

**Adam Tooze. *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916-1931*. London: Allen Lane, 2014. ISBN 978-1-846-14034-1. Pp. xxiii, 644. Hardcover, £30.00; Paperback/ e-book: £12,99.**

In the flood of First World War scholarship published during the conflict's centennial, Adam Tooze's *The Deluge* certainly ranks among the most original and ambitious. It is a revisionist work of international history at least as powerful as Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers*. But where Clark advances a short-term view of the war's causes, Tooze's aim is to place the war in a long-term context: that of its real consequences for the rest of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

Focusing on the Great War's aftermath takes him onto well-trodden ground: the dispute over the viability of the peace signed at Versailles and after that has raged essentially unabated since its ratification in 1919. But appearances deceive. Though it engages much of that debate directly, *The Deluge* is ultimately not a book about the durability or justice of the Versailles treaty system. Tooze's aim is more fundamental: to show that the First World War caused a 'paradigm shift' in international relations by enabling the meteoric ascent of the United States to the pinnacle of international power (p. 15). What Washington did under Woodrow Wilson and his successors became crucial to the calculations of every other great power from Britain to Japan, indeed becoming a 'question that would haunt the century that followed' (p. 6). The US's gargantuan scale dwarfed that of every other power, even the British Empire. Harnessed to the US approach to international affairs, which rejected the European practices of balance-of-power politics and imperial competition, it completely upended the Eurocentric world order within which the Great War had exploded.

Tooze is a historian with great powers of reinterpretation. One of the central characters in his book is the US president Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921), whose progressive liberal

politics dominates over half of the book. Tooze rejects the common view of Wilson as naively idealistic in a cutthroat international system; indeed he frontally attacks it. Instead of Wilson's well-known January 1918 Fourteen Points, Tooze foregrounds his 'peace without victory' speech given in January 1917, before US entry into the war. He argues that Wilson is best seen not as an idealist or even a liberal internationalist, but as a dyed-in-the-wool US nationalist whose 'goal was absolute pre-eminence' for his country (p. 44). 'Peace without victory' meant he rejected the Entente's pursuit of total victory over Germany. Tooze, an expert in financial history, recalls the Entente's financial dependence on Wall Street, and insightfully connects this to Wilson's claiming the moral high ground. He sought to leverage US financial dominance to achieve 'the collective humbling of all the European powers' by imposing US arbitration. 'The door to the American century swung wide in January 1917' with Wilson's uncompromising demand for U.S. hegemony (pp. 53-55).<sup>2</sup>

*The Deluge* is not content with just this reassessment, however. After historically reconstructing Wilson's bid for hegemony, Tooze's second theme is to reinterpret the First World War's other consequence: the vast international political struggle to cope with the war's transformative repercussions. Interestingly, Tooze pitches this in terms of 'uneven and combined development,' Leon Trotsky's idea of the irregular and erratic progression of capitalist modernity. Justin Rosenberg and others have recently revived 'UC&D' as the basis of a new theory of international relations (IR), but judging by his references Tooze does not seem to be aware of their work. This is unfortunate, as his book could start a fascinating interdisciplinary

---

<sup>1</sup> C. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Peace without victory' was the book's previous, provisional title, in fact.

dialogue on the concept.<sup>3</sup>

Tooze's account of the struggle over the war's uneven consequences is a truly international history. He links international politics from Washington to Japan and looks beyond diplomats and *raisons d'états* to domestic politics, ideas and economics. His approach is not unique, but Tooze couples it with his wide reading of non-English historiographies to achieve a new perspective in a huge range of debates. He thus recovers the historical agency of oft-forgotten groups, allowing him to reach innovative conclusions about the war's long-term repercussions.

