

The Pity of War

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Consider a counter-factual or two. Would this book have been different had its author not have been immersed in the history of banking over the last few years? Would it have looked different had the author not been an active member of the Conservative party in the Thatcher years? Would it have taken on a different tone had it not been written by someone polished in the Oxbridge system, where paradox and aphorism are valued as the epitome of human wisdom? The answer is almost certainly yes, but since it is difficult to reduce human creativity to a series of counter-factual questions, we can never know precisely how important these particularities have been in the development of the thought of one scholar.

How much more difficult, then, it is, to posit counter-factuals applied not to individual behaviour but to that of whole societies? The problem is a mathematical one. Variables can be weighted within equations, but the weights ascribed to those variables are meaningless unless we believe we have specified all the variables that enter into the process described mathematically by an equation or set of equations. And no historical process can be so specified.

The same problem appears in the distinction between projections and predictions. A projection is simply the playing out of assumptions; in this sense all projections are correct, even if the assumptions on which they are based are bizarre. A prediction is a statement of what the future is likely to be. Uncertainties are boundary conditions of predictions; projections have no such limits.

What then has Niall Ferguson produced in his book *The Pity of War*? Much of real historical interest and intelligence. But his flair for the clever sometimes gets the better of him, and he adds to the judicious scholarship that appears in parts of this book a set of conjectures about what if which lie uneasily in the no-mans land between projection and prediction.

Consider these confident predictions:

(1) p. 458: "If the British Expeditionary Force had never been sent, there is no question that the Germans would have won the war.

(2) p. 459: "Had Britain stood aside even for a matter of weeks continental Europe could therefore have been transformed into something not wholly unlike the European Union we know today but without the massive contraction in British overseas power entailed by the fighting of the two world wars."

How can we evaluate the strength or weakness of these predictions? The first rules out much of the literature on the logistical impossibility of the Schlieffen plan, and on the surprising willingness of French conscripts to bleed for the Republic, and to die by the tens of thousands for it. The British Expeditionary Force did not stop the German invasion of France; it was a minor element in what was in 1914 largely a Franco-German bloodbath. But these are minor quibbles. The problem is more fundamental: it is the confident statement of a prediction which goes beyond any set of evidence known to us now.

The second prediction tells us that had Britain stayed out of the war, then the European Community, dominated as it is today by Germany, would have been born at some stage in this century, and without the massive diminution of British power consequent on her losses, human and material, in the two world wars. This prediction, fundamental to Ferguson's conservative project, is simply breathtaking in its sweep and daring. To simplify matters, the statement is in the form of two vectors: an ascending one of German power, and a descending one of British power. Ferguson's case is that, without the First World War, the German arrow would ultimately arrive at the dominant position it holds in the world today, without Hitler and the devastation of his regime, but the British arrow would not be in the slough of despond to which it has been relegated by her squandering of her assets and manpower on an avoidable and pointless conflict. Thus, the Great War, Ferguson concludes, is not so much a tragedy as "the greatest error of modern history" (p. 462).

These statements can never take the form of real predictions, since they do not specify the hundreds of intervening variables relevant to the prediction. Instead, they are projections, just as good as their underlying assumptions: Germany goes up; Britain goes down; Europe emerges in the form we know it today. These are true statements. They are indisputable, but they hardly contribute to an understanding of historical process and historical change.

The difficulty of this kind of reasoning appears in other parts of the book. Ferguson argues that in the war crisis of 1914, the Liberal cabinet was split. So far, so good. But he then takes his particular leap into the dark, by claiming that "in the end" the British Cabinet "agreed to support Grey partly for fear of being turned out of office and letting in the Tories" (p.443). This, he argues, is why Britain went to war, a decision which meant that "it was the British government which ultimately decided to turn the continental war into a world war" (p. 463). "In the end"; "partly"; "ultimately"; what do these qualifiers qualify? We cannot know, because we are not able to place one consideration not letting the Tories in alongside others: anger at German and Austrian provocations; Francophilia; even James Joll's "unspoken assumptions" about honour and national dignity. It is only when all the variables and factors are arrayed can we say that, yes, keeping the Tories out was the decisive issue. But Ferguson does not do that. And that is because he cannot do it. History is too messy for real predictions to emerge from conflicting and incomplete evidence.

