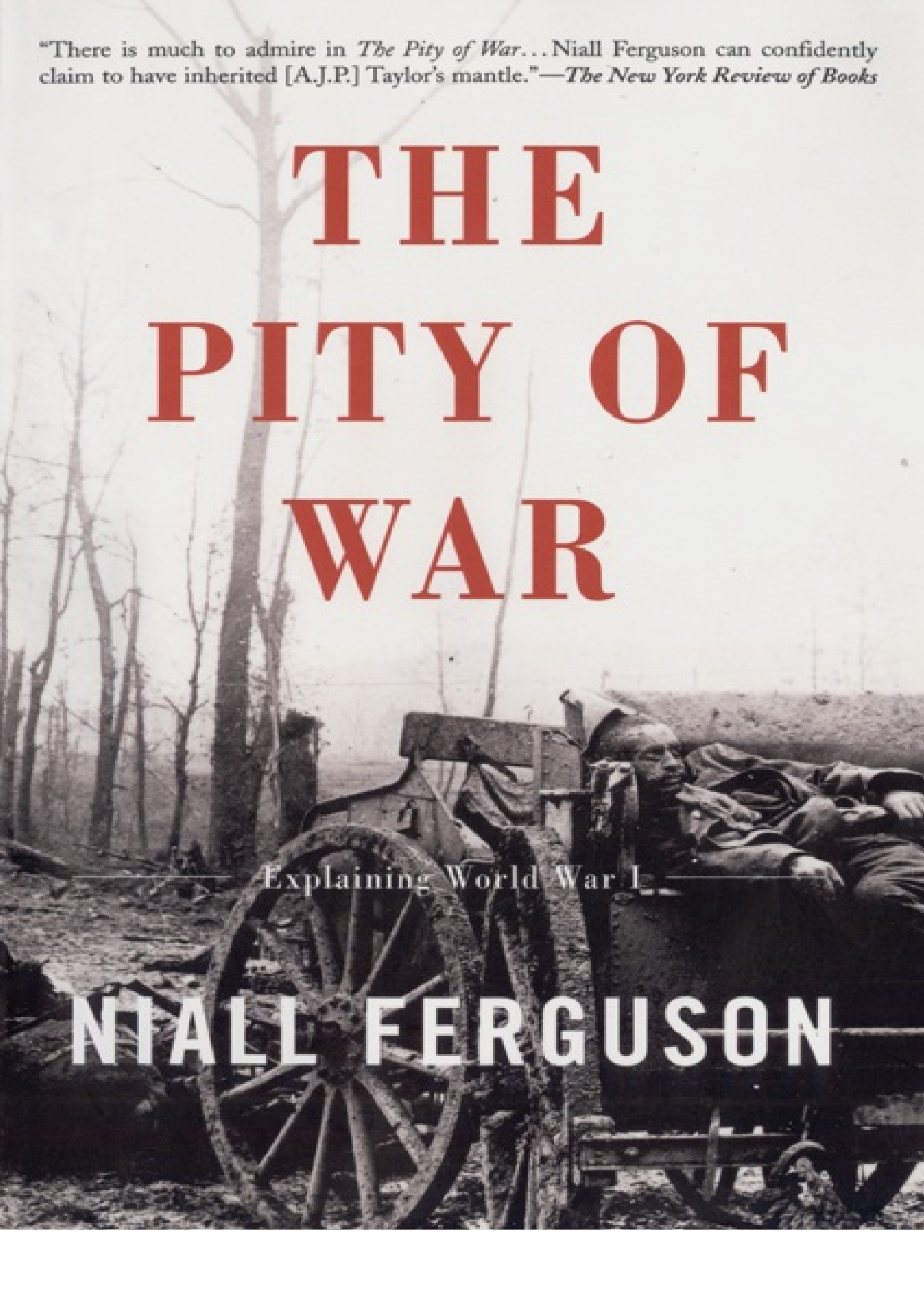


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THE PITY OF WAR

Explaining World War I

NIALL FERGUSON



The Pity of War

Paper and Iron: Hamburg Business and German Politics in the Era of Inflation, 1897–1927

Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals

The House of Rothschild: Money's Prophets, 1798–1848

NIALL FERGUSON

The Pity of War



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Finally, I would like to thank my family for tolerating my unreasonable working hours and my irascibility.

The book is dedicated to the memory of my grandfathers, who fought for their country in the two world wars.

The photographs in this book are a mixture of the official and the unofficial. The latter are perhaps more interesting; they are certainly less familiar; indeed, most of the photographs taken by ordinary soldiers are reproduced here for the first time.

