Robert Gerwarth’s *The Vanquished* presents a series of stark images in its opening pages. Gerwarth describes the moment when a Turkish cavalry unit entered Smyrna, a city on the coast of Anatolia that had belonged to the Ottomans since the fourteenth century. The city was ancient and its population was cosmopolitan, consisting of Muslims, Jews, and Armenian and Greek Orthodox Christians. The Ottoman Empire and subsequent Turkish Republic had been in a state of war with a variety of opponents for over ten years, dating back to Italy’s invasion of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1911. But, as Gerwarth tells us, this Turkish unit was not welcomed home like Homer’s Odysseus. That is because the population did not consider the Turks as a friendly army coming home. The Greeks, with the encouragement of the British government, had invaded Anatolia in 1919, using Smyrna as their base of operations for a violent invasion in which Greek troops committed countless atrocities against Turkish Muslims, aided by Christians among the local population. By September 1922, after three years of fighting, the Greek army had been beaten by the armies of Mustafa Kemal, the future Atatürk. They withdrew from Anatolia, looting and murdering on their way.

The Turkish cavalry unit exacted a retribution on the Christian citizens of the town, helped by an angry Turkish mob. Violence was the order of the day for two weeks as an estimated thirty thousand people were killed and “many more were robbed, beaten, or raped by Turkish soldiers, paramilitaries and local teenage gangs” (p. 3). Turks set fire to the Christian quarters, driving the Christians out of their hiding places. They escaped to the quay along the waterfront where twenty-one Allied warships had a good view of things on the shore. Fire approached them from all sides as Turkish troops cordoned off the area and allowed no one to escape. The Allies refused to intervene. As the Allies watched, the citizens of Smyrna died among the flames or chose to drown in the water.

Gerwarth does not present the events of Smyrna in September 1922 as some exotic episode on the edge of Europe or as a moment of violence and brutalization that comes merely at the end of the First World War. Rather, the deliberate murder of civilians as retribution and ethnic cleansing is central to a larger story that has been ignored by much history writing on the First World War and its aftermath. In fact, the central point of this book is that the common narrative that the First World War ended on November 11, 1918, is a story that only makes sense to the Western Allies, especially the British and the French. For the rest of the belligerents of the First World War, the vanquished, the world war was trans-
formed into civil wars and border conflicts that were as violent and disruptive as the war itself. Moreover, it was these episodes of violence that had lasting influence in the years following the official end of hostilities in 1918.

Gerwarth’s story is woven together mostly from secondary sources, with some memoir material that adds texture to the narrative. And this is a book where narrative prose, pulling together episodes that stretch from Finland in the north to Palestine in the south, dominates. Gerwarth often chooses to recount episodes of violence rather than offer dense scholarly analyses of the larger meaning of the events themselves. This book is especially more show than tell.

Gerwarth’s story is one where peace was not absolute, but precarious and often absent. The focus of the book is about the story of the “vanquished”; Gerwarth tells us that his book “aims to reconstruct the experiences of people living in those countries that were on the losing side in the Great War: the Habsburg, Romanov, Hohenzollern and Ottoman empires (and their successor states), as well as Bulgaria” (p. 6). Tellingly, he also includes in his story Greece and Italy, those countries that “lost the peace,” though they may have been victorious in the war itself. In doing so, Gerwarth hopes not only to show new connections but also to build on a historiography that has largely rehabilitated the prewar histories of the large land empires in the East. The implicit argument of those histories has been that these far-from-perfect empires were nonetheless less violent and more progressive than the nation-states that followed them. Gerwarth shows how violent the conclusion of the First World War really was, drawing our attention to the years 1917-23, which contained important moments for the forging of the interwar period and the twentieth century.

Gerwarth shows how the successor states to the empires and their fellow defeated powers were forged in war and violence. This violence continued to shape their policies in the interwar period. Moreover, the conflicts “that erupted after 1917-18” “occurred after a century in which European states had more or less successfully managed to assert their monopoly on legitimate violence, in which national armies had become the norm, and in which the fundamentally important distinction between combatants and non-combatants had been codified (even if frequently breached in practice)” (p. 13). Gerwarth says that the First World War failed to end, or more specifically, that violence begun in the war did not end, because it transformed into violence that was not exercised exclusively by men in uniform, directed by states, and mostly directed on the field of battle. Violence itself became democratized. The end of the First World War in Europe and the Ottoman Empire dissolved into violence that “was infinitely more ungovernable.” What motivated this violence was a deeper understanding of the conflict as an existential one, “fought to annihilate the enemy, be they ethnic or class enemies.” States no longer had a firm hand on violence, and militias of various political persuasions assumed the role of the national army for themselves. In the meantime, “the lines between friends and foes, combatants and civilians, became terrifyingly unclear” (p. 13).

