Journal of Contemporary History Copyright © 2000 SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, Vol 35(2), 319–328.
[0022-0094(200004)35:2;319–328;012699]

Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson

Review Article
The First World War

John Keegan, *The First World War*, London, Hutchinson, 1998; 500 pp.; ISBN 0-091-80178-8
Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, London, Allen Lane, 1998; 624 pp.; ISBN 0-713-99246-8

Why are we so obsessed by the Great War of 1914–18? Contrary to a popular view, it was not history's longest or bloodiest conflict. It was shorter than the second world war, and consumed only one-fifth as many lives. It caused much hunger, but no famines. It saw no vast destruction of cities, or butchery of women and children, or (outside the Ottoman Empire) frightful episodes of genocide. Such bombing from the air as took place was, despite the travails of the Kaiser's fleet of Zeppelins, insignificant. Indeed one aspect of the first world war which is so deplored, namely the phenomenon of trench warfare and military stalemate, ensured that armies would lack the opportunity (even if they had possessed the wish) to rampage over enemy territory, burning cities and raping women.

So why does the first world war continue to haunt, fascinate and puzzle us? Why is this war, more than any other, the struggle we commemorate? (Armistice day dates from the first world war as, for Australia and New Zealand, does Anzac Day.) And why are we convinced that that conflict, in particular, was history's prime example of war as horror and futility?

One reason is its timing. In the century before 1914, wars between European states had been few and brief. Also during that century, European living standards (certainly in the industrializing west) had begun markedly to rise. With the seemingly irresistible development of an international industrial economy, of liberal systems of government, and of socialist ideals, the day seemed to be approaching when both endemic poverty and conflict between nations would become a thing of the past.

The war of 1914–18 challenged this hopeful vision of a world more prosperous and more peaceful. It unveiled the dark side of industrial advancement: the prodigious capacity of modern industry to produce weapons of destruction in almost limitless quantities. It killed and maimed millions of healthy young males (disproportionately from the better nourished and educated and skilled sections of society). It witnessed prolonged engagements

which appeared to accomplish nothing. It dispelled the social Darwinian illusion that war, however unpleasant, served to advance the fit and eliminate the unfit. And it raised the distinct possibility that, with the further application of science and technology to the business of war, even the persistence of life on earth might be under threat.

The world has lived in the shadow of the Great War ever since. The second world war may have confirmed its appalling messages, on a vastly extended scale. It taught us little we had not learned already.

There is a further reason why the war of 1914–18 retains its fascination. It still gives rise to serious dispute about its key features: its causes, its conduct and its outcome. Each aspect engenders fierce controversy.

There is no agreement about what caused the war or whether it could have been avoided. There is no agreement about what constituted a proper way of conducting it: did the strategies and weapons necessary to end it quickly exist but go unheeded, or was it bound to become a protracted, bloody slogging-match? There is no agreement about which side revealed the greater competence in the conduct of operations, or what factors (on the battlefield or elsewhere) at last broke the grip of stalemate and brought the matter to a conclusion. Finally, there is no agreement about the merits and demerits of the peace settlement which emerged from the war, or about what part that settlement played in Europe's onrush towards another great conflict.

So the steady output of books on the first world war continues and shows no sign of abating: books on specific aspects, and books which seek to encompass the entire conflict. Both books under review here come into the second category and contain much information of value. Neither, although for different reasons, is well balanced or wholly satisfying.

John Keegan is one of our most eminent war historians. He has written works quite specific in nature, such as *Six Armies in Normandy* (London 1982), dealing with the Anglo-American invasion of Europe in mid-1944, and he has written works embracing the entire face of warfare. As evidence of the breadth of his expertise, he is at present editing a 24-volume history of war (to which, as it happens, the authors of this review have been assigned the volume on the first world war, while Keegan himself explores a quite dissimilar area: that of nomadic warfare).

In the past, Keegan has written impressive pieces on the conflict of 1914–18, but in small doses and scattered over a wide area. Of the utmost value have been a short volume (in a transitory paperback series) on the opening weeks of the war, a splendid exposition of the nature of trench warfare in Purnell's history (in 128 weekly instalments) of the first world war, and a single, quite riveting chapter on the first day of the Somme campaign in his own *Face of Battle* (London 1976). With these offerings already to his credit, a volume by him covering the whole of the 1914–18 war promises well.

