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Peter Hart, *The Great War: A Combat History of the First World War*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xxii, 522. ISBN 978-0-19-997627-0.

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“The Great War was a human tragedy” (468), concludes historian Peter Hart after surveying more than four years of bloodletting on a global scale. As we approach the centennial of the war’s outbreak, there has been a spate of books attempting to understand the war and situate it in the dark heart of Europe’s twentieth century. Hart endeavors to write a “combat history” that will place the experience of violence and battle at the center of our perception of the war. As Oral Historian of the Imperial War Museum in London, with a specialty in sound recordings, Hart has an excellent ear for the rhythms and cadences of life in time of war. He is also the author of several previous books on the First World War.¹

Hart’s bluntly Rankean goal is to “look at the whys and wherefores of the military conduct of the Great War in an attempt to discern what was really going on” (xx). He intends to tell that story through the voices of its participants, highlighting the relationship between the words and thoughts of commanders and the lived experiences of the men who fought. Thus, we hear not only from Generals Erich Ludendorff and Erich von Falkenhayn, Field Marshal Douglas Haig, and Admiral Reinhard Scheer, but also soldiers and sailors of various nations whose written accounts sometimes came back from the war when their authors did not. We witness the human consequences of command decisions through the words of ordinary soldiers like Pvt. William Quinton, 2nd Bedfordshire Regiment, and a German corporal named Frederick Meisel.

Hart posits no overarching argument, nor does the book need one. It provides a salutary and necessary reminder to a British audience that, national myths aside, much of the credit for victory belonged to Britain’s allies. The Germans, for their part, “knew who had beaten them. The determined enmity and resilience of France, their most serious military foe, was taken for granted, but it was the participation of the British in the war that had tipped the balance against Germany” (xxii).

The book is organized more or less chronologically, shifting from front to front in successive chapters. An exceptionally skilled writer, Hart knows the scholarly and popular literature well and wears his erudition lightly (only specialists will crave more endnotes). Even those conversant with current trends in scholarship will benefit from his succinct and judicious observations. In deconstructing the myths of the first day on the Somme, for example, Hart writes that “In a sense the story of 1 July has been inverted. This was not a tale of incompetence by the British, but rather a reflection on the strength of the German defences, coupled with the malleable resilience of their soldiers” (221).

Hart is at his best in describing the landscape of battle, where the interactions between strategic, tactical, and personal experiences shine through. The chapter on Gallipoli is a small masterpiece. Hart knows the ground well, having written on the campaign recently (see note 1 below). His incisive analysis lends context and urgency to the words of men like Capt. David French, 1st Royal Dublin Fusiliers, who recalls in a letter the moment he disembarked from the SS *River Clyde* on V Beach at Helles on 26 April 1915: “The fellows in the regiment had told me I was getting too fat to run, but those who saw me go through that bit of water changed their opinions later—I ran like hell!!!!” (173).

The deft use of many voices is both a great strength of the book and a potential weakness. Hart knows intimately the manuscript collections at the Imperial War Museums and the National Army Museum in Britain, but, as he freely acknowledges, for non-British combatants he had to rely on secondary sources, which often lack the freshness and unvarnished immediacy of accounts like Captain French’s. On the Turk-

1. Among others, *The Somme* (2006; rpt. NY: Pegasus, 2008); *Aces Falling: War above the Trenches, 1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007); *Gallipoli* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2011); and, with Nigel Steele, *Jutland, 1916: Death in the Grey Wastes* (London: Cassell, 2003) and *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground* (London: Cassell, 2004).

ish side of the bloody stalemate of Gallipoli, we have far fewer voices, apart from the often cited Mustafa Kemal.

My biggest reservation about the book is its lack of balance. Hart's access to primary source archives and his own penetrating insights certainly enrich his history of the *British* experience of the war; this is not even remotely the case in his coverage of the many other combatant states or fronts. While rightly noting that historians have neglected the Russians' role in the war, Hart himself shows little interest in making sense of the vast conflict in the East. His entire account of the Eastern Front, including the collapse of Russia, occupies about a quarter of the space he dedicates to the single year 1917 in the West.

The "more obscure campaigns" (xxi) that Hart ignores altogether include the various battles for Germany's colonies in the early days of the war. The ferocious struggle between the Ottoman and Russian empires in the Caucasus² is barely touched on. It should be a critical topic in any serious history of the war, since it destroyed both empires and expanded the scope of "legitimate" targets of wartime violence to civilians—in this case, most infamously, Armenian subjects of Ottoman rule.

By concentrating narrowly on strategic decision-making, operations, and combat, Hart runs the risk of falling into a very old trap in the history of the First World War. Combatants did not fight and perish in a vacuum. It must be realized that the war was prosecuted by highly mobilized, aggressive societies and involved complex, constantly renegotiated relationships among the belligerent states. While not every historian of the war need adopt a vast, integrated, global approach,³ any synthesis must try to clarify the connections between fronts, home fronts, and states in a world at war. To disregard such relationships is to miss the significance and the ultimately formative nature of the First World War.

Historians have long recognized the enormous disjuncture between the war's proximate cause (the shooting of a none-too-popular dynastic heir by a band of nationalist fanatics in a violent corner of Europe) and the horrific global conflict that it spawned. For better or worse, millions of Europeans and others believed they were fighting for something real during those terrible years. Without acknowledging that fact, we cannot truly appreciate the resilience of the armies and societies who waged the war. In their seminal consideration of the subject, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker identify a "Great Paradox": that the war and all its sustained violence was "accepted in 1914–18, and much later *rejected* The general disenchantment that set in during the 1920s with the crusading spirit that had animated and motivated the combatants of 1914–18 remains essentially opaque to us."⁴ If the conflict was "a human tragedy," this was less a consequence of the years of war than an indictment of the failed postwar order that followed.

Despite its shortcomings, *The Great War* is an engaging, highly readable account that will appeal widely to readers of military history. Peter Hart's insights and lucid prose earn his book a place on bookshelves already groaning under the weight of new overviews of the twentieth century's first global war.

2. Aply chronicled by Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2011).

3. As in, e.g., Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. 1: *To Arms* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2001).

4. *14–18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (NY: Hill & Wang, 2003) 170–71.