

Review Article: The Eastern Front and the First World War

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S. McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011), xii + 324, ISBN: 978-0674-07233-6; D. Lieven, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London: Penguin, 2015), ix + 429, ISBN: 978-0-141-39974-4; D.R. Stone, *The Russian Army in the Great War: the Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015), xii + 360, ISBN: 978-0 700-62095-1; G.A. Tunstall, *The Austro-Hungarian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), x + 466, ISBN: 978-0-521-18124-2; A. Watson, *The Fortress: the Great Siege of Przemyśl* (London: Penguin, 2019), xxii + 346, ISBN: 978-0-141-98633-3; A. Gendler, *Khurbm, 1914-1922: Prelude to the Holocaust* (New York: Varda, 2019), ISBN: 978-1-590-45101-4; J. Veidlinger, *In the Midst of Civilised Europe: the Pogroms of 1918-1921 and Origins of the Holocaust* (London: Henry Holt & Co., 2021), 468, ISBN: 978-1-509-86744-8; P. Gatrell, *Russia's First World War: a Social and Economic History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), xxi + 318, ISBN: 0-582-32818-1.

Although the bicentenary of the First World Wars is now well behind us, publishing houses across the English-speaking world continue to produce new works on the subject that are in many cases worthy of attention, while the twenty years or more that we have witnessed of levels of scholarly activity not seen since the 1960s mean that said works have been taking their place in a crowded field, and, what is more, a crowded field that is increasingly diverse: while books on such topics as the British army, the Somme and Passchendaele continue to abound, there have also been greatly increased levels of recognition of the importance of other theatres of war and indeed other armies. In what is hoped will be the first of a series of such articles, in this piece we will look at the Eastern Front and, in particular, the experiences and war efforts of arch-rivals Russia and Austria-Hungary, the hope being that readers will thereby be inspired to delve rather more than they might otherwise do so into the political and social context of battles and battlefields.¹

¹ For many years, the only English-language text on Russia's war with Germany and Austria-Hungary was Norman Stone's *The Eastern Front* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975). In the opinion of the current author, while this work has now been joined by a fair selection of other studies, it has yet to be displaced from the pre-eminent position it has held hitherto, and, more than that, remains indispensable. However, for an alternative introduction that may be a little more accessible, see D. Boyd, *The Other First World War: the Blood-Soaked Russian Fronts, 1914-1922* (Chiselhurst: History Press, 2014).

Ever since the guns fell silent on 11 November 1918, there has been a long and sometimes extremely bitter debate on the origins of the catastrophe that overwhelmed Europe and, indeed, the wider world, four years previously. For most of the current author's lifetime, the prevailing view has been a modified version of the famous Fritz-Fischer thesis known as 'grasping after world power'. In its purest form – the claim that Germany seized upon the murder of the Archduke Franz-Ferdinand to engineer a war that would enable her to make a bid for a great colonial empire – this has long since been discredited, it having been established beyond any doubt whatsoever that no-one in power in Berlin in 1914 was thinking of any such thing and, further, that, if more-or-less ambitious 'shopping lists' of territorial demands quickly emerged in the wake of the outbreak of hostilities, these were a response to the fact that Germany found herself at war rather the reflection of a settled plan of aggression. However, just because the issue of territorial aggrandisement could no longer be regarded as a factor in Germany's actions, this does not mean that the Wilhelmine régime was innocent: with alarm growing at, first, the evident slide in the fortunes of Austria-Hungary, and, second, the rapid Russian recovery from the humiliations of the Russo-Japanese War and the revolution of 1905, it was all too clear that Berlin had plenty of other reasons for precipitating a crisis that would allow the implementation the Schlieffen Plan – Germany's one and only strategic option – before this last was rendered inoperable by changing conditions on the ground. With evidence plentiful that Germany egged on Austria-Hungary to take a hard line against Serbia even at the cost of provoking Russia into war and all that that would mean, the result was that Fischer continued to dominate the field. However, even for those favourable to the notion of German guilt, there has always been one point which has never failed to give pause to any of them with a shred of honesty. In brief, given that the key moment which expanded a Balkan squabble into a European conflict was the Russian decision to mobilise in support of Serbia, it is impossible not at the very least to wonder whether Saint Petersburg should not bear some share of the blame.

