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The war that didn't end all wars

CATACLYSM: THE FIRST WORLD WAR AS POLITICAL TRAGEDY

By David Stevenson

HarperCollins

592 pp., \$54

In March 1914, the widely read English pacifist H.N. Brailsford made the unfortunate prediction that "there will be no more wars among the six Great Powers."

In the first half of 1914, there were threats of war in the Balkans (but then there were always wars in the Balkans); relations between Britain and Germany seemed to be improving; France, having occupied Morocco in 1911, was going out of its way to provoke Germany no further; Russia was intent on a period of peace following its defeat by Japan in 1905.

Best-selling books proved -- correctly, as it turned out -- that war would be so economically disruptive that it would be unprofitable -- even for the victors. Some leftists, such as the English radical J.A. Hobson and the German Marxist Karl Kautsky, argued that intelligent capitalists might combine peacefully to exploit the planet for their mutual benefit. War, when it came, was unexpected, and its length and its body count were even more of a surprise.

As a date, 1914, like 1945 and 1789, has passed into history as a name for the end of one era and the beginning of another. The First World War ended what came to appear in rose-tinted retrospect the long European peace that had held since 1815, and it inaugurated the era of the two World Wars and of the kind of global ideological conflict that seems not to have ended in 1989.

David Stevenson's title, *Cataclysm*, captures the feeling that an unparalleled disaster had descended on the most ambitious and self-confident civilization that the planet has ever seen.

Stevenson's subtitle, *The First World War as Political Tragedy*, summarizes the central argument of this dense, learned, but necessarily fast-paced volume: Stevenson argues that Germany and Austria "made a decision to start a Balkan war and to accept the risk that it would

escalate into a European one." The war was a tragedy -- a characteristic decision gone wrong - and not an inevitability. With this argument, Stevenson is wading into a classic historical controversy: the famous war guilt question.

The Treaty of Versailles ending the First World War asserted that guilt for the war lay with the Germans, and imposed massive reparations payments in retaliation.

The war guilt clause led German historians and some revisionist Americans to argue that the war had been caused by the inevitable dynamics of an unstable international system. Still others followed Lenin in contending that the war had been caused by the equally inevitable dynamics of international capitalism.

Arguments for inevitability of course undermined the imputation of guilt to any one party. The economic dislocations caused by reparations played a large role in bringing Hitler to power, and the feeling that the Germans had been unjustly blamed for a war that was really the fault of everyone (or perhaps no one) contributed significantly to the willingness of the Western powers to appease Hitler in the 1930s: Historiographical disputes can have important consequences.

In the 1950s, as France and Germany pledged "never again," it became almost bad form to blame Germany for the war of 1914. This changed in the 1960s, when the German historian Fritz Fischer published two volumes based on archives of German war plans, demonstrating that Germany had in fact had expansionist aims.

Fischer provoked a massively involved "Fischer controversy" -- rare is the historian who would not be thrilled to be at the centre of an eponymous controversy -- but he was at bottom, as Stevenson argues, right: Germany started a small war but was prepared to risk a big one, and when the small one escalated it was Germany that invaded France, and not the reverse.

On the way to France, the German Army violated Belgium's neutrality, thus bringing in the British, pledged to defend Belgium by a famous "scrap of paper," Lord Palmerston's 1839 Treaty of London.

Britain in 1914, of course, meant the British Empire, and Canada, like Australia and even India, supported Britain with an automatic loyalty remote from the grudging and invidious spirit with which we regard our allies today. The stresses of the war, as Stevenson notes, did much to accelerate the rise of minor nationalisms and the end of the greater imperial nationalism that had led the Dominions to fight with such unstinting loyalty.

Canadian nationalists will not be pleased with the passing manner in which Stevenson deals with the Canadian and other Dominion contributions to the war effort.

The defeat at Gallipoli, where large numbers of Australians were killed, and its consequences are mentioned, but it rates no place in the index. The attack of the Canadian Corps under Sir Arthur Currie at Amiens on Aug. 8, 1918, which played a large part in what the German commander Erich Ludendorff called "the black day of the German Army," is mentioned only briefly, and Vimy Ridge, like Gallipoli, is not to be found in the index.

Canadian and Australian historians tend to write less the history of the war than the history of their countries' contributions to the war effort, often leaving an exaggerated impression of their importance and sometimes going so far as to suggest (without evidence) that Dominion troops were used as cannon-fodder in order to save English lives.

Stevenson, a professor at the London School of Economics, is concerned primarily with the higher strategic direction of the war, and goes to the opposite extreme of treating Dominion troops as though they were just more units of the British Army.

In addition to his military and strategic focus -- a very properly old-fashioned focus when discussing a war -- Stevenson places considerable emphasis on the diplomacy and the economics of the war, and he displays an impressive knowledge of the internal politics of Germany and Russia.

So much has now been written about the First World War that Stevenson is often obliged to summarize the disputes of other historians, which he does fairly and without neglecting to come to his own conclusions.

There is unlikely soon to be a better single volume history of the First World War and its historiographical controversies.

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