



MICHAEL S. NEIBERG
FIGHTING THE GREAT WAR
A GLOBAL HISTORY



Michael S. Neiberg is Professor of History at the
United States Air Force Academy

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Commentary by Michael S. Neiberg

Mona Lisa's Smile and the Writing of the Great War

An archive can be an unpleasant place. To protect the documents, archives are usually kept in tightly sealed rooms, a condition that is not normally a problem, except when the air conditioning breaks. I had the unusual bad luck of working in the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives in London during the oppressive European heat wave of 2003. As the heat in the room rose to conditions too stifling for English kennels to legally keep dogs, I kept working because I had just two weeks within which to complete my research. Added to the inescapable heat were a veritable army of noisy workmen and engineers banging tools against the air conditioning unit in a vain quest to discover why it was not working. They eventually examined the original plans and discovered that the system had been designed to shut itself off if the temperature exceeded 32 degrees Celsius for an entire 24-hour period; I never did discover why an air conditioning system would be designed to shut itself off if it got too *hot*. As I later learned, overriding this odd design criteria simply required an engineer to enter a code into the system, but London had not been this hot for this long in so many years that the code had long since been lost.

Also in an effort to protect the documents, archives have developed a series of inexpensive and inconvenient security measures. The simplest of these systems requires a researcher to get an escort in or out of the reading room. Thus if one wants to get a drink of water or simply take a break from the feeling of working inside a sauna, one has to bother a busy archivist for permission to leave. In the case of the Imperial War Museum, an archivist must escort the researcher down two flights of steps and then ride with the researcher to the ground floor in a cramped European elevator. The French army archives have neither elevators nor air-conditioning, but are guarded by unarmed yet still tough-looking soldiers in camouflage. They somehow manage to combine the insouciant unpleasantness of the French bureaucrat with the slightly angry unpleasantness of a 19-year-old who wishes he was anywhere else. I went to that archive every day for a month and the same young private (tattooed on seemingly every exposed part of his

body) greeted me every morning with the same snarled demand for my researcher number, seemingly unaware that I had ever been there before.

Scholars put up with these inconveniences because inside these rooms are the clues they seek to unlock the problems with which they are wrestling. Indeed, if a researcher knows what he or she is looking for, or is just lucky, archives can be wonderfully surprising. The person in the seat just to the left of mine in the French army archives was working with full-color, hand-drawn engineering diagrams made by the staff of Louis XIV's famous military architect, Vauban. To my right sat a man looking through manuscript registers of several Napoleonic units in an effort to locate his ancestors, one of whom turned out to be an officer on Napoleon's staff.

Normally, researchers are limited by what the archive will let the researcher read (often with no explanation as to why a particular collection might be closed), what material is in that archive, and how much time is available to look at an individual collection. Many archives limit the number of collections one can see in a day. More than once, I ordered collections that looked more helpful in the finding aids than they did once they appeared on my desk, leaving me at my limit by lunchtime and leading to a wasted afternoon (although I *was* in Paris). Other times one can find treasures quite by accident, such as my stumbling upon the *journal des marches* (journal of daily reports) of the 171st French Infantry Regiment, the unit whose Third Company received the German delegation that had come from Berlin to negotiate the armistice.

For all their limitations and occasional frustrations, archives remain the best place to seek clues and to either confirm or throw into doubt one's hypotheses. Published memoirs are often insightful, but are usually written with posterity in mind and, especially if written years after events, are subject to the whims of human memory. Official histories also serve as an important historical source, but they typically search for an uncontroversial middle position that both preserves the reputations of key figures and presents the government's position in as favorable a light as possible. Contemporary journalism can capture the mood of a moment, but can also be subject to censorship and the limits of what one reporter can see, hear, and know.

Archives thus hold the keys to getting as close as possible to the events and mindsets of the people who shaped history. Official archives normally carry only official correspondence—worthwhile stuff, but often terribly dry and mundane; the official French unit reports from World War I almost invariably began with a notice informing the cooks about the assigned locations for collecting meat and vegetables. The Imperial War Museum, founded in 1917, aimed instead to collect and preserve the letters, diaries, and unpublished memoirs of soldiers

in order to provide a more human face to war than was possible through the prosaic official records.