In so far as this last issue is concerned, the standard view of the situation is that, still reeling from the humiliation of the Russo-Japanese war, the régime of Nicholas II simply could not risk a further setback in the field of foreign policy and was therefore trapped into a position of belligerence by its own weakness, though this is not to say that many elements of the Russian state and political nation did not see going to war as a chance of further imperial aggrandisement. So far so good. At this point, however, enter Sean McMeekin, the Turkish-based author of several key works on the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, and with him his new *Russian Origins of the First World War*. Thus, in McMeekin's view, Russia was far more

the villain of the piece than has hitherto been allowed. In brief, far from taking a purely reactive role in the July Crisis, Saint Petersburg rather actively sought to drive events forward in pursuit of goals that were about much more than mere political stability. Broadly speaking, the argument runs as follows. Germany, it is generally argued, needed a war to break out in 1914, the impending completion of the Russian programme of the construction of strategic railways that had for some years been underway in the western borderlands meaning that the Ballplatz would thereafter run out of options. However, true enough though this is, the Russians faced a similar problem in that in the summer of 1914 Constantinople was due to take delivery of two ultra-modern battleships that had been under construction for her in Britain and completely outclassed such rather limited naval resources as the Russians possessed in the Black Sea. Given the fact that the Turks controlled the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus alike, there was no way that the powerful battle-fleet that the Russians had been building at Saint Petersburg could be of any assistance, it followed that the only thing to be done was to strike now and, at the very least seize control of the Bosphorus as, in effect, an outwork of the key naval base of Sevastopol. To this extent, Russian thinking on the issue was purely defensive, but many influential figures in the régime wanted far more than this, believing that Russia was destined to take over, not just the territories surrounding the Dardanelles, the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara, including the city of Constantinople, but also the wide swathes of eastern Anatolia in which the Christian Armenians were the largest ethnic group, if not in an actual majority. With the Ottomans possessed of a command of the sea that was unlikely to be challenged any time soon (while Russia did have three new battleships on the stocks in Odessa, even the first of these was unlikely to be available until late in 1915), once again the way forward was war, it being either that or sit back and watch a century or more of military endeavour drain into the sand. In much the same way as the Germans did, then, the Russians seized on the July Crisis as a way out, what McMeekin shows being that they actually started mobilising well before the moment they officially did so on 30 July and thereby greatly accelerated the pace of events.

All this said, McMeekin is far from entirely convincing in the contention that he makes on the basis of the above arguments, namely that Russia was at least as guilty as Germany in the immediate causation of the First World War. While it is certainly true that Saint Petersburg manifestly failed to stop a Balkan crisis from escalating into a European one and, in the instances of many prominent figures fell with gleeful abandon upon the opportunity seemingly afforded tsardom by Austria's move against Serbia, it was Vienna and Berlin that opened the floodgates. To make matters worse, far too much of the evidence presented by McMeekin comes over as either purely circumstantial or is presented in such a way that it can only be

described as highly *parti-pris*. As a good example, we can here cite the rhetorical questions with which he bombards the reader in respect of Russia's decision to initiate preparations for war (as he would put it) immediately news broke of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia on 24 July. Thus:

Why, after all, if Sazonov and Krivoshein [the Russian Foreign Minister and his chief ally in the Council of Ministers] wished merely to safeguard Serbia's independence, did they mobilise not only thirteen entire army corps ... but also the fleets of the Baltic and the Black Sea, neither of which bodies of water were contiguous at any point to Austria-Hungary (or Serbia, for that matter)? Why did they include Odessa alongside Kazan, Kiev and Moscow among the four military districts in which the ominous "Period Preparatory to War" was inaugurated – a district where recent operational planning focused on amphibious operations against Constantinople? (p. 59).

The answer, of course is quite simple – in brief, along with every other government in Europe, the leaders of Russia recognised that the crisis could very easily spark off a general war, and that this was, in consequence, something in respect of which they could not but ensure that they were not caught short – but McMeekin does not offer so much as a gesture in the direction of this caveat, and instead continually falls back on mere assertion, it therefore being the opinion of the current author that, in however modified a form, it is the Fischer thesis that remains vigent.