In the event, this book does not altogether live up to expectations. It has excellent sections, particularly regarding those aspects of the conflict where he has already revealed his mastery. But that standard is not maintained con-

sistently. For one thing, it is a strangely proportioned book. In a text of 457 pages, we are almost at page 200 before reaching the end of 1914, and as far as page 333 before getting to the end of 1916. That means there is an over-abundance of detail regarding some early battles, whose density may well baffle the general reader (especially given the publisher's deplorable frugality with maps). This is succeeded by a desperate lack of detail as the war proceeds.

One example of imbalance is Keegan's handling of the Battle of the Somme. The events of 1 July 1916 are made crystal clear, with a powerful retailing of the British command's deficiencies in weaponry and delusions of judgment. By contrast, the ensuing four-and-a-half months of the Somme campaign, which in the view of one school of historians are crucial to explaining the outcome of the war (a view which at least should be discussed), are dismissed in a few not very informative pages.

Particularly puzzling is the manner in which the whole second half of the war is dealt with in just 124 pages. Thus, all the events of 1917, including the U-boat campaign, America's entry into the war, the Russian Revolution, the French mutinies, Britain's terrible bloodletting in Flanders, Italy's disaster at Caporetto and the first great tank offensive at Cambrai are dealt with in a mere 60 pages. (They are unaided by a single map devoted exclusively to that year. Indeed the notorious Passchendaele ridge, scene of sacrificial endeavours in 1917, does not appear on any map anywhere in the book.)

Most baffling of all, the titanic battles on the Western Front in 1918, with Germany's dazzling successes in the first half of the year and swift defeat in the second, are swept aside in a bare 40 pages. They are part of a chapter perversely called 'America and Armageddon'. The nature of the Allies' battlefield triumphs between August and November 1918 is not analysed at all. There is the obligatory act of obeisance to the importance of tanks, but there is little on other, far more significant, developments in weaponry.

Certainly, Keegan has told us early on that he regards as 'pointless waste' the efforts being made by some historians to locate the inwardness of the changing events on the battlefield rather than these developments in tactics and weaponry. But those of us who are engaged in such efforts expect to receive a considered rejection rather than an abrupt dismissal.

There are other big issues where explanation is present in this book, but hardly thoroughly developed. Keegan's approach to the causes of the war's outbreak almost brings to mind the memoirs of Britain's wartime Prime Minister, David Lloyd George. The latter propounded, seemingly without noticing, two different and ultimately contradictory versions of the coming of the war in 1914. Almost the same is true here.

So, in his text, Keegan appears to find no place for Fritz Fischer's powerful arguments concerning Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of war. Yet (as John Grigg has pointed out when reviewing this book in *The Times*) in the bibliography Keegan offers the judgment that Fischer's works, 'though causing outrage in Germany at the time of their publication remain essential texts'. If Fischer's views are essential, why are they absent from the body of this book?

This contradiction resurfaces in other forms. On page 74 Keegan tells us that in July 1914 'Germany had wanted a diplomatic success that would leave its Austrian ally stronger in European eyes; it had not wanted war'. Yet, by page 450 a different, longer-term interpretation of Germany's attitude has taken centre stage. He relates how in July 1919 the commanders of the interned German High Seas Fleet scuttled their ships, and he comments on the irony of this event. Had the Kaiser, in the run-up to the first world war,

> . . . not embarked on a strategically unnecessary attempt to match Britain's maritime strength, fatal hostility between the two countries would have been avoided; so, too, in all possibility might have been the neurotic climate of suspicion and insecurity from which the First World War was born. The unmarked graveyard of his squadrons remains as a memorial to selfish and ultimately pointless military ambition.

Is there not something inconsistent about a single historian arguing both that the rulers of Germany 'had not wanted war' and that they had engaged in 'selfish and ultimately pointless military ambition', thereby generating 'fatal hostility' and 'the neurotic climate of suspicion and insecurity from which the First World War was born'?

