

TO END ALL WARS – A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918
Adam Hochschild, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011

This may not be the best history of World War I battles and strategy out there, but it's the best book about World War I that I have read. Hochschild's objective description and analysis reveal the depth of support for the war and resistance to the war from the perspective of Britain. Throughout he treats fairly the same opposing motivations and tensions in France, Germany, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and other principals, in lesser detail. Both patriots and pacifists are weighed in the balance.

The book's introduction and concluding chapter, "An Imaginary Cemetery," alone are well worth the price of the book (\$28) as are the b and w photos, and maps. I stumbled onto the book while browsing the 'new books' shelves of our Albany City Library. I will not attempt to review or summarize it, but will offer some excerpts to give you a flavor of the content, after the two following endorsements: (Italics below are direct quotes from the book.)

"In this deeply moving history of the so-called Great War, those opposing the mindless folly receive equal billing with the politicians, generals, and propagandists obdurately insisting on its perpetuation." Andrew J. Bacevich

"In his hands, World War I becomes a clash not only of empires and armies, but of individuals: King and Kaiser, warriors and pacifists, coal miners and aristocrats. Epic yet human-scaled, this is history for buffs and novices alike, a stirring and provocative exploration of the Great War and the nature of war itself." Tony Horwitz

The bodies of soldiers of the British Empire lie in 400 cemeteries in the Somme battlefield region alone, a rough crescent of territory less than 20 miles long. . . . some 21,000 British soldiers killed or fatally wounded on (just) one day of the greatest bloodshed in the history of their country's military before or since. . . . troops under British command had suffered 500,000 casualties on the Somme front, including at least 125,000 deaths. In that same battle the French had lost 200,000 dead and wounded. (Total casualties were more than one million) . . . and the Allies had gained roughly seven square miles of ground.

The magnitude of the slaughter: 35% of all German men who were between the ages of 19 and 22 when fighting broke out in 1914 were killed in the next four and a half years, and many of the remainder grievously wounded. For France the toll was higher: half of all Frenchmen aged 20 to 32 in 1914 were dead when the war was over.

By the conflict's end, more than 20,000 British men of military age had refused the draft. Many refused noncombatant alternative service too, and more than 6,000 served prison terms under harsh conditions.

In part this book is the story of some of these war resisters and of the example they set, if not for their own time, then perhaps for the future. I wish theirs was a victorious story, but it is not. Unlike, say, witch-burning, slavery, or apartheid, war is still with us. Uniforms, parades, and martial music continue to cast their allure; . . . throughout the world boys and men still dream of military glory as much as they did a century ago. And so, in much greater part, this is a book

about those who actually fought the war of 1914-1918, for whom the magnetic attraction of combat, or at least the belief that it was patriotic and necessary, proved so much stronger than human revulsion at mass death or any perception that, win or lose, this was a war that would change the world for the worse.

Throughout Europe, men were fearful not of being killed, but of not getting a chance to fight before the war was over. (In the beginning all sides thought this would be short war.) "A single worry tormented me at that time, as with so many others, would we not reach the Front too late?" wrote a young German corporal, Adolf Hitler.

Bertrand Russell at 42 years old was a Cambridge logician, mathematician, and his country's best known philosopher. The grandson of a prime minister, he wrote fluently and widely for the general public. He described himself in the autumn of 1914 as being "tortured by patriotism . . . I desired the defeat of Germany as ardently as any retired colonel. Love of England is very nearly the strongest emotion I possess." What left Russell even more anguished was realizing that "anticipation of carnage was delightful to something like ninety percent of the population. . . . As a lover of truth, the national propaganda of the belligerent nations sickened me. As a lover of civilization, the return to barbarism appalled me. . . . the massacre of the young wrung my heart." Over the duration of the war, he never yielded in his belief that "this war is trivial, for all its vastness. No great principle is at stake, no great human purpose is involved on either side." These convictions, expressed in a blizzard of articles and speeches, would soon land him in the forefront of a slowly growing antiwar movement, and cost him his Cambridge lectureship and his passport. Eventually, they would put him behind bars.