Such personal recollections were especially important to me and my project, a general history of World War I that aimed to explain the war's many complexities as succinctly and intelligently as possible. A global war with a seemingly unending number of facets and complications, World War I all too often gets reduced to rather naïve and unsustainable one-liners like the tragic "war to end all wars" and emotive (if not always accurate) images of mud-filled trenches and clueless commanders incompetently leading innocent men to their slaughter in enormous numbers.

Getting beyond these hyperbolic images has long presented teachers and scholars with tremendous challenges. Despite the excellent work of historians to put some nuance into public and scholarly understandings of the war, World War I remains the war that virtually no one (including many specialists) understands, fought for causes astonishingly disconnected from its effects. F. Scott Fitzgerald famously explained the war by writing that it had required

...religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relations that existed between the classes...You had to remember Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in Valence and beer gardens in the Unter der Linden and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather's whiskers.¹

This old world grows ever more disconnected from us each day, making the tasks of understanding and explaining the war ever the more difficult.

World War I remains for me like using the Mona Lisa to teach the Renaissance. When asked to identify the painting, all students will immediately know the title, the painter, a myth or two about the subject's identity, and where the painting sits today. Many will proudly tell me that they have seen it in person. When I ask them, however, why the Mona Lisa is the world's most famous painting, they quickly grow silent. This is through no fault of their own. The painting has entered our collective imaginations as a critical part of our artistic and historical heritage without any deep analysis of why.

Similarly, virtually all scholars agree that World War I is one of the epochal watershed moments in European and world history, but, unless they are interested in Soviet history, they are often at a loss to explain exactly why. Even renowned scholars express either confusion or outright ignorance of the war owing to a misplaced or entirely absent understanding of it.² The war, like the Mona Lisa, is

identifiable to all, but, like La Joconde's wry smile (or is it beguiling? I can never decide.), the First World War is still mysterious and hides as much as it reveals.

Like many great writing stories and epiphanies, my own path to teaching and writing about this misunderstood war begins with a confession. In 1998 I rather blithely and naively agreed to teach a course on the war, confident in my abilities to do so based on the familiar framework of lost generations, poignant poetry, and a world gone mad. I had, after all, taught along these lines in survey courses for years. All of my efforts to run the course in this fashion, however, ran into frustrations born of my own inabilities to answer the simplest questions in my own mind. Were these generals really that much more incompetent or unfeeling than their peers of other wars? Did the soldiers of this war really grow more despondent than those of other wars? How did they maintain a capacity to fight and endure amid the unprecedented horrors of industrialized warfare? How did the shooting of a little-known and less-liked archduke in a relative backwater like Sarajevo lead to a war of this magnitude?

Reading about the war did not help me get much closer to the answers. Several textbooks about the war, most written by eminent scholars of other wars, either repeated the same clichés or kept the focus so squarely on Europe that notions of a "world" war almost disappeared from view. All too often, the First World War merely served as a horrifying dress rehearsal for the Second, but little more. The vituperative and emotional arguments about the relative merits and faults of individual commanders did not help either.

The appearance of Hew Strachan's magisterial *The First World War: To Arms* in 2001 was a major milestone.³ Envisioned as the first volume of a trilogy, the book is a tour de force by a specialist who understands the war as a series of interrelated global events. One of the best books to appear on any war in the last few decades, Strachan moved the field forward immeasurably. Still, at 1,227 pages for volume one alone and containing detailed discussions of relatively arcane subjects like the philosophy of Henri Bergson, the book was unlikely to become standard fare for undergraduates and intelligent general readers.