As for the vexed question concerning the outcome and consequences of the Great War, Keegan offers little guidance. Instead, we are left with half-a-dozen pages of random observations: references to 'the many graveyards which are the Great War's chief heritage' (a lapse, one must hope, into rhetoric rather than a serious judgment); the assertion that 'the Second World War was the continuation of the First'; and the obligatory — and quite undeveloped — announcement that Germany was blackmailed by starvation 'into signing a humiliating peace treaty'. The point that the humiliation consisted of being defeated in the war, not of having to sign the treaty that followed from defeat, goes unnoticed. (It was not unnoticed by Adolf Hitler.)

On his last page Keegan tells us: 'The First World War is a mystery. Its origins are mysterious. So is its course.' One must hope that one day this usually most insightful historian will return to the subject and sort out the mysteries that presently beset him.

Niall Ferguson has also written an overall history of the first world war. Like Keegan's book, it contains some splendid sections — not least among them that on the peace settlement, about which Keegan says so little. But far more than Keegan, it is in many respects desperately unconvincing and unsatisfactory.

Ferguson is clearly one of the coming men of the history profession. A British political journal, *Prospect*, reports that Penguin books advanced him £600,000 for three books, of which the volume under review is the first. (The third, according to this report, is to be on Sex and the Holocaust, a truly alarming possibility.) He has already established a powerful reputation as an economic historian, his most recent production in that field being a monumental volume on the House of Rothschild (*The World's Banker: The History of the House of Rothschild*, London 1998).

There can sometimes be a problem with economic historians who choose to range over a broader area of history. On occasion, but by no means invariably, they conclude that their form of expertise qualifies them to pass judgment on matters not basically economic. Marxist historians, of course, have been prone to do this almost as an act of faith. For them the economic substructure explains everything and validates everything.

As *The Pity of War* reveals, economic historians of more conservative disposition are also tempted to employ their expertise to pass judgment in other areas. So Ferguson chooses to dispense with any account of the course of events on the battlefield. He does not deem an assessment of strategy or command or the appropriate use of weaponry necessary to explain the outcome of the war. Yet this does not preclude him from reaching definite conclusions about which side fought the more effectively, or why the war ended the way it did. By recourse to a great range of statistical material, he offers decidedly challenging conclusions on these matters.

Certainly, Ferguson does not share Keegan's puzzlement about why the war came about. For him, the war's origins are clear. In the face of mounting military capacity on the part of their potential adversaries, the rulers of Germany decided to act first. A massive pre-emptive strike would first overwhelm France and then dispose of Russia. That would restore Germany's sense of security.

This account seems to establish the Kaiser and his advisers as the villains of the piece. But Ferguson detects no villainy in their actions. From the viewpoint of an economic historian, the conquest of the continent by the armies and autocrats of Wilhelmine Germany, along with the blotting-out of liberal forms of government, would have been entirely benign. The European economic community we know today would have been established 80 years earlier. Thereby, Europe would have become united and prosperous, Britain would have remained master of its empire (and so would have escaped economic and territorial diminution), Russia would have been spared its lapse into communism, and the emergence of the USA as the world's major economic force — at Britain's and Europe's expense — would have been avoided.

As a judgment on the consequences of ruthless German military conquest, this appears bizarre. It also happens to be, for students of the recent historiography of the second world war, painfully familiar. During the last decade, a school of right-wing historians, which includes John Charmley and a former cabinet colleague of Margaret Thatcher's, Alan Clark, has engaged in similar speculations to Ferguson's, but in regard to the second world war. Had Hitler's conquest of Europe in 1940 been left in place, they similarly argued, Europe would then have secured its economic union, Britain would have retained its empire and so remained a great power, Stalinism would have been disposed of, and the USA would have been kept firmly in its place. Better Hitler than Roosevelt appears the unspoken agenda in one scenario, as better the Kaiser than Woodrow Wilson in the other. And if in neither case did the scenario reach fulfilment, the culprit was not the ruler of Germany. In both

instances, a prominent Briton was the villain of the piece. In 1940, for Charmley and Clark, it was Winston Churchill. In 1914, for Ferguson, it was Britain's Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey. According to *The Pity of War*, Grey, who had come into office with the formation of the Liberal government in 1905, cajoled his cabinet colleagues into taking the side of France in a war which was none of Britain's business, thereby rendering it enormous harm and no benefit.

