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Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914-1918*. New York: Basic Books, 2014. Pp. xv, 788. ISBN 978-0-465-01872-7.

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The flood of books expected for the centenary of the First World War arrived in 2013, crested in 2014, and has now started to ebb. Many of the new studies have reexamined the causes and origins of the war; a few have offered broad narratives of the war as whole, examined the armies and war efforts of individual countries, and traced the “long shadow” of the war.

Alexander Watson’s *Ring of Steel* is not really a general history of the war or even of the participant states named in its subtitle. Instead, it belongs to what I think of as the New First World War History. As such, it is a remarkable addition to our understanding of how violence affected the lives and strategic choices of the peoples and leaders of Austria-Hungary and Germany.

The operative question here—why did the war last so long?—is an old one that has typically led to considerations of strategy and diplomacy or evaluations of generals, seen as donkeys or geniuses. It has also prompted meticulous analyses of economic mobilization and policy-making. While Watson does not neglect these matters, *Ring of Steel* concentrates instead on the very modern question of popular consent, that is, why the peoples of Austria-Hungary and Germany chose to go to and remain at war and how that consent persisted and eventually decayed over time.

Watson’s answer is simple: consent resulted not from governmental repression, but because people, organizations, and institutions actively elected to support the conflict. This support ebbed and flowed in complex and surprising ways through the first half of the war. In particular, human and material sacrifices drove leaders and populations to expect and demand more and more from themselves and from the war. This led in turn to the radicalization of war aims and the war effort. At the same time, the experience of deprivation fragmented both armies and civilian populations and, in the end, destroyed their willingness to bear the costs of the war, making defeat and disintegration of the previous social order inevitable. The consequences for individuals and for Europe as a whole were long-lasting. As Watson points out in his conclusion, those who lived through the chaotic end of the war in the East were predisposed to join in the ethnic violence and genocide of the 1930s and 1940s.

This brief summary does little justice to Watson’s work, which addresses themes prevalent in recent scholarship on the First World War—particularly, cultural identity and the experience of violence. The new historians have reemphasized the importance of combat but with a wider perspective. They go beyond battle to consider violence at home, whether it was the result of military occupation, competition within societies over scarce resources, or abuse of civilians by their own governments. They also look carefully and sensitively at the ways loss shaped and reshaped lives during and long after the war.

The author’s treatment of these topics is especially compelling when he assesses the reverberations of the occupations of Galicia and East Prussia throughout the war. His discussions reflect a conversance with current Holocaust and genocide studies. Finally, the new approach intentionally decentralizes the Western Front and restores the Eastern Front, the Balkans, and the battles outside Europe to greater prominence in the history of the war.

Watson (Goldsmiths, Univ. of London) is the author of an earlier book on morale and motivation in the German and British armies of the World War I.¹ Having spent time at the University of Warsaw makes him even better qualified to evaluate the complicated politics and cultures of the Habsburg Monarchy. As his footnotes show, he has read encyclopedically the recent literature about the war.

1. *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2009).

Watson's challenges to older interpretations are a strength of his book. A brief review cannot do more than offer a couple examples. The author rejects, for instance, the idea that the British failure at the Somme resulted from inadequate resources, inexperienced and naïve troops, and a more skilled and experienced German army.

[I]f anybody on the Somme battlefield is overdue to be treated with a little pathos it is not the attackers, with their threefold artillery superiority, total control of the air and copious reserves of manpower, but rather the German defenders opposite. The men who met the British attack on 1 July were mostly from the south of the country, and as likely to curse in sing-song accents "the dammed Prussians" as "Tommy" or the "Franzmann." By no stretch of the imagination can they be described as professional.... They were the sorts of soldiers who defined the German army of the middle war years, grumbling about the rations, praying to God to protect them just that little bit longer and yearning for Maria, Ursel or Greta. (315)

More controversially, he suggests that the radical expansion of German war aims by Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff was a rational response to the lessons they had learned from the war.

The Third OHL's [Supreme Army Command's] territorial aims were on a totally different scale from the French government's demands, but ... both shared something of the same zero-sum view of international relations: both sought security at their enemy's expense. As Germany had so many bitter enemies, and as war had exposed her great economic vulnerability, her gains, as Ludendorff's reasoning went, would have to be large to guarantee her safety. To understand his motives one has to look beyond tired stereotypes of Prussian militarism or the general's personality; Ludendorff had, after all, been against large-scale annexations in early 1915 and the east was not a natural place for Germany to exercise its expansionist ambitions. The decisive recalculation had clearly come about in wartime, in response to the failure of the offensive bid for a quick victory in 1914 and the new economic conflict introduced by the British.... (464-65)

The book's scope is not comprehensive. Watson considers strategy and diplomacy only when it helps him answer his bigger question. Thus, the first quarter of the book offers a detailed treatment of the outbreak and initial campaigns of the war, and he returns to the battlefield in both 1916 and 1918. But there is virtually no discussion of the critical military victories of 1915 or of the defensive battles of 1917. Further, while he pays more attention than most historians to the Habsburg experience, his book remains tilted slightly toward Germany; more balanced broad surveys are available.²{2} Watson's prose is clear and his ideas important, but his subtle argumentation demands the reader's full concentration. His frequent pauses to engage closely the historical consensus on particular issues occasionally impede the flow of his argument. "Amateurs" may certainly learn a great deal from this book, but academics and professional historians will find it easier going than casual readers.

Ring of Steel invites responses from historians of the other belligerent nations, and a comparative discussion of the roles of consent and deprivation could be most enlightening. Surely the experience of violence was just as significant for many of the Entente powers. How and to what degrees did that experience affect consent and policy in, for example, France and Russia? We know even less in this regard about the lesser powers—Serbia, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire.

Alexander Watson is to be congratulated for opening up new avenues to further study, the sign of a successful book. Readers with a serious interest in the First World War and its legacy will need to be familiar with the debates and lines of analysis examined in *Ring of Steel*.

2. See, esp., Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918*, 2nd ed. (NY: Bloomsbury, 2014).