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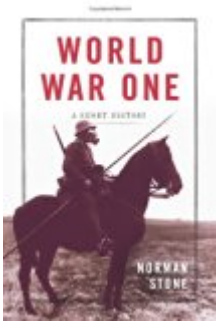
Norman Stone. *World War One: A Short History.* New York: Basic Books, 2009. xi + 186 pp. $16.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-465-01368-5.



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Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

Norman Stone has always been something of an iconoclast, whether attacking the great British historian E. H. Carr, grappling with the question of the Armenian genocide, denigrating the quality and scent of English undergraduates, or, now, writing a concise history of the First World War. He is also an outstanding historian, when he puts his mind to it. Stone's *Europe Transformed* (1983) won the Fontana History of Europe Award, and *The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (1975) won not only the Wolfson History Award but also remains (as Stone modestly points out, p. 171) the seminal work on the topic over thirty years later. Now, as the dust jacket reads, "one of the world's greatest historians has achieved the almost impossible task of writing a brief book on this epic war."

Stone is late to the game of writing short histories of the First World War, however; Sir Michael Howard, the "best living military historian" (according to that book's dust jacket), wrote an even briefer book on this epic war in 2007.[1] Over the past forty years, in fact, almost every "great historian" seems to have stepped up and had a crack at a history of the conflict. Some books are shorter than others, but Stone is not inventing the wheel here.[2] Nor is he trying to. This is not just a history of the First World War; it is a contentious lecture in the style of A. J. P. Taylor, whose own short history of the conflict Stone believes has not gained due respect (p. 173).[3] Stone's work may be designed to remedy the situation.

Stone's turn at the plate is less than masterful, however. Instead of a home run, he produces only a long, loud foul. The opening chapter, for instance, is a straightforward indictment of German policy as the sole cause of the war. There is never a question of other powers' intentions or missteps, or any indication that there is the slightest historical debate about the issue. Where Taylor engaged in historical debates, Stone issues pronouncements. In a single page, Stone returns the following verdicts: "The Warburgs in Hamburg were being told, by a special courier, what to do. Berlin wanted war.... War was to be provoked.... The Austrians were told that they should use [the

Archduke's murder] to attack Serbia, Russia's client" (p. 25). The Habsburgs, in Stone's version, feared war and delayed. "Discreet banging on the table came from Berlin, and ... the ultimatum was sent off.... There was more banging of the table in Berlin, and war was declared on the 28th" (p. 25). There is not a single note or scholarly reference to support any of this claim.

The few notes Stone provides for each chapter read like asides--which they may well be, since the book resembles a condensed version of lecture notes designed to challenge an advanced undergraduate seminar. The style is flippant and authoritative at the same time, a master's lecture on the strategy and high politics of the First World War that dares those students who think they know something to speak up. For while Stone is patient enough to explain what a salient is and how enfilading fire works (pp. 45-46), he also tosses out random declarations, for instance that Italy, "the weakest of the powers," was responsible for the outbreak of the war: "no Cavour, no Bismarck; no Mussolini, no Hitler" (p. 14). Elsewhere, Stone surprisingly notes that the sums expected of Germany in the Treaty of Versailles could have been "extracted from an occupied country, as the Nazis displayed in France during the Second World War and as the European Economic Community did in Germany thereafter" (p. 188). And so it goes.

The sharp, glib rhetorical style Stone displays must make for a fascinating lecture. The narrative has a rich sense of immediacy , accentuated with intimate details, as if Stone knew each figure personally. There is Sir Douglas Haig, "surrounded by creepy young officers, helping him on and off with his coat" (pp. 162-163). We also meet Erich Ludendorff, "a north German farmer's son ... easily awed by the grandeur of the Habsburgs" in 1914, who "began to hit the bottle" after Amiens in 1917 (pp. 58, 173). Tsar Nicholas II apparently licked his own stamps (p. 130). Throw in a handful of references to poems, films, and novels both contemporary and modern, as Stone does, add dashes of jaunty, scornful judgments, and the result is indeed a literary tour de force. The phrase "cannot put it down" does indeed come to mind.

The question remains: Who should pick it up? The *Evening Standard* (again from the dust jacket) suggests that "this stimulating work can be read for pleasure in a single afternoon, even if you are not particularly interested in World War One." Perhaps. The book is certainly entertaining enough, but someone not particularly interested in the subject would likely miss the contrary nature of Stone's arguments and the subtlety of his asides. Indeed, a reader may even be led astray from the actual topic of the book. For the uninitiated undergraduate, there is too much detail; for the scholar there is too little.

Despite Stone's promises of complete coverage of the war, his focus is firmly on high politics. Erich von Falkenhayn, Robert Nivelle, Theobald von Bethman-Hollweg, Woodrow Wilson, and the usual suspects grace the pages frequently. At times, the rapid diplomatic interplay might bewilder those unfamiliar with the political background of the early twentieth century. In Stone's account, strategic concerns begin and end with the major battles of the western front and a few of the lesser-known eastern campaigns. The Italian front is covered in passing (p. 78). There is a good page or three on Turkey's involvement and, to be fair, a long, delicately balanced paragraph on the Turks' interactions with the Armenians during the war. Stone almost ignores the war at sea, and spends even less time on trench warfare. The African portion of the conflict merits no mention. The maps are adequate, but the photographs opening each chapter incidental. *World War One* could, conceivably, serve as an undergraduate text, with the caveat that the instructor would need to provide significant additional lecturing for students to grasp the general contours of the war.

A much better use of the book would be as the central source in an advanced seminar. There,

Stone's literary digressions and sharp jabs would provide more than enough fodder for debate. One idea for a lesson plan might be: "Stone notes that 'Arthur Zimmermann's telegram was Germany's suicide note, written in farce.' Discuss" (p. 125). The professor, of course, would still have to provide significant guidance and explanation. Stone's persistent use of passive voice and the lack of a scholarly apparatus may render it frustrating to all but the most gifted and dogged of graduate students--and not a few professors--but that is probably the point. Norman Stone has laid out a short, neat version of the First World War that, in the true tradition of A. J. P. Taylor, challenges the accepted wisdom of the day. It may be great history, or not; it certainly makes for an interesting excursion.

Notes

[1]. Michael Howard, *The First World War: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[2]. A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War* (New York: Perigee, 1972).

[3]. Spencer Tucker, *The Great War 1914-1918* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); and Michael Lyons, *World War I: A Short History* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1999), are two short histories of note. John Keegan, Ian F. W. Beckett, Martin Gilbert, and H. P. Wilmot, among others, have also written First World War histories of varying length. Taylor's *The First World War* was first published in 1966.