There is a problem here. Grey was not the man who, at the opening of the twentieth century, directed British foreign policy away from its historic rivalry with France and muted goodwill towards Germany, and towards a policy of entente with France and suspicion of Germany. That deed had been done in 1904 by the long-standing conservative regime. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Britain had usually been aligned against France. Sometimes that had been simply the result of rivalry over colonies. At other times, as during the reigns of Louis XIV and Napoleon I, it had resulted from far more powerful imperatives. These rulers of France had threatened to establish complete political and military domination over Europe, including command of the Channel ports.

By 1900, France might still have been a colonial rival of Britain, but it carried no threat of establishing European hegemony. Germany, for the first (but not the last) time, did threaten to seize such hegemony. Its unification in 1870–71 had straight away imperilled the balance of power, as Britain indicated in 1875 when it had warned Bismarck against delivering another feared strike against the French. From 1875, the imbalance had increased as Germany, in addition to being the greatest military power in the world, had become the principal economic power on the continent. In the 1890s, the rulers of Germany settled the matter. They embarked on a naval building programme aimed directly at Britain. Given Britain's notorious military inadequacy and its total dependence on maritime supremacy to preserve its economy and even to feed itself, the British were bound to respond.

In 1904, Britain placed colonial differences on hold and entered into a course of rapprochement with France (and later Russia). Thereby it signalled to Germany that Britain could not be expected to look on unmoved should the Kaiser's forces strike in the west towards the Channel ports. Grey was still a year away from becoming Foreign Minister.

Ferguson ignores this. He ignores Britain's earlier warning to Bismarck against a further assault on France. He even ignores, in this context, Germany's launching of a naval building programme, and so is able to disregard the crucial determinant of Britain's diplomatic realignment. He accounts for Britain's rapprochement with France in 1904 by elevating France to the status of the mightiest colonial power, and describing Britain's entry into the Entente as a form of appeasement of the strongest power. (Accordingly, it was a deed which was not at all directed against Germany.)

This is not serious history. It is an unwarranted displacement from the 1930s of a term (appeasement) to describe Britain's attempt, by surrendering

other people's territory in Europe, to buy off a power eager to act aggressively against its neighbours. Such a proceeding was nothing any British government would have contemplated between 1900 and 1914.

The formation of the Anglo-French Entente in 1904, Ferguson tells us, did have the incidental effect of putting Germany offside. But it did not reflect British alarm at Germany's threatening posture. Only Sir Edward Grey drove Britain down the path of involving itself in a war against Germany which concerned no vital British interest.

There is a difficulty here. To render plausible his account of the determinants of British foreign policy, Ferguson must show that Britain would not have suffered any great deprivation by standing aside from this war. The evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. Only a month after the outbreak of the war, with victory in the west apparently imminent, Germany's Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, laid down the terms of settlement which Germany would require of its victims. His 'September programme' (only unearthed by Fritz Fischer in the 1950s) is a terrifying document uncannily foreshadowing the policy of conquest on which Adolf Hitler embarked 20 years later.

There can be no doubt about what would have followed for a neutral Britain had this programme become reality. Britain would have found itself excluded from one of its richest markets, namely continental Europe. It would have faced threats from what Kenneth Bourne has called 'an overwhelming number of offensive bases' (*The Foreign Policy of Victorian England 1830–1902*, Oxford 1970, 7–8), and it would be confronting a Germany now capable — through the economic exploitation of its 'common market' conquests — of outbuilding Britain's battlefleet and so taking command of Britain's sea approaches. Facing this scenario, Britain appeared to have no choice but to aid its friends (not allies) in halting Germany's march to conquest.