How violence became transformed in the First World War and how that transformed violence carried over into the interwar period frames the larger arc of the book’s 267 pages of prose. The book starts with the Russian Revolutions of 1917, which eventually resulted in Lenin pulling Soviet Russia out of the war. Germany and Austria-Hungary signed a punitive peace with Russia at Brest-Litovsk, stripping away large swathes of territory and creating new nation-states that would serve as satellites for the Central powers. Peace in the East held the promise of restoring the bodies of Central Europeans and reinforcing other active fronts in the war. In fact, in early 1918, the war actually looked winnable to Germany and its allies. All powers, from the Ottoman Empire to Germany, prepared new offensives to knock the Allied powers out of the war. Germany amassed its forces in preparation for an all-out assault in the West. Gerwarth says that the taste of victory filtered from the high commands and leadership into the general populace on the home front.

But such optimism quickly turned out to be an illusion—one that came crashing down with an unstoppable force just a few months later. After routing the Italian army at Caporetto, Austria-Hungary’s army dissolved with a horrifically failed offensive on the Piave. The Bulgarians, despite occupying large parts of southern Serbia and defeating Romania in Dobruja, were starving at home. The length of the war threatened to take them out by 1917. The Ludendorff Offensives stalled in the West. German troops started to blame their military leadership. Against the backdrop of all this was the promise and hope offered by Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, which offered a peace without an outright victory or annihilation on the battlefield. Gerwarth does not say so explicitly, but his treatment of these events suggests that historians should keep in mind the imagination of both the military leadership and the people on the home front in 1917-18. They imagined victory, a lift-
The Bolshevik Revolution provides the framing events for the second part of the book, consisting of five central chapters. The Bolshevik Revolution produced more violence, both in the ways it generated class-based violence to take over the institutions of the state and in the ways that it generated violent responses from governments, partisans, and new states. When the armistice was declared in the West on November 11, 1918, war began anew in the East. The Russian Red Army—not yet the Soviet Union—went on a campaign to reconquer the western borderlands of the former tsarist empire. This was a stroke at rearranging, by military force, the borders agreed to at Brest-Litovsk in March. Emboldened by revolutions in Berlin, Vienna, and Budapest, the Red Army marched west. War continued as Germany was asked by the Allies to keep its troops in the East. Ethnic German minorities were cobbled together to form voluntary defense forces, which named themselves the Freikorps—recalling from the German volunteer forces that expelled Napoleon in 1813. Gerwarth points out that the new form of war that had emerged was different than the organized battles of the western front between 1914 and 1918. The form of war that emerged after 1918 was a “conflict without clearly demarcated battle lines or readily identifiable combatants.” Uniforms were improvised and German troops fighting against the ragtag forces of the Bolsheviks perceived a guerrilla war, in which the “opponent had to be fought ruthlessly and killed without remorse.” Austro-Hungarian troops faced similar levels of confusion in their war in the Balkans and likewise responded with excesses of violence. But what was new here was the idea that “no one could be left alive” (p. 71). The Freikorps engaged in struggles where the enemies were everywhere and civilians were all, in some form or another, combatants.

The Russian Civil War was also replete with such new categories of enemy. Gerwarth follows recent studies that also extend the First World War into a continuum of violence into the Russian Civil War. He writes that the Russian Civil War "was, in fact, a whole of overlapping and mutually reinforcing conflicts: a rapidly escalating struggle between the armed forces of Lenin’s Bolshevik government and its ‘counter-revolutionary’ opponents; the attempts by several regions on the western border of the former Russian Empire to break away entirely from Petrograd’s rule; and peasant insurgencies, triggered by the Communists’ forced requisitions of desperately needed foodstuffs” (p. 77). Add foreign intervention and we have a long, violent crisis. The Russian Civil War cost, at our best estimates, the lives of three million people.

Retaliatory violence became part of the continuum of violence in the Russian Civil War. And the violence was extreme. General Roman, Baron von Unger-Sternberg, presided over horrific slaughter of Bolsheviks and their supporters. Antisemitic violence accompanied the Whites as they noted the number of Jews among the Bolshevik leadership. Bolsheviks became synonymous with Jews and used as a new excuse for violence against Jews. In other places, the existence of violence and the general lawlessness that appeared in the scorched earth that lay in an army’s path helped open up old antisemitic prejudices and the acceptability of violence against Jews. From Latvia to Poland and Ukraine, armies harassed and often slaughtered Jewish civilians. In Lwów, once Polish troops expelled Ukrainian troops to claim the town for Poland, Polish troops cordoned off the city’s Jewish quarter and began massacring Jewish men of military age. Seventy-three Jews died in a three-day pogrom that laid waste to the Jewish quarter.