George Mosse has argued that ‘the photographs that soldiers took themselves for their families were always realistic’; whereas the official photographs tended to perpetuate ‘the Myth of the War Experience’ (Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, pp. 150f.). To judge by these photographs, this is not quite true. Certainly, the accredited photographers whose work was published during the war tended to avoid pictures of their own side’s dead; but not invariably. Indeed, it is surprising how much of the horror of war can be seen in some ‘official’ photography. More importantly, the soldiers’ private albums are not necessarily ‘realistic’ – if by that one means unflinching in depicting the horrors of the trenches.

The archetype of a ‘realistic’ war photographer was John Heartfield. The two pictures which he captioned ‘This is how a hero’s death really looks’ are harrowing images of dead soldiers, broken, disfigured, mud-covered. But Heartfield was an exceptionally politicized soldier. He was, in fact, German. Christened Helmut Herzfeld, he changed his name to John Heartfield in 1915 as a protest against wartime Anglophobia. He later recalled how he consciously strove to challenge the official photography while he was serving in the trenches:

Photos of the war were being used to support the policy to hold out when the war had long since been settled on the Marne and the German army had already been beaten . . . I was a soldier from very early on. Then we pasted, I pasted and quickly cut out a photo and then put one under another. Of course, that produced another counterpoint, a contradiction that expressed something different. (Pachnicke and Honnef, *John Heartfield*, p. 14)

And thus was born Weimar photomontage. However, the majority of soldiers who took cameras to the Front (and it should be remembered that British soldiers were not allowed to) were less politicized. Few strove for ‘realism’ in Heartfield’s sense of a counterpoint to propaganda. Their photos tell us as much about the way they wanted to see the war – and the war to be seen by others – as the official photographs tell us about the objectives of government propaganda.

All pictures are courtesy of the Archive of Military Conflict, London.

For

J G F

and

T G H

*For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.*

Wilfred Owen,
'Strange Meeting'

*The Sinister Spirit sneered: 'It had to be!'
And again the Spirit of Pity whispered, 'Why?'*

Thomas Hardy,
'And There Was a Great Calm'

J G F

John Gilmour Ferguson had just turned sixteen when the First World War¹ broke out. The recruiting sergeant believed him—or chose to—when he lied about his age, but before the formalities of enlistment could be completed his mother arrived and dragged him home. If the boy from Fife feared at that moment that he might miss the action, however, his anxiety was unjustified. By the time he was allowed to join up the following year, any idea that the war would be a short one had been dispelled. After the usual months of training, he was sent to the trenches as a private (serial number S/22933) in the 2nd Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, part of the 26th Brigade in the 9th Division of the British Expeditionary Force. He was one of 557,618 Scots who enlisted in the British army during the First World War. Of these, more than a quarter—26.4 per cent—lost their lives. Only the Serbian and Turkish armies sustained such severe casualties.²

My grandfather was one of the lucky 73.6 per cent. He was shot through the shoulder by a sniper whose bullet would certainly have killed him if it had struck a few inches lower. He survived a gas attack, though his lungs suffered permanent damage. His most vivid recollection of the war—or at least the one he related to his son—was of a German attack. As the enemy troops ran towards his trench, he and his comrades fixed bayonets and prepared for the order to go ‘over the top’. At the last moment, however, the command was given to the Cameronians further down the line. So heavy were the casualties in the ensuing engagement that he felt sure he would have died if the order had been given to the Seaforths.

Not many records survive of John Ferguson’s war. Like the overwhelming majority of the millions of men who fought in the First World War, he published neither poems nor memoirs. Nor have his letters home survived. His service file remains inaccessible and the regimental records offer only the barest information. It is possible, for example, that he was at the Battle of the Somme in July 1916 where—in just fourteen days’ intensive fighting at Billion Wood, Carnoy and Longueuil—his battalion had seventy men killed and 381 wounded or taken prisoner out of a total strength of around 750. Perhaps he was also at Eaucourt l’Abbaye three months later, when the brigade’s casualties were as high as 70 per cent in the first few minutes of the attack. Or perhaps it was at St Laurent near Arras that he received his wound. Was he lucky enough to miss Passchendaele, when his battalion lost forty-four men and a further 214 who were wounded or captured in the assault on Zeggars Cappel? Or was it there that he was gassed? Some time after he suffered these injuries, he was taken out of the front line to assist with the training of new recruits: there is a photograph of him with a large group of men seated in front of a blackboard drawing of a grenade. But his recollection of a big German attack suggests that he may conceivably have been in the trenches in the spring of 1918, when Ludendorff launched his final vain bid to win the war. The 2nd Battalion lost more than 300 men in the month of March alone as they were driven back from Gouzeaucourt.³

