admires), but he leaves uncited the best poem Kipling ever wrote about war and its consequences, the simple couplet produced after his son was killed:

If any question why we died
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

No one has ever thought that the First World War didn't have meaning, in the sense of an effect on things that came after, and purpose, in the sense that it happened because people believed it to be necessary. The questions persist. Were this purpose and this meaning worth the expense of life, the deaths of all those nineteen-year-old boys? Was what had been achieved in Europe by 1919 worth knowing that your son gasped out his last breath in the mud, as Kipling and eight million other fathers did? Was the credibility of liberal civilization worth the suicide of liberal civilization? One of the things that twentieth-century philosophy learned, in the wake of the war, is that big words are empty uniforms without men to live out their meanings, and that high moral purposes have no value outside a context of consequences. As the new century begins, the First World War seems as present, and just as great a pity, as it ever did.