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Book Review by Daniel J. Mahoney

THE WAR TO END ALL POLITICS

14-18: Understanding the Great War,
by Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker,
translated from the French by Catherine Temerson.
Hill and Wang, 279 pages, \$24



THE SHORT BUT TUMULTUOUS 20TH CENTURY came to an end with the largely unanticipated implosion of the Soviet empire between 1989 and 1991. As a political phenomenon, the century began with the breakdown of the European diplomatic order in August 1914 and the unleashing of total war on the continent. "The Great War," as it was called until 1939, was marked by unprecedented violence (nearly 10 million soldiers and civilians perished before it was all over) and by the display of prodigious national energies and civic passions. In its wake drifted the fragments of great multinational empires (most particularly the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman). The old bourgeois Christian order in Europe appeared in ruins and the future seemed to belong to audacious totalitarian revolutionaries of the Left and Right. A murderous Lenin was in power in Soviet Russia and Mussolini and Hitler were soon to follow in Italy and Germany. At its end, the initial euphoria of war gave way to a wave of pessimism and pacifism which weakened the democracies and paved the way for new "wars in chain reaction," to use Raymond Aron's suggestive phrase.

In retrospect, the Great War was really the first dramatic phase in a protracted political conflict that lasted from 1914 until 1945 (the "Thirty Years War" as Churchill, de Gaulle, and Aron all called it). In its turn, this Thirty Years War created the conditions for Cold War and global conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union in the decades following 1945. The gunshot fired in Sarajevo in summer 1914 thus had unpredictable but world-trans-

forming consequences. The European nation-state never quite recovered from this self-inflicted wound. Totalitarians succeeded in seizing the mantle of "progress" from the once self-confident partisans of liberal civilization. But Europe's crisis became America's opportunity. On three separate occasions (1917, 1941, and again during the Cold War) America came to the rescue of old Europe and, as a result, definitively found its place in universal history. Under the comparatively benign protection of the U.S., the European democracies recovered their liberty, prosperity, and self-respect.

One should not turn to *14-18* expecting to find much guidance for understanding the political stakes and consequences associated with the Great War. Nor will Americans find much discussion of America's involvement in the war or her crucial role in bringing it to an end. The perspective that dominates this work is decidedly "metapolitical" and "Eurocentric." Its authors, directors of the Historial of the Great War at the Chateau de Peronne near the Somme, are interested in recovering a comprehensive *anthropological* perspective on the war that purportedly transcends narrowly political analysis. However flawed this approach may be, it doesn't prevent their book from being of real interest. To their credit, the authors of *14-18* appreciate the limits of much recent European reflection on the Great War. Carried away by a facile, morally smug pacifism, contemporary European commentators tend to see soldiers as mere victims (playthings of nationalist elites) and celebrate rebels and mutineers as the real heroes.

Against this highly dubious interpretation of

the war, the authors of *14-18* set out to explore a mystery largely opaque to contemporary humanitarian and pacifist sensibilities. Europeans had been mostly at peace since 1815 (or at least had avoided a continent-wide conflict) and had supreme confidence in the progressive character of their civilization. It was commonplace for statesmen and intellectuals alike to affirm the obsolescence of war due to the pacifying effects of commercial and scientific civilization. Yet when war broke out, Europe witnessed a remarkable eruption of patriotic passions. Millions volunteered for the armed forces (we forget that conscription wasn't even instituted in Great Britain until the beginning of 1916). Civilian populations willingly, even enthusiastically, sustained the greatest sacrifices. One of the merits of this book is its demonstration that these patriotic passions were not simply manufactured by governments, the results of crude propaganda or government-induced hysteria. The authors convincingly show that these nationalist passions arose, at least initially, from below, and were imbued with a genuinely religious intensity. At the time, a full range of participants and commentators remarked on the spiritual commitment of peoples to the common good, to civic sacrifice and victory at war. Few in fact doubted the justice of their respective national causes. The Germans defended the superiority of their "Kultur" against the mechanistic and homogenizing "civilization" of the British and French, while the British and French defended ordered liberty and the rights of man against an enemy that had committed gruesome atrocities in Belgium and had violated international order.



ONE MIGHT THINK THAT THE LENGTH and terrible character of the conflict would undermine these sentiments. Raymond Aron has brilliantly shown how the “technical surprise,” the dominance of defense over offense after 1914, gave rise to unmeasured or “hyperbolic” war. What Victor Davis Hanson has called “the Western way of war” was definitively shattered. No longer did war consist of “brief, brutal clashes” that allowed courage and ingenuity to shine. Instead, battles went on for months at a time (Verdun lasted for 10!) with little progress on either side. Soldiers and civilians alike experienced soul-numbing horrors. Yet the majority’s resolve persisted amid the horrific cruelties of all-out war. Despite some inevitable erosion of public support, most Europeans “continued to believe that their initial feelings in the summer of 1914 were still justified” long after the promise of rapid victory had been disappointed.

