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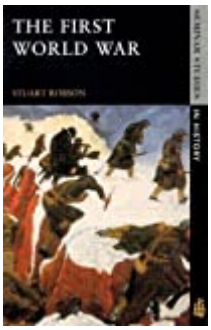

Stuart Robson. *The First World War.* London and New York: Longman, 1998. xii + 156 pp. $11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-31556-3.

Reviewed by Leland Barrows (UNESCO)

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When an Aid to Understanding Becomes a Barrier

The *raison d'etre* of this book is perhaps best summed up by a blurb on its back cover that describes the series of which it is a part. The "Seminar Studies in History," the reader is informed, provides "a means of bridging the gap between specialist articles and monographs and textbooks." The genre thus is that of a reading that a university teacher of Western Civilization or of post-1815 European History might assign to cover the First World War in lieu of the relevant chapter in a general textbook.

The reader, accordingly, is presented with a 96-page attempt at a historical synthesis of the Great War that while strictly bound to the 1914-1918 time frame covers much more than military history. It evokes the initial battle plans (the Schlieffen/Moltke Plan in the case of the Germans, Plan XVII in the case of the French), the course and consequences of war mobilization on the home fronts, the emergence of war economies, and explanations as to why the Entente powers won and the Central Powers lost. The text introduces a social-cultural element: considerations of how the war was perceived from several national points of view, among the combatants and at home, while it was going on, and afterwards; the mutual influence of war, on one hand, and science and technology, on the other; the social and demographic effects of the war; and the effects of war propaganda as generated by both sides. A final chapter assesses the results of the War as a set of paradoxes, among them the idea that Germany or rather the German army, thanks to General Erich Ludendorff's duplicity, came out of the maelstrom undefeated but stabbed in the back and that the British Army, which to Robson played the major role on the Western Front after the failure of the Nivelle Offensive of Spring 1917, appeared to come out diminished because Prime Minister Lloyd George chose to denigrate the achievement of the British Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Douglas Haig.

Comprehension of the text is aided by five maps: i) the German invasion routes into Luxembourg, Belgium, and France in August 1914; ii) the Eastern Front from 1914 to 1918; iii) the Western Front in 1915 (with Verdun misspelled and the Meuse, Sambre, Moselle, and Meurthe Rivers missing); iv) the Gallipoli Campaign; and v) the Verdun region of France in 1916. The text is complemented by a set of teaching/learning aids that includes

seventeen short documents, readings drawn from a variety of sources, that illustrate or develop points raised in the text; a four-page "Chronology of events"; a short biographical dictionary called "Cast of Characters" listing seventy-one of the personages active in the War; a "Glossary" listing and defining thirty-four terms, ranging from "strategy" and "tactics" to "traverse" and "trenches firestep," and finally, a "Bibliography" of 297 entries, all but one of which are in English (including English translations from original languages).

The teaching/learning aids, particularly the seventeen "Documents," collectively give the reader a better feel for what this war was to its participants than does the text. The "Documents," along with the "Chronology of Events," the "Cast of Characters," and the "Glossary," provide much valuable detail.

The "Documents" are a mixed lot. Particularly gripping is "Document 6," "A German View of Trench Fighting: Excerpts from the Diary of Rudolf Binding" drawn from Rudolf Binding, *A Fatalist at War* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1929), particularly the image it evokes of the corpse of a British soldier that somehow got built into the parapet of a German trench in such a way that a soldier could hang his rifle on its puttee-clad protruding legs. Equally gripping is "Document 16," an excerpt from the letter of a Canadian nurse describing the death in a British hospital of an evacuated soldier, the victim of mustard gas. "Document 1," an early (September 1914) statement of German war aims by Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, is all the more fascinating in that it suggests that eighty-four years later Germany seems to have achieved many of its stated economic aims of 1914 through its membership in the European Union. Robson has unfortunately not made any comments about this and other similar sorts of coincidences that appear regularly throughout the book.

The "Bibliography" gives very good coverage of the latest scholarship regarding the First World War, particularly its socio-cultural and technological ramifications. It also lists old favourites such as Barbara Tuchman's, *The Guns of August* (New York: MacMillan, 1962) and Alistair Horne's, *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), both of which, although targeting narrow but very significant sets of events in the War, give valuable background information and sequels and are in many ways more suitable for the beginning undergraduate student or the general reader than the book being reviewed. Both books are eminently readable.

The book jacket states that the "format, well-tried and effective, combines information, analysis and assessment effectively." This reviewer, however, has doubts as to the effectiveness of this book, despite the very good teaching aids and "Bibliography," because the 96-page narrative synthesis itself is both incomplete, tendentious, cliche-ridden, and confusing–and, in some cases, misleading or even wrong. At the same time, the reviewer recognizes the extreme difficulty of writing a successful historical synthesis of the First World War in less than a hundred pages. In the limited space that follows, he will point out a few of the problems that he has perceived.

