

The Great War for Peace

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The deluge that is the centenary of 1914–18 war is upon us. As the commemoration period rolls on over the next four, five or even more years – the centenaries of unveiling war memorials will take us well into the 2020s – the number of books, newspaper, magazine, TV, radio and online contributions is already greater than any one person might hope to keep up with – even should he or she wish. Much of that output will be desperately seeking new angles and new approaches to try to stand out from the rest. Some of it will be scholarly and reflective and yet a large swathe of it will, almost inevitably, be a sensational wallowing in gore and sentimentality. The patriotic drums will be beaten again and, probably in equal measure, damned. Michael Gove’s reservations about the *Black Adder* effect on the history of the war will be both cheered and dismissed while the politics of it all and the politics of the memories will be rehearsed over and over again. At the same time, understandably, wholly commendably, more modestly and certainly more quietly, there will be hundreds, probably thousands, of family and local histories, exploring the impact of the war at the personal and community level. The Heritage Lottery Fund and the Arts Council are busily supporting many such projects whose end products range from publications and exhibitions to children’s work in schools and theatrical productions.

Published in 2014, William Mulligan’s *The Great War for Peace*, is very much part of the deluge. It is, nonetheless, a largely welcome part. As one of his supporters, Chris Clark, who had the foresight to get his own book on the war, *The Sleepwalkers*, published in 2012, has it, Mulligan’s book is, ‘An impressive work of profound scholarship, sweeping vision and synoptic elegance’. Jay Winter commends it as ‘an important book demolishing the false distinction between the history of peace in the twentieth century and the history of war’. No reflection on Dr Mulligan’s work could doubt its rigorous scholarship and erudition. At the same time, his mastery of the history of the war in each of the combatant countries is in very real contrast to the more predictable national studies. He seems to be equally at home with the complexities of the Japanese or the Bulgarian story as he is with the British, French, American, German, Russian or Italian. In that sense, as Clark describes it, the sweep of his understanding is both welcome and hugely impressive. As such, even setting aside his unique theme, it is to be warmly recommended.

With all of this in mind it goes without saying that this is an ambitious book. It is also, in a very real way, an original book. However, it is that very ambition and originality which create difficulties for the reader. It sets

out to challenge the simplistic views of those historians and commentators, past and present, who see the war as nothing but catastrophe and disaster. In contrast the book sets out to catalogue the ways in which every aspect of the war prompted thoughts of and plans for peace. As the war pursued its relentless course, its very character as the first modern and, eventually, 'total' war had an irreversible impact on the whole of Europe, and across the world. It transformed politics and communities, dislocated economic activity, expanded the role of the state, created food shortages, produced mass experiences of death and grief and brought the violent faces of occupation, internment and exile to millions of people. That being the case, Dr Mulligan argues that very violent failure of the pre-war world and the chaos of Armageddon gave the idea of peace a greater and more pervasive currency. As he confesses, 'it may seem somewhat naïve or even perverse to place peace at the centre of the story' (pp. 3–4). Nevertheless, he asserts:

Peace was at the centre of the First World War, providing meaning to the conflict. In turn, peace was imagined and constructed in new ways that had an enduring legacy in twentieth century international relations ... Peace became a conceptual repository, a short-hand for people's aspirations for a better, more just, and more prosperous world ... and came to embrace a much wider and deeper set of social and international relations, including labour regulations, the principle of nationality, constitutional reform, trusteeship, welfare, transnational associations, and international institutions ... (pp. 4–5)

All of this, he argues at length and in detail, 'resulted from the experiences of the war and the ways in which contemporaries made sense of the broader historical meaning of the conflict'.

He paints his picture from a broad and diverse palette and a narrative which begins in 1911 and the crises of the pre-war world. His masterly analysis of the failure of the peace based on a 'balance of power' raises the issue of how such things might be done to ensure a peaceful world. With that notion of how best to construct the peace an ever-present theme, he charts a course from 1911 to 1925, to Locarno and the reconstruction of the post-war world and he concludes, much as he began,

The First World War was the seminal event of the twentieth century, but concentrating on its evidently catastrophic consequences neglects the ways in which the experience of the war redefined what peace meant and how it might be forged ... As peace was interwoven with war, from the moment war was declared, it became increasingly difficult to make peace. Governments eschewed a compromise settlement in favour of their visions of peace. The traditional distinctions between war and peace were blurred. War became an instrument to achieve peace, peace a future condition that justified the war (p. 375).