All these, however, are no more than educated guesses. Apart from his rank and serial number, the only hard evidence I have is a small box containing three medals, a tiny bible and a few photographs of him in uniform—a rather stony-faced lad in a kilt. The first of the medals, the British Medal, depicts a nude man on horseback. Behind the rider is the date 1914; at the horse’s nose, the tradition

terminus 1918. Under its rear hooves—apparently about to be crushed—is a skull. (Does this represent a triumph over Death or some unfortunate German?) The other side resembles nothing more than an old coin. It bears the morose regal profile and the inscription:

GEORGIVS.V.BRITTONN.REX.ET.IND.IMP

The imagery of the Victory Medal is also classical. On the front there is a winged angel bearing an olive branch in her right hand and waving her left, though it is not quite clear whether this represents British womanhood welcoming the survivor home or the angel of death waving him goodbye. The inscription on the obverse (this time in English) reads:

THE GREAT
• WAR FOR •
CIVILISATION
1914–1919⁴

My grandfather's third medal was an Iron Cross—a souvenir from a dead or captured German.

That my grandfather fought on the Western Front was, and still is, a strange source of pride. If I try to analyse that pride, I suppose it has to do with the fact that the First World War remains the worst thing the people of my country have ever had to endure. To survive it was to be mysterious and fortunate. But survival also seemed to suggest great resilience. Most impressive of all was the fact that my grandfather returned to lead a relatively stable and (at least outwardly) contented civilian life. He got a job with a small export house and was sent to sell whisky and hardware in Ecuador. That was as exotic as it got. After a couple of years he returned to Scotland, settled in Glasgow, married, set himself up as an ironmonger, had a son, lost his wife through illness, married my grandmother, and had another son: my father. The rest of his life he spent in a council house in Shettleston, an eastern suburb of Glasgow then dominated by a huge, reeking ironworks. Despite inflicting further damage on his lungs by chain-smoking (a habit probably acquired in the trenches, where tobacco was the universal drug), he had the strength to keep his small business afloat through a succession of economic storms, and lived to dandle his two grandchildren wheezily on his knee. He seems to have been able to live, in other words, quite normally. In this, of course, he resembled the great majority of men who fought in the war.

He did not talk much about it to me; after his death, however, I came to think about it a great deal. It was rather hard not to. Shortly after the war, the school my parents sent me to, the Glasgow Academy, had been formally dedicated to the memory of those who had died in the war. Between the ages of six and seventeen, therefore, I was educated literally inside a war memorial. Each morning, the first thing I saw as I approached the school was a pale, granite slab which stood at the corner of Green Western Road and Colebrooke Terrace and bore the names of former pupils of the school who had died in the war. There was a similar 'roll of honour' on the second floor of the main school building, a cavernous neo-classical edifice. Sometimes, on the way from Algebra to Latin, we walked right past it. The balcony was so narrow that we had to go in single file, and each time I had the chance to read one of the names: I seem to remember there being at least one Ferguson, though no relation of mine. And above all those dead names, in bold capitals, there was the legend which I came to know as well as the Lord's Prayer we mumbled each morning at assembly:

I think my first serious historical thought was an objection to that stern injunction. But they *do* die. Why deny it? And, as John Maynard Keynes once sarcastically remarked, in the long run we are all dead—even those with the luck to survive the First World War. Eighty years have passed since the Armistice of 11 November 1918, and—as far as it is possible to know in the absence of an official veterans' register—no more than a few hundred of those who fought in the British forces are still alive. The World War I Veterans' Association has 160 members; the Western Front Association has around ninety old soldiers. Five hundred is the highest conceivable total of survivors.⁶ The number cannot be much higher in the other combatant countries. Soon the First World War will join the Crimean War, the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War beyond the reach of first-hand recollection. Say not that the brave die? A schoolboy could accept, without giving it too much thought, the bald assertion that all who had died in the war had been brave. But the idea that engraving the names on a wall somehow kept them alive: that was unconvincing.

Of course, I saw a great deal more of the Second World War on television (in frequently repeated post-war films). But perhaps for that very reason the First World War always seemed to me the more serious affair; I instinctively felt this even before I knew that twice as many Britons had been killed in the earlier war.⁷ The first piece of historical research I was ever asked to do, when I was barely twelve, was a 'project'. Without hesitation, I chose the subject 'Trench Warfare' and produced two bulging jotters full of pictures of the Western Front which I had cut out of magazines like *Look and Learn*, accompanied by a simple commentary, the sources of which I no longer remember (I had not yet discovered footnotes).