Besides, by the time I first read Strachan's book I had already determined to write my own history of the war. I had recently finished a short biography of Ferdinand Foch, the French marshal who assumed general command of the allied armies in 1918 and built the coalition that won the war. That book allowed me to see the war from the perspective of one man, admittedly an unusual man who succeeded in large part by recovering from terrible mistakes and relearning the nature of war. A careful study of the development of Foch from the man who ordered senseless and bloody charges in 1915 to the man who meticulously studied war and learned to really understand it by 1918 will put to rest any images of

armies filled with blundering generals, although such men surely existed. Another project, *Warfare and Society in Europe, 1898 to the Present*, helped me to see the war as part of much larger European political, social, and cultural patterns.

Despite the latter book's broader focus, I began my study of World War I by trying to understand Fitzgerald's world of Derby and weddings at the mairie. In other words, I tried as much as possible to forget that an even more horrific second world war was to come. By 1919 the frustrations and failures of the Paris Peace Conference had led many people to guess that the hatreds of the "Great War" would soon produce a second round; *Times* of London war correspondent Charles à Court Repington had already begun to call the war of 1914-1918 the "First World War" in an eponymous book. Still, when the crisis that led to the war first began in 1914 few Europeans discussing the events of the day in cafés in Valence or beer gardens in the Unter der Linden predicted that a first world war would ensue, let alone a second.

To recapture the world that Fitzgerald described, I began the book with the famous exchange of telegrams between Kaiser Wilhelm II and his friend and cousin, Tsar Nicholas II. Nothing better captures the world of the European elite in 1914 than this courteous, hopeful transmittal of messages between royal cousins who genuinely believed that they could reach a friendly accord capable of holding back the forces that were drawing much of the world inexorably toward war. That the events of the day were in fact so much larger than these two powerful men seems largely to have escaped their notice, a lapse of judgment that led both of them to abdication and ignominy before the war had ended.

The rest of this book tries to move the reader from the world of those telegrams to the forest of Compiègne where, in November, 1918, the two sides signed the armistice that ended the war. By then, few Europeans or Americans cared about postcards from the Crown Prince. Those postcards, like the aristocratic systems of which they were a part, had already been relegated to another age that seemed much more than four years old. The twin specters of communism and fascism had already begun to emerge as replacements for the old system and wars in Russia, Turkey, and Poland ensured that no "war to end all wars" had yet occurred. Many of the continent's most prescient observers, like David Lloyd George and Foch, saw that the Europe of 1919 was in fact much less safe than the Europe of 1914 had been.

I had three themes in the forefront of my mind as I constructed and wrote this book. First, I wanted this book to be as international in focus as possible. Limited as I am to English and French, this aspect would prove to be a challenge to me as it had to numerous other scholars. Nevertheless, a new generation of scholarship based on primary materials has recently appeared on the experiences

of the Ottoman Empire, Romania, and Africa. We still lack detailed studies on the experiences of the Russians, Arabs, and many parts of Africa, but scholars can now begin to put together many more pieces of the global puzzle than was possible even a few years ago.

This book therefore tried to show how interrelated and truly global the actions of various theaters really were. In contrast to a “global” war like the Seven Years War (1756-1763), events in Africa, the Caucasus, or East Asia had a direct and almost immediate impact on events in Europe and vice versa. Of course, a principal reason for this immediacy springs from the accelerated speeds of communication and transportation, but technology alone won’t suffice as an explanation. Owing to the development of empires, formal and informal, Europeans of this period thought in international terms in ways they never had before. The British knew they had to win in Flanders, for example, or risk Germany taking away large parts of India, Africa, or Australia in any post-war peace treaty. This interconnectedness largely explains why so many imperial subjects were willing to fight and die for the cause of empire; New Zealand sent a larger proportion of its young men and its wealth to war than any other place on earth, and did so without ever resorting to conscription.

Second, this book had to explain the actions of the men and women of the era as clearly as possible. I did not try to second guess people facing pressures and stresses I will hopefully never even have to imagine; historians should play Monday Morning Quarterback at their own risk. Instead I tried as far as possible to explain the factors conditioning the decisions and actions of key people. Trying to guess what an individual might or might not have been thinking 90 years ago is maddeningly difficult, akin (to use the example again) to trying to figure out what exactly Mona Lisa is smiling about, if indeed she is smiling.

