



## *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916–1931* by Adam Tooze.

New York: Viking, 2014. Pp. xxiii, 644. ISBN 978–0–670–02492–6.

Review by Teddy J. Uldricks, The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (uldrickst@yahoo.com).

---

Adam Tooze (Yale Univ.) is best known for his academic blockbuster, *The Wages of Destruction*.<sup>1</sup> In his latest book, *The Deluge*, a prequel to that work, he argues that “A new order emerged from the Great War that promised ... fundamentally to restructure relations between the great powers—Britain, France, Italy, Japan, Germany, Russia and the United States.... The new order that was in the making was defined in large part by the absent presence of its most defining element—the new power of the United States” (3–4). Part of the problem, Tooze suggests, was the relative immaturity of the American political system and its electorate. Before President Franklin Roosevelt’s administration, the US government lacked the power and resources to play the role required by the postwar international situation. This is well plowed ground—Robert Boyce<sup>2</sup> has rightly suggested that the time between the two world wars has been the most studied period in history. Nevertheless, the last decade has seen a spate of new works offering fresh perspectives on the era.<sup>3</sup>

It has long been acknowledged that the First World War profoundly altered international relations, economic as well as political. George Kennan called it “the greatest seminal catastrophe of the 20th century”<sup>4</sup> and many historians have studied the European and even global impact of that *Urkatastrophe*.<sup>5</sup> War often morphed into revolution; indeed, under modern conditions, the two are scarcely distinguishable.<sup>6</sup> The Great War undermined the financial stability of the British and French empires, while destroying the German, Austrian, Russian, and Ottoman empires (the Qing Empire had already collapsed in 1912). It unleashed revolutions and counterrevolutions throughout eastern and central Europe, stimulated anti-colonial movements around the world, and accelerated the destruction of Enlightenment optimism.

The focus throughout *The Deluge* is on the United States and the reaction of other powers to growing American might. Tooze begins in 1916, the year US industrial output surpassed the combined total for the British Empire. It was also the year of Verdun and the Somme, when the Western allies could no longer fund their own war effort and had to rely on Wall Street to finance their participation in the conflict.

---

1. Subtitle: *The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (NY: Penguin, 2006).

2. In *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalization* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) ix.

3. E.g., Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919–1933* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2007) and *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1933–1939* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2011); David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Legacies of the Great War in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Norton, 2014); and Alexander Anievas, *Capital, The State and War: Class Conflict and Geopolitics in the Thirty Years’ Crisis, 1914–1945* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan Pr, 2014), who analyzes the interwar crisis in terms of the Marxist idea of “combined and uneven development.”

4. *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1979) 3.

5. See, e.g., Stephan Burgdorff and Klaus Wiegrefe, eds., *Der Ersten Weltkrieg: Die Urkatastrophe des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2004).

6. See Elie Halévy, *The Era of Tyrannies*, trans. R.K. Webb (NY: NYU Pr, 1966) 234–47.

In contrast to the common picture of the American president as a high-minded moralist and internationalist, Tooze's Woodrow Wilson is a muscular nationalist determined to improve the world through American supremacy. He pushed the Entente and Central powers to accept "a peace without victory" as the only way to "ensure that the United States emerged as the truly undisputed arbiter of world affairs" (16). To advance his agenda, Wilson threatened to bankrupt the belligerents and to sow division on their home fronts. He envisioned a new world order based on American hegemony, free trade, and liberal democracy (for white men, at least), and an end to militarism and the existing structure of imperialism.

The author maintains that, amid the global chaos, the American president was bent on preserving "the future 'of white supremacy on this planet'" (60). The "asymmetrical financial geometry" the United States imposed on the Entente "signaled the end to the great-power competition that had defined the age of imperialism" (211). Beyond defeating aggressive Prussian militarism, Wilson opposed any reassertion of British and French power and hoped to unravel the Anglo-Japanese alliance as well. To realize his grand vision for a new world order,

Wilson needed to rally public opinion and he needed above all to control Washington, the new hub of global power. But it was precisely there, in the week prior to the Armistice, that Wilson lost his grip... Both the American public and key decision-makers in the Wilson administration came to experience their country no longer as standing detached and pre-eminent above the global crisis, but as dangerously enmeshed with it. The stage was set for the post-war backlash. (229, 216)

The Republicans and much of the public neither understood nor liked Wilson's unilateral diplomacy in quest of hegemony. "Wilson's main Republican opponents were no more isolationists than [French Prime Minister George] Clemenceau and [British Prime Minister David] Lloyd George were reactionaries. What they had in common was their rejection of Wilson's peculiar vision of American global leadership" (231). The horrors of war combined with the Red Scare, labor unrest, racial violence, and inflation made many Americans recoil from assuming the role of world leader. But if Washington would not don the mantle of global leadership, it certainly would not permit any other power to do so. Thus, in 1921-22, the United States opposed Lloyd George's attempt (at the Genoa Conference) to revive a liberal world order under British guidance.

