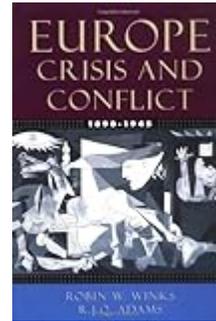




Robin W. Winks, R. J. Q. Adams. *Europe, 1890-1945: Crisis and Conflict.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xiv + 306pp. \$77.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-515449-8; \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-515450-4.



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The Half Century From Hell

This Winks and Adams volume on the most murderous decades of European history is an astute choice for undergraduate education in history, political science, or international relations. It covers fifty-five years of fundamental economic, social, and political upheaval with remarkable lucidity and economy. Its use of maps and illustrations is appropriate; its recommendations on further reading are unavoidably limited and selective, yet responsible. This reviewer would not hesitate to adopt it, partly on account of these inherent virtues but additionally because the pedagogical opportunity afforded by its oversights, happily enough, are the kind the energetic lecturer welcomes.

In their preface the authors assert that “ultimately, history is about what people believe to be true” and that, to this extent, “virtually all history is intellectual history” (p. xiii). With this in mind they dedicate the book’s opening chapter on the New Age to the intellectual revolution of modernism in the arts, architecture, and the social sciences, stressing the impact of new visions of society in the realm of politics ranging from the relationship between eugenics and racialism to that between feminism

and the cause of women’s suffrage. In other words, the sweep of the chapter is enormous and yet Winks and Adams carry it off with aplomb and set the stage perfectly for chapter 2 on the modernization of nations. This too is a strong chapter. The authors make a clear shift of focus toward the condition of the European nation-state; the ferment of new political ideas; the prospect of a radical reordering of the great powers; competition among European states for colonial dominion over non-European people; navalism and the arms race; and the incendiary potential of the ailing Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian Empires. The chapter ends with the emergence of the United States as a world power and stresses that in culture and language and political tradition the America of 1900 was “unquestionably to be considered with the European Great Powers” (p. 65). There is an obvious intellectual tension between Theodore Roosevelt’s enthusiasm for the construction of the Panama Canal and an excerpt from Alfred Thayer Mahan’s *Influence of Sea Power on History* on the opposing page in which the great navalist contends that the canal will in the short-term “be a military disaster to the United States.” Yet this tension is neither noted nor explored by the authors, in itself not

an important oversight but nevertheless symptomatic of the book's principal weakness.

That is to be found in the authors' reluctance to answer the question, "what does it all mean?" at the end of each chapter and, more remarkably still, at the end of the book. Instead, each chapter closes with a summary not unlike those found at the end of high school texts for the benefit of students unable to work up the energy for a read of more than two pages: a dry reiteration of the chapter's content without so much as a nod in the direction of synthesis or analysis. This practice is unworthy, both of two such accomplished scholars and of the considerable and successful labor devoted to the substance of the chapters. What Winks and Adams have described in the first third of their book, after all, is the march toward what John Keegan calls a "European tragedy" in the trenches of 1914-18.[1] Just as the scientific wonders of the New Age and the scientific pretensions of the late nineteenth century invited Europeans to take control of their lives under the banners of women's suffrage and socialist internationalism, the modernization of nations involved the great powers in harnessing modern science for new arts of war so devastating that within four years European confidence in rationalism was crushed and many believed such control to be permanently beyond their reach. The authors know this, so why not say it? Can anything short of a cosmic collapse begin to explain the popularity of the collectivist dementia of interwar communism and fascism?

Chapters 3 ("Great War, Great Revolution") and 4 ("Between the Wars: A Twenty-Year Crisis") are strong chapters, the backbone of the book. Winks and Adams's explanation of the diplomatic and military collision of July and August 1914 is as succinctly sound as any you will find at the introductory level, and their narrative proceeds seamlessly into the Russian Revolution of 1917. The assertion that one of the surprising results of the destruction of World War I was the spur given to the modern environmental movement was certainly a surprise to this reviewer, but the treatment of the imperfect peace-making of 1919; the sullen withdrawal of American isolationism; the defeated yet unrepentant power of German nationalism; and the violent birth of a colossus, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, sets up a generally strong explanation of the great unraveling of the twenty-year crisis promised in the following chapter. In light of the fact that Adams is an authority on Britain's diplomacy of appeasement between the wars, it was something of a disappointment to find no mention of the role of appeasement as a legitimate tradition of British diplomacy reach-