If McMeekin's central argument is, at the very least open to question, this does not mean that his book should be thrown aside. Despite the title of his book, it is not just the July Crisis towards which McMeekin directs his attention. On the contrary, in pursuit of his determination to prove that Russia was fighting a war of aggression which had little or nothing to do with Serbia, he also reviews many aspects of Saint Petersburg's conduct of the war, not the least of which is its weaponization of the Ottoman Empire's Christian minorities. It is here, perhaps, that McMeekin is at his most effective, his argument being that, determined to make use of the increasingly disaffected Armenians, in particular, as a 'fifth column', in the wake of the outbreak of war, the Russians strove by every possible means to push them into a full-scale revolt. In this, of course, they soon succeeded, 13 April 1915 seeing bands of Armenian nationalists seizing the city of Van and turning on its unfortunate Muslim inhabitants, but the logical corollary of a rapid drive into the interior to take advantage of the rebellion and save the Armenians from Turkish retribution was not immediately forthcoming. That this was not entirely the fault of Russian backsliding – within three weeks of the events in Van, the Germans and Austro-Hungarians had launched a massive offensive in Galicia that soon had their

opponents in wholesale retreat and thereby threw the whole of the Eastern Front into crisis – is true enough, but, even so, it is very hard to acquit the Russians of at least a part-share in the responsibility for the horrific events that transpired in the wake of the suppression of the revolt in Van, namely the murder or death from disease and starvation of anything up to 2,000,000 Armenians. That many of these unfortunates would probably have perished anyway is true enough, but, even so, it is a shoddy tale.²

McMeekin, however, is not the only historian to have been giving thought to Russia's role in the origins of the First World War. We come here to the highly accomplished pen of Dominic Lieven. A Russian specialist rather than a Turkish one, Lieven is, as might be expected, far more inclined to give the régime of Nicholas II at the very least a favourable hearing, if not the benefit of the doubt. As such *Towards the Flame* could not possibly be more different from *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, in which respect we can do no better than compare and contrast their characterization of the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Sazonov. Whereas McMeekin portrays the latter as both fundamentally dishonest and a war monger and claims the 'he must now stand in the dock of historical judgement' (p. 238), Lieven sees him as 'one of the most decent men ever to head Russia's Foreign Ministry'. (p. 366). Equally, while McMeekin insists that Sazonov was bent on – even obsessed with – seizing Constantinople and the Straits when he came to power, Lieven points out that, 'before the outbreak of World War One, Sazonov not only rejected the specific proposals put to him by his close ally, Boris Trubetskoy, to the effect that taking Constantinople would benefit Russia or should be a goal of Russian foreign policy' and 'did not commit himself even as regards seeking Russian possession just of the Straits' (p. 255).

From all this it follows that readers of *Towards the Flame* will not find anything like the same narrative as that put forward by McMeekin. On the contrary, Lieven, whose work came out four years after *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, is all but open in his denunciation of the latter's thesis. As Lieven writes, 'In German propaganda, and sometimes in the works of historians, the fact that Russia was the first to authorise general mobilisation is used as an argument for pinning responsibility on Saint Petersburg for the outbreak of war ... In my opinion, there is a little truth in this accusation, but not much ... If one concentrates just

² There is a growing line of thought that regards a wholesale assault on the Armenian people, if not their outright extermination, as being something that had been decided on well before the revolt in Van and, further, that the Ottoman Empire's entry into the First World War was in large part a ploy designed to open the way for such a policy. See, for example, T. Akçam, *A Shameful Act: the Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (London: Henry Holt & Co., 2007), 113-57, and B. Morris & D. Zeevi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 244-62.

on the July Crisis itself, then responsibility for the outbreak of war rests overwhelmingly on the shoulders of Berlin and Vienna' (pp. 337-8). However, if the account he offers of the origins of the war is, in consequence, essentially in tune with the neo-Fischerite line, this does not mean that *Towards the Flame* is lacking in original material. On the contrary, readers will profit enormously from what is its central theme, namely the emergence in the wake of the reforms of the 'October Manifesto' of a vibrant and often violently nationalistic press whose voice could not be ignored, the suggestion being that, even had it wished to do otherwise, the régime could not afford to take anything other than a hard line in the face of the Austrian threat to Serbia, given the repeated humiliations it had suffered in successive Balkan crises in the years before 1914.