My English teachers encouraged this interest. Like so many schoolchildren of my generation, I was introduced at an early age (fourteen) to the poetry of Wilfred Owen—'Dulce et Decorum est' sticks, chillingly, in the mind:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! . . .
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the forth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* was a set text in the fifth or sixth form. I also recall reading in bed Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* and Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*; and watching a rather good, because understated, television adaptation of Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*. The small screen also introduced me to the film versions of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which captivated me, and *Oh! What a Lovely War*, which annoyed me by its knowing anachronism. But it was 'Dulce et Decorum est'—so unambiguously directed at schoolmasters, so unambiguously about the asphyxiation of a *boy*—that did it. I found it bizarre that we should be expected to memorise this in the morning, only to don our Cadet Force uniforms and parade around the playground that same afternoon. Despite the fact that I was born some fifty years after it broke out, the First World War had therefore had a profound influence on me—as it has on so many other Britons too young to have first-hand memories of it.

To Americans, on the other hand, the First World War is the forgotten war, or so it sometimes seems to a British observer. Considering the extent of the American contribution to the war, and its effect on the time on American society, this is surprising. World War I seems almost to have fallen into a historical void between the American Civil War and World War II.

Why is this? One reason, possibly, is that to the large number of American families who immigrated to the United States after 1918 the war has no special significance; or, to those whose country of origin had been on the losing side, a purely negative significance. Yet another reason may be that, as a latecomer to the European war, the United States did not have a leading role in the conflict. Some of the greatest works of post-war American fiction convey something like an American inferiority complex on this point. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* (1934), for example, Dick Diver wanders obsessively and wistfully through the decaying trenches at Thiépvall some six years after the war's end. He has read up about the war and is full of pretentious theories about its causes, but the key point is that he did not fight in it.⁸ When the hero of Fitzgerald's earlier masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* describes his brilliant war record, nobody believes a word of it. Not even the medal he produces seems real.⁹

In *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Ernest Hemingway wrote perhaps the most famous American novel based on personal war experience. But the novel is much further removed from autobiographical reality than, for example, the post-war novels of Siegfried Sassoon. Even in interviews, Hemingway could not resist embroidering the story of his time as Red Cross ambulance driver in Italy, enlisting retrospectively in the Italian army and promoting himself to First Lieutenant. Hemingway even claimed, quite untruthfully, to have fought in three battles. In fact, he spent most of his time in Italy in a hospital, having been hit by a stray shrapnel shell while distributing cigarettes near Piave in the summer of 1918.¹⁰

Does the American literature of the war testify to a genuine American detachment from—even a lack of interest in—the war? Perhaps. In all, the United States mobilized around 4.3 million men to fight in the First World War. This figure should be compared with figures of 7.9 million for France, 8.4 million for the British Empire, 13.2 million for Germany and 15.8 million for Russia. Even more striking is the disparity in military participation rates: total U.S. mobilization represented around 4 per cent of the population; the comparable figure for France was 19.9 per cent. Mortality figures tell a similar story. Around 114,000 Americans lost their lives as a result of the war; an additional 205,000 were wounded. This was a tiny fraction of the total death toll of the war: 1.2 per cent. Moreover, the mortality rate of American troops (2.7 per cent) was the lowest of any army in the war; the figure for Scottish soldiers was almost ten times higher. Even the Indian army had a higher mortality rate than the American. Only 0.4 per cent of American men aged between 15 and 49 were killed in the conflict compared with figures of 22.7 per cent for Serbia and 13.3 per cent for France.

Yet these figures give a misleading impression of the war's significance for the United States, for the involvement of so many American soldiers in what was at root a European war represented a watershed in American history—a first, crucial step on the road to that 'globalism' which came to characterize American foreign policy for most of the twentieth century. The personal conversion of President Woodrow Wilson from non-interventionism into an almost messianic desire to wage a war for the sake of international law and collective security was, of course, not universally experienced. But American isolationism was never again a wholly convincing doctrine. And, as we shall see, the experience of the war had all kinds of unexpected effects on American life, heavily qualifying the

sacrosanctity of personal liberty for the sake of a patriotism which even by European standards was exclusive and intolerant.

Nor should we diminish the significance of those 114,000 American deaths. To be sure, the death toll of the Civil War—618,000, around a fifth of all men who were mobilized—was much higher.¹¹ So too was that of the Second World War (292,100). But the number of Americans who died in the much-filmed Vietnam War was ‘only’ 57,939, and the number killed in Korea was 33,000. Far more troops were in France in June 1918 than in Vietnam in 1969 (the peak of U.S. involvement)—a million compared with 542,000.

