

10-2-2019

Review of "The Great Class War 1914-1918" by Jacques R. Pauwels

Manas Dutta

Recommended Citation

Dutta, Manas (2019) "Review of "The Great Class War 1914-1918" by Jacques R. Pauwels," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol28/iss2/9>

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Jacques R. Pauwels. *The Great Class War 1914-1918*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 2016. Pp. 632.

The First World War (1914-1918), or the Great War for Civilisation as it was known at the time, was a watershed event in modern world history. The events of that conflict changed the social and political maps of the globe forever. Its repercussions reverberate through time and many contemporary conflicts, particularly in Arab and Middle Eastern countries, trace their roots directly to the fallout of that war. It was evident by the time of the Paris Peace Conference that more than forty million soldiers and civilians—disproportionately those of working-class and peasant background—had been ruthlessly slaughtered on the battlefields. Jacques Pauwels argues that these sweeping and complex interwoven changes had one thing in common: they were all the product of the first truly modern, mechanised, and industrial war.

Pauwels' monograph *The Great Class War 1914-1918* is a fresh and timely attempt at thinking about how the discourse of war in a global context is structured by historians, such as Hew Strachan. Drawing generously from various archival documents such as official war reports, and sepoys' hand-written letters, as well as secondary sources, Pauwels makes the case that in the decade before the war, European states, even those like Britain and France which had undergone relatively early bourgeois revolutions, were dominated by personnel drawn from the old order of landed aristocrats. Their prepotency as dominant partners alongside a timid bourgeoisie translated into state policies that were decisively shaped by a worldview blending social Darwinism and Nietzschean philosophy, combined with an identifiably feudal glorification of warfare as a tool of state-building and internal purification. Here, Pauwels argues:

The First World War had amounted to a large scale offensive launched by the counterrevolutionary elite in the context of a contemporary class conflict that had started with the French Revolution, but it had produced unexpected and most undesirable results: a great revolution in Russia and a flood of democratic reforms in most Western countries (p. 550).

The author seeks to highlight the multifaceted issues of the Great War as a global phenomenon and tries to explain this experience

in three parts in his monograph. Part One, entitled “The Long Nineteenth Century, ‘Mother’ of the Great War,” describes the socio-political situation of Europe during the nineteenth century and how that ultimately led to the start of the Great War. Part Two, titled “The Great Class War 1914-1918,” explains issues such as socio-political and economic unrest, the democratisation process, and the class characters of the numerous armies. The long shadow of the Great War is dealt with in the third section, mainly focusing on how the First World War set the groundwork for the Second World War.

This book argues that by 1915 the conflict had become a genuinely world war, with battles raging in colonial possessions in the Middle East and Africa as well as on the Western Front that fuelled the need for even more manpower, propaganda, and of course death. Later, countries like Bulgaria, and eventually the United States entered the war in earnest. The author argues that discontent developed on the battle front as well as on the home front and the issues of food shortages, high prices, and news of the deaths of loved ones, along with an obvious lack of progress toward victory, drove worker militancy of the kind that the war was in part designed to combat.

While reading this voluminous monograph, one must admit that Pauwels’ book contains so many valuable insights that it is quite easy to lose sight of the tremendous importance of the book’s central argument. In contrast to the existing Marxist (and non-Marxist) literature, which tends to focus on entangling alliances between countries with different imperialist interests, Pauwels places class struggle front and centre. The conflicting alliances among contesting imperialist powers helped to shape the crisis of the ruling classes and their hegemony. Pauwels reminds us that these were alliances drawn up by states whose primary interest was exploiting and suppressing workers both at home and abroad—that success at one required success at the other. The author has ably demonstrated throughout his research how the English-language literature has produced many works which discuss the imperialist powers’ exploitation of other nations, but none have dared to make domestic class struggle a foundational component of the history of the First World War.

The Great Class War traces the dramatic change in warfare’s relationship to the state as well as to society. Pauwels highlights the traditions of the older ways of imperialist warfare, which came to be replaced by the fragmented and containable skirmishes of the Cold War and then followed by the more abstract and diffuse “war”

against "terror." The integration of war-waging with the monopoly-capitalist state often led to the biggest economic and technological transformations, which were generally undertaken by the state itself for military purposes. In the United States, the most easily adduced examples of this trend (apart from nuclear energy and weaponry) are the development of the Interstate Highway System and the Internet, both of which were government undertakings driven by Cold War military considerations. Interestingly, Pauwels argues that Soviet theorists discussed at length these ramifications, referring to them as constituting a "scientific and technological revolution that commenced as state-monopoly capitalism fully consolidated in 1945. [...] [T]he crisis facing the older aristocratic-bourgeois bloc was not merely one of class struggle, but of class struggle occurring in a context where the bourgeois states of Europe had achieved a level of development incompatible with the ethos of the older landed elites" (p. 606).

Pauwels is so focused on placing class struggle at the core of his analysis that he tends to treat it in an undifferentiated way from country to country. Certainly, he notes that it succeeded in precipitating a revolution in Russia and nearly did so in several other countries, but he leaves unexplained why it was in Hungary, Russia, and Germany that the class struggle was particularly heated, and presented unique opportunities that were absent in the United Kingdom, France or the USA. What the former three countries had in common was sharper class antagonisms resulting from the sudden importation of large stocks of fixed capital from earlier developing capitalist societies. As well, new factories required a significantly sized labour force and these workers confronted a set of political institutions poorly adapted to handling their grievances, readying the ground for socio-political movements in the long shadow of war.

The author has done a great service for the Marxists, who were seeking to understand the domestic roots—indeed, the class roots—of the so-called Great War. His book stands as a moving testament to what can happen when a militant working class, armed and trained in the weapons of war, splits from bourgeois misguided leadership and pursues its ultimate class interests. The Trotskyian understanding of the bourgeois military and the attempt to split its enlisted rank-and-file from the capitalist officer corps has been ably explored by the author.

Overall, the book explores the many-sided tensions which have played a crucial role in the Great War. The focus throughout the

book is on the classism at the root of the war. The book goes beyond the conventional narratives and traces the roles played by the elites of very wealthy aristocratic landowners, industrialists and bankers, by the processes of democratisation and the rise of the masses. This book combines two approaches to explain the Great War: the 'vertical approach' which argues that traditional armed conflict is between countries and involves the upper as well as lower classes and the 'horizontal approach' which demonstrates the lethality of war and subsequently the catastrophic massacre of millions of people (pp. 14-15). This monograph will hopefully encourage further research on the subject. Building upon existing research by Canadian historians like Modris Eksteins, and others such as Tammy M. Proctor and Adam Hochschild,¹ Pauwels has successfully produced an authoritative account on the First World War.

MANAS DUTTA, KAZI NAZRUL UNIVERSITY

¹ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000); Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011); Jonathan F. Vance, et. al., eds., *The Great War: From Memory to History* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015); and Susan R. Grayzel and Tammy M. Proctor, eds., *Gender and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).