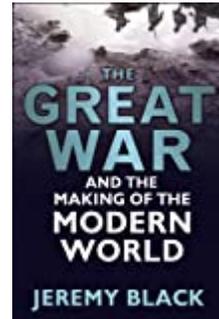




**Jeremy Black.** *The Great War and the Making of the Modern World.* London: Continuum, 2011. xv + 337 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8264-4093-8.



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**Published on** H-Empire (January, 2012)

**Commissioned by** Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

## No Longer A Mindless Slaughter: Revising the Great War

The Great War looms large within modern European history as well as periodizations of modernity itself. There is no shortage of scholarly work on social, cultural, political, military, and diplomatic aspects of the conflict. In the past decade, as the war's centennial approaches, widespread academic and popular interest has manifested new institutional commitments to understanding it. For instance, there are the conferences and publications of the International Society for First World War Studies and the MA degree program in First World War studies offered by University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom. Inquiry into the Great War has been fruitful enough to spawn its own disciplinary specialization in addition to occupying important places within various fields of history.

Nevertheless, despite the accumulation of scholarship, Jeremy Black argues that the conflagration remains one of the most misunderstood of all major wars (p. 235). Most scholarly and popular knowledge, in his estimation, originate from pacifist critiques and could be epitomized by A. J. P. Taylor's oft-repeated assessment

of the Battle of the Somme: "brave, helpless soldiers suffering and dying on the orders of blundering, obstinate generals while achieving nothing." Taylor's argument that the British and French offensive in the summer of 1916 set the picture by which future generations saw the First World War dominated several decades of the historiography.[1] However, more recently, military historians have begun questioning whether viewing the conflict through the lens of pointless sacrifice has occluded a more complete understanding of the war. William Philpott so thoroughly revised the canonical interpretation of the battle itself in *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme and the Making of the Twentieth Century* (2009) that the *Sunday Times* review concluded that it was now impossible to see the Somme as a futile engagement in a futile conflict.[2] Following from Philpott and others, Black brings his own considerable expertise as a military historian to bear on the task of analyzing the war from a more balanced perspective than those who begin with the conclusions proffered by Taylor.

A chronologically organized narrative of the war on

multiple fronts forms the core of Black's account, masterfully synthesizing military history and carefully chosen primary source evidence from his own extensive research. The simple chapter titles corresponding to the years of the war belie the comprehensiveness contained within them as Black manages to interweave events and activities from all theaters of the war into his retelling. He comfortably analyzes land battles from all over the globe in relation to each other, such as comparing an amphibious assault in East Africa to the better-known landings at Gallipoli. All the while he reminds readers that fighting took place beyond France and Belgium: in Mesopotamia, the Balkans, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Rather than separating out conflict at sea, Black interweaves the stories of submarine warfare and Germany's attempt to rival Britain's naval dominance with the accounts of battles on land. Partly this approach results from his concerted attempt to revise the conventional historiography that emphasizes the stalemate of trench warfare on the western front to validate its conclusions about the nature of the war. Scholars who examine other parts of the globe and for whom the Great War may seem to be a European or Western issue, either historically or historiographically, will appreciate Black's comprehensiveness and evenhandedness. He analyzes the global scope of the war as an integral part of understanding it, and as a relevant fact for deriving meaning from the conflict not only because many of the combatants claimed imperial dominions but also because fighting extended to so many places.

Specialists who study modern Europe and know of the war from such accounts as Taylor's *Illustrated History*, Paul Fussler's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* (1976), and more recent works may find Black's approach to the conflict provocative. In his argument, trench warfare neither produced military stalemate nor should become an overwhelming metaphor for understanding the war itself. Tanks and airplanes did not make much difference in the course of the war. Other technologies that exacerbated soldiers' suffering, such as poison gas, hardly merit a mention from Black. Indeed the new military technologies did not result in "the heavy casualties of the Great War," which "reflected not so much the futility of war, or of this war, but, rather, the determination of the world's leading industrial powers to continue hostilities almost at any cost." Rather than placing the blame for mass death on the machine gun or modern tools of killing, the military explanation for high casualties, Black argues, lies in "the strength of counter-tactics: the advantage weapons

technology gave the defence and the value of defence in moderate depth, given the contemporary constraints on offensive warfare, and the numbers of troops available for the defence." High casualty rates thus originated not from trenches themselves but instead from a confluence of technological, political, and social factors. Black's final rejoinder on this common perception of the Great War reminds readers that "casualty rates were scarcely low in many other conflicts, including the Second World War" (p. 233).

