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Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Pp. lxxi, 808. ISBN 978-1-59420-100-4.

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Niall Ferguson's recent book, *The War of the World*, seeks to explain an age of destructive wars and unrest that killed more people than any other century in human history. A world-renowned British historian, now a professor at Harvard University, Ferguson has written earlier volumes, including *The Pity of War*, *Empire*, and *Colossus*,¹ that offer challenging and well-argued interpretations of major topics in world history. *The War of the World* is in the same vein. In his book and the accompanying highly successful television documentary of the same title,² Ferguson offers a bold new elucidation of twentieth-century world history.

Ferguson claims that traditional explanations for twentieth-century violence, while certainly helpful and necessary to scholarship on the subject, are not sufficient: specifically, ethnic conflict, economic volatility, and empires in decline best explain twentieth-century violence and power shifts (xli). He further argues that the first half of the century featured a disproportionate amount of bloodshed, from the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) to the Korean War (1950–53), termed here the “Fifty Years’ War” (lxix–lxxi). Another main thesis of the book is that the twentieth century witnessed not a triumph of the West but a “reorientation towards the East,” or, put differently, a “descent of the West” (lxvii–lxix). Finally, Ferguson recasts the question “why was the twentieth century more violent than previous centuries” to “why was twentieth-century violence so concentrated in space and time?” In other words, why such extreme violence in regions like Eastern Europe and Southeastern Asia and at specific moments such as the decade from 1936 to 1945 (649)?

Ferguson elaborates his principal argument in the introduction, discussing in detail the connections among ethnic conflict, economic volatility, and decaying empires in fueling twentieth-century violence. He observes that “the fatal triangle of territory” between the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Balkans was a zone of conflict because it comprised so many ethnic groups and lay along the junction of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires (lxiii). In addition, economic volatility—rapid swings between growth and contraction—leads to increased sociopolitical tensions, since economic resources are rarely distributed evenly. This was certainly the case in Eastern Europe before, during, and after the First World War (lix–lxii). Due to rising social and political tensions, Ferguson writes, that the imperial powers already faced at the turn of the century, it is no surprise that economic volatility further destabilized them and hastened their collapse. In short, sharp economic changes were bound to cause extraordinary violence and transform multiethnic empires; the early twentieth century was a time of such change.

Ferguson gives many examples to support his case. For instance, he devotes ample coverage to the role of Jews in twentieth-century empires (56–70, 136–40, 154–59, 164–74), especially Tsarist and Communist Russia. He notes that, although not uniquely a Russian policy, the nineteenth-century Tsarist regime undertook measures to make Jews second-class subjects, ranging from efforts to convert them to Christianity to promoting and carrying out systematic pogroms. When the Russian populace experienced enormous economic opportunity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews acquired disproportionate wealth and consequently became easy scapegoats for those who did not benefit from such opportunity. Moreover, Ferguson demonstrates that the First World War and the Russian Revolution, which resulted in the fall of the Tsarist Russian Empire and the rise of economic volatility, in turn perpetuated ethnic conflict in the region. Like other minorities residing in Russia, many Jews initially welcomed the coming to power of

1. *The Pity of War* (NY: Basic Books, 1999), *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (NY: Basic Books, 2003), *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (NY: Penguin, 2004).

2. First aired in the United States (PBS) in 2008 and available in DVD format.

Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks as a sign of an end to Russification, subordination, and exploitation. However, this hope proved short-lived, as Joseph Stalin, serving as People's Commissar for Nationalities' Affairs, used the existence of ethnic strife among many of Russia's minorities, such as Georgians, Armenians, Abkhazians, and Slavs, as a pretense to crack down on all of Russia's minorities, but especially Jews. In a shocking turnabout, Bolshevik sympathizers and other minority groups such as Ukrainians pillaged Jewish homes and businesses during the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Consequently, even though Russia had moved from an absolute monarchy to a communist dictatorship by the 1920s, the daily lives of the Jews changed for the worse. Russian Jews had become the main victims of converging ethnic conflict, economic volatility, and imperial decline.

Ferguson also considers the extraordinary violence that accompanied the decline and collapse of the Ottoman Empire (174–84). He boldly calls the Empire a perfect case of what happens when a multiethnic empire evolves into a nation state—carnage. Like the Jews in Russia, the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were “doubly vulnerable” as a “relatively wealthy” religious minority (176). The Ottoman state sponsored frequent attacks against the Armenians, who lived mostly in the eastern portion of the Empire. These culminated in outright massacres during the First World War, when ethnic minorities were often viewed as a direct threat to states fighting for their very survival. Another large ethnic minority, the Greeks, had resided in communities along the western Anatolian coast since ancient times. However, both the Ottoman government and the Ottoman populace viewed the Greeks as enemies of the state much like the Armenians. As a result, most of these Greek communities were deported or massacred even before Greece joined the Entente against the Ottoman Empire and the Central Powers in 1917. Using contemporary consular reports and newspaper accounts, Ferguson compares the vividly described Ottoman atrocities against Greeks to the bloodshed and carnage in H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. The only notable difference between Wells' futuristic fantasy novel and reports in London's *Daily Mail* was that the latter portrayed human beings as both victims and perpetrators. Even the 1919 Treaty of Sèvres did not stop the violence. Within months, the treaty was practically a nonissue, as Mustafa Kemal led a fierce Turkish resistance against the Entente powers in hopes of forming an independent and homogenous Turkish nation state. By 1923, “more than 1.2 million Greeks and 100,000 Armenians had been forced from their ancestral homes,” and the Greeks in turn expelled Muslims from western Thrace and Macedonia (184). Once again, the triad of ethnic violence, economic volatility, and an empire in decline had led to murderous campaigns of violence in the early twentieth century.