Robson has been strict in leaving out information on backgrounds and sequels in both the text and in the "Cast of Characters," He thus says very little about the political and diplomatic origins of the War or about such matters as the evolution of aspects of modern warfare prior to 1914 that might have suggested both that the War would be long and that the trench system would appear and evolve. He gives very little pre-1914 and post-1918 biographical information about the principal military and civilian protagonists. He fails, for instance, to evoke the colonial experience of such French officers as General Joseph Simon Gallieni and Marshal Joseph Joffre even though he does so in the case of the British Field Marshal, Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener, who did anticipate a long war. He also fails to mention or to emphasizes the fact that most of the British generals, particularly General Sir John French and General Sir Douglas Haig as well as Lord Kitchener, had fought in the South African War (1899-1902), a war in which the British forces did not necessarily distinguish themselves.

The colonial backgrounds of senior British and French officers were important because of the ways in which colonial experience influenced their perceptions of the strategies and tactics to be employed in European warfare. It also conferred administrative experience as well as a degree of independence of mind, influencing patterns of behaviour in crisis situations and enabling such generals as Joffre, Gallieni, and Charles Mangin, a strong partisan of the use of African troops in Europe, to escape from the consequences of such military doctrines as that of the "offensive a outrance" (that also had a partial colonial origin) when these proved to be unworkable.

Regarding post 1919 personages and events, Robson's two comments about the future career of Marshal Philippe Henri Petain, the hero of Verdun, consist of an aside about the French collaborationist regime of 1940 (p. 90) and the statement that Petain "Lived one war too long" (p. 127). When Robson chooses to say

more, his comments tend to be tendentious or ambiguous. One can likewise question Robson's conclusion that "the Great War made Canada and Australia"–an assertion, in support of which in the case of Canada, he bases on Jonathan Vance's, *Death So Noble* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997). Rather the Great War, particularly the debate over conscription in Canada, exacerbated the cleavage between French and English Canadians whose recollections of "the war as an ennobling and successful crusade" (p. 94) were more a reaction to French Canadian "traitors" on one hand, and vacillating, isolationist Americans, on the other. As for Australia, the birth trauma of nationalism was probably caused more by the feeling of abandonment by Britain after the British surrender of Singapore in 1942 than by participation in the First World War.

As Robson is Canadian, a professor of history at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, he tends to emphasize the role of the British and the Commonwealth forces both on the Western Front and at Gallipoli. In particular, he evokes the thoughts about successful infantry attacks of General Sir Arthur Currie, by 1917 the Commander of the Canadian Corps. While it is helpful that Robson has underlined the contributions of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to the military efforts of the Entente that many accounts of the War only include more-or-less anonymously in the British effort, he fails to say very much about the French colonial and North African troops and guest workers who were of great importance to the French war effort. He also neglects the American military presence, not even mentioning the name of the US Commander-in-Chief, General John Joseph Pershing. Robson also de-emphasizes President Woodrow Wilson's role in the peace process and indirectly dismisses the Fourteen Points as a "liberal imperialist bid for world power… that had to wait for Pearl Harbor in 1941" (p. 91).

One can cite other examples of Professor Robson's tendentiousness. He is very critical of Marshal Joffre, French Commander-in-Chief at the outbreak of hostilities. He is equally critical of Plan 17, the French battle plan calling for the reconquest of Alsace and Lorraine by means of a rapid offensive action (*offensive a outrance*) in the event of war with Germany. He blames Joffre for the lack of realism of this Plan that in addition to failing to anticipate the slaughter that entrenched heavy artillery would inflict upon uncovered infantry charging forward, took very little account of the strong possibility that Germany would invade France through Belgium.

Plan 17 was nevertheless more realistic and anticipatory of what really occurred in August 1914 than was Plan 16 that was in effect when Joffre took over as Chief of the French General Staff in 1911. Although Robson attributes Plan 17 to General Joffre and his chief-of-staff, General Noel Joseph de Curieres de Castelnau, its elaboration was strongly influenced by the military collaboration of the British General, Sir Henry Wilson, and General Ferdinand Foch going back to 1909. The two of them anticipated a German violation of Belgian neutrality to be countered by the intervention of the British army in France near the Belgian frontier. The nascent Plan 17 would also be known as "Plan 17 - Plan W" in recognition of Sir Henry Wilson's contribution (see R. Alexandre, *Avec Joffre d'Agadir a Verdun*, Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1932). Thus Plan 17 did anticipate German action through Belgium; it simply got the proportions wrong, but it assigned a position to the British Expeditionary Force facing the Belgian frontier on the left flank of the French Armies.