South of Ypres, where the British and Germans faced each other across the white-frosted fields of Flanders, Christmas 1914 dawned cold and foggy. The Brits noticed that a wooden board had been hoisted with the words "You no fight, we no fight." When no shots were fired . . . soon a German NCO hauled a Christmas tree into no man's land. These forays multiplied along more than two-thirds of the British held section of the front. Thousands of British and German soldiers were trading cigarettes, helmets, food, souvenirs, taking pictures and singing Christmas carols in both languages. . . . They played soccer games The Christmas Truce, as it came to be called, has passed into legend, celebrated in books, poems, songs, and films. It represented an outburst of spontaneous solidarity among ordinary, working-class soldiers (albeit officers with as high a rank as colonels participated in the fraternization) that outraged higher-ups and militarists on both sides. On the other hand, MP Keir Hardie hailed the truce as an omen of revolutionary changes. "Why are men who can be so friendly sent out to kill each other? They have no quarrel When the war is over . . . each will realize that the lies told them by their press and their politicians had been deliberately concocted to mislead them. They will realize that the workers of the world are not 'enemies' to each other, but comrades. He saw the Christmas Truce as a one-day wildcat strike against the war.

Ferocity about the war could be seen everywhere. "Kill Germans! Kill them!" raged one clergyman in a 1915 sermon. . . . "Not for the sake of killing, but to save the world. Kill the good as well as the bad. Kill those who have shown kindness to our wounded . . . I look upon it as a war for purity. I look upon everyone who dies in it as a martyr." The speaker was Arthur Winnington-Ingram, the Anglican bishop of London.

Distinguished journalist, Edmund Dene Morel poured out an unceasing stream of books, articles, and pamphlets arguing that the war was not due to German aggression alone, but also to various secret treaties and agreements – including the understanding Britain had had with France – and to an uncontrolled arms race.

Conscription spurred the country's antiwar movement into new life. . . . 200,000 Britons signed a petition calling for a negotiated peace. Except for Russia . . . none of the other major powers would develop an antiwar movement as large and vocal. . . . Anyone claiming exemption from the draft for whatever reason, whether as a conscientious objector or because he was engaged in labor "of national importance," had to go before one of many special tribunals around the country. The military representative on one tribunal asked a socialist militant, "Are you doing work of national importance?" "No," came the reply, "but I'm engaged in work of international importance."

After two years of fighting, the war's death toll already far exceeded that of the entire decade and a half of the Napoleonic Wars. And these were not just military deaths. Although Britain and France had regarded Germany's air raids on cities as shocking acts of barbarism, they themselves were now bombing Germany from the air, and the Royal Navy was indirectly killing a far larger number of civilians by its tight blockade. . . . Germany had never planned for any of this, since they were so certain the war would be short. With the army and navy first in line for food, civilians increasingly went hungry and by the war's end hundreds of thousands of them would starve to death. . . . German adults lost 20 percent of their body weight during the war. In Austria-Hungary, conditions were even worse.

Unlike other wars before and since there were no behind-the-scenes peace negotiations while the battles raged. Both sides were committed to fight to the bitter end. . . . if someone in a prominent position on either side so much as advocated peace talks, it was considered close to treason.

After working with a Quaker relief organization in France early in the war, Emily Hobhouse, called "a woman known to have indulged in absurd and undesirable conduct," by one high-ranking official at the Foreign Office, . . . was the sole Briton to join socialists from both sides and several neutral countries who met in a small Swiss Village. . . . the conference's final compromise manifesto proclaimed "Down with war!" and was issued to an uninterested world on May Day, 1916. . . . However hopeless her lone-wolf diplomacy, and however naïve she was . . . in the entire course of the deadliest conflict the world has ever seen, she was the sole person from any of the warring countries who actually journeyed to the other side in search of peace.

Unlike post World War I wars, the fronts where the battles were fought included higher ranking officers, and sons of members of Parliament and the ruling social class. On Sept. 15, 1916, as he led his troops in yet another attack on the Somme front, a German bullet struck the chest of Raymond Asquith, son of the prime minister. Trying to keep up his men's spirits by a show of nonchalance, he lit a cigarette after falling to the ground. He died on his way to a first-aid station.