Moreover, in financial terms, the American contribution to the First World War was immense and arguably decisive. In terms of total expenditure, only Germany and Britain spent more on the war. Alongside U.S. government expenditure of \$36.2 billion needs to be set the total value of American loans to the Entente powers (Britain, France, Russia and their allies); cash advances to these states during the war amounted to around \$9.6 billion. Britain alone borrowed \$4.3 billion. Much of the American money was lent to allow the combatants to import American goods, including armaments worth around \$600 million. Thanks to the war, the United States went from being a net international debtor to being the world’s banker, with net foreign assets of around \$11 billion by the end of 1919. This, and the subsequent loans to help reconstruct the European economies after the war, created enduring and uncomfortable ‘golden fetters’ between the New World and the Old.

TEN QUESTIONS

This book is not a narrative of the First World War; that can be found elsewhere.¹³ Nor do I deal with all ‘the myriad faces of war’:¹⁴ many aspects of the conflict and some theatres of war (such as East Africa and Mesopotamia) are unavoidably neglected. On the other hand, I have attempted to get out of the deeply dug trenches of academic specialization by relating economic and social history more closely than is customary to diplomatic and military history. Military historians have traditionally tended to discuss strategic and tactical issues without paying adequate attention to the economic constraints under which the generals had to labour. Economic and social historians (especially in Germany) have meanwhile tended to neglect the fighting itself, consciously or unconsciously assuming that the war was decided on the ‘Home Fronts’ rather than on the battlefields themselves. And most historians still tend to study the war from the vantage point of a single nation-state. Nowhere is this more obvious than in books on the literary impact of the war.¹⁶ But it is also a feature of many recent volumes of essays and conference papers.¹⁷

My approach is analytical. There are ten questions which I attempt to answer:

1. Was the war inevitable, whether because of militarism, imperialism, secret diplomacy or the arms race ([chapters 1–4](#))?
2. Why did Germany’s leaders gamble on war in 1914 ([Chapter 5](#))?
3. Why did Britain’s leaders decide to intervene when war broke out on the Continent ([Chapter 6](#))?
4. Was the war, as is often asserted, really greeted with popular enthusiasm ([Chapter 7](#))?
5. Did propaganda, and especially the press, keep the war going, as Karl Kraus believed ([Chapter 8](#))?
6. Why did the huge economic superiority of the British Empire not suffice to inflict defeat

on the Central Powers more quickly and without American intervention (chapters 9 and 11)?

7. Why did the military superiority of the German army fail to deliver victory over the British and French armies on the Western Front, as it delivered victory over Serbia, Rumania and Russia (Chapter 10)?
8. Why did men keep fighting when, as the war poets tell us, conditions on the battlefield were so wretched (Chapter 12)?
9. Why did men stop fighting (Chapter 13)?
10. Who won the peace—to be precise, who ended up paying for the war (Chapter 14)?

By way of a preamble, and to show why new answers can still be found to those questions, I wish to point out the contradictory nature of the beliefs most commonly held on the subject as it has been and is remembered. The first is that the war was horrible. The second is that it was nevertheless inevitable. It is worth asking where these ideas come from. Historians do well to remember that they owe very little indeed to the historical profession.

EVIL WAR

The persistence of the idea that the war was ‘a bad thing’ owes much to the genre known as ‘war poetry’ (usually meaning ‘anti-war’), which became firmly established in British school curriculum in the 1970s.

Poems eschewing the traditional romantic, elevated diction of the Victorians, Edwardians and ‘Georgians’—though not always their structural conventions—began to be written by soldiers well before the end of the war.¹⁸ Sassoon wrote his first ‘outspoken’ war poem, ‘In the Pink’, in February 1916¹⁹ and published a number of others in *The Old Huntsman* in May the following year; *Countess Attack* came out in 1918, the same year as Richard Aldington’s ‘The Blood of the Young Men’ (‘We are sick of blood, of the taste and sight of it’).²⁰ By the time of his death in 1918, Owen had written over a hundred poems, though it was only after the war that such work began to reach a wide audience.²¹ Edmund Blunden’s least lyrical poem—‘Third Ypres’—was also published after the war,²² as was Ivor Gurney’s ‘Strange Hells’.²³

Although the influence of *fin-de-siècle* Expressionism and Symbolism on continental poetry lingered on into the war, Sassoon and Owen had their counterparts on the other side in poets like Wilhelm Klemm, Carl Zuckmeyer and the short-lived Alfred Lichtenstein, who died in the second month of the war. Indeed, Lichtenstein has a good claim to have been the first of the anti-war poets. His ‘Prayer before Battle’ predates Sassoon’s change of style by a year and a half:

God protect me from misfortune,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
May no high explosives hit me,
May our enemies, the bastards,
Never take me, never shoot me,
May I never die in squalor
For our well-loved fatherland.

