Russia and the first world war

Blindlyoverthe

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Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the

End of Tsarist Russia. By Dominic Lieven.

Allen Lane; 429 pages; £25. To be published

in America by Viking in August

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HE firstworld warbroughtmanyafflic-

tions to Europe: revolution, civil war,

two famines, collectivisation, dictatorship

and terror. The botched peace ofVersailles

stoked revanchism and broughtfurther ca-

tastrophe in 1939. So the decisions which

tookRussia into a needless warin 1914 can

be blamed for the death of at least 50m

subjects of the tsarist and Soviet empires,

pluscountlessothers.

The origins, course and effects of the

war have been minutely researched by

Western historians, butnot, until Dominic

Lieven’s masterly new book, from a Rus-

sian point ofview. The result is a gripping,

poignantand in some respectsrevolution-

ary contribution to European history. The

author—a distinguished British scholar de-

scended from several of the protagonists

he describes—hashad unprecedented, and

possiblyunique, accessto the Russian state

archives. Shortly after he finished his re-

search, the library fell into a Moscow rail-

waytunnel. Aweeklateritwasclosed.

“Towards the Flame” begins with a

lucid sketch of the decades leading up to

the war. The balance between the sixgreat

powers—Austria-Hungary, Britain, France,

Germany, Russia and Turkey—was always

at risk of upset. It depended on a mixture

ofcool-headed bluffand good diplomacy.

Theywere all too often lacking.

Bythe end ofthe 19th centurythe Euro-

pean security order was disintegrating,

pulled apart by nationalism, imperialism

and globalisation. The empireswere like ti-

gers, which even when threatened with ex-

tinction will not co-operate. Preservation

required statecraft based on common in-

terests, not those of ethnic groups whose

own linguistic and cultural aspirations

were crystallising into the desire to run

their own affairs. Globalisation was erod-

ing national boundaries. But that was

anathema to economically illiterate lead-

ers who saw interdependence as weak-

ness. Thinking was also skewed by what

Mr Lieven calls “vapid” biological meta-

phors in which the state was seen as a liv-

ingorganism, ruthlesslycompetingfor size

and resources, prizing prestige and

strength overstabilityand practicality.

Britain and France had overseas em-

pires. The otherEuropean powershad col-

onies closer to home. Austria-Hungary

wasgrapplingwith restlessSlavsinside its

borders, and still more unruly ones in its

Balkan neighbours. It was heavily, and

humiliatingly, dependent on Germany,

which in turn feltstifled byitslate arrival in

the race foroverseasterritories.

Russia had the greatestwoes. Humiliat-

ed in the warof1905 with Japan, itwasnot

modernising fast enough to keep up with

the other great powers. The rise of Ukrai-

nian national feeling(partiallyencouraged

by Austria-Hungary) was a lethal threat to

Russian identity; much the same as now,

some would say. Russia hankered after lib-

eratingthe Slavsofthe Balkansand seizing

control of the Bosporus from the ailing

Ottoman empire, thus boosting its naval

power. Pent-up angeramongpeasantsand

industrial workers, and an impatient mid-

dle class, meantthatreform and repression

alike risked a social explosion.

The leaders were grotesquely ill-suited

to the problems they faced. Mr Lieven

paintsa seriesofvivid portraitsof the Rus-

sian decision-makers and functionaries,

and theirattemptsto overcome a system of

governmentwhich elevated autocracyto a

virtue: the tsar had to be “pope, king and

dictator” atonce, and wasbad ateach one.

What nowadays would be called civil

society played a “nefarious” role too, Mr

Lieven argues. He outlines the unhelpful

partplayed in manycountriesbya hysteri-

cally nationalist press, voluntary bodies,

such as the powerful naval fan clubs in

Germany, which saw it as theirrole to pre-

vent compromise besmirching the nation-

al honour, and segmentsofthe Russian ar-

istocracy which detested professionalism

and pragmatism in state administration.

Mr Lieven’s Russia-centred point of

view may jar with Poles and others who

see the collapse ofthe tsaristempire asthe

midwife ofnational rebirth. Butthe book’s

eloquence, insights and detail make it an

indispensable read for anyone trying to

understand European history in the last

century—orworld affairsin general.

Readerswill be leftaghastatthe wayin

which largely sensible, humane and well-

educated men brought about such suffer-

ing and havoc with their blinkered deci-

sion-making. Mr Lieven’s concluding

thoughts, written from a Japanese moun-

tainside where he hasa second home, add

a further note of dismay. He draws some

sketchy but alarming parallels between

Europe’s descent into disaster 100 years

ago, and East Asia’s fractious security to-

day, which isbesetbya familiarcocktail of

stridentnationalism and brinkmanship.