

policy doctrines that, in privileging process over outcome, and consensus over justice, play neatly into the hands of the world's villains.

## Variables of Violence

### The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West

by Niall Ferguson

*Penguin. 880 pp. \$35.00*

Reviewed by  
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IN THE last years Niall Ferguson has written six big books while teaching at institutions on either side of the Atlantic—he currently occupies a chair in history at Harvard—and preparing and presenting ambitious television programs. His latest book, which grew out of one of those programs, is a thoroughly disenchanted history of the last century: a century of wars, their almost equally sinister preludes, and their often grisly aftermaths. Like all his books, it is written with fluency and often sardonic wit.

For a book with the word “war” in its title, there is very little actual warfare, whether tactical, operational, or strategic, to be found here—that is, very little military history. That may be because Ferguson thinks there is too much of it already, or more likely because he shares the disdain of almost all academic historians for “war books”—a disdain that stands in stark contrast to the unflagging demand of the reading public at every level for war books of all kinds, from the Peloponnesian war to the latest personal memoir of Iraq.

Instead, Ferguson focuses on

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what he considers important: the politics, economics, public finance, and, above all, human toll of a century of armed conflict, dictatorship, persecution, and civil strife. Page after page of *The War of the World* is devoted, for example, to the despoliation, deportation, and murder of supposedly rich farmers (“kulaks”) by Stalin’s Soviet regime, which went on to persecute just about everyone else as well; of Poles by Germans; of Chinese by the Japanese armed forces whose advance in World War II was often followed by mass rape; and of course of Jews. Among post-World War II victims, we meet the Chinese again, this time suffering on a far larger scale, as well as the Khmers, Bosnians, Rwandans, and many others.

Conspicuously missing from Ferguson’s catalog, as from other, similar surveys, is the 1932–35 Chaco war between Bolivia and Paraguay in which at least 100,000 were killed out of a combined total population of just over three million—a stupendous proportion, unexceeded in the 20th century. But one need hardly criticize this book for not being comprehensive enough or otherwise lacking in solid information. Although there are occasional traces of hurried data-harvesting by way of Internet search engines—as in the misleadingly precise figure of 16,000 Japanese losses in the battle of Taierhchuang in China—these are rare and not decisive.

In any such exercise, however, the great question to be answered is this: *why* was the 20th century so much more violent than earlier epochs of mankind? Ferguson’s answer is that, in this era, a particularly lethal mixture was compounded out of three specific factors: ethnic conflict with a racial dimension, economic volatility, and empires in decline. Across his hundreds of pages, in between descriptions of persecutions, war, and other forms of violence, this contention is explained, detailed, and illustrated. And the three factors, taken to-

gether, do make a kind of sense. Still, questions and doubts remain.

IT IS TRUE, for example, that ethnic and racial conflict tends inherently to be more absolute in character than other forms of violence—and more abhorrent morally, because victims cannot save themselves even by means of political or religious conversion. In the 1990’s no Tutsi could rally to the Hutu side to survive the Rwanda massacre, because, much as with the Jews under Nazi persecution, in Hutu eyes the cardinal and inerasable offense was to *be* a Tutsi, not anything that the victim professed or did. The only ones who might have saved themselves were Hutus known to be against the massacre and thus also singled out for murder; but the only way they could have saved themselves was to join in the killing with enough visible enthusiasm to satisfy their fellow Hutus.

It is a virtue of this book that Ferguson recounts the crimes and tragedies of racial persecution with a perfectly fresh sense of indignation, and with no trace whatsoever of the “Holocaust fatigue” that has become the approved stance of too many writers who should know better. Still, it is a statistical fact that the greatest killings of the 20th century were *not* racially motivated. The two largest, indeed, were carried out by regimes with rather good anti-racist credentials.