In arguing for his “descent of the West” thesis, Ferguson focuses on the rise of Japan (43–56, 285–311). He begins by stating that the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 signaled the “waning” of Western domination over the East, as the West had to recognize Japan as an equal on the diplomatic scene and acknowledge its military, economic, and political control over East Asia (56). He then addresses the rise of the Japanese Empire in the early twentieth century, identifying several similarities with the British Empire. For instance, both Britain and Meiji Japan “had emerged from an era of civil war to embrace constitutional monarchy,” both became the first industrialized nation in their continent, both featured rigid social hierarchies and a devotion to monarchy, and both “venerated and romanticized the chivalric codes of a partly imagined feudal past” (285). As Britain had acquired an empire centered on the remnants of Mughal India, so too Japanese leaders sought living space and economic hegemony over East Asia, centered on the “no less defunct Qing empire” in China (286). The only major difference, according to Ferguson, was that Japan's advancement came over a century later than Britain's, which meant it would face a much more difficult task in establishing a long-term empire due to the growth of other great powers, including the Soviet Union and the United States. However, Ferguson does note other significant differences between the British and Japanese empires during Japan's expansion in China in the 1930s: whereas the British subjugation of India “had been based as much on co-optation as coercion” and the influence of important businessmen, the Japanese military dominated the more moderate civilian leadership in determining their country's foreign policy (308). Consequently, Japanese military aggression in China spurred much greater opposition from the Chinese than the British had encountered from the Indians. Nevertheless, the rise of Japan brought not only “another great

fault line, running through Manchuria and northern Korea, between the Amur and the Yalu,” leading to shocking violence, death, and destruction, but also the first direct challenge to Western hegemony, a critical precedent in modern history (56).

A mere review cannot do justice to the depth and sophistication of Ferguson’s study. Besides making the case for his major theses, he offers quite detailed analyses and interpretations of the First World War, the Versailles Treaty, the origins and sheer brutality of the Second World War, and the dictatorships of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Stalin’s Soviet Union. To cite just one example, Ferguson acutely evaluates the German military’s predicament in conducting a world war rather than a European war beginning in 1914. In the end, the Germans simply could not overcome three crucial disadvantages in fighting a global conflict—naval inferiority, Entente imperialism, and financial weakness (112–18). Ferguson also stresses economics as a historical force to very good effect (he holds a joint appointment in the Harvard Business School). Although his narrative assumes a basic knowledge of economic terminology, his use of charts and figures makes his assertions about the significance of economic volatility intelligible and cogent. Taken as a whole, this some 800-page study offers a wide-ranging interpretation of twentieth-century world history that is both novel and compelling.

There are some weaknesses, however. Although Ferguson’s general approach may be original, key components of his chief arguments are not. For starters, he is certainly not the first scholar to argue that ethnic conflict and crumbling empires led to horrific violence in the twentieth century. Nor is he the first to observe that European diplomacy and militarism were as responsible for the outbreak of the First World War as Germany and Austria-Hungary (102–8); that the Treaty of Versailles failed because of the ideology of national self-determination and the minority problem (166); that Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Russia shared important similarities as totalitarian regimes (416–38, 576–89). Moreover, Ferguson’s argumentation, much like the notable European historian A.J.P. Taylor’s, is often explicitly provocative and highly disputable. Like Taylor,³ he offers a revisionist interpretation of the origins of the Second World War (312–82), explaining at length why appeasement failed and the British should have intervened sooner against Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. He seems to engage in a personal vendetta against Neville Chamberlain and blame the British government for not stopping the Second World War, instead of placing the blame where it belongs—on Hitler. At the same time, Ferguson is elsewhere clearly biased in favor of Britain. His claim that the supremacy of the Japanese military over its civilian leadership, in contrast to Britain’s imperial system, led to a more humane British Empire is dubious. This bias is again striking in his otherwise fine discussion of the treatment of prisoners of war, where he maintains that British troops behaved much more humanely in dealing with prisoners than did the troops of other nations (537–52). In addition, military historians are sure to take issue with Ferguson’s contention that the British set the standard for military tactics and operations in the interwar years, and that the Wehrmacht drew much of its Blitzkrieg doctrine from the British military strategist Liddell Hart (385–96). Ferguson even refers to Nazi Germany as “Mordor,” the evil empire in the *Lord of the Rings* epic, and to the British as its chief opponent (409–15).

Despite such flaws, *The War of the World* assesses the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century in extraordinary breadth and depth. Ferguson’s controversial book should generate vigorous discussion of an already well-known topic and its clarity of argument makes it suitable even for college students with some background knowledge of European and world history.

3. See his *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961; rev. NY: Atheneum, 1983).