Antisemitic violence served old hatreds and new ways of justifying such hatred. But much of the violence was also about claiming territory and giving the Allies deliberating the peace in Paris a series of faits accomplis that they had to accept as they redrew the map of Europe. Poland remained in a state of war, claiming and defending territory, from its founding through 1921. “The practice of land-grabbing with the aim of creating new realities before the Allies in Paris could make up their minds was by no means unique to the Polish.” Gerwarth tells us that this happened all over former Habsburg Central Europe as “all victorious successor states of the defunct Habsburg Empire tried to expand their borders through paramilitary action, in order to establish fresh ‘realities’” (p. 194). Within this use of force to draw the new boundaries of Europe, ethnic cleansing became a key feature to make the population conform and justify those borders, whether by expulsion or outright murder. Czech troops massacred Germans in the Sudetenland (itself a new invention of the interwar period) on March 4, 1919. Similar waves of violence occurred in the former Habsburg Crownland of Carinthia as it was contested by the newly formed Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SCS) and the German-Austrian Republic.
In the meantime, the vanquished established parliamentary democracies in the hopes that they were taking on forms to fit into the postwar order. They also imagined that the Allies would treat them as new friends at Paris. Instead, the delegations of Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, Ottoman Turkey, and Germany were treated as the enemy. Then they were presented with treaties that spelled out territorial losses, financial punishment, and military emasculation. Gerwarth says that such treatment of the vanquished further destabilized the regimes and peace. For instance, most Germans condemned the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles as outright criminal. Reformers in Germany thought that the Allies had betrayed them and that their reforms had been in vain.

But Gerwarth goes beyond Germany. He says that historians have ignored the fact that the rest of the defeated powers had fared worse than Germany. Austria and Hungary, after losing territory, were saddled with the empire’s entire war debt, while the new nation-states carved out of the old empire were treated as victors. Austro-Germans in Bohemia, in Italy, in the SCS, and other places in east central Europe were now subjects of new nation-states, where they were treated as untrustworthy aliens and deprived of their right of self-determination. Hungary lost two-thirds of its prewar territory, lost 73 percent of its population, and had collapsed economically. The Treaty of Neuilly forced Bulgaria to cede eleven thousand square kilometers of territory—including Western Thrace, which was handed over to Greece, and four border areas to the SCS—and was required to pay a “staggering” reparations bill of 2250 million gold francs, over thirty-seven years. This was the highest reparations bill of all the Central powers. The ceding of territory led to Bulgarian refugees from those regions. Turkey likewise was treated severely. The Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, the last of the Paris Peace Treaties, was signed with the sultan’s government under Damad Ferid. In this treaty, the Allies clearly intended not to secure the peace or secure the rights of self-determination of peoples, but rather to appease their own appetites for footholds in Anatolia and the Levant. Constantinople would rule over a severely reduced territory while Greece was allocated Smyrna and the surrounding area. The Armenians received vast areas of eastern Anatolia; Kurdistan was to become an autonomous region. The Bosporus was placed under international administration. But the Turks, now under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, never ratified the treaty and instead fought its implementation, which brings us back to the episode in Smyrna, recounted at the beginning of the book.

According to Gerwarth, resentment against the treaties fueled a sense of humiliation of defeat. “Worse still, the application of the principle of national self-determination to territories of mind-boggling ethnic complexity was at best naïve and, in practice, an invitation to transform the violence of the First World War into a multitude of border conflicts and civil wars” (p. 214). Gerwarth places such violence on par with, or even exceeding, the Paris Peace Treaties in their importance in shaping the postwar order.

Gewarth’s *The Vanquished* stands out as an important, subtly provocative work that seeks to shift our narratives of the interwar period beyond the end of the War in the West, beyond Germany’s defeat, and beyond the Treaty of Versailles. It does this not through hard assertion but through anecdotes and solid evidence. It should be seen as a summation of decades of scholarship, one that puts stories once swept under the rug and forgotten in the center of the twentieth century’s violent and turbulent history. For this, we should be grateful. This book deserves a wide readership, both in the broader public and the undergraduate classroom.

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