

The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923

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One of the most memorable and unsettling works of historical fiction to appear in the last 15 years is Louis de Bernières' *Birds without Wings*, which tells the stories of the inhabitants of Eskibahçe, a fictional village in the Ottoman Empire, in the years before, during and after the First World War. At times, the book makes for harrowing reading, especially the chapters that deal with the experiences of those called up to fight at the front during the Gallipoli campaign. However, though de Bernières' account of bloody slaughter in trenches on the Dardanelles is moving and appalling, it pales in comparison to those parts of the book which treat the post-war period, when Greek forces invaded Turkey aiming to create a neo-Byzantine empire in the heartlands of the Ottoman Empire. The chapters that deal with Gallipoli describe a conflict which, however horrifying, pitted soldiers against soldiers; but these later chapters depict an apocalyptic landscape in which Greek and Turkish regular and irregular troops slaughtered each other and civilians in their barracks, places of work and homes, often in the most graphic and barbaric fashion imaginable. Indeed, after reading de Bernières' book, it is this gruesome and distressing account of the bloodshed that occurred *after* the guns on the Western Front had fallen silent that remains with the reader.

It is with precisely this kind of post-1918 conflict that Robert Gerwarth's new book *The Vanquished* is concerned. Indeed, an account of the murderous Turkish re-occupation of the port town of Smyrna (more than three years after it had been taken by the Greek army amid scenes of comparable horror) makes up the first part of the introduction. Gerwarth, Professor of European History at University College Dublin, is well placed to write such a book, having already delivered a well-received biography of Reinhard Heydrich (a man who was shaped by exactly this kind of post-1918 violence) and some important articles on counter-revolutionary movements in the aftermath of the Great War. And as Gerwarth emphasises in *The Vanquished*, the conventional periodization of the First World War known to most western history students (1914–18) seems wholly inadequate when we consider the sheer scale of the violence and bloodletting that continued to blight much of central, eastern and southern Europe for half a decade after hostilities on the Western Front formally ended. His main purpose in this book, in fact, is to provide an account of these myriad national and transnational conflicts in a single concise volume; to bring renewed attention to and awareness of them. Winston Churchill may have dismissed these conflicts as 'the wars of the pygmies' (p. 8), but Gerwarth sees in them the foundations and origins of a second wave of mass-ethnic and ideological violence that engulfed

Europe after 1939.

The Vanquished is divided into three sections, each of which consists of five chapters. The first section, 'Defeat', is concerned with the year and a half before the November 1918 armistice and focuses particularly on the experiences of two of the war's principal losers: Russia and Germany. The opening chapters first show how the Tsarist regime and then a short-lived parliamentary democracy succumbed to successive Russian revolutions which ultimately resulted in the victory of the Bolsheviks. But because Lenin was determined to take Russia out of the war, he concluded a highly punitive peace at Brest-Litovsk which put Germany in control of much of Eastern Europe. This gave Ludendorff's military dictatorship a fleeting taste of victory and continental dominance that would figure prominently in the dreams of post-war German radical nationalists. But the triumph of the Central Powers would prove to be short lived and the outcome of the war was decided in the west, where Ludendorff gambled on an all-or-nothing offensive against the Allies and, fatefully, lost.

For Gerwarth, these two developments – the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the defeat of the Central Powers in 1918 – are key to understanding the whirlwind of violence that descended upon parts of Europe in the years after the war. The second section of the book focuses on one of the principal fundamentals of this violence: revolutionary and counter-revolutionary convulsions, many of them occurring in the territories of the former Russian Empire and still others inspired by (or fearful of) the example of Lenin's revolution. In the Baltic, German Freikorps units continued to battle the Red Army and indigenous nationalists well into 1919, while the Russian Civil War pitted revolutionaries, counter-revolutionaries and nationalists against each other in a singularly nightmarish conflagration which claimed more Russian lives than the First World War itself. But the spectre cast by Russian Bolshevism stretched far into central and southern Europe; uprisings of domestic revolutionaries produced near civil war-like conditions in parts of Germany, Austria and Hungary, while wave after wave of strikes in Italy, many of them inspired by events in Russia, provoked a particularly ferocious reaction in the form of Benito Mussolini's fascist movement. Right-wing regimes also emerged in Spain, Portugal and Bulgaria largely as a response to revolutionary upheaval.