I, (RK), have always regarded Joseph Goebbels and the Nazi propaganda war machine as the most potent in world history. Perhaps, but Allied World War I achievements were certainly a harbinger of what transpired two decades later. The British, under the direction of John Buchan, were masters of this effective tool. *Chief military commander, Douglas Haig, wrote in mid-1916 "Military history teems with instances where sound military principles have had to be abandoned owing to the pressure of ill-informed public opinion. The press is the best means at hand to prevent the danger in the present war." As Director of Information, John Buchan oversaw the expansion of the most sophisticated propaganda operation the world had yet seen. It produced a torrent of materials, including paintings and drawings . . . portraying the Germans as bloodthirsty barbarians. Telegrams put an upbeat twist on the latest war news for the press at home and abroad. Leaflets were dropped over the German trenches. Lecturers were dispatched everywhere . . . including the United States. One cartoon depicts 'the conscientious objector at the front.' A hideous German private is punching his rear end with a bayonet. The CO says "Oh, you naughty unkind German – really, if you don't desist I'll forget I've got a conscience, and I'll smack you on the wrist!"*

And so the press was mobilized, more rigorously than ever. As John Buchan put it afterword, "So far as Britain is concerned, the war could not have been fought for one month without its newspapers." . . . Lloyd George even told Bertrand Russell he would not hesitate to prosecute someone for publishing the Sermon on the Mount if it interfered with the war effort. . . . The (propaganda) game worked more effectively on readers at home than on soldiers. Most of the men had, all their lives, been accepting 'what it says 'ere in the paper' as being presumptively true. No more. War correspondent, C.E. Montague, once found himself in a dugout with a sergeant who said, "Can't believe a word you read, sir, can you?"

On military executions: "Men often told us sadly that they had been in firing parties which had been ordered out to shoot six or seven poor fellows." As the bloody deadlock in the trenches continued, discipline became steadily tougher and each year of the war had seen an ominous, sharp increase in the number of British military executions, mostly for desertion: from four in 1914 to 95 in 1916. The considerably larger German army, which we usually think of as more draconian in discipline, sent only 48 men to the firing squad during the entire war.

As the staggering scale of British losses . . . sank in, the War Cabinet began questioning Haig's costly battering-ram strategy. Lloyd George suggested sending British arms elsewhere, anywhere they wouldn't run up against a solid wall of German barbed wire and machine guns. . . . Like Lloyd George, the Germans were looking for ways around the impasse on the Western Front. And this led them to take one of the great gambles of the war. . . . early 1917 to declare unlimited submarine warfare, making fair game almost any vessel headed for Allied ports, including those of a neutral country. U-boats sank three American merchant ships, drowning many sailors and prompting an outcry in Congress and the press. On April 7, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany.

Alice and Hettie Wheeldon, writing from their jail cells "I think this (the ordeal they were going through) is only one of the convulsive death rattles of Capitalism." "We will break before we bend." "The world is my country."

Meanwhile in Russia, party organizers assembled a huge crowd to greet them (Lenin and the Bolsheviks) at Petrograd's Finland Station. In a country ravaged by war and now throwing off centuries of autocracy, the party's message of "peace, land, and bread" had immediate, powerful resonance In Churchill's words, Germany had sent Lenin on his way to Russia "like a plague bacillus."

If there were ever a war that should have had an early, negotiated peace, it was this one. Before the conflict, the major powers may have been in rival alliances, but they had all been getting along reasonably well, Could there ever have been a more improbable chain of events than the one from the assassinations at Sarajevo to an entire continent in flames a mere six months later? And why, in that case, could it not be undone? The tragedy was that no one could come up with a peace formula that satisfied both sides.

. . . the first to publish a statement unlike any the war had yet seen – an eloquent avowal from a front-line officer, and a highly decorated one at that, declaring his intention to stop fighting: "I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe this War, upon which I entered as a War of defence, has now become a War of aggression and conquest." The letter writer, Second Lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon, had just published a much-praised book of war poems. . . . Sassoon was sent off to the comfortable surroundings of a rehabilitation hospital for shell-shocked officers. . . . A fellow patient was the 24 year old aspiring writer Wilfred Owen, recovering from wounds and shell-shock, to whom the older Sassoon offered crucial encouragement. Owen became the greatest poet of the war.