ing back to the nineteenth century. On the other hand, chapter 4's passages on the origin and animus of fascism, combined with the attention given to the common and varying circumstances behind its rise to power in Italy, Spain, and Germany, are very strong. The chapter's dramatic thrust is, however, somewhat undermined by a discussion of Spain, Portugal, and the successor states of the Habsburg Empire after Winks and Adams have already taken the treatment of the Third Reich as far as the Kristallnacht of November 1938. This is apparently because they are concerned at this stage with the domestic factors conditioning the twenty years' crisis, so that the discussion of the diplomatic endgame leading to Munich and Danzig is actually left to chapter 6.

A commendable feature is the attempt to place the European crisis of the 1920s and 1930s in a global context. The authors assert that hitherto an awareness of the history of non-Western societies had not been significant to an understanding of Western history but that "now they would become so, and Western history and world history would become virtually indistinguishable" (p. 193). The following discussion of China, Japan, India, and the Middle East in discrete categories, however, partly betrays the spirit of this assertion. This could have been remedied by a determination to demonstrate the connections between the failing hold of European colonialism in South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East, the emergence of a particularly aggressive Asian imperialism in Japan, and the rising national aspirations of non-European peoples by way of integrated treatment. An alternative would have been to deal with the merger of European and world history in serious concluding sections for chapters 5 and 6 rather than the desultory summaries with which the authors are, oddly, satisfied. They note, for example, that "Great Britain was the first nation to suffer from the ills of postindustrial development" and that "people in the French colonies of Algeria, Senegal, and Indochina demanded home rule or independence" (p.207). Surely this is precisely the place to assert that by the 1920s Britain was an industrial power in the first stage of decline and an imperial power so overextended financially and militarily by its overseas commitments that it could offer neither a convincing deterrent to renewed German aggression in Europe nor sufficient support to France, another imperial geriatric, in the same cause. Surely too, it was the place to point out that the British politician most aware of the strength of the German threat in Europe and frantic to shunt London away from the diplomacy of appeasement, Churchill, also did not believe that Indians would be able to govern themselves as well as Britain was

currently governing them.

The omission of any concluding generalizations of this variety is predictably most telling in the last chapter. Its handling of the road to war, 1931-1939, as well as of the course of military conflict in Europe and the Pacific, 1939-45, is carried off very well. There is also genuine merit in the authors' treatment of the international crises of the 1930s as separate yet interrelated episodes in the progressive disintegration of the Western democracies' makeshift efforts to appease their past and future enemy, Germany, while beggaring the security of their friends. What is missing here is any feeling for the absolute centrality of Germany, a nation of extraordinary dynamism and promise in the New Age of the 1890s, to the half century of hell that followed. The question of Germany's integration into a balance of power acceptable to its neighbors in the East and West is the fundamental issue of Europe in the era beginning with Bismarck's dismissal by Kaiser Wilhelm II and ending in Hitler's bunker—indeed so fundamental that it was not wholly resolved in 1945 and awaited the outcome of the West's collective confrontation with Soviet power in 1989. Admittedly, the authors grapple well with both the enormity of the twentieth century's second global conflict as well as of its implications for the rest of the century—a laudable accomplishment in skilled synthesis and writing discipline in a chapter of only forty-six pages—yet they finish both chap-

ter and book with a whimper in a summary that will certainly fail to impress upon the uninitiated the awful darkness of an era that began so hopefully.

This is, then, a good book that with more work could have been a great book. If the authors felt a pedagogical responsibility to place the European crisis in a global context, they should have accepted more of the burden inherent in that task, as exemplified in the work of William Keylor and P. M. H. Bell, or remained content with the more Euro-centric format employed by Mark Mazower. After all, there is more than enough to chew profitably in this limited menu, especially in a book beginning with immodest promise to cover the first half of the twentieth century with a mind to the relevance of everyone from Mme. Curie to Richard Wagner. Less, as it turns out, would have been more.

Notes

[1]. John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), pp.3-23.

[2]. William R. Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century World: An International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); P. M. H. Bell, *The World Since 1945: An International History* (London: Arnold, 2001); Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage: 2000).

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