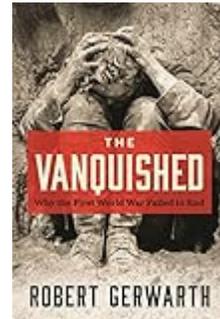


**Robert Gerwarth.** *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016. 464 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-28245-5.



**Reviewed by** Richard Fulton (Washington State University)

**Published on** H-War (April, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

History has it that the Great War started in August 1914 and ended in November 1918. However, historians have long argued that the roots of the Great War go back into the nineteenth century, from whence old national grudges, like French resentment of the Treaty of Versailles forced on them by Prussia in 1871, planted seeds for the war. Politicians's sensitivities to slights against national honor, as with the Serbians and Russians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, planted other seeds, as did popular sentiments like the growing British distrust of Germany that was so intense and became so ingrained into the culture that among other things it led to a series of invasion novels, beginning with *The Battle of Dorking* (1871). From the First Balkans Crisis in 1874 (remember jingoism?) that hotbed of discontent provided a series of little wars among the various nationalities and between those nationalities and the Ottoman Turks. And between the Serbians and Austrians, and Serbians and Bulgarians, and Serbians and Croats, and in fact, the Serbians and just about everyone in the neighborhood. And for a variety of reasons, the Six Empires—Hohenzollern, Habsburg, Romanov, Ottoman, French, and British—all took sides. As Christopher Clark describes in *The Sleepwalkers, How Europe Went to War in 1914* (2012), a web of interper-

sonal arrangements, agreements, disagreements, humiliations, misunderstandings, and hurt feelings more appropriate to junior high school than the circles of great power diplomacy ruled pre-World War I Europe, and the formal treaties that resulted from all that personal diplomacy made some kind of Great War (if not the one we got, then another one with different alliances and outcomes) inevitable. So, only the cataclysmic shooting started in 1914; the diplomatic war had been seething for decades.

And now, here comes Robert Gerwarth claiming that the war didn't actually end in November 1918, either. Of the six great European empires in 1914, four were continental, counting the Ottomans as a European empire. The two empires (three counting the United States) who managed the disastrous peace process from Versailles to Lausanne had very little imperial skin in the game where it counted: in central and eastern Europe, and around Turkey. Did that make a difference in how borders were redrawn and reparations were managed? Undoubtedly, as Gerwarth makes clear in *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End*, because the end of the war in November of 1918 was not really the end of the war. Gerwarth illustrates that as civil wars overlapped with revolutions, counter-revolutions and border conflicts between emerging states without clearly defined frontiers

or internationally recognized governments, âpost-warâ Europe between the official end of the Great War in 1918 and the Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923 was the most violent place on the planetâ (p. 7).

Gerwarth opens his study of the stretch of time beginning with the 1917 Russian Revolution and ending with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) with a summary description of Smyrnaâs descent into hell and chaos in September of 1922. The Greek buccaneering and the fate of Smyrna represented in miniature the fate of countless cities, regions, and polities and their millions of human beings after formal hostilities had ceased in November of 1918âand even before 1918 in the territories that changed hands in battle in central and eastern Europe, or in the case of Russia, erupted internally. In 1919, with British encouragement, Smyrna, a Turkish city, had been occupied by a Greek expeditionary force intent on reestablishing the classic Greek Empire at the expense of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. Greece was on the winning side of World War I, you see, and the Ottoman Empire was on the losing side, so the Greeks were allowed to engage in a little national adventurism. Despite the Treaty of Sevres, the fate of the Ottoman Empire had not yet been fully decided in the peace process, because the Turks rejected the treaty. With the Italians also intent on seizing Ottoman territory, the Greeks decided that when the dust around the treaties settled, the realities on the ground would play an important role in deciding which country owned what territory.

For three years the Greeks fought to consolidate their gains, moving deeper into Asia Minor with an ineptly led but brutal army. As they advanced, they pillaged Muslim communities in a concentrated campaign of looting, murder, rape, and torture. The Turks, who had been defending their territories against the French, Italians, and a variety of pirates masquerading as nation-states on other fronts, finally managed to reorganize their army with some efficiency and concentrate on beating the Greeks back. As the Turks advanced, they carried out reprisal pillaging on Christian, Jewish, and Armenian communities which had cooperated with the Greeks. And the Greeks, as they retreated, pillaged whatever Muslim communities still existed. Finally the Greek army retreated to Smyrna, their starting point, where they boarded ships and went home to Greece, leaving thousands of Armenians, Greek Christians, and Jews at the mercy of the Turkish army and outraged and triumphant Muslim mobs. Over 30,000 non-Muslims were killed, and thousands more raped, tortured, beaten, and forced into exile.

What happened in Smyrnaâthe mindless, vicious, brutal violence that was one part thuggery, one part âofficialâ policy, one part settling of scores going back anywhere from a few months to a thousand yearsâwas replicated throughout central and eastern Europe: in Russia during and after the overthrow of the tsar; in Finland, where a nasty little civil war killed off 1 percent of the population in less than six months; in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria â. Gerwarth identifies three âdistinct but mutually reinforcing and often overlapping, types of conflictâ (p. 9): between national armies in interstate wars; between two political sides in civil wars; and between ethnic militias and mobs in social and national revolution. Gerwarth uses Smyrna to bookend his study, detailing the wrenching violence against civilians in his introduction, and the mass murders, economic and political chaos, and refugee crises in his conclusion. One of the significant points of the last treaty of the war, the Treaty of Lausanne, specified an exchange of populations, moving almost two hundred thousand Greek Christians from central Anatolia to Greece, and four hundred thousand Greek Muslims to Turkey. Eventually over a million refugees swamped the 4.5 million resentful citizens of Greece; the Muslim refugees in Turkey, many of whom spoke only Greek, were not welcomed by *their* new neighbors, either.