As Gerwarth observes, the violent tremors of the Russian Revolution bore little resemblance to the state-on-state, strictly military warfare that had occurred between 1914 and 1918. The aim here was not to force the enemy to terms; this was 'existential violence' (p. 13) designed to annihilate him (or, indeed, her, as in the case of the Spartacist leader Rosa Luxemburg, murdered by German Freikorps in January 1919 amidst revolutionary turmoil in Berlin, or the communist 'Rifle Women' who fought the Freikorps in the battle of Riga).

Whereas the book's second section examines the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary tumult unleashed by the war and Russian Revolution, the third focuses on a different wellspring of post-1918 violence: the collapse of the European land empires amidst nationalist uprisings at the end of the war. From November 1918 on, the different nationalities that had made up the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Ottoman and German Empires began declaring independence in line with Wilson's '14 Points' but, in many cases, the territories they laid claim to were contested, with armed conflict, land grabbing and wild acts of ethnic cleansing the unhappy results. When the Allies met at Versailles in early 1919, one of their main aims was to resolve this explosive mixture of ethnicities in eastern and southern Europe, mainly by dividing the defeated land empires among those nations and national minorities they favoured – such as the Poles, Czechs, Romanians and Greeks. But, frequently, the lines drawn by the Allies on the map of Europe only resulted in the creation of new, unstable multi-ethnic states with uncertain borders. Thus 35 per cent of the population of the newly created Poland, for example, did not ethnically identify as Polish, while the 'Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes' forced together populations of various nationality and confession into a single, unstable, territorial straitjacket. Furthermore, even after the publication of the Versailles Treaty, territorial dispute, ethnic cleansing and armed conflict continued to be the order of the day in central and southern Europe. Indeed, the last act in this drama of imperial collapse and inter-ethnic strife was, in fact, Smyrna, when the Turks finally expelled the invading Greek army from Anatolia and brought an end not only to neo-Byzantine dreams of a new empire on the Bosphorus, but also to the five years of 'post-war' conflict that are the subject of this book.

Gerwarth's principal purpose in this book, then, is to provide a single, concise, one-volume overview of the myriad conflicts that made up the half-decade of warfare that engulfed parts of Europe after November 1918. Indeed, the entire study is essentially underpinned by the argument that all of these post-1918 conflicts, whether their origins lay in ethnic and territorial dispute or revolutionary convulsion, whether they occurred in the frozen wastes of Siberia or on the streets of Barcelona, can ultimately be grouped together and understood as a single spasm of continental violence that lasted for half a decade after 1918, with the Bolshevik Revolution and defeat of the Central Powers as their twin points of origin.

But Gerwarth contributes more than a mere synthesis and contextualisation of post-1918 violence; he also argues that there were profound continuities between the half-decade of post-1918 conflict and the extremely high levels of ethnic and political violence that again gripped Central, Eastern and Southern Europe after 1939. These continuities can be identified on two separate levels. First, most straightforwardly, they involved the very same people, with 'the violent actors of 1917–23 often identical with those who would unleash a new cycle of violence in the 1930s' (p. 257). Freikorps paramilitaries who fought Bolsheviks in the Baltic went on to become prominent Nazis implementing exterminatory policies in Eastern Europe, while the leaders of the far-right Arrow Cross, which took control of Hungary in 1944 and helped turn the Hungarian Jews over to the Germans, had also experienced their 'political awakening' in the years after 1918. As Gerwarth convincingly shows, of crucial importance here was the belief among many of these individuals that the Central Powers had been on the verge of victory in 1918 before their all-conquering armies had been 'stabbed in the back' by domestic revolutionaries. Ominously, the puppet masters of these revolutions were increasingly said to be Jewish representatives of an 'international conspiracy' which had its headquarters in Moscow. It was thus here – in the manner of the war's ending and the 'injustices' that followed it – that an important stone was laid on the road to a second world war and the Final Solution.

The continuity in personnel which linked the conflicts of 1918–23 with 1939–45 was, Gerwarth argues, accompanied by a second line of continuity: persistent resentments over the redrawing of the ethnic and territorial map that had occurred at the end of the war. Nationalist politicians and paramilitaries of the vanquished powers never forgot the territories they had lost and never waned in their determination to 'tear up' the 'dictated peace' of Versailles. Indeed, for Gerwarth, the 'overtly exterminationist imperial project' pursued by the Nazis (and supported by Hungarian, Croatian, Italian and other radical nationalists from across Eastern and Southern Europe) 'owed much to the logic of ethnic conflict and irredentism' established in 1918–19 (p. 215).