Ferguson disagrees. Perhaps in September 1914 the rulers of Germany did embrace a thoroughly predatory programme of annexation. But, he speculates, that did not mean that they would have done the same had Britain, a month before, agreed to stay out of the war (even though, he acknowledges, that would have made a German victory certain). Did not Bethmann Hollweg — in an attempt to procure British neutrality — assure Britain that Germany, although about to overrun Belgium and France, had no territorial ambitions there?

Of course, Bethmann Hollweg was at the same time demonstrating the limited worth of such assurances. He was telling the British ambassador that Germany's guarantee of Belgian neutrality was nothing more than a 'scrap of paper', which could not be expected to govern Germany's actions. That does not inhibit Ferguson from concluding that the German government's latest batch of assurances was watertight. For 'it would have been foolish [for Germany's rulers] to have reneged' on them (171).

Three things demand to be said about this. First, Germany's rulers had not hitherto been inhibited from acting towards Britain in a way that was plainly 'foolish'. As Keegan stresses, Germany's decision to challenge Britain at sea

was folly of a high order. That had proved no restraint. Second, Bethmann Hollweg's endorsement in September of a predatory programme of annexation had nothing to do with Britain's entry into the war in August. It was a straightforward response to Germany's anticipated smashing victory. Third, the benign terms of settlement which (in Ferguson's speculation) Germany's rulers would have observed in response to British assurance of neutrality happened not to be remotely benign. They constituted a great leap towards hegemony over Europe.

Should Britain have stayed out of the war, Ferguson tells us (171), 'the most that would have remained' of German demands were the following. First, quoting German documents, a defeated France, we learn, would have been forced to pay indemnities large and protracted enough to prevent it from rearming, and would have had to submit to 'a commercial treaty which makes France economically dependent on Germany' and 'secures the French market for our exports'. (Are we really supposed to regard this as the equivalent of the present-day common market?) Second, Germany would have required of its victims the formation of 'a central European economic association' stretching all the way from the English Channel through Scandinavia to Poland. This association 'in practice will be *under German leadership* and must stabilise Germany's *economic dominance* over Mitteleuropa' [emphasis added]. Third, there were to be unspecified 'colonial acquisitions, where the first aim is the creation of a continuous Central African colonial empire'. Fourth, Holland, despite having been spared a German invasion, 'must be made internally dependent on us'. Finally (or anyway for the moment) there were plans to 'thrust [Russia] back as far as possible from Germany's eastern frontier'.

All this, let it be stressed, was not Bethmann Hollweg's excessive September programme, let alone some lunatic vision of the young Adolf Hitler. These were the moderate terms offered by Germany as the means of keeping Britain out of the war. That offer, Ferguson insists, Britain only declined — at terrible cost to itself — on account of the inclinations of Sir Edward Grey, not because they were manifestly intolerable.

At least it might be thought that the grievous price which resulted from Grey's actions was paid for a purpose. Germany's attempts to dominate continental Europe were eventually thwarted, thanks to British intervention. Ferguson, however, is not mollified. First, as we have seen, he judges the consequences of a German conquest of Europe to have been entirely benign: a version of European economic union 80 years early. Second, the Entente powers (including Britain) proved entirely deluded in thinking that they could outfight the German army. Germany proved far more effective than its adversaries in mobilizing its economy for war and in destroying the armies of its adversaries.

This exposition raises all sorts of puzzles. First, Ferguson's manner of showing that the Germans did a better job of converting their industries to the production of weapons seems incomplete. He acknowledges the existence of Gerald Feldman's classic, *Army Industry and Labour in Germany, 1914–1918*

(Princeton, NJ 1966), which demonstrates all sorts of failings in Germany's attempted mobilization of its home front. Yet, although *The Pity of War* comes to contrary conclusions, it nowhere refutes Feldman's arguments.

Nor does Ferguson's own exposition necessarily support his conclusions. He is concerned to show that the German war economy was more efficient than that of its opponents, because its production of weapons proved less costly. So a fall in output in Germany was accompanied by a fall in wages, thereby preserving unit costs. In Britain, on the other hand, an unhealthy situation developed where, although output was advancing, wage increases were running ahead of it.

