



## 1917: War, Peace, and Revolution by David Stevenson.

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In his new book, historian David Stevenson (London School of Economics) argues that, by 1917, the European belligerents of the Great War found themselves ensnared in a conflict they knew to be unsustainable. Both sides sought to break the deadlock by launching massive offensives. Their desperate gambles failed to bring victory and hundreds of thousands of combatants died in Flanders, France, Italy, and Russia. That year<sup>1</sup> saw the entry of the United States into the war and the historic revolutions in Russia. Brazil, China, Greece, and Siam also joined the war in that year, making the conflict a true “world war.” Unrest in India forced a reluctant Great Britain to accede to a degree of home rule that ultimately led to independence. And, too, the Balfour Declaration changed the future of the Middle East. In short, 1917 marked a dramatic shift in world history.

Other authors have sought to better understand the First World War by concentrating on a single year of its duration.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Stevenson’s last book was an account of 1918.<sup>3</sup> There is a certain logic to this tactic, since elections, military operations and campaigns, and vagaries of agricultural and industrial production make each calendar year unique. The present volume, however, adopts a broader, global view, surveying events in the Americas, on Europe’s battlefields, in the Middle East, and across Asia.

The fourth year of World War I witnessed greater coordination among members of both the Central Powers and the Entente. Political leaders exerted increasing influence on strategy and policy making, but could not altogether wrest control from military commanders. The complexities of conducting a global industrial war while managing developments on the home front and in imperial holdings simply overwhelmed economic, military, and political leaders. Most of their policy choices were reached only after contentious debates and little consensus.

Decisions were taken not in calm and isolation but in rapid-fire succession and as fragments of an interconnected whole. The sheer range of choices confronting the belligerents—from Flanders to Russia, India, and Palestine, to say nothing of the home fronts—seems overwhelming. Certainly statesmen must by definition be risk takers, and challenging and contested choices lie at the heart of their responsibilities. Yet in wartime the stakes grow higher and the imponderables vaster. (398)

The first of the book’s four parts, “Atlantic Prologue,” comprises three chapters concerning major trends: (a) the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in an effort to cripple Great Britain before the United States could properly mobilize its forces; (b) President Woodrow Wilson’s request for a declaration of war against Germany, with an eye to influencing any postwar settlements and making the world safe for democracy; and (c) Britain’s implementation of the

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1. More precisely, December 1916–January 1918.

2. E.g., Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (NY: Knopf, 2013); Lyn Macdonald, *1915: The Death of Innocence* (NY: Holt, 1995); Keith Jeffery, *1916: A Global History* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2015); and Gregor Dallas, *War and Peace* (NY: Overlook Pr, 2001).

3. Viz., *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2011).

convoy system, a move the war cabinet had to force on Adm. John Jellicoe, who would have preferred to keep his destroyers at Scapa Flow to guard against the German fleet.

Part II, “Continental Impasse,” contains six chapters: two on Russia, and one each on France, Flanders, Italy, and the peace initiatives of 1917. As in 1916, both sides conducted joint planning conferences to coordinate their operations. The order of the day was more of the same, but on a grander scale, featuring new weaponry, absurdly optimistic expectations, and underestimations of enemy strength. The French Nivelle, British Third Ypres (Passchendaele), and Russian Kerensky offensives all fit this pattern. Nivelle succeeded only in triggering mutiny among his own troops, while Kerensky broke the will of the Russian army and people, opening the door for the Bolsheviks as the only anti-war party.

The Entente held no monopoly on military efforts that backfired. The humiliating defeat the Austro-Hungarians and Germans inflicted on the Italians at Caporetto ironically caused their enemy to rally to the flag as it had not done since 1915; moreover, increased support from its western allies left Italy in a better position than it held prior to Caporetto.

The final chapter of Part II examines the several peace initiatives of 1917. Various belligerents conducted backchannel discussions largely unbeknown to their allies and without the full support of their own governments. In fact, such negotiations tended to be ploys meant to divide enemies rather than genuine attempts to end the war. No matter how bad the situation on the front lines or at home, no governmental leaders, with the exception of the Bolsheviks, seriously considered peace in 1917.

The three chapters of Part III focus on the “Global Repercussions” of poorly considered policy choices of 1917 that resonate to this day. The European powers never understood that they had lost control of events. Believing they were making measured moves, in reality they opened a Pandora’s Box. Britain used India (which then included present-day Bangladesh and Pakistan) as its base for military operations in Mesopotamia, but also as a source of manufactured supplies and equipment, tax revenues, and, crucially, manpower at a time when Prime Minister David Lloyd-George was dunning British colonies for more troops. All this placed great strains on Indian society and led to demands for reforms, including home rule. But the concessions the British made in the 1919 Government of India Act did not give the Indians all they wanted. They were, depending on one’s perspective, a first step either in the right direction or down a slippery slope, as Lord Curzon of the War Cabinet argued. Each reform led to calls for more complete home rule; this ultimately undermined both British control in South Asia and European global imperialism in general.

In the Middle East, as Gen. Edmund Allenby’s force was driving towards Jerusalem, the British feared that the Zionist movement leaned too sympathetically toward Germany. Policy-makers in London felt a need to win over an increasingly important international constituency (especially after the American entry into the war) and undermine Ottoman control in the region, with a view to constructing a zone of control in postwar Palestine to protect the Suez Canal. They gave little thought to what creating a Jewish national homeland might actually mean or its potential impact on the Arab population.

Sympathy with Zionism carried less weight, unsurprisingly, than perceptions of national and imperial interest. The same applied to France’s Cambon Declaration, which paved the way for the British one, although American support appears to have been derived more simply from Wilson’s idealism. The British hoped to use the Zionists, as the Zionists hoped to use the British, and both sides overestimated what the partnership might bring. But for all the opportunism that surrounded it, after other 1917 legacies had receded the declaration’s consequences would endure. (361)

Formerly neutral nations began to join the Entente in 1917. The experiences of Greece, Brazil, Siam, and China proved that a belligerent could participate in the conflict in various ways. Brazil, for example, made little contribution to the war effort, while Siam sent a contingent of 1,254 volunteers to join the fight; Greece provided over 150,000 men to the Entente campaign in the Balkans. China sent no armed forces, but dispatched over 100,000 laborers to the Western Front to haul supplies and dig trenches, among other tasks. The experiences of Brazil and Siam illustrate the scope of the German submarine strategy, which affected more than just the United States. Internal debates over the proper course of action proved divisive in the halls of neutral powers. The question of declaring war brought both Greece and China to the brink of civil war. In the end, like Wilson, both nations wagered that any hardship they endured would further their national security goals in the postwar peace. Like other high-stake calculations made in 1917, this one failed to pay off.<sup>4</sup>

The concluding Part IV, “Towards 1918,” concerns the Bolshevik takeover of the Russian government and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which took Russia out of the war and placed even more emphasis on the Western Front. In one last desperate venture to end the war, the Germans went over the top in 1918. Their spring offensives shocked the British and French and threatened Paris, but the arrival of the Americans, who put a million men on the front lines before the armistice, turned the tide. As in their rationale for resuming unrestricted submarine warfare the year before, the Germans had bet against the United States and, once again, lost badly.

*1917: War, Peace, and Revolution* represents a thoughtful synthesis of relevant secondary literature and published primary and archival sources. Its narrative is enriched by an invaluable bibliography, maps and photographs spread throughout the text, and helpful lists of abbreviations and principal personalities. It is a seminal work that will engage and inform students, scholars, and general readers alike.

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4. See Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (NY: Random House, 2003).