So much for the context of the epic struggle that raged in Eastern Europe from 1914 to 1917. What, though, of the actual fighting? In understanding the course and outcome of any given war, it is always important to begin with a clear appreciation of the rival armed forces and their capabilities. So far as this particular aspect of the subject is concerned, the student is well served. Let us begin here with the Russian army. While there are earlier studies that could be mentioned in this respect such as those by Ward Rutherford and Nicholas Cornish, in this review we shall concentrate on David Stone's *The Russian Army in the Great War*. This is, perhaps, a little disappointing in that it is in large part a campaign history, but the reader is nonetheless afforded plenty of details of a force that was anything but the ramshackle assembly of Communist propaganda: reasonably well-versed on the subject though he is, even the current reviewer was surprised to discover that among the troops who marched off to war in 1914 was the world's very first armoured unit (to be precise, a company of ten armoured cars, including at least one armed with a 76mm gun). What the army struggled with, then, was not so much military backwardness, but rather the manifold deficiencies of the political, social and economic context in which it was operating, of which by far the worst was the inadequate nature of much of the Russian railway system (had the connections with Murmansk, Archangel and Vladivostok been better, for example, the terrible shortages of weapons and ammunition that at times bedevilled Russia's generals would probably never have arisen). In many respects, its efforts to rise to the challenge were remarkably successful: as Stone shows, by the time that revolution struck in March 1917, the troops were not just fully armed, but equipped with steel-helmets and the most effective gas-mask that was available to any of the belligerent powers, while the previous year had seen the hugely successful Brusilov offensive. That said, the configuration of Russia's western border presented the army with a task that would have been all but impossible for even the very best of armies. Thus, thrust out far to the west in a huge

salient that was completely encompassed by Germany and Austria-Hungary, and composed of rolling plains devoid of defensible borders, her Polish territories could not be held in the face of a determined enemy offensive, the result being the ‘Great Retreat’ of 1915 and, with it, the refugee crisis that played so great a part in the onset of revolution.

Mention of the events of March 1917, of course, cannot but raise the issue of the impact of the war on the loyalty of the armed forces. In so far as this last is concerned, Stone is inclined to remain loyal to conventional wisdom, namely the oft-stated conviction that the revolution did not begin in the trenches, but rather on the home front. However, while this is true enough, it has always seemed to this reviewer that such claims are a little facile: there is no disguising the facts, first, that soldiers were prominent among the rioters who brought down the tsarist régime, and, second, that desertion was enormous, so much so, indeed that, by the spring of 1916 the South-Western Front alone was losing 5,000 deserters a month as opposed the 13,000 deserters a year that the army as a whole suffered in the period 1912-14. Offer some evidence to suggest that the malaise did not run as deep though Stone does, one is left wondering just how long the army would have kept on fighting had there been no March Revolution. If *The Russian Army in the Great War* is a good book, then, it certainly does not stand in the way of further works that go into this issue in greater depth.

Given the importance of the role Austria-Hungary played on the Eastern Front, a natural choice for this review essay was Graydon Tunstall’s account of the grey-blue clad legions of the Emperor Francis-Joseph. Whilst readers may care to buttress this work with Alexander Watson’s study of Germany and Austria-Hungary in the First World War, *Ring of Steel*, this is yet the most detailed English-language account that we have by far of the Habsburg war effort, and, with it, one that makes for sorry reading. In brief, though it was the régime of Franz Joseph that unleashed the war of 1914 (or, at least, such remains the present author’s contention), of all the powers of Europe, Austria-Hungary was the one least well equipped to launch a major conflict. For reasons that were both political and budgetary, it had far smaller reserves of trained manpower than Germany, France and Russia, while its armament, infrastructure, industry and military doctrine alike were utterly inadequate to meet the challenges which it was to face, still more problems quickly being thrown up by the obstreperous attitude of the Hungarian half of the monarchy. As a result, even triumphing in a two-front was beyond it, let alone the three-front one which it had to contend with from May 1915, while, as Tunstall shows, the quality of the army became ever more exiguous thanks to its inability to replenish the hopelessly insufficient cadre of veterans with which it embarked on the contest. Given all these issues, the utter irresponsibility of the decision to go to war against Serbia in 1914 cannot

but strike the reader with full force, while one is left wondering how the *könig-und-kaiserlich* forces kept going as long as they did, this being something that Tunstall could really have explored in greater depth. Absent too, meanwhile, is any discussion of the appalling atrocities which Habsburg generals regularly visited on the areas they occupied, this being a subject that Tunstall really should have tackled and all the more so as concepts such as the punishment and subjugation of racial inferiors lay at the heart of the Austro-Hungarian war effort.

That there is more to be said on the subject of Austria-Hungary is all too apparent from Alexander Watson's masterly account of the travails of the Galician fortress of Przemsyl in the period from August 1914 till its definitive capture by the Russians in March 1915. *The Fortress* offers a detailed narrative of the two sieges to which Przemsyl was subjected and the campaigns that formed the context of said operations, but it is, perhaps, most useful for the chilling details that it offers of the policies adopted by the Austro-Hungarian commanders with respect to the civilian population. Of these, Tunstall has nothing to say, whereas Watson is explicit in his condemnation of what occurred. Thus, as Franz Joseph's troops struggled to contend with the ruinous effects of the hopelessly compromised strategy to which they had been committed in Galicia, they found a scapegoat for their plight in the region's large Ukrainian population. Identified as spies and traitors, the latter were subjected to a reign of terror that, if sporadic and lacking in central organization, may have cost as many as 30,000 lives by the end of 1914, the only thing that can be said in mitigation being that the Russians were frequently just as vicious, the only difference being that their targets were rather Poles and, especially, Jews.