Look, I’d like to live much longer,
Milk the cows and stuff my girl friends
And beat up that lousy Josef,

Get drunk on lots more occasions
Till a blissful death o'ertakes me.

Look, I'll offer heartfelt prayers,
Say my beads seven times daily,
If you, God, of your gracious bounty,
Choose to kill my mate, say Huber
Or else Meier, and let me off.

But suppose I have to take it
Don't let me get badly wounded.
Send me just a little leg wound
Or a slight gash on the forearm
So I go home as a hero
Who has got a tale to tell.

Moreover, Zuckmeyer's 1917 verses about the young soldier's lot—hunger, killing, lice, drinking, fighting and masturbation—are a good deal more brutal than anything in Owen.²⁴ War poetry was thus not as much of an English peculiarity as is sometimes thought:²⁵ the French had Guillaume Apollinaire, for example; the Italians, Giuseppe Ungaretti. One recent collection of First World War poetry includes more than fifty writers, representing nearly all the major combatants; no doubt the number could be increased.²⁶ As the success of this and other collections²⁷ shows, war poetry shows no sign of falling out of fashion in schools and universities.

Then there is the anti-war prose: the pamphlets, the war memoirs and the war novels, some of them so autobiographical as to be memoirs. It was in fact non-combatant authors who first attacked the war in prose. George Bernard Shaw spent the winter of 1914 poring over the rival powers' official works of self-justification before writing his *Common Sense about the War*, a combination of socialism and his own distinctive crankiness. This had been preceded by a newspaper article urging soldiers on both sides to 'SHOOT THEIR OFFICERS AND GO HOME'.²⁸ Less ludicrous was Francis Meynell's December 1914 article 'War's a Crime', which imagined vividly 'the shrieking, mutilated and stinking horrors of the battlefield' and 'the slaying and maiming and raping of innocent people'. Clive Bell's *Peace at Once* (1915) was less histrionic; Bell shared Shaw's assumption that the war would only benefit 'a few capitalists'.²⁹ Rather closer to the action—he watched the Battle of the Somme from an observation point—a mystified Ford Madox Ford described 'a million men moving one against the other . . . into a Hell of fear'.³⁰

The first significant British attempt to voice criticism in the form of fiction was *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916), in which H. G. Wells posed the question: 'What have we been fighting for? What are we fighting for? Does anyone know?' After two years, Wells suggested, the war had become merely 'a monstrous strain and wasting'.³¹ Two women—Agnes Hamilton and Rose Allatini—put the case against the war more strongly in 1916 and 1918 respectively.³² Writing in 1916–17, D. H. Lawrence denounced its 'violence and injustice and destruction' and predicted that 'the deluge of iron rain will destroy the world here, utterly'. The war had 'smashed the growing tip of European civilisation'.³³

Even propagandists changed their tune once the war was over. In *The Realities of War* (1920), the former war correspondent Philip Gibbs recanted; contrary to his own wartime reports, there had been

a great carving of human flesh which was of our boyhood, while the old men directed their sacrifice, and the profiteers grew rich, and the fires of hate were stoked up at patriotic banquets and in editorial chairs . . . Modern civilization was wrecked on those fire-blasted fields . . . [There had been] a monstrous massacre of human beings who prayed to the same God, loved the

same joys of life, and had no hatred of one another except as it had been lighted and inflamed by their governors, their philosophers, and their newspapers. The German soldier cursed the militarism which had plunged him into that horror. The British soldier . . . looked back on his side of the lines and saw . . . the evil of a secret diplomacy which juggled with the lives of humble men so that war might be sprung upon them without their knowledge or consent, and the evil of rulers who hated German militarism . . . because of its strength in rivalry, and the evil of a folly in the minds of men which had taught them to regard war as a glorious adventure . . .³⁴

Nor was Gibbs the only repentant journalist. To Harold Begbie, the war had been ‘such a mangling of butchery, such an indiscriminate anarchy of slaughter and mutilation, such a filthiness of Bedlami carnage, as no man had witnessed from the beginning of time’.³⁵

As Samuel Hynes has shown, there was an immense quantity of this kind of thing in the British fiction of the 1920s. Ford Madox Ford’s Christopher Tietjens in the *Parade’s End* novels personifies the decline and fall of the English elite, betrayed by the carpetbaggers at home.³⁶ There is a similar aristocratic casualty in Michael Arlen’s *The Green Hat* (1924).³⁷ Virginia Woolf has yet another war victim in *Mrs Dalloway*: the suicidal ex-soldier Septimus Smith is the archetypal ‘man to whom things are done’, in whose eyes the war has deprived the world of meaning.³⁸

