



10-30-2019

Review of Pandora's Box: A History of the First World War

Ian A. Isherwood
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/idsfac>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [European History Commons](#)

[Share feedback](#) about the accessibility of this item.

Recommended Citation

Isherwood, Ian. Review of *Pandora's Box: A History of the First World War*, by Jörn Leonhard. *Journal of World History* 30, no. 4 (2019): 621-624.

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/idsfac/32>

This open access review is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Review of Pandora's Box: A History of the First World War

Abstract

Perhaps the gravest difficulty with any single volume book on the Great War is taming the war's complexities while still maintaining a degree of nuance and insight that goes beyond the temptation for simplification. Indeed, the war's scale itself makes this task even more unmanageable. How can an author possibly offer a nuanced treatment that takes into consideration a war fought on three continents, not to mention, the political and social realities on the war's many home fronts and the changing dynamics of differing and complex societies under strain? To be comprehensive is an impossible task especially given the wealth of history written about the war's many subfields and distinct niche subjects. No historian can truly have mastery of the Great War's deep and broad literatures and no single volume can possibly be "comprehensive." *[excerpt]*

Keywords

Great war, history

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | European History | History

Book Reviews

Pandora's Box: A History of the First World War. By JÖRN LEONHARD. Translated by Patrick Camiller. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018. 1087 pp. \$39.95 (hardcover).

Perhaps the gravest difficulty with any single volume book on the Great War is taming the war's complexities while still maintaining a degree of nuance and insight that goes beyond the temptation for simplification. Indeed, the war's scale itself makes this task even more unmanageable. How can an author possibly offer a nuanced treatment that takes into consideration a war fought on three continents, not to mention, the political and social realities on the war's many home fronts and the changing dynamics of differing and complex societies under strain? To be comprehensive is an impossible task especially given the wealth of history written about the war's many subfields and distinct niche subjects. No historian can truly have mastery of the Great War's deep and broad literatures and no single volume can possibly be "comprehensive."

This is not to indicate that the task of a one-volume history is impossible, but only as a caveat to its difficulty. Others have written one-volume histories that provide both insight and depth, while also to sustaining the attention spans of both the public and specialists. Hew Strachan's condensed survey of the war *The First World War* is a model of both brevity and complexity, the chapters arranged neatly around conceptual themes important to understanding the trajectory of the

war's most important and decisive theatres and campaigns.¹ More comprehensive is David Stevenson's masterful *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*, which approaches the war from the perspective of the political failure of peace and the dismantling of the existing political world order by war.² Michael Neiberg's pithy *Fighting the Great War* is another admirable one-volume work, one that provides a sense of clarity, especially as an introduction for American students who might not have the same background as Europeans for whom the war is more acutely a part of their felt history.³ All of these authors sought to limit their framework in order to draw out the war's major themes—its causes, its conduct on multiple fronts, and its lasting consequences—in a way that makes sense of the war's complexities, while also offering concrete explanations for the reader.

Jörn Leonhard's *Pandora's Box* is the latest (and likely largest) single-volume history of the First World War. Leonhard is the Friedrich-Schiller Professor of West European History at the University of Freiburg and is a specialist in modern history, particularly, of the political culture of liberalism and nationalism in central Europe. His latest book is a masterful synthesis of current scholarship in First World War studies and might be the most comprehensive one-volume history of the war. The book is a phenomenal achievement of research across national boundaries and across camps of interpretation. It is an incredibly sophisticated weaving together of erudite academic research from all corners, sides, and indeed, even from the obscure recesses of the field. Those in doubt of the book's depth and breadth of the existing literature should consult its seventy-two pages of bibliography which bears witness to the very firm foundation in which Leonhard has built his house.

The organization of the book is complicated and the chapters lengthy. *Pandora's Box* is divided into ten thematic chronological chapters that are then divided into sub-chapters that each read like essays on a particular subject or concept important to understanding the overall chapter. For example, chapter 2—Antecedents—is divided into four subchapters: “balances of power and dynamics of change,” “conflict areas and action logics,” “panoramas of progress, scenarios of war,” and “master narratives and open outcomes.” This method of

¹ Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Viking, 2004).