The small Belgian city of Ypres was by now the most ravaged in Western Europe. . . . There are 88,000 British Empire troops listed on memorials there as "missing," no one knows how many drowned. Belgian farmers' plows still uncover their skeletons today. To the fear of drowning was added a new horror. The Germans had begun using mustard gas.

"We're telling lies," the newspaper proprietor Lord Rothermere (who had already lost one son to the war and would soon lose another) said to a journalist in November 1917. "We daren't tell the public the truth, that we're losing more officers than the Germans, and that it's impossible to get through the Western Front." . . . Officers continued to die at a higher rate than enlisted men, junior officers especially. . . . A British fighter pilot arriving at the front had an average life expectancy of less than three months.

Meanwhile, on the Eastern Front, on December 15, 1917, the two delegations announced an armistice. The war between the Central Powers and Russia, which left millions dead and wounded and tens of thousands of square miles of devastated land, was over. The news reverberated around the world.

Basil Thomson warned the War Cabinet of "a rather sudden growth of pacifism" in Britain. "There is no gathering of working people in the country which is not disposed to regard Capitalism as a proven failure." American radicals scoffed at President Woodrow Wilson's

high-flown rhetoric about democracy and self-determination, insisting that the real reason the U.S. was fighting for an Allied victory was to ensure that massive American war loans to Britain and France would be paid back. The U. S. quickly began conscription. . . . In her prison cell in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg was outraged, and railed against Lenin's "rule by terror . . . Freedom only for the supporters of the government . . . is no freedom," she wrote. "Freedom is always for the one who thinks differently."

Rudyard Kipling was a staunch patriot in the war. Yet his most striking comment about four years of bloodshed was this enigmatic couplet from his "Epitaphs of the War": "If any question why we died, tell them, because our fathers lied." Did he mean, as he had often said, that prewar politicians lied in claiming that Britain was adequately prepared for a major conflict? Or was he speaking of a lie that went deeper?

The Armistice was signed in Foch's railway car at 5 a.m. on November 11, 1918, to go into effect six hours later. Although the agreement, signed over the protests of the shaken German delegates, was called the Armistice, in reality it was a German surrender. It was a most unprecedented one, however, . . . Triumphant German government propaganda continued to the last minute . . . newsreels never showed troops retreating or surrendering – leaving civilians thinking . . . the country's soldiers were on the verge of victory. . . . And all this preceded a more detailed and far more onerous peace treaty that would be forced on the Germans at Versailles months later.

The winners gathered in January 1919 to divide the spoils. The Paris Peace Conference lasted, with a few breaks, for a full year, and out of it came a string of treaties and decisions that helped determine the course of the next 20 years and speed the way to a second, wider, more ruinous war. Germany was partly demilitarized and its territory reduced by about 10 percent; it was also burdened with huge reparations payments and the humiliating requirement to formally acknowledge its guilt for starting the war. The rearranged map was a global one.

While Woodrow Wilson is said to have called the struggle just ended "the war to end all wars," Alfred, Lord Milner, the "man of no illusions", grimly realistic, called the Versailles treaty "a peace to end peace."

At only 25, Wilfred Owen had never published a book but had in his notebooks the finest body of poetry about the experience of war written in the 20th Century. At noon on November 11 . . . Owen's mother received the black-bordered War Office telegram telling her that a week earlier her son had been killed in action. In verses about this day, another poet, Thomas Hardy, wrote: Calm fell. From heaven distilled a clemency; There was peace on earth, and silence in the sky; Some could, some could not, shake off misery: The Sinister Spirit sneered: "It had to be!" And again the Spirit of Pity whispered, "Why?"

In conclusion, one must ask how different the last century would have been sans one event, World War I? Possibly no Nazi Fascism, Holocaust, World War II, Soviet Communism, Cold War, the rapid growth of weaponry/ technology. We cannot be sure of those escapes, but we do know the world would have had an opportunity for peace and reconciliation. More importantly,

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have we learned the lessons of World War I? Can we agree on the definitions of those lessons?
Hochschild's final chapter is a brilliant essay on World War I and the nature of war.

Ray Kauffman
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