



2009.08.01

Norman Stone, *World War One: A Short History*. New York: Basic Books, 2009. Pp. xiv, 226. ISBN 978-0-465-01368-5.

Reviewed by William J. Astore, Pennsylvania College of Technology (wastore@pct.edu)

In seven concise chapters, Norman Stone, a professor of history at Bilkent University, tackles an enormously complex subject: the origins, course, and legacy of World War I. Written with verve and an eye for telling anecdotes, his “short history” supplies a discerning overview of this most devastating and tragic of wars. The necessarily selective account focuses mainly on the fighting, giving balanced coverage to both the (more famous) western and the (oft-neglected) eastern fronts, not surprisingly for the historian who won the Wolfson Prize in 1976 for his *The Eastern Front, 1914-1917*.<sup>1</sup> Naval warfare he briefly mentions: the Battle of Jutland cruises by at flank speed; U-boats surface to hazard Allied shipping as Germany drives the United States into the war in 1917 with its unrestricted submarine warfare campaign. Aerial enthusiasts he disappoints: pursuit planes, bombers, dirigibles, and famous aces are firmly grounded.

Focusing in the main on events in Europe, Stone could, and should, have developed further the imperial dimensions of the war. He mentions the Gallipoli campaign and the dilemma of ANZAC troops, and notes in passing the presence of Senegalese troops on the western front. But he neglects Canadian contributions, ignores the war in Africa, and says nothing about contributions to the French war effort by Vietnamese laborers. He also says surprisingly little about morale and conditions on the various home fronts, even among the major European belligerents. This mainly top-down account of major political events and military operations makes brief forays into tactical realms, such as German storm trooper tactics or the exploits of notables like Erwin Rommel in Italy during the Battle of Caporetto (1917).

Stone is especially good at combining concise accounts with illustrative, often amusing, anecdotes. Here’s an example on the opening days of the war in August 1914:

The war in the West began with boots and saddles and bugles, with divisions of French dragoons and German Uhlans showing off. The Austro-Hungarians used a saddle that was designed to give the rider a perfect seat. In hot weather, and with horses requisitioned from civilians, it rubbed the skin on the poor beasts’ backs, and the dragoons returned from their first foray into Russian territory leading them on foot. Russian cavalry probed East Prussia and fell back at once for lack of fodder, while the elderly Khan of Nakhichevan, one of the Tsar’s prized Tatar cavalrymen ... was unable to mount his horse because of piles (39).

In discussing German fears earlier in 1914 of a rapidly modernizing Russia, Stone writes that Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, the German Chancellor, was asked by his son if they should plant long-maturing elms on their estate. No, the Chancellor replied, only the Russians would profit thereby. “In that, he was right,” Stone tartly notes, “thirty years later, they [the Russians] did indeed arrive in Brandenburg, and stayed for another fifty” (19).

The occasional acerbity of Stone’s prose is often a strength, but is sometimes unjustified. For example, he describes Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British Expeditionary Force, as doing “a great deal to wreck” the British Army, quotes an unattributed saying that he was “the best Scottish general ... in that he killed the most Englishmen” (126), and states that he surrounded himself with “creepy young officers, helping him on and off with his coat” (162). Haig certainly had a long learning curve, but he was neither callous nor especially vain, and in 1918 he performed well during the hundred days’ campaign that ended the war with the Allies victorious.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1975; rpt. NY: Penguin, 1998.

Stone is kinder to France's Ferdinand Foch, praising him for his adaptability. In 1918, Foch "discovered how this war was to be won: he stopped [after his successful counterattack that July]. No more battering with light weapons against [rested and better armed enemy] reserves. The answer was to suspend the attack where it had succeeded, and attack somewhere else, keeping the enemy reserves on the move" (171).<sup>2</sup> Stone credits General Alexei Brusilov as the first senior man on the Allied side to adapt fully to the changed operational conditions of war—the fact that defensive technology and mass armies had produced a stalemate that could only be broken (at tremendous cost in men and matériel) if a commander had the resources and insight to modulate his attacks, combining them in such a way as to give a disrupted and tired enemy no time to recover.