Ultimately, then, Gerwarth contends that fascists of the inter-war period were less the products of 'brutalising' experiences during the First World War (a view most commonly associated with the historian George L. Mosse), but rather of the 'ideologised' and 'existential' conflicts that immediately followed it. This is a very suggestive argument. In reckoning with Mosse's 'brutalisation' thesis, historians long asked why Britain and France, countries which also underwent such experiences, did not produce the same quality or quantity of radical, violent nationalists as Central and Eastern Europe after 1918. That we must shift our focus to the immediate post-war period rather than the war itself in order to explain this apparent disparity seems eminently plausible.

Many of Gerwarth's arguments, then, are convincing and illuminating, but there remains a slight problem with the book's overall conceptualisation. Its title, *The Vanquished*, seems a little restrictive given that it does not, in fact, deal only with those who lost the First World War. This inherent tension becomes clear on page 6, when Gerwarth states his intention to focus 'on the defeated land empires of Europe' – principally Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Turkey – but concedes on the same page that his analysis will also include Italy. True, many Italians felt themselves to have been on the receiving end of a 'mutilated victory' that had betrayed their sacrifices during the war, but does this justify grouping them together with those states – like Germany or Hungary – that were humiliated during the peace negotiations and deprived of vast tracts of territory? Probably not.

This is not mere pedantry. It points to a serious issue with our overall understanding of post-war violence; namely, that there is no crystal-clear relationship between the countries which lost (or were even involved in) the First World War and those which then experienced post-war violence or, indeed, later became right-wing dictatorships. Some cases are relatively clear cut – Germany, Hungary, Austria and Bulgaria were unambiguously 'vanquished' powers; they also experienced considerable post-war tumult and violence; and they had all given way to authoritarian regimes of varying totalitarian drive and irredentist ferocity by 1939. But in other cases, the relationship between losing (or winning) and what happened next is less straightforward. The Turks lost the war, yet they preserved much of their territorial integrity as well as a Republic (albeit a single-party Republic dominated by Atatürk); the Greeks ostensibly won in 1918, only to have their dreams of a post-war empire violently crushed in 1923, and by 1939, Greek democracy had succumbed to military dictatorship. Neither the Poles nor the Czechs were 'vanquished' peoples – both had won states for themselves and swathes of territory in central Europe – yet their post-war experiences were very different. The Czechs were involved in substantial post-1918 conflict with Germans, Poles and Hungarians, yet Czech democracy survived until the German invasion in 1939, whereas Poland – also engaged in myriad conflicts with German, Czech and Ukrainian nationalists as well as the Red Army – was in the grip of a military 'strongman' by the end of the 1920s. Romania was on the winning side and had gained new territories, yet it was also extensively involved in post-war military conflict, produced an extreme right-wing and anti-Semitic mass movement in the form of the Iron Guard, and had descended into civil strife and political tumult by the mid-1930s. Further afield, meanwhile, Spain was not even involved in the war as a belligerent, yet post-war civil strife there had taken on near-revolutionary proportions by 1923, signalling the installation of a military dictatorship under Primo de Rivera and, 13 years later, full-scale civil war.

All of this is covered in Gerwarth's book, but it raises the question of whether a focus on 'the vanquished' is really identical with an analysis of post-war European violence and a longer-term susceptibility to authoritarian or fascist politics. Finding patterns here – between (i) whether a country was on the winning or losing side, (ii) whether and what kind of post-war violence it experienced, and (iii) whether democracy did or did not survive in the long-term – is far from easy.

This, however, is more of an observation about the suitability of the book's title rather than a criticism of its content. Indeed, *The Vanquished* is a work of considerable and convincing scholarship. As a single-volume compendium of the enormous violence that afflicted Europe after the First World War, it is hard to imagine a more comprehensive account than this. Gerwarth's central argument – that all this violence can ultimately be

contextualised together as part of an overarching phenomenon, and that not enough historians have paid attention to it – is plausible and well made, and his focus on the Bolshevik Revolution and imperial collapse as the seminal historical drivers of these conflicts is also illuminating. Above all, in putting his finger on the links in the biographies of prominent fascists between the half-decade of post-1918 and the even greater bloodletting after 1939, Gerwarth draws our attention to a factor which is critical for understanding fascism.

Finally, it is a pleasure to read a work of popular history that manages to get the balance right between academic rigour and readability. Gerwarth's prose is terse without being dry and he provides detailed footnotes without going overboard. The result is an unusually engrossing history book which not only sheds light on certain areas that have been insufficiently explored in mainstream works but also invites us to rethink our assumptions about the First World War and the extreme nationalist and fascist movements of the inter-war period. Gerwarth's point that many of these ancient hatreds have had continued ramifications long after 1923 – in the form of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s or the ongoing civil conflicts in the Ukraine – is also grimly persuasive.

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