Perhaps one of the most pernicious outcomes of the Lausanne Convention was that it established a legal precedent for a state to expel its own citizens on the grounds that they constituted an âother.â Thus, for all of the old states gathered under the Habsburg Empire, or the Ottomans or Romanovs, states whose populations spoke different languages, honored different customs, prayed in different churches, but who managed to live in reasonable harmony, a new world had dawned. Ethnic homogeneity had become a desirable state, and ethnic cleansing became a desirable activity. Both could only be achieved by a level of violence that reduced the âothersâ to nonhuman status. At the same time, the combination of social unrest, financial uncertainty, and the rise of fascism and communism, which promised order as alternative to the chaos into which the liberal democracies had sunk, made the next war almost inevitable.

The chaos in the vanquished lands was made more deadly by the presence of large numbers of armed, trained, technically defeated soldiers itching to find some measure of honorâor at the very least, revengeâafter their demobilization. The most active of these were Germans from the western front who had for the most part been willing to fight on, even with diminishing supplies of

food, ammunition, and trained replacements. They went back to their homes with their rifles and the general feeling that they had been sold out by civilians, politicians, Bolsheviks, pusillanimous allies, the navy, and all those who had demanded an end to the war. Still armed and still in uniform and more often than not unemployed, they formed the *Freikorps* and set out to obliterate Bolshevism, not only in Germany but also in Poland, the Baltic states, and anywhere else their ruthless efficiency and penchant for violence was welcomed by someone. Victorious soldiers in Italy, facing unemployment and a peace that Mussolini told them didn't honor their sacrifice, marched on Rome. Greek soldiers deposed their own government after the debacle at Smyrna. Turkish forces opposed to the Treaty of Sevres overthrew their own government and forced a new treaty at Lausanne. For most of the 1920s, internationally recognized governments in central and eastern Europe and the former Ottoman Empire waged war against populist armed uprisings of their own people. Then came the depression of 1929, and populism mutated quickly into authoritarianism among both the winners and losers.

Gerwarth argues that the Great War didn't really end until 1945. The world that was created by the flawed peace after a war defined by a logic of violence, the criminalization and dehumanization of the enemy, the willingness to jettison democratic institutions for stability (both economic and social), the insistence on settling old scores with others, the desire to make [insert country or people here] great again flamed up spectacularly across the world, starting in Manchuria and Ethiopia and reaching its crescendo with the massacre of the Jews in Europe. Racism, imperialism (and its incredibly destructive Siamese twin, cultural condescension on the part of British, French, and American elites), and ignorance on the part of the winners led to their creation of a world order that carried the seeds of its own destruction in a short twenty years. Mussolini was swept to power on his promise to make Italy great again. The German Right gained followers in what was left of Austria and Germany after the peace treaties shattered the two countries by announcing, with Karl Pabst, the replacement of the old trinity of the French Revolution [liberty, equality, fraternity] with a new trinity: authority, order, and justice (p. 141). Germans, Italians, Greeks, Turks, Russians, and citizens of new or totally reorganized countries like Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Baltic states demanded cultural unification with fellow Poles, Romanians, Bulgarians, etc., who had been shuffled off to other polities like Czechoslovakia and Hungary. "Violence was

ubiquitous as armed forces of different sizes and political purposes continued to clash across eastern and central Europe, and new governments came and went amid much bloodshed," Gerwarth writes. "Between 1917 and 1920 alone, Europe experienced no fewer than twenty-seven violent transfers of political power, many of them accompanied by latent or open civil wars" (pp. 4-5). And for the next twenty years (and one might say, for the next century) there was the successor to imperial Russia destabilizing the countries on its border, sending in armed goons to intimidate the local population on the pretext of defending the rights of alien Russians, and ultimately annexing great swaths of territory (Crimea) or creating client states (Belarus).

Given current events, it's tempting to argue that the Great War continues in much of the world. That logic of violence that we inherited from the Great War and its flawed peace? What but a logic of violence and a dehumanization of the other can explain the mass murders in countries from Rwanda to Kosovo? To extend that thought, it is chilling to see almost a century later the Western democracies moving toward authoritarianism, lured by the twin sirens of security and revenge, with others being blamed for a real or perceived national malaise, both economic and social.

The centennial years of the Great War have been the occasion of a wave of interesting, valuable studies on that key watershed for the modern world. *The Vanquished* is among the most valuable, not only for what it shows us about mistakes and lost opportunities from a century ago, but also for showing us that decisions always have consequences, often unintended consequences. I would have liked to have seen more notice given to the former Ottoman states of the Middle East, given that the arbitrary imperialist division of the Arab portions of that territory between France and Britain continues to have explosive consequences. And at least a note might have been attached to the supposed fury of the Japanese at being mistreated at the Paris negotiations because of Western racism, given that Japanese racism was behind their visitation of Nazi-like atrocities on the peoples of South and East Asia and the Westerners who fell into their grasp. But those are quibbles. Gerwarth's research is incredibly exhaustive; the notes and bibliography alone provide scholars with a trove of resources for further study. His conclusions are sound and clearly arrived at. And his prose is just plain entertaining to read.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Richard Fulton. Review of Gerwarth, Robert, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2017.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48663>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.