The protagonists in Tooze's account are progressive liberals and moderates in all the major belligerent countries. He is at pains to emphasize their agency and importance, especially in countries often associated in English-language history with illiberal politics like Germany, Russia and Japan. Thus he reserves major roles for Russian democrats between the February and the October Revolutions, Japanese moderates, and the German Reichstag majority that sued for peace in November 1918 and in 1919 inaugurated the Weimar Republic. These groups opened a mid-1917 window for 'peace without victory' that the Entente, intent on total victory, tried to keep closed. Both were opposed by the antagonists of Tooze's account—extremists like Vladimir Lenin or Benito Mussolini and military maximalists like Erich Ludendorff or Winston Churchill. This conflict between liberals and extremists with mutually exclusive strategies of how to cope with the new international reality is a thread that runs throughout *The Deluge*.

The same conflict caused what Tooze calls 'the politics of 'peace without victory'' to quickly escape Wilson's control (p. 159). His program for US hegemony predictably did not go unchallenged by the Entente, which unified democracies that had been great powers for centuries. Indeed Wilson did not have a unique claim to liberal leadership—the British premier

David Lloyd George's progressive politics receives almost equal attention in Tooze's account. But the Entente linked its own liberalism to a dogged pursuit of total victory over Germany, to the extent that they made 'strategic imperatives and the pursuit of democracy (...) inseparable' (p. 170).

From this viewpoint Tooze does not see the struggle over the Treaty of Versailles or the League of Nations Covenant as one between the idealistic Wilson and a Machiavellian Entente, an interpretation still common in IR textbooks. Instead it involved competing liberal models for coping with the new international reality. In this vein he innovatively contrasts the US political-economic model, 'capitalist abundance,' with the Entente's wartime one: radical multilateral integration of their war efforts. 'Inter-Allied cooperation' was the direct ancestor of European integration (p. 205).

The contest between liberal forces over the shape of the post-war international order, with the extremists waiting in the wings, is the third theme of *The Deluge*. Tooze ties together his two previous themes, the rise of the US and the liberal-extremist struggle, to account for the failure to establish a durable liberal peace after 1918. Though understated both on the dust jacket and in the introduction, it is the US that here appears as the problem rather than the solution. For though they commanded the power to deal with the 'deluge' of the book's title, Wilson's Republican successors continued his pursuit of narrow US interests, rejecting European-style multilateralism. Thus the 1924 US-backed Dawes Plan to end the twin Ruhr and German hyperinflation crises is to Tooze an 'evisceration. (...) It was a peace. There were certainly no European victors' (p. 461). In the long run this had the effect, Tooze argues, of disrupting the harmony of interests between liberal forces. 'Layer by layer, piece by piece, issue by issue' it disintegrated, until the Great Depression brought the 'deluge' to US shores and unilateralism on behalf of all major powers opened the gap through which the Nazi assault on international order would rip (p. 511). Only by building the New Deal state was the US able to intervene decisively to establish a new world order.

---

<sup>3</sup> See J. Rosenberg, 'Isaac Deutscher and the Lost History of International Relations', *New Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 215 (January–February 1996), pp. 3-15.

Toward the end of *The Deluge*, Tooze picks up the pace. Though his periodisation ends in 1931, the 1924 Dawes Plan is the real closing event of his argument. He spends less than fifty pages on the decade afterwards. The book already runs past 500 pages, but in this way it does leave important questions unanswered. For instance, though Tooze continuously underlines US ascendancy, even he admits that throughout the period 'the only truly global power' was the British Empire (p. 392). Tooze also argues that episodes like Britain's 1932 abandonment of free trade were the real cause of the protectionist wave that worsened the Depression, rather than the oft-cited US Smoot-Hawley tariff. This implies that Britain too had a claim to playing lead violin in world politics. The question Tooze leaves open is how by the 1940s these two liberal, Anglophone superpowers resolved their rivalry while simultaneously managing to salvage the liberal world order from the fires of a new world war.

This is not really criticism, of course. Tooze's work is ambitious enough as it is. He enables this question rather than not being able to answer it. The book presents a revisionist argument on a breathtaking range of issues. This is due to Tooze's highly original interpretation of sources, often done by placing them in a greater historical or international contexts. As a result, *The Deluge* is a significant and deeply thought-provoking work that will provide students of the period and of international history and IR in general, with much food for thought over the years to come.

**Thomas Bottelier**  
**King's College London**

---