Other examples abound. On page 169, he argues that German war aims without British entry into the war would have been less grandiose than they rapidly became. How can we be sure? It is as if Britain precipitated Germany's territorial claims in September 1914. On page 444, he states that "one reason so many men volunteered in the first weeks of the war [in Britain] was that unemployment soared because of the economic crisis the war had unleashed". How does he know? This is almost certainly mistaken, and flies in the face of evidence about high rates of voluntary enlistment later in 1914, when the disruption of trade occasioned by entry into war was damped down. Then there is the statement, that in the post-war German context, fiscal "stabilization would have increased unemployment in the short term" and that "A rate of unemployment of around 10 percent of trade union members would have represented a significantly 'softer landing' than that of 1923/24" (p.431). The first part of this statement is a prediction of an accurate kind: deflation creates joblessness; but the second statement joblessness leads to stability is the stuff of pure conjecture in the shakiest democracy in post-war Europe. Once again, this is an historical statement about plausible outcomes based on insufficient data. Too many variables are unknown for us to accept these statements as useful. The "should have/could have" game is one with low yields. As a computer once put it, "The best way to play this game is not to play it at all".

When not engaged in such speculative history, Ferguson offers us in this book some outstanding interpretations of vexed questions in the history of the First World War. His chapters on morale and the problem of surrendering are first-rate; his account of the myths of war enthusiasm commands respect; and his treatment of the press and propaganda go well beyond previous (and mistaken) accounts of propagandists as puppeteers and the reading public as puppets.

Most useful to this reviewer are his discussions of the economic history of the war. Here he presents a case which is at variance with that offered by many scholars including my own. Ferguson shows, with force and substantial subtlety that the German war economy was not as much of a mess as others have argued. He shows that the imbalance of resources was so great, and Allied expenditure so much higher than that of Germany that what requires explanation is why it took the Allies so long to win? This is a powerful argument, and one which requires a considered answer well beyond the scope of this review.

Suffice it to say, that the reasons one side wins in war may not be the same as the reasons the other side loses. There is no straightforward economic balance here. On the Western front, where the war would be won or lost, Germany held defensive positions from mid-1914 to early 1918. The Allies engaged in a series of expensive and futile campaigns to dislodge the German army from its hold on the eastern quadrant of France and virtually all of Belgium. Of course it was more expensive for the Allies to attack and to attack again. The German army was simply better at defensive warfare under these conditions. But when Ludendorff attacked in March 1918, he showed that he too could not turn offensive warfare into victory. Though the Michael offensive was massively successful, it changed nothing. Tactical brilliance masked strategic blindness. What his soldiers came to see, and finally what Ludendorff came to see, was not so much that they had lost the war, but that they could not win it. To make them see this essential point, the Allies paid a staggering price in manpower and in materiel, indeed a higher price than was paid by Germany, but the Allies finally drove the point home. Ferguson agrees that at this critical moment of the war, it was not American firepower but the potential of the American presence in the war in 1919, 1920 or beyond that made a key difference. This is the same point reinforced. By the summer of 1918, German soldiers (and their families at home) knew that they could not win. That is why soldiers surrendered by the thousands -- in what Deist calls a "soldiers" strike -- and why the home front gave up the struggle. That is why German leaders finally asked Woodrow Wilson to broker an Armistice, even at the price of the Kaiser's abdication.

Ferguson rightly returns to the critical question "what price victory?" He is correct in arguing that the price the Allies paid for their victory was well out of proportion to what they ultimately achieved. But that is not the same as saying that the war was not worth fighting, or that it could have been avoided. Ferguson has some astute things to say about the absence of pacifism in the bulk of soldiers' memoirs of the war. But perhaps he should attend to the widespread feeling stated in many of them (and in their letters) that many soldiers fought the war because they were convinced it was a defensive war not of their own making, and that what they were defending not only their comrades in the line, but also what they saw as a way of life. With respect to the British and French cases, I am still persuaded that they were right.

In its barest outlines, the Great War was a clash between Britain and France on the one hand, and Germany on the other, for domination of northwestern Europe. In that conflict, 4 million men in uniform died from these three countries alone. Nothing could "justify" this loss of life; nothing could justify the price the victors paid for that victory. But what is remarkable about the Great War is how deep was the popular conviction on both sides that the war had to be won. It was a war of consent. For that reason alone, I still believe (pace Ferguson) that the Great War was not an error, but rather the central tragedy that set the twentieth century in motion.

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