The Treaty of Versailles has, of course, been vilified by many critics, but Tooze is not among them. He convincingly refutes all of John Maynard Keynes's criticisms of the peace settlement. In his view, "Versailles lived up to its claim to have married diplomacy with expert decision-making in a new and enlightened fashion" (282-83). Thus, it was not the supposed weakness or inequities of Versailles that doomed Europe to an even more terrible war twenty years later. Moreover, the author does not see the Republican presidents of the 1920s as much departing from the Wilsonian course. Since Wilson was "an exponent of turn-of-the-century high nationalism," Tooze is able to claim Warren Harding and his successors were not "inward-turning or isolationist" but, like Wilson, "unilateral and exceptionalist" (348).

Rhetorically, Tooze, like historian A.J.P. Taylor, delights in bold revisionist assertions. For example, he suggests that "The real problem [with the Locarno Accords] was not in the East, but in the West. The basic question was the attitude of America. Without backing from America, could Britain and France really contain German aggression whether directed eastwards or westwards?" (473-74). So, too, he contends it was not the specter of revolution but the prospect of German hegemony over Eurasia that panicked the Allies in spring 1918 (156).

In this extraordinarily ambitious book, Tooze weaves developments in China, India, Ireland, Turkey, Egypt, Brazil, and elsewhere into his analysis. The consequent need to rely heavily on secondary

sources is sometimes problematic. In dealing with the Russian revolutions and civil war, for example, he follows the controversial opinions of Richard Pipes<sup>7</sup> and neglects the important work of Richard Debo.<sup>8</sup> Thus, for him, Allied intervention in Russia was essentially anti-German, not anti-Soviet. Here and elsewhere he underestimates fear of communism as a motive for Allied actions. By 1921, he writes, “the Soviet regime appeared to the Western Powers less like a revolutionary threat than a failed state” (423). That insight eluded the Conservative Party, which dominated British politics for most of the interwar period.

Why, ultimately, did the lights fade out in Europe? What set the stage for Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and the Second World War? According to Tooze, the failure of the United States to join the League of Nations, ratify the Versailles Treaty, accept a mutual defense pact with Britain and France, and underwrite the European mutual security agreements of the 1920s. “America’s absence from the League, combined with Britain and France’s dependence on it, had the effect of making America into a de facto ‘super-State’, exercising a veto over the combined decisions of the rest of the world. Nothing less was the ambition both of Wilson and his Republican successors” (516). The United States failed to play the role which only it could play. “It was precisely the looming potential, the future dominance of American capitalist democracy, that was the common factor impelling Hitler, Stalin, the Italian Fascists and their Japanese counterparts to such radical action” (7). That judgment, while containing some truth, greatly oversimplifies the picture of a postwar world awash in Marxist and anti-Marxist, nationalist, imperialist and anti-imperialist animosities.

Not everyone will agree that the United States’ avoidance of a leading role in world politics in the 1920s and 30s—almost by itself—doomed the world to an even bloodier conflagration in 1939. As Zara Steiner has written, “There is no straight line from the peace settlements of 1919 to the outbreak and spread of the European conflict, though the Great War set in motion the shock waves that led to the loss of European predominance.”<sup>9</sup> She sees genuine signs of progress toward a more stable and peaceful world in the 1920s. The “motive force of destructive systemic change” was not the “absent presence” of the United States, but “the demise of the Weimar Republic and the triumph of Hitler....”<sup>10</sup> Less optimistically, Robert Boyce sees catastrophe looming “midway through the interwar period [when] the international economic system *and* the international political system simultaneously broke down.”<sup>11</sup> American policy has been fairly criticized for contributing to these linked disasters, but so have the policies of all the liberal states.

*The Deluge* is a stimulating and challenging book that will reward specialist and general readers alike, especially with its astute, salutary stress on economic issues. Its weakness is insufficient attention to the powerful ideological storms that raged during the interwar years. Read in conjunction with the works of Steiner and Boyce, Adam Tooze’s new book contributes to a more balanced view of the painful remaking of the global order in the first half of the twentieth century.

---

7. *The Russian Revolution* (NY: Vintage, 1991).

8. *Revolution and Survival: The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1917-1918* (Toronto: U Toronto Pr, 1979) and *Survival and Consolidation: The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1918-1921* (Montreal: McGill-Queens U Pr, 1992).

9. *The Lights That Failed* (note 3 above) viii.

10. *Ibid.*, 1043.

11. *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalization* (NY: Palgrave, 2009) 5.