Then there is the problem of the geographical scope of the war. Robson places great emphasis on the Western Front. Only the listings in the four-page "Chronology of Events" make an attempt at geographical balance by the inclusion of such events as the Arab revolt in the Hedjaz (June 1916) and the entrance of British forces into Jerusalem (9 December 1917). He describes the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 primarily to show what a disaster it was, but he fails to give the full background. The point of Gallipoli was not simply to attack the Central Powers elsewhere than on the stalemated Western Front but to aid the Russians who were being attacked by the Turks in the Caucasus and to open up the Straits and the Black Sea to the Entente. The continuation by the French of the Gallipoli campaign in the form of the Salonika campaign is barely mentioned even though it was intended to relieve Serbia, to combat Bulgaria that had declared for the Central Powers, and to increase pressure on the southern flank of the Austro-Hungarian Empire by inducing Romania to declare for the Entente. Robson says little about the fighting in Italy or about the reinforcement of the Italian army by detachments from France and Great Britain. He barely evokes the Romanian war effort and does not mention the French expeditionary army in Romania. Regrettably, Robson does not mention the campaign in German East Africa during which the German commander, General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, successfully held off larger British, South African, and Portuguese forces, only surrendering when ordered to do so on 14 November 1918, three days after the armistice in

Europe. In short, Robson's First World War is almost provincially European.

Even aspects of the war that are well explained have confusing gaps. Take, for instance, the Battle of Verdun. Robson emphasizes the importance of the "Voie Sacree," the one road by which Verdun could be supplied by means of a continuous truck convoy; however, he fails to explain why the various railway lines shown on the map of the Verdun Region (Map 5, p. 43), particularly the east-west *chemin-de-fer meusien*, that paralleled the road could not be used for this purpose. In fact this railway operated and was used to move in food and other supplies, the road and the trucks being reserved for men and ammunition.

Like other students of the First World War, Robson stresses the ways in which war stimulated technological innovations on both sides: the development and the use of poison gas, the development of tanks, particularly by the British, as well as the development of dirigibles, airplanes, air combat tactics, *ersatz* products, and the like. Nevertheless, in his descriptions of the crucial importance of railway networks to the war effort, Robson fails to note the difficulties for both sides on the Eastern Front caused by the discrepancy in the Russian and the general European railway gauges. Moreover, in his fascination with technology in World War I, Robson completely forgets the great importance of the horse, not necessarily for cavalry (although the belligerents used light cavalry for reconnaissance; *i.e.*, the German *Uhlanen*), but as beasts of burden, particularly for moving and positioning heavy artillery. The outcomes of campaigns on both sides were influenced by the abundance or the shortage of horses and feed (oats and hay).

A peculiar inaccuracy is Robson's claim that "we know less about the French mutiny of 1917 than about any other event in modern French history," an exaggeration, particularly when stated in a book published in 1998, however much the French authorities of the period (and for many years afterwards) attempted to keep the situation secret. The archives of the period have been open for scholarly use for some twenty years. Such French historians as Guy Pedroncini and Pierre Durand have published quite extensively on the question of the 1917 mutiny. Although Robson cites the famous anti-war *Chanson de Craonne* (Document 4) to illustrate his brief description (pp. 68-70) of the Mutiny, there is considerably more material available to interested historians.

Finally, one wonders how Robson's attempts at humour will appeal to his readers. Take, for instance, the title of Chapter Two, "1914: Oops! the Plans Fail" or his quip that Sir John French, the Commander in Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in 1914, "wavered between Eeyore's pessimism... and Pooh's optimism" (p. 123). Are the readers expected to be familiar with Winnie the Pooh? Then there is the description of the British General, Charles Plumer, as looking "more like a resident of Fawlty Towers than a general"–an apt description–but how many readers of this book will have ever heard of "Fawlty Towers"? Wishing to be humourous, Robson could, more appropriately, have cited examples of contemporary humour, for instance, that early on the British soldiers nicknamed the French general, Louis Franchet d'Esperey, who replaced General Charles Lanrezac in command of the French Fifth Army, as "Desperate Frankey." Robson has, however, included among the "Documents" (Document 14) a list of soldiers' slang, some of it very humourous (drawn from John Brophy and Eric Partridge, *The Long Trail: Soldiers' Songs and Slang 1914-18*, Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1965). The list includes practically every expression used by the Entente troops to designate Germans–"Fritz," "Jerry," "Boche," "Hun," and "Heiny" (p. 111)–but it does not include "Tommy", the nickname for British soldiers.

Although the "Documents" and the "Bibliography" are really the saving grace of this book, one regrets that their utility is diminished because of a faulty reference system. Each item is numbered, the author citing the numbers as needed in the text, placing them in square brackets. This method is reader-hostile. Given the generalized use of computer-assisted page layout and printing, why did Professor Robson fail to utilize a standard reference format placing individual citations, identified in the text by index numbers, at the foot of the relevant pages? Equally disappointing is the "Index" (pp. 151-55) that is incomplete, failing to mention important personages, like Corporal Adolph Hitler, the names of whom appear in the text.

In short, although written by an expert on the First World War, this book is a potboiler of limited interest for the readers for whom, according to the publisher, it is destined. It is certainly not suitable for unassisted or unsupplemented use by an undergraduate with little or no prior knowledge of the First World War. At best, it might be of some utility to a professor preparing a lecture on an aspect of the subject or to a graduate student preparing for his PhD comprehensive examinations. In either case, however, the teaching (and learning) aids, particularly the "Documents" and the "Bibliography," will prove

to be of greater value than the text.

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