This gap between the subjective feelings of justification and the objective facts of carnage and mayhem is a great stumbling block for our authors. If Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker successfully resist seeing all of the actors in the drama as victims, they are less successful in resisting the tendency to see them as villains. Our authors are in the final analysis under the spell of a humanitarian ideology that makes it impossible for them to take seriously any idea of a just war. They find it impossible to distinguish between the just war and a millenarian, Manichean conception of politics that denies the enemy’s humanity. They are self-described “children of the West’s disengagement from war.” To their credit, they have the courage to think about war; this is something that clearly sets them apart from many of their European contemporaries. They are rightly concerned with the violence that sunders communities and causes real damage to men’s souls. But because they eschew a properly political analysis of war they finally can see in it only “sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

In light of the evils of total war (which include the growing effacement of the distinction between civilians and combatants, the use of forced labor and internment camps, and the dehumanization of the enemy by all sides), it is understandable that some believe that modern war is no longer capable of serving larger moral-political purposes. The humanitarian wants to enlarge memory by reminding us of the untold victims who perished or saw their lives turned upside down as a result of war’s furies. But this humanitarian perspective finally risks a nihilism all its own. Churchill and de Gaulle reminded us that the violence of the Great War was nihilistic to the extent that it had ceased to serve authentic political purposes. There was a deficit of statesmanship on all sides. Our authors rightly point

out that, under conditions of total war, pressures build to deny the enemy’s humanity. Even the most liberal Frenchmen and Britons didn’t hesitate to attribute the defects of German politics to the perfidies of the German “race.” 14-18 eloquently highlights this escalation to extremes and traces the ways in which a great civilization came close to committing spiritual suicide. But one must also ask if the “deconstruction,” in the name of common humanity, of the sentiments and motives of the actors in the drama is indeed the final word on this question.

The sense of common humanity, after all, is not the only or strongest bond connecting men. Our authors ably describe the ways that French Catholics and French republicans united in defense of *patrie* against a German invader. This *union sacrée* as the French called it, bound men and women who had been at each other’s throats right up until the war’s outbreak, reconciling secular and religious France in a common endeavor to defend French and European liberty. Our authors, of course, highlight the excesses and inhumanities that sometimes accompanied this effort, but they are not really in a position to challenge its fundamental nobility. There is something sacred about the political bond as such and human beings rightly honor those who pay the ultimate price to maintain its integrity. Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker are perplexed by the patriotic and religious sensibility of the great French Catholic poet and philosopher Charles Péguy, who could write in 1913 on the eve of the Great War:

Blessed are those who died for carnal
earth
Provided it was a just war...
Blessed are those who died for carnal
cities.
For they are the body of the city of God.
Blessed are those who died for their
hearth and their fire,
And the lowly honors of their father’s
house.

To many of us the poet’s words eloquently express the nobility of sacrifice and the sacredness of the civic bond. As it turns out, the great Péguy gave his life for the freedom of his beloved France at the battle of the Marne in the opening weeks of the war. For the humanitarian, Péguy’s words are incomprehensible because they supposedly negate the only real bond that unites man as man. The humanitarian affirms a notion of the human universal that finally severs it from any political articulation, from every “carnal” embodiment.

From the strictly humanitarian perspective, every national cause is equally suspect because it leads to the exclusion of the “Other.” The authors of this book are right to argue that World War I created an opening for European

totalitarianism. But they are wrong to locate it narrowly in intense national passions. Totalitarianism arose in reaction to bourgeois Christian civilization and was in no way its logical culmination. To be sure, the Nazis subverted the idea of the nation by severing it from universal principles of political right and liberal and Christian civilization. But the nation can more truthfully be appreciated as a means of giving these universal principles real life, of embodying the demands of civilization in a concrete way. That surely was Péguy’s deepest insight.

It won’t do to condemn every particular loyalty as proto-totalitarian, as a step on the way to fascism. The true historian necessarily “relativizes” the claims of every nation, of every political actor. It is true that all peoples and nations are capable of injustice and none embodies the universal in an unqualified manner (but, as Lincoln and Reinhold Niebuhr have both shown, a recognition that each nation stands under the judgment of God in no way entails moral relativism). All of the sovereign states who participated in the Great War wanted to assert their power, glory, and independence. But all were not equally right, or wrong, to do so. As Raymond Aron has written:

In France and Britain there were no equivalents of the Pan-Germanists or the romantic theorists of violence: Both countries tended to be conservative and to relinquish old dreams of conquest. The Germany of Wilhelm II, in the midst of expansion, was more inclined to war and contemplated a recourse to arms with less reluctance than the bourgeois democracies.

Germany thus had a special responsibility for the outbreak of the war. To say this is to not to side with nationalist passions but to recognize the crucial difference between conservative and revolutionary states that is essential to the maintenance of a civilized world order.

Today, many Europeans dream of putting an end to the nation-state, of creating a transnational community that will put an end to politics, and war, once and for all. They are still traumatized by the “wars in chain reaction” that mutilated Europe and paved the way for the preeminence of American empire. Pierre Manent has eloquently suggested that the specter of “depoliticization” haunts a continent that wishes to escape the demands of universal history. This fascinating if deeply flawed book helps us better understand why Europeans, in the light of the bitter experience of total war, succumbed to that temptation.

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