Here lies the challenge for the reader. Dr Mulligan's arguments place the matter of peace at the centre of things. But this is not the benign process that his title, *The Great War for Peace*, might suggest. It is very far from that. The 'peace' offered by the combatants during 1917 was rejected because it did not match the specifics of their aspirations. 'Peace' very clearly had various meanings at different times to many different people, nations and ideologies. The opportunity for an end to the killing was less important than securing a preferred sort of 'peace'. Differences over those sorts of peace were, therefore, in themselves sufficient reason for war or for the continuation of war. For example, an Austrian statesman who might see the survival of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a multi-cultural bulwark against chaos, and, therefore, contributing to Europe's 'peace', would have had difficulties in selling the idea to Czech, Serbian or Hungarian nationalists. Americans convinced of the values of free market capitalism would, especially in 1918, have found it impossible to convince the new leaders of the Soviet Union that their neo-liberal economics held the blueprint for world peace. And yet, as Dr Mulligan describes, the idea of peace in all its many and diverse forms, became a recurrent theme during the First World War. He also suggests it was rather more than that.

Since the First World War ... peace had become a repository of demands and expectations for a better future. War and peace, as experience and expectation, condition and aim, dystopia and utopia, were interwoven over the course of the twentieth century – but gradually ... peace has survived, even flourished (p. 377).

The optimistic note he strikes in these very last words is sadly belied by current events. Even if we accept the notion of the ‘Long’ First World War and extend its time-frame to 1945, or even to the end of the Cold War in, say, 1989, that flourishing ‘peace’ remains elusive. Some of the elements of that wished-for peace are indeed in place but could hardly be described as ‘flourishing’. The attempts to resolve international conflicts by calm deliberation and arbitration or even by military intervention which informed the creation of the League of Nations and its successor, the United Nations have been weak and ineffective. Disarmament, such a feature of peace-making in the inter-war years, has fallen off the international agenda – there is even nuclear weapons proliferation by stealth. The Middle East settlements held in place by the Cold War’s client regimes are disintegrating and large parts of Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia held in thrall by warlords of one persuasion or another and militias armed by all and sundry. The list is endless – not helped by the military interventions of the United States and its allies. However, and significantly for Dr Mulligan’s theme, the real success for peace has been in Europe, where it all began. The European Union has ensured that the rivalries which created both World Wars are no longer expressed in military terms. The collapse of Soviet hegemony in the East and the absorption of former Soviet bloc countries into the EU have strengthened that process although not without creating other tensions and renewed violence in Russia and the Ukraine. But Europe, no matter how peaceful most of it might remain, is not the world and the First World War was indeed a war which had its effects far beyond Europe.

Notwithstanding the huge detail and ambition of the book, there is, however, a worrying major omission. In spite of brief references to the British anti-war movement, he has nothing substantial to say about the war’s opponents there or anywhere else. Given that his central theme is the way in which talking about peace became such a part of the war, to exclude the peace movement from his account of those conversations seems perverse. It is the book’s Achilles heel. In Britain and the United States at least, the constant campaigning of those who opposed the war and refused to have anything to do with it as imprisoned conscientious objectors or as part of the Women’s International Movement for Peace and Freedom, created the context against which all other discussions must be set. Their continued activities after 1918 and the part played by anti-war activists in peacetime politics are important parts of that continuing process. His bibliography is entirely lacking in any references to major texts dealing with the histories of First World War peace activism and the index is most unhelpful. For example, the 1917 Stockholm Peace Conference, although dealt with in the text and acknowledged there as having been of some importance, occurs in the index as a subheading of ‘France’. There are no references to ‘pacifism’, ‘conscientious objectors’ or even to the Leeds Conference of 1917. Eclectic though that list might be, it does subvert confidence in the index as a guide to what the book might have to say and what it actually covers. Of course, this may be a product of the digitising process, nevertheless, an index should reveal and not obscure.

Dr Mulligan’s book is a significant, if flawed, contribution to the debate about the impact of the First World War. He has set out a number of thought-provoking arguments which should prompt further work. Ripe for further consideration now is the history and very nature of the idea of peace and its institutions from 1914 to the present day and, more than that, one which compares those ideas from country to country, culture to culture. If one man’s ‘peace’ is another man’s provocation then we really ought to know just how far to press our ideas of peace before they become reasons for war.

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