That the Russian army targeted the Jews is not denied by David Stone, but his treatment of the subject is very brief, all that he says being that suspicion that the Jews were in league with Russia's enemies led to wholesale deportations to areas deep in the interior from which contact with the Germans and Austrians would be near impossible. This, however, is not good enough. While Stone does admit that, driven by deep-seated anti-semitism or simply the frustrations of campaign life, Russian soldiers from time to time terrorised or even killed individual Jews, he very much gives the impression that such incidents were far from being the norm. As Alexander Gendler shows in the collection of eyewitness testimony that constitutes his excellent *Khurbm, 1914-1922*, in taking this line, Stone goes too far. Thus, hardly had the Russian forces crossed the frontier into Austrian-ruled Galicia, then rumours began to spread that the enormous Jewish community in the region was engaging in such activities as spying for the enemy, assisting Austrian fugitives or signalling to enemy aircraft. In town after town, Russian soldiers, the vast majority of them members of the Orthodox Church who had, like all their fellow communicants, been filled with the belief that Jews were Christ-killers, as well as

poor villagers for whom the Jewish taverner or shop-keeper was the only source of credit, were therefore allowed to run amok. Jewish quarters were burned to the ground; Jewish shops and businesses ransacked; Jewish cemeteries and places of worship desecrated or destroyed; Jewish schools and cultural associations closed down; Jewish notables taken hostage and, in at least 150 cases, executed; Jewish officials dismissed from their posts; and large numbers of Jewish women brutally raped. Killings, too, were widespread, eighteen Jews being murdered in Lviv, eighteen more in Brody and as many as 150 in Jaroslaw. As for the non-Jewish part of the population, Poles and Ukrainians alike were assured that the Russians had come to free them from the Jewish yoke, the invaders also being all too happy to let them join the fray. Deportations, then, did take place and in very large numbers, but there can be no suggestion that the policy was based solely on military necessity: considerable elements of Russian society were quite clearly bent on genocide, this certainly being the way in which the episode was interpreted by its unfortunate victims – not for nothing, then, did the latter remember it as the *khurbm* (literally ‘the destruction’), and not for nothing, too, were Germany and Austria-Hungary’s Jews utterly steadfast in their support of the Central Powers.

As the title of Gendler’s book recognises, the travails of the Jewish communities of eastern Europe did not end with the coming of the Russian Revolution: far from it, alas. While there may have been individual instances of violence and arbitrary behaviour, from the beginning of the war until the revolution, whilst continuing to remain subject to the rules that denied them access to the full range of civil rights, the Jews were not openly attacked, and there was no move to tighten up the régime under which they lived still further. That said, in a variety of ways the war encouraged criticism of them as a group, it being variously put about that they were spying for Germany and Austria, profiting from the war or engaging in wholesale draft-dodging. Meanwhile, the revolution brought fresh challenges in that workers were inclined to regard them as particularly rapacious elements of the bourgeoisie; those opposed to the revolution as its chief progenitors; and the peasantry as the agents of a state that even under the Bolsheviks seemed for more interested in requisitioning than it did in redistribution. These tensions were visible in many parts of the empire, but, as Jeffrey Veidlinger shows in *In the Midst of Civilised Europe*, the rise of nationalism amongst the so-called ‘Little Russians’ made them particularly acute in the Ukraine. In theory, the new régime that took control in Kyiv was committed to a policy of equality for all, while it also included a number of Jewish ministers. Unfortunately, however, it had little chance of imposing its authority, and the result was that there was nothing to stop the local warlords into whose hands power tended to slip from treating the Jews as scapegoats or even inciting their followers to violence against them as a means of

getting reinforcements. With large numbers of soldiers returning from the front stirred up by three years of vicious military anti-semitism, such recruits were not hard to find, and the results were truly horrific in that a number of towns, including, most notably, Zhitomyr and Proskuriv, witnessed terrible massacres in which hundreds of Jews were put to death amid the usual scenes of drunkenness, plunder, arson and sexual violence. Such cases, however, were but the tip of the iceberg, Veidlinger suggesting that there were incidents of one degree of severity or another in at least 500 settlements. In all, the death toll may have been as high as 40,000 in terms of those who perished in the actual pogroms and another 70,000 who were carried off by disease, starvation or the effect of wounds they had suffered at the hands of the rioters.³