The longer perspective that informs Black's work as well as the recent revisionism emanating about the conflict might stem in part from the impending 2014 anniversary of the outbreak of the war. With the deaths in recent decades of the last few veterans who experienced the trenches, to be followed in the coming half-century by their immediate descendants who learned first hand of trauma and shell shock from their fathers and uncles, the horror of the conflict is further out of reach. Living witnesses to the Great War undoubtedly conveyed their experiences to the extent that they shaped the questions and narratives of numerous scholars, who in some respects produced accounts of the conflict that demonstrated they understood the experience of veterans.

Most historians, of course, write without their own first-hand knowledge of their subjects, so this speculation should not be taken as an argument that Black is wrong in his assessments of the Great War. Rather, it is possible to identify this work as part of a shifting historiography and one that is splintering into different branches. As the conflict itself becomes more removed from experiential memory, synthetic narratives of it may follow from Black and become detached in their treatment of the personalities and experiences. The common soldiers may become far less helpless while no less brave, their generals and political leaders much more complex and significantly less blundering. For instance, according to Black, the mutiny of French soldiers in 1917 amounted to "disobedience ... [that] arose from a particular crisis" and from which "morale recovered quickly" (p. 228). Specialists who have studied those events might disagree with Black's dismissal of them, and it is possible that the mutiny episode in particular will be revised yet again following the release of additional government documents after 2017. In the case of military leaders, some of whom had been condemned for mistakes or foolish orders that cost soldiers' lives, Black is generally sympathetic and evaluates them based on strategic and tactical factors. In some respects, he manages to make these prominent figures more understandable and human by demonstrat-

ing why they ordered what they did. Methodologically this will have been achieved, somewhat paradoxically, not from historians basing their accounts on poetry, letters, or diaries, but instead from their examination of the strategic, geopolitical, patriotic, and military imperatives that compelled common soldiers to fight and prominent leaders to send them to war.

Black provides this kind of revision to the narratives of the Great War, but in a synthetic work like this one there will inevitably be some missed opportunities and lingering questions that will provoke specialist readers who have deep knowledge of the historiography. Multiple articles and monographs have been written on subjects that receive several sentences or paragraphs in *The Great War and the Making of the Modern World*. It would be unfair to criticize Black for these omissions because his project aims to provide a readable narrative that tries to explain and discuss the war without yielding to the ease of conventional platitude (p. 280). In this he succeeds. However, it is difficult to embrace wholly his view of the Great War. For one thing, his approach is constrained somewhat by the perspective of military history, and the works that he tends to discount or omit are those that stem from cultural and social perspectives. Additionally, some of his conclusions in the thematically organized chapters at the end of the book are a bit too re-

ductive. For instance, in an attempt to understand the aftermath of the Great War, he declares, it is inappropriate to argue from Versailles to Hitler because the Nazis rejected Versailles and the international system it sought to create (p. 252). Leaving aside the extensive debate about the consequences of the peace, at the very least it is clear that the international order of the 1920s proved to be too weak to contain the territorial ambitions of authoritarian regimes. Black's desire to go against some of the conventional conclusions of historians regarding the Great War and its aftermath ends up tangling up some of his own claims about its importance. If we are left without arguments from 1919 to 1939, just as if we are left thinking that neither the trench warfare nor the suffering and death was particularly unusual, it becomes less clear how the Great War made the modern world. Still, Black provides an effective and comprehensive narrative of the war that challenges many conventional assumptions and will produce lively discussion and debate.

#### Notes

[1]. A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (London: Perigee, 1966), 140.

[2]. Nick Rennison, *The Sunday Times*, July 12, 2009.

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**Citation:** Andrew Keating. Review of Black, Jeremy, *The Great War and the Making of the Modern World*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

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