Stone is perhaps kindest to the Germans, praising them for "displays of panache," as at Caporetto or during the Ludendorff Offensive (March 1918), "of which the plodders on the Allied side were utterly incapable" (8). But his later praise for Brusilov and for the Allies' novel proto-Blitzkrieg techniques in the summer of 1918 contradicts this statement. What did German "panache" actually achieve during the Ludendorff Offensives (March–July 1918), other than demoralization through overstretch and the ultimate collapse of the German Army?

Quick to dismiss Allied commanders like Haig and Robert Nivelle as "plodders" and incompetents, Stone treats German commanders (other than the "nervous" and irresolute Helmuth von Moltke of the war's opening weeks) with undeserved respect. More seriously, he suggests that the mendacious, misleading, and ultimately catastrophic *Dolchstoßlegende*—the "stab-in-the-back myth," which blamed Jews, Socialists, "soft-brained academics," and other supposedly disloyal elements for the German military's collapse—was stimulated accidentally by a question an English journalist asked Ludendorff (189). But Stone himself writes (179) that Ludendorff had begun hatching the "Our Army never lost, and even so others are to blame, not me" myth already in October 1918. In fact, elements of the German Right were preparing a version of the *Dolchstoßlegende* even earlier, during the preceding summer. It was designed to shift blame, if the war should prove unwinnable, from the military and the Right to their political rivals on the Left (ominously, German Jews were already singled out as potential scapegoats).<sup>3</sup>

After they drove their army beyond its tether in 1918, Hindenburg and Ludendorff embraced this myth to deflect blame for losing the war. After all, they had been "silent dictators" of Germany from the summer of 1916 until nearly the war's end;<sup>4</sup> if they were not to blame, who was? Furthermore, the myth consoled a beaten army on the verge of complete collapse, providing a balm to soldiers who had given their all in a lost cause and perhaps even staving off a more radical restructuring of Germany in 1919. But all this came at an enormous price: the furtherance of German militarism and the grievances of deluded fanatics like Adolf Hitler, who sowed the dragon's teeth for a second, even more calamitous, global war.

A weakness of this book is its supporting material. The appended seven maps lack the detail required to trace the author's campaign and battle summaries. The half-tone illustrations that serve as chapter headings could be both clearer and larger. A short section on sources at the end omits recent accounts of the war that are complementary to Stone's.<sup>5</sup>

All in all, this book is best suited not to novices, but to informed students of the war, who will appreciate the author's penetrating insights and biting wit. One last example of that wit, in Stone's treatment of the dénouement of the war, especially resonated with this reviewer:

<sup>2</sup> For a recent, pro-Foch account, see Michael S. Neiberg, *Foch: Supreme Allied Commander in the Great War* (Washington: Brassey's, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See William J. Astore & Dennis E. Showalter, *Hindenburg: Icon of German Militarism* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2005) 72, 80–82, 102–5.

<sup>4</sup> See Martin Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship: The Politics of the German High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff, 1916–1918* (NY: Holmes & Meier, 1976), and Robert B. Asprey, *The German High Command at War: Hindenburg and Ludendorff Conduct World War I* (NY: Morrow, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Michael Howard, *The First World War* (Oxford: Oxford U Pr, 2002) and Michael S. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2005). See also Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (London: Arnold, 1997).

At the end of the film *Oh! What a Lovely War* there is a scene of genius, as war graves, stretching all over the screen, have red tape slowly wound around them. This was what now happened. Officials and High Commands solemnly debated the ins and outs of the armistice for rather more than a month, and meanwhile the men went on fighting and dying, in tens of thousands. The German Note gave the Allies some trouble, because they were being forced to talk the language of democracy and self-determination whereas they were all resolved on vengeance and the creating of empires at the expense of the defeated. Even the Belgians thought they should seize the Scheldt estuary from the Dutch. Getting a unified response, combining rapacity with sanctity, was difficult, though in the end British skills prevailed (179).

Just so.