Connected to this second theme was a third, that of introducing to readers the full complexities of the war and all of its many facets. Old images of unimaginative offensives, Christmas truces, and a “war for nothing” must give way to an understanding of the war that involved fascinating personalities, tremendous operational and tactical innovations by all sides, and a war that set the parameters for so many of the issues with which we still wrestle today, including Arab rebellions in Palestine, the exact relationship of Turkey to Europe and the Arab world, the growth and decline of Russia, the place of the United States in world affairs, and, not least, an allied invasion of Iraq from Basra to Kut to Baghdad to Mosul.

To understand so monumental an event requires a study of it for its own sake. Like all major historical events it is confusing, contradictory, and inconsistent. In more than six years of intense study of this subject I have yet to find any simple

answers. The task of the writer dealing with such a subject is not so much to present a book that says “here is what it all means” as to present one that says “here are the main problems, now it is your turn to wrestle with them.” William Faulkner is supposed to have said that he wrote *Absalom, Absalom!* so that the reader would have to work as hard to read the book as he worked to write it. That certainly was not my goal (quite the contrary, I hope), but I do want my readers to see the war in the same complex ways that I see it.

Historians also face the challenge of explaining the significance of events over what Ferdinand Braudel called the *Longue Durée*. He meant that events in history can only rarely be explained by recourse to recent events. As Fitzgerald so eloquently explained, the forces that bought the German, British, and French armies to the Somme River in 1916 long predated the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June, 1914. They came instead from social, cultural, and political assumptions that were centuries in the making.

Chou Enlai understood the problem of the *Longue Durée* and the need to place events in as large a context as possible. As a way of getting to know his opposite number in China, Henry Kissinger is supposed to have asked Chou for his opinions on the French Revolution. If one believes the story, Chou replied to Kissinger, “It is too soon to tell.” The comment, if it happened, is classically Chinese and typical of historical memories in a place where history is understood in terms of centuries or even more. It is also a typical remark of the historian who understands that short term patterns in history tell us much less about humanity and the organization of human societies than do long patterns.

Still, a writer working on a deadline and with a strict word limit must form generalizations and look for explicable patterns. I understood that one of my most daunting tasks involved not reducing the explicable patterns to simplistic clichés. For the period of the Great War I think we have gotten all the clarity we will ever get from the time-worn clichés of a series of “butchers and bunglers” in positions of senior command, a generation of “doomed youth” marching unwittingly to their deaths, and a vision of a European continent whose members were all more or less responsible for a tragedy that all are quick to condemn but few are able to explain.

My journey through these problems is certainly not new. As Chou Enlai understood, most historical events need a century or more to pass before their true meaning even begins to come into focus. For example, are we to see the Great War more as the death throes of a presumed age of European progress or the penultimate chapter of a bloody history of Europe that has now given way to a period of mutual cooperation and relative pacifism? Does the Great War represent the last gasps of an aristocratic Europe whose antediluvian political,

social, and cultural systems drew the continent to war or, as I increasingly suspect, does it represent the middle phase of German expansionism between the era of unification and the age of the Nazis? In both of these examples, the perspective of the *Longue Durée* helps us to see these questions in a more complex light that will eventually produce more complex answers.

Of course, the *Longue Durée* for the study of the Great War may still not be long enough. It is well to remember that all post-war periods are also inter-war periods. The final seismic aftershocks of the Great War may yet be felt. Like all careful scholars, therefore, I know that my contribution to this literature is far from the last word on the subject. All I have really done is provide another guess as to why Mona Lisa is smiling, or smirking, or grimacing, or doing all three.

Notes

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* (New York: Scribners, 1933), p. 56.
2. To cite just two examples, famed military historian John Keegan drew a great deal of fire for claiming that the war's origins were a "mystery" and Harvard professor Steven Ozment's *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) devotes just a page and a half to the war. It also states that the German army invaded Belgium in 1914 to avoid France's Maginot Line of fortifications, a terrible historical error that should never have appeared in print and reveals the lack of concern that even a credible scholar of European history could show toward not one but two world wars.
3. Hew Strachan, *The First World War, To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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