

<Book Note JPR 3/92>

Stevenson, David, 1991. The First World War and International Politics. Oxford: Clarendon Press. GBP 14.95 pb. 392 pp.

In times of war, diplomacy is certainly not suspended. Quite the contrary: wars make diplomacy even more consequential, since warring states tend to make big bargains and huge concessions in order to gain the support of third parties. This comes out clearly in David Stevenson's important book on the diplomacy of World War I, originally issued in 1988 and now available in paperback (with some corrections). Stevenson asks and answers four questions: (1) Why did the European governments decide to resort to violence in July-August 1914? (2) Why did a European conflict expand to become global? (3) Why did it fail to be ended by compromise? and: (4) Why did the peace settlement take the form it did? His answers are: (1) They resorted to violence as a result of political decisions based on a belief that the war could bring a rapid victory. (2) The conflict became global because European expansion had created a global balance of power. Rather than being victims drawn helplessly into the conflict the states entering the war 1915-18 were independent actors trying (often unsuccessfully) to obtain advantages by joining one of the camps. Japan, Turkey, Italy, Bulgaria, Rumania, the USA, the Latin American states, China and Siam all entered the war for their own reasons (Greece was a partial exception). (3) Until the Tsar fell in February 1917, no compromise was possible since war aims on both sides were far too radical. If Germany had lost the war then, the peace settlement would have been much harsher than it eventually was. From March to November 1917, as an effect of the overthrow of the tsar and the US entry into the war, aims were modified, but not sufficiently to provide basis for a compromise. After the Bolshevik Revolution, the belligerents again drifted further apart. (4) The unsuccessful peace settlement with Germany and the mandate system set up in the former Ottoman Empire took the form they did as a result of a process of inter-Allied bargaining in which the ascendancy gained by the USA at the Armistice in November 1918 was gradually dissipated. In Eastern Europe the Allies were not so powerful. The broad lines of the rather successful East European settlement were determined by the local balance of power after the Habsburg monarchy disintegrated, and this the Allied leaders had neither the capacity nor the will to rearrange. Stevenson's two last chapters on the final phase of the war and the peace settlement are of particular value to those who need a brief on the historical origins of the Central and East European state system -- formed by the campaigns and diplomacy of World War I, frozen down with modifications by the victors of World War II, and recalled to life by the revolutions of 1989. Stevenson's concluding chapter is not a conclusion, but an epilogue on the road from WWI to WWII, and from there to what still appeared, when the book was written, as a lasting stability on the bedrock of a "permanent and fundamental" weakening of Germany. In the end, Stevenson speculates: "...if the Soviet Union and the United States should ever again withdraw from Europe ... not all the ghosts of World War I diplomacy may yet prove to be exorcized" (p. 323).

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