The savagery with which the Jews were treated in the wake of 1917, and, albeit to a lesser extent, the three years which preceded it, clearly had its roots in the strains of total war. Anti-semitism was nothing new in Russian society, but such was the impact of the struggle with Germany and Austria-Hungary that it generated a need for scapegoats to which the Jews were uniquely vulnerable. The travails endured by the peoples of Russia (Jews included), these were certainly considerable, and for those wishing to examine them there is no better guide than Peter Gatrell's *Russia's First World War*. As might be expected, this lays out a picture that is bleak indeed whose salient features are soaring inflation, growing food shortages in the cities, the collapse of the railway system, rapid economic modernization, ever deteriorating living conditions, rampant over-crowding, the displacement, forcible or otherwise, of millions of people from the western borderlands into the interior of the country, ever sharper class antagonism and, above all, the constant demands of the army for more and more cannon-fodder. Taken together, all this suggests that revolution was inevitable, but, as Gatrell points out, to believe such a claim is to beg a major question in that many of the other belligerent powers were beset on the home front just as heavily and yet in every case fought on till they were finally overcome by military defeat, and that despite the fact that their suffering was in some respects even worse (the five per cent of its men of military age lost in the course of the campaigns of 1914-17, for example, was a figure that was easily outstripped in France, and, still more so, Germany).

³ It should not be thought that the Ukrainian nationalists were alone in killing Jews. On the contrary, often led by officers who were violently anti-semitic, the White armies also engaged in terrible atrocities that led to many thousands of deaths. That said, however, it is worth pointing out that many of the rank and file in the armies that fought the Bolsheviks in the south of Russia were drawn from the same Ukrainian peasantry who had massacred the Jews in places like Zhitomyr and Proskuriv.

According to Gatrell, then, if revolution broke out in Russia, it was not so much because the people were pushed to the limit, but rather because the régime proved incapable of making the sort of compromises with forces outside its aegis – the trade unions are but one example – that were on show elsewhere. Well, perhaps, but, as Watson has shown in *Ring of Steel*, so utterly unresponsive was the Habsburg monarchy to the pressures unleashed by the war that it is extremely difficult to make the argument stick in the case of Austria-Hungary, the result being that Gatrell's case cannot be given a more favourable verdict than 'not proven'. Meanwhile, it cannot but be felt that *Russia's First World War* has a certain soullessness about it, it often seeming that the author is so interested in statistics that he is inclined to ignore the popular experience of front and rear alike. Hard though the task may be in certain respects, this surely needs to be explored in far more depth: to fail to engage with the lived experience of history is to fail to engage with the latter's full complexity.

To conclude, then, First-World-War Russia – a subject that has all too often only been discussed in the narrow context of the origins of the revolutions of 1917 – has in the course of the past twenty years been discussed more intensively in the anglophone historiography than has ever been the case hitherto. Yet there is still much that could be done. How much better informed we would be had David Stone quoted from even a fraction of the letters that combatants at the front are known to have sent to their families or Peter Gatrell presented a selection of the soldiers' songs that he tells us were collected in Russia in the course of the 1920s. And how odd, too, that so little use is made of the accounts of the many British and American diplomats, journalists, nurses and volunteers who found themselves experiencing the First World War in Russia, not to mention the desperate appeals penned by many Russian Jews to their co-religionists in the United States in an effort to dissuade the government of Woodrow Wilson from entering the war on the Allied side. Such works, true, are subject to many limitations, and yet they are also full of acute observations of all sorts.⁴ Let us hope, then, that the books we have reviewed in this article will continue to be supplemented by many others.

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⁴ Here, for example, is the anguished account of conditions in Lviv in the wake of the city's occupation by the Russians in October 1914 penned by Galician Jew, Benjamin Sigel: 'Not even religious services can be held regularly as the Russian police do not allow people to gather together. Out of all the public institutions in the community, only one is still functioning – the cemetery in which there is a very great deal to do. Starvation and cold are raging among the 60,000 Jews in the town. Every morning, crowds of women with naked, starving children, press against the doors of the synagogues. Many ... packs of insane people wander through the streets.' B. Sigel, *The Great War and the Fate of the Jews*, ed. M.A. O'Neill (n.p., 2012), n.p.