² David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

³ Michael Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

organization allows for absorption of each of the key analytical points on each topic. The central drawback to this style of organization is that it places greater emphasis on argumentation rather than exposition and a more clear-cut linear narrative. So, if the reader wants the story of the war, then they have to piece it together through the argumentation, rather than having it unfold for them, as is the case with narrative history. That being written, with only ten chapters in a 900-page book, the subchapters also make reading each chapter more manageable.

A few of the chapters stand out for their mastery. Chapter 3, “Drift and Escalation,” is a comprehensive survey of the literature on the war’s causation, one that presents a nuanced argument. Rather than blaming vague systemic causes such as nationalism or the alliance system, Leonhard instead rightly looked for answers in the motivations of decision makers towards the July Crisis. His conclusion, that those decision makers “failed because of competing and conflicting action logics, because of assumptions and perceptions about one another that created a reality of their own” (p. 110) is supported by much contemporary scholarship on the subject. Similarly, chapter 5 “Wearing Down and Holding Out,” though unwieldy at times, makes a compelling argument that the essential year for transformation of the conflict was in 1916–1917 and that attrition led to changes in the way that Europeans saw war. The next chapter, “Expansion and Erosion” covers the global military and political crises of the year 1917, but also demonstrates the dynamic way that the war changed European and world history through the strikes, mutinies, and revolution of that year. The final two chapters—entitled “Memories” and “Burdens” are short summaries of the war’s legacies. For a book as long and as ambitious in its scope and scale as this, these chapters read like an afterthought and could have been combined for a more comprehensive conclusion.

As broad as the book is in its absorption of secondary literature, it is an exhausting survey. The format of chapters and subchapters and emphasis on numbering important points of analysis make this book a particularly dense read, one that is intimidating in its erudition. Pandora’s box is not light nor is it to be taken lightly. Indeed, this is not a beginner’s survey of the Great War, but one in which the reader needs a strong background in the war’s conduct to understand fully the points being made and their relevance to the historiography. A more than general knowledge of the subject would help the reader get the most out of the book. This very minor point about the book’s sophistication should not diminish what is a brilliant synthesis of the history of the

Great War. This one-volume history is both nuanced and dynamic and it is one of the best works of history written during the centenary.

IAN ISHERWOOD
Gettysburg College

A Local History of Global Capital: Jute and Peasant Life in the Bengal Delta. By TARIQ OMAR ALI. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 272 pp. \$39.95 (hardcover).

A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World. By ERIKA RAPPAPORT. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. 568 pp. \$39.50 (hardcover).

Both Tariq Omar Ali and Erika Rappaport present ways of integrating the local with the global, which add to the discipline of World History. Ali's book is a local history, which considers the influence of global markets upon a specific location: the jute-growing tracts of the Bengal delta, which today is largely in Bangladesh. Rappaport instead provides a voluminous global history of tea, which considers its production in China and India but focuses mostly on its consumption in Britain and many other regions, including India, South Africa, North America, and Australia. In many ways, the differences and overlap between these two books shows both the benefits and pitfalls to thinking about histories of goods and markets both globally and locally at the same time. In this way, we can still consider global commodity chains and the economic interconnectedness of different regions, yet do not depend on the abstract universalism of economic laws. For example, both books complicate the law of supply and demand by showing local variations: Ali's book investigates Bengali influences on the production and supply of jute while Rappaport looks at the various social forces which shaped the demand for tea in each location she studies. A variety of scholars have been complicating these universal economic laws for quite some time,¹ but these two books still present a valuable contribution to this genre.

Ali's book is truly a history from below. The center of his history is the peasants who grew jute, many of whom suffered great immiseration

¹ Sydney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York; London: Penguin Books, 1985); Marshall Sahlins, "Cosmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of 'the world system,'" in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, volume LXXIV (1988), 1–52.