Tens of millions of Chinese were killed by other Chinese. To compound the paradox, these were overwhelmingly Han Chinese killed by fellow Han Chinese, while members of China’s many non-Han minorities (except of course for the recalcitrant Tibetans) were, if anything, less likely to be persecuted. Similarly, many millions among the peoples of the Soviet Union were killed by their peers among the minions of Lenin and Stalin. As for the Khmer Rouge, they were definitely racist when it came to Vietnamese, including those who had lived for cen-

turies in what is now Cambodia, but they, too, mostly killed fellow Khmers.

FERGUSON'S second explanatory factor, economic volatility, seems no less compelling on the surface, but no less problematic when probed. Such volatility, especially as manifested in the post-1929 global depression, dislocated whole societies, impoverished many individuals, and made many others acutely insecure. In both Germany and Japan, and in countries as diverse as compact Estonia and heterogeneous Romania, citizens were led to renounce moderation and to repudiate democratic parties in favor of authoritarians and war-seeking extremists.

But economic volatility did not undermine the democratic systems of the English-speaking countries or of France, the low countries, Scandinavia, or Switzerland. Not only that, but some countries that remained democratic, like Australia and the U.S., actually underwent greater economic dislocation than did countries like Japan and Spain that lost whatever democratic institutions they had. To be sure, one does not demand of a historian that he provide scientific explanations covering every single case, but these exceptions do nevertheless greatly weaken Ferguson's thesis.

In general, no matter how plausible economic explanations of political change may appear, on closer examination it always turns out that the stronger determinant is the prior political culture. Although a society's political health is certainly influenced by its economic system and that system's performance, this influence is felt only over the span of generations; short-term volatili-

ty has a much smaller impact. In particular, democracies that are solid enough can overcome almost anything—including not only economic collapse but prolonged foreign occupation—while experimental democracies sustained only by enlightened minorities are much more easily fractured. This seems obvious and in some ways tautological, but no less true for that.

This brings us to Ferguson's third factor: the decline of empire. True, the pre-World War I empires of Hapsburg Austro-Hungary, Hohenzollern Germany, Romanov Russia, and Ottoman Turkey were (for all the extreme differences among them) collectively much less violent than their chronically turbulent post-1918 successor states. But before being carried away by nostalgia for their white-gloved elegance, bourgeois certitudes, and unquestioning confidence in the inevitability of human progress, one would do well to recall that those very same empires *started* the catastrophic sequence of 20th-century conflict by going to war in 1914.

Nor was this mere accident: in retrospect, it seems certain that imperial stability had been achieved by the soft or hard suppression of internal forces whose frustrated energies kept accumulating until they exploded in revolution, civil strife, ethnic violence, and war. Pre-1914 Germany was already substantially democratic but also frenziedly militaristic, and very visibly spoiling for a fight. The Hapsburg empire was largely democratic in its governance and admirably liberal in some ways; but its very existence blocked the unification projects of at least eight nationalities, not counting the co-imperial Magyars. As for the Ot-

toman empire, it had lost its European possessions by 1914, but its own institutions were thoroughly decayed, while its Young Turk would-be modernizers were mostly interested in modernizing the army and the navy, not the economy or the society.

In short, whatever general validity may reside in the notion that empires are conducive to stability, and that their breakdown generates violence, Ferguson's argument is undermined by the specific nature of the pre-1914 empires that did collapse, and that had plainly generated much instability beforehand.

IN THE END, the problem is not that Ferguson does not explain enough to account for the extreme violence of the past century. To the contrary, he explains too much. Humans are violent. When their ability to inflict violence increases, and when no countervailing political responses emerge to restrain them, they become more violent. If such violence increased greatly in the 20th century, that may be simply because both administrative progress and technological advancement heightened the ability to inflict it; even the Rwandan killers, armed only with clubs and blades, were directed from place to place by radio broadcasts.

This leaves it up to the bystanders either to allow the violence to occur and prolong itself or to act to stop it. But the bystanders, too, have their history, and one whose main characteristics are remarkably uniform. We know that history well; from time to time, as in the cases of Rwanda and Darfur, we too have been bystanders, no more effective in stopping the killing than our predecessors.