

**David Stevenson.** *1917: War, Peace, and Revolution.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017. pgs \$39.95, hardcover, ISBN 978-0-19-870238-2.

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Much World War I scholarship analyzes how conditions eventually sparked war; another significant body addresses military operations and national experiences during the war. Esteemed historian David Stevenson makes a unique contribution with *1917: War, Peace, and Revolution*, as he describes how World War I leaders made decisions that maintained the conflict's momentum. Stevenson convincingly identifies American entry into war and Tsar Nicholas's abdication as the two most important shaping events of 1917 and presents his findings in three parts. First, an "Atlantic Prologue" demonstrates Great Britain's dire straits as Germany unleashed its U-boat fleet only to provoke the US into action. Part 2 refocuses on continental Europe, with discussions of Nicholas's abdication and then French, Russian, British, and Italian military offensives in turn. Finally, Stevenson widens the geographic aperture in part 3, illuminating the global nature of the conflict and how people used the war to advance their own national interests. Through all these events, Stevenson keys in on the leaders who influenced and made decisions, so much so that the rapidly changing cast of characters becomes cumbersome at times. Thankfully, Stevenson provides an indispensable list of principal personalities for reference. Ultimately, leaders' decisions to maintain the conflict

constructed sources of conflict that would haunt the world through the present.

If hyperbole should ever be accepted in academic scholarship perhaps it is in reference to World War I's consequences. The immense ramifications are readily apparent in Stevenson's narrative. The easy target to highlight is World War II, as 1917 set conditions for Versailles, and its terms sowed the seeds for an even grander conflict. World War I also set favorable conditions for Lenin to launch his revolution which later created space for Stalin and a path to a global polarization which flourished through the Cold War. And while many associate the birth of Israel with World War II, Zionism took firm root in World War I, as British diplomats, under intense pressure to survive as a state, made promises to Jews. Those promises, of course, conflicted with others to the Arabs and France. Ironically, World War I also provided leverage to British India and indeed, began to set the stage for later independence.

From a distance, World War I can seem an impervious web of irrationality and senseless slaughter. However, warfare is a human endeavor, and requires human decisions for subsistence. Stevenson does a phenomenal job throughout the work by demonstrating how human leaders negotiated solutions and made rational decisions to

continue the conflict in pursuit of national interests. He highlights how those leaders faced intense and complex contextual pressures that are difficult to understand in a broad perspective. By approaching the decisions from the viewpoint of each belligerent, decisions begin to make sense given their interpretations of contextual factors, even if hindsight reveals the decisions to be misguided. In 1917, those factors often came in one of five forms: the current state of civil-military relationships, loyalty to already established alliances or agreements, an unwillingness to let go of past losses, concerns over national morale and internal political movements, and, perhaps most importantly in 1917, a continued anxiety and uncertainty concerning what role the United States would eventually play in the conflict. Those themes surface repeatedly throughout the work.

In a world characterized by conflicting agreements and alliances shrouded in secrecy, diplomatic failures often resulted in military offensives. Stevenson illuminates the decision-making processes that led to the disasters of Chemin de Dames, Passchendaele, the Kerensky offensive, and Caporetto. And while the decisions themselves tended to make sense, they were not simple, and decision makers wrestled with pressures. For example, Stevenson's coverage of the French leadership illuminates their grim predicament. To begin, agreements with the British compelled them to uphold their end of the bargain and plan a 1917 offensive on schedule. Their hopes were bolstered by Robert Nivelle's past performance; his leadership offered a glimmer of hope. Conversely, the idea of launching a major offensive felt preposterous given the morale of an army threatening mutiny. Meanwhile, the idea of waiting until the United States could mobilize and provide assistance held sway over some prominent leaders. Regardless, planning and preparation for the assault continued, since divining the future role of the US was difficult at best. Eventually, even as the Germans withdrew from the targeted sector and security was clearly compromised, the

British launched their simultaneous attacks at the agreed upon time. To stand by their allies, the French decided they had to launch theirs on the Chemin de Dames, and met horrific results. Military capability and morale suffered extensively. Stevenson posits this event as a primary shaper of French reluctance to take the offensive through 1940. Leaders for all the war's participants faced similar sets of pressures which accumulated to make decisions exceedingly difficult.

Stevenson draws extensively from various archives and contemporary sources to demonstrate how leaders made decisions. In fact, much of the rich narrative is drawn from official meeting minutes and provides some exceptionally detailed deliberations. Others, especially Russia's deliberations, are admittedly less clear as no formal records were created. Even without official minutes to draw from, Stevenson paints an instructive picture of decision making under pressure, ties decisions to battlefield actions, and extrapolates long-term results.

In short, Stevenson demonstrates how World War I bred conflict. The deeply rooted imperative for leaders to secure favorable outcomes for their states left them with few alternatives to pursue. Peace feelers failed as heads of state simply refused to relent on their war demands, especially when events seemed to be trending in a positive direction. Conversely, when things trended badly, it only gave the leaders more impetus to choose conflict, continue the fight, and avoid an undesirable peace. Options that did emerge amidst this political-military complexity often led to bigger and more fiercely contested conflicts in the post-war environment. Faced with difficult decisions, and pressured by time, leaders opted to act, and perhaps made bad situations even worse.

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