The striking thing is how far the post-war gloom extended beyond Bloomsbury. Even so jingoistic a writer as John Buchan—whose wartime yarn *Greenmantle* was a harbinger of the ‘Lawrence Arabia’ myth—was not immune. Buchan’s *A Prince of the Captivity* (1933) has as its central character Adam Melfort, an ascetic war hero who struggles to find a use for his compulsive self-sacrificing bravery in the post-war world of cosmopolitans and proletarians.³⁹ By this time, Buchan was having to try hard to persuade himself that the war had not been in vain. Even writers who had been too young to play any part in the war could add to the critical mass. A crucial event in Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s *Scots Quair* (1932–4) is the execution of the heroine Chris’s husband Ewan for desertion.⁴⁰ C. Forester’s *The General* (1936) did much to propagate the stereotype of the donkey-like British commander.⁴¹

It has been the (often semi-fictional) testimony of the ex-soldiers, however, which has proved more influential than all these fictions. One of the earliest and most enduring novels by a British war veteran, A. P. Herbert’s *The Secret Battle* (1919), was based on the case of Edwin Dyett, a naval sub-lieutenant shot for cowardice: its point is that ‘Harry Penrose’ was a brave man whose nerves had been shattered by prolonged exposure to the terrors of combat.⁴² In 1922 the *Guardian* leader-writer and war veteran C. E. Montague published his polemical memoir *Disenchantment* (surely the most influential of all post-war titles). ‘Battles have no aureoles now’, Montague declared, ‘in the sight of the young men [who] . . . have seen the trenches full of gassed men, and the queue of their friends at the brothel-door in Béthune.’ In this war, he wrote in a phrase which still resonates, ‘the lions felt they had found out the asses’.⁴³

By the time Montague’s novel *Rough Justice* came out in 1926, it was part of a veritable wave of war writing, as if a decade had been needed for the experience to become intelligible, or at least expressible. T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was published privately in 1926 and made available in an edited form as *Revolt in the Desert* the next year; 1926 also saw the publication of Herbert Read’s *In Retreat*. There followed works by Max Plowman and R. H. Mottram (1927); Blunden, Sassoon and E. E. Cummings (all 1928); Richard Aldington, Charles Edmonds, Frederic Manning and Robert Graves (all 1929); and, in the bumper year 1930, Sassoon, Henry Williamson, Frederic Manning, Richard Blaker and Liam o’Flaherty.⁴⁴ Sassoon’s bitter phrase that ‘the war was a dirty trick which had been played on me and my generation’ is one of many which might be quoted

from the books of this vintage.

Such condemnations were echoed elsewhere. Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (1916)—which had sold 300,000 copies by the end of the war—set an early standard for French disgust with the war on the Western Front, surpassed only by the devastating early chapters of his political opposite Louis Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932).⁴⁵ In 1936 Roger Martin du Gard published *The Summer of 1914*, apparently the final volume of his vast dynastic saga *The Thibaults*, in which Jacques Thibault dies trying to scatter pacifist leaflets over French and German troops in August 1914. In the year the book came out, the author wrote to a friend: 'Anything rather than war! Anything! . . . Nothing, no trial, no servitude can be compared to war . . .'⁴⁶

Germany, of course, produced the most famous of all the anti-war novels in Erich Maria Remarque's still harrowing *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), which sold astonishingly well in translation in both Britain and France. But Remarque was not the only anti-war writer of the Weimar period. Similar sentiments were expressed in Ludwig Renn's *Krieg*, which had come out the year before, while Austria had Andreas Latzko's *People at War* (1917) and Arnold Zweig's *The Case of Sergeant Grischa* (1928). Vienna also produced the most coruscating critique of the war written for the stage: Kraus's *Last Days of Mankind*, which he began in 1915 and eventually published in its complete form in May 1922.⁴⁷

Americans, too, harboured bitter memories. For the American pilot Elliott White Springs, the war was 'a grotesque comedy' and 'useless'.⁴⁸ For all his romanticizing of the man of action, even Hemingway conveyed to readers of *A Farewell to Arms* the absurdity of the Austrian–Italian war on the Isonzo Front and the cynicism of the men who fought there.