The simple-minded among us will feel that this is not addressing the crucial issue: namely, which side was producing the greater number of weapons. That is a matter which happens not to be in doubt. In the first half of 1918, as British forces were driven into retreat, they lost mighty quantities of guns and shells and aeroplanes but received replacements virtually immediately. By contrast, when the Germans were driven into retreat in the second half of 1918, their home front proved incapable of replacing the huge losses of material.

Ferguson is equally loath to notice that, at the last, the armies of the western democracies outfought their adversaries and drove them to capitulate. The forces of Germany, he insists, proved more effective right to the end. He demonstrates this by resorting to further statistics: this time casualty figures. Throughout the war, he claims, Entente armies lost more heavily than the Germans. But casualty statistics are notoriously treacherous. For one thing, Ferguson's figure of Allied losses included the millions of Russian soldiers who surrendered as their state structure and military system collapsed. That helps to explain why the Germans won on the Eastern Front. It tells us nothing about who won, and why, on the Western Front — the theatre where, from first day to last, the ultimate outcome of the war would be decided.

Moreover, Ferguson's conclusion concerning Germany's superior military effectiveness leaves him with a problem. Why did Germany capitulate? Why did its adversaries triumph? To its credit, *The Pity of War* does not resort to the fraudulent explanation embraced by the German high command even ahead of the Nazi Party: that a victorious German army was stabbed in the back by the German home front. But Ferguson's argument is almost as unconvincing. He tells us that the German army capitulated because it was misled by its own high command.

In this account, the war ended because of a collapse in the morale of the Kaiser's forces. Now there is a plausible reason why the morale of an army gives way: it has lost all hope of winning. That was certainly the case with the German army by the second half of 1918. Germany's climactic bid for victory in the first half had plainly failed. Thereafter its enemies were palpably outfighting it, driving it relentlessly into retreat, forcing it to abandon every defensive system it had sought to create, demonstrating an overwhelming superiority in weaponry. The German army's failure of morale may therefore be regarded as a logical response to an unendurable reality.

Ferguson, eschewing narrative, does not notice any of this. In his version, the German army lost the will to fight only because two men, without good reason, cracked under the strain. One was General Ludendorff, Germany's 'de facto ruler' (313). The other was the Kaiser, 'her de jure ruler' (313). Both had come to regard the war as lost. But this was an over-reaction to a temporary setback, evidence not of objective reality but only that 'the exhausted and ill Ludendorff' (314) was having a nervous breakdown. His soldiers, however, did not appreciate this. Instead they 'sensed that their leaders regarded the war as lost' (314), and assumed that these leaders knew their business. So, without sufficient cause, they stopped fighting.

At this point Ferguson's exposition has become simply preposterous. Rank and file German soldiers had no idea what Ludendorff, or the Kaiser, were thinking. They did not need to know. What was happening on the battlefield was all too evident. It was not Ludendorff's delusion that the game was up, but the plain fact that the game was indeed up, that brought the war to an end.

Ferguson has written a challenging book. He has selected a number of widely-held views concerning the first world war, and asked whether they are soundly based. This is always worth doing. In a number of instances he has provided good reason for doubting their validity: for example, when he challenges the importance so often assigned to press propaganda in wartime, or expounds matters of war finance, or studies the motives which kept men fighting, or demolishes the Keynesian interpretation of the peace settlement.

Yet, on other utterly fundamental matters, such as the issue of why Britain intervened in the war, or what would have been the consequence of a German triumph, or who won the war, or how the victory was accomplished, he is wrong-headed to an alarming degree. That is the pity of Ferguson.

Robin Prior

is Associate Professor and Head of the School of History at the Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra. His publications include *Churchill's 'World Crisis' as History*, and, with Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front and Passchendaele: the Untold Story*. He was also an editor of the *Oxford Companion in Australian Military History*.

Trevor Wilson

taught history at Adelaide University and is now Professor Emeritus. His publications include *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–35*, *The Political Diaries of C.P. Scott 1911–28* and *The Myriad Faces of War*, a one-volume history of the first world war which won an Adelaide Festival of Arts prize. With Robin Prior he has written *Command on the Western Front and Passchendaele: the Untold Story*.