The memory of an evil war also lives on in grisly painted images. The English artist Paul Nash intended that his eerie, mud-filled landscapes like *The Menin Road* (1919) should 'bring back words from the men who are fighting to those who want to go on forever . . . and may it burn their loud souls'.⁴⁹ Max Beckmann's brief and traumatic military career transformed his style as an artist, a change prefigured by his pathetic drawings of wounded comrades—drawings similar in style to those of a number of less well-known French *camoufleurs*.⁵⁰ The work of George Grosz was also affected by his experiences as a volunteer (he ended up in a mental hospital). His grotesque cartoon 'The Faith Healers' (dated 1918) shows a military doctor passing a skeleton as 'KV (kriegsdienstverwendungsfähig, 'fit for active service'). The war-inspired pictures of the avant-garde still have the power to shock. What could be more hellish than George Leroux's *Hell* (1917–18), with its gasmasked *poilus* and half-submerged corpses, barely visible in a landscape of mud, water and dark smoke?⁵¹ What could be more harrowing than Max Slevogt's *The Mothers*, an endless column of wailing women alongside an endless ditch full of dead men?⁵²

Nothing illustrates better the persistence of the First World War's reputation as an evil war than the recent British fiction it has inspired such as Pat Barker's 1990s trilogy, *Regeneration*, *The Eye* and *the Door* and Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong*. It is not from historians that the majority of modern readers gain their impressions of the First World War, but from books like these—and, of course, from newspapers, television, theatre and the cinema. I have already mentioned *Oh, What a Lovely War*—first performed by the Theatre Workshop in 1963—that quintessential 'message for the Sixties' that wars could always happen so long as power was in the hands of upper-class twits.⁵³ Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli* has a not dissimilar theme, juxtaposing Antipodean idealism with Pom idiocy. Television documentaries have also been influential; both the twenty-six-part documentary *The Great War* (first shown on BBC2 in 1964) and the more recent KCET/BBC series

1914–1918 won large audiences. Although the earlier series was in many ways intended to explain rather than condemn the war, many viewers seem to have been almost deaf to the commentary, instead allowing the grim archive footage to reinforce their received notions about ‘the horror of trench warfare’ and ‘the appalling and needless slaughter of innocent people’.⁵⁴ By comparison, *1914–1918* went with the grain, concentrating on the cultural history of the war as it was ‘endured by millions of ordinary men and women’.⁵⁵ And so the image of a bad, futile war is endlessly replicated. Even comedy series like Rowan Atkinson’s *Blackadder Goes Forth* adds to the folk memory of donkey-lily leadership.

What is more, every year thousands of people travel to the battlefields of the Western Front to ‘see for themselves’, a curious cross between remembrance and tourism which began almost as soon as the war ended.⁵⁶ What they see is not, of course, what the soldiers who fought there saw. They see the great, geometrical cemeteries designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and others after the war; and the now largely healed countryside, which can be understood as tragic today only with the assistance of battlefield guidebooks.⁵⁷

NECESSARY WAR?

One historian above all gave academic respectability to the notion of the wickedness of the Great War. A. J. P. Taylor’s illustrated *The First World War*, first published in 1963, remains the most successful of all books on the subject.⁵⁸ It was one of the first adult history books I read as a boy; indeed, I think the photograph of a hideously decomposed soldier’s corpse on the cover of my parents’ edition was my first glimpse of a dead body. Taylor’s war was study in folly and futility: ‘The statesmen were overwhelmed by the magnitude of events. The generals were overwhelmed also . . . All fumbled more or less helplessly . . . No one asked what the war was about. The Germans had started the war in order to win; the Allies fought so as not to lose . . . Winning the war was the end in itself.’⁵⁹ This pointless war was also waged ineptly and wastefully: Verdun was contested ‘literally for the sake of fighting’; Third Ypres was ‘the blindest slaughter of a blind war’. Taylor was anything but a sentimentalist; but precisely his acerbic—even facetious—tone complemented more emotive accounts by a number of equally readable historians who published just before him: Leon Wolff, Barbara Tuchman, Alan Clark and Alistair Horne.⁶⁰ Writing at the time these books were appearing, Robert Kee fulminated against the ‘gigantic swindle by which the top politicians and generals . . . wax[ed] more powerful and prosperous . . . at the expense of millions of brave men in a hell . . . in some ways analogous to the concentration camps indispensable to Nazi Germany’.⁶¹ This passion has not spent itself as the years have passed. Combining as they do the recollections of veterans and the author’s own indignation, Lytton Macdonald’s volumes on key phases of the war on the Western Front have tended to endorse the idea that the war was sheer hell and the soldiers its victims.⁶² John Laffin continues to refer to British generals as ‘butchers and bunglers’.⁶³

However, it is important to recognize that these remain minority views. In fact, a surprisingly large number of historians have insisted, and continue to insist, that the First World War was not ‘senseless’. If it had its evil side, then it was a necessary evil.

Of course, attempts have been made to justify the war ever since it began. The various combatant governments hastened to publish their own official explanations of the war’s outbreak in books of various hues: the Belgian Grey Book, the Austrian Red Book, the Russian Black Book and the German

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