

To End All Wars: An anthology of antiwar comics about World War I

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To End All Wars: The Graphic Anthology of The First World War, John Stuart Clark and Jonathan Clode, editors, Turnaround Publisher Services

To End All Wars: The Graphic Anthology of The First World War is a striking and welcome work in the current climate, as it makes a sincere effort to bring a critical view of World War I to a wide audience. It is a graphic anthology, presenting 26 separate stories (by 53 artists), with an eye towards the popularity of comics among young people who are otherwise taught little about the reality of war.

Each comic is factually based and deals with a specific element or episode of the 1914-1918 conflict; each is creatively developed to bring the subject matter to life. The stories reveal the experiences of soldiers, sailors, victims of colonialism, nurses, civilians, journalists, propagandists and others. Stories involving military personnel bring out not only the cruelty of the conflict, but also the absurdity, dark humor and human drama that took place.

Many of the artists and writers who contributed works come from Britain, but there is work as well from artists in Ireland, Indonesia, Spain, Greece, Argentina, the US and elsewhere—13 countries in all. This results in a wide variety of styles and approaches. Certain artists chose very light and cartoon-like visuals, while others used highly detailed and representational images. Many drawings were done with pen and ink (hand drawn or digital), but a few artists adopted a more painterly approach.

Notably, the curatorial approach of the anthology is focused on the need for meaningful and appealing art that counteracts the current effort by politicians, the media and many academics to rehabilitate and legitimize the slaughterhouse of World War I, which produced some 16 million dead and 20 million wounded.

The introduction by Pat Mills discusses the “Very British Lie,” currently being circulated, which maintains that the conflict was a noble and just war waged by Britain in defense of democracy. The WSWWS has written a number of times in the past few months on this campaign, and has noted similar trends in Canada and Australia as well.

To End All Wars ~~ed~~ ^{ed} ~~rightly~~ ^{rightly} identify the attempt to rehabilitate World War I as attempts as well to silence criticism of more recent predatory wars (Afghanistan, Iraq) and prepare youth to participate in new ones.

Editor John Stuart Clark wrote and drew the first comic in the anthology, “The Iron Dice.” It is crucial to the work, as it addresses the issue of overall responsibility for the criminal war. Concretely, it presents a scenario in which the leaders of the various war powers appear before the International Criminal Court, while a global audience of injured and ghastly World War I veterans demands the defendants explain to the world how such a calamity came about.

As the proceedings begin, a victim states, “But we were told war was inevitable,” to which another responds: “Then history needs re-examining.” From there, a peg-legged war veteran prosecutor listens to the stammering, arrogant explanations of British, French, German and Austrian royalty and military brass. As they try to explain their provocative actions in the Balkans, the prosecutor asks for clarification: “We are talking 1914, not 2014? It sounds familiar.”

The drama of the prosecution is heightened by the page layout, which gives an energetic arrangement to the text, with inclusion of selected historical material. The comic ends with a couple sitting at home, watching television, which has just cut away from the proceedings at the court to get “the latest on the eurozone crisis.”

Several of the comics offer exceptional combinations of artwork and narrative. “The Coward’s War,” with art by Matt Soffe, is so strikingly illustrated that each panel demands to be viewed on a much larger scale. The medium is hard to pinpoint; it has characteristics of pastel, watercolor and digital illustration, which blend beautifully together.

It tells the story of a teenage boy, Thomas Highgate, who joins the British Army at the beginning of the war, and contrasts his naïveté and youth to the savagery to come. Dramatic images show “machines ... chemicals ... high explosives,” and then, his boyish face: “A simple soldier

with a pocketful of national pride had no chance.”

The story follows his tragic fate: he would fall not on the front lines, but at the hands of a firing squad for desertion, thanks to the vicious, contemptuous attitude of the British high command. As one soldier says at the end: “As if there weren’t *enough* bloomin’ ways to die already.”

“Dead in the Water” is perhaps the most striking and dramatic comic in the anthology; its story and visuals combine harmoniously. The comic begins with the British high command sneeringly dismissing the threat that the new German U-boats present to the “mighty British Navy.” Meanwhile, three British ships are cruising the North Sea when spotted by U9, a German U-boat, which quickly sinks all three ships without suffering any damage itself.

The torpedo strikes kill 1,459 British sailors, who are shown fighting to stay above water amid wreckage through frenetic line work and the haunting representation of the faces.

Other comics in the anthology might have ended here, but a turn of the pages reveals one of the more memorable images in the book—a large image of the U-boat captain that breaks the bounds of panels to show both the official German celebration of the slaughter and the captain’s own distress over witnessing the drowning sailors. Juxtaposition and contrast are used to excellent effect in the two-page spread, while later pages show the tragic climax of his dilemma as a participant in the violence.

A significant inclusion in the anthology is Colm Regan’s “No More Than Cattle , ” set in Nyasaland, a British colonial protectorate in southern Africa, now Malawi. In its short format, the comic provides historical background about colonial oppression in the region and then briefly explains the social structure existing during the war. Africans already facing daily oppression on agricultural estates were forced to become the labor force of European armies on the continent under predictably brutal conditions.

The story follows one example, on the massive A.L. Bruce estate in Magomero district, where the absurdity of dying for the colonial empires pushes social antagonisms to the breaking point. A letter from a local Christian pastor, John Chilembwe, opposing African involvement in the war, is censored by a British-run newspaper.

Meanwhile, workers on the estate rebel and kill an estate manager and a storeowner. Chilembwe and others flee to Mozambique as the British respond with mass killings, 36 executions and lengthy prison sentences. Colonial rule persists, but opposition to British rule is clearly established. The story brings valuable history to light.

More could be said about other works, which offer varying degrees of intriguing subject matter and imagery, but space is limited. One general element missing in the work,

however, with a few exceptions, is any effort to provide a broader, socio-historical explanation of how the war began and how it ended.

For example, “The Iron Dice” puts the rulers of Europe on trial, but a significant reality making the launching of war possible was the collapse of Social Democracy, the official mass leadership of the working class, which had sworn to oppose such an eventuality. The parties of the Second International in Germany, France and elsewhere voted for war credits and lined up with their own ruling elite and military against the populations of other countries, enabling the bloodbath to take place. None of the comics explores this complex but critical factor.

Also absent is the Russian Revolution of 1917, the response of the working class to the crisis of the capitalist system that had produced the war. Various stories show opposition to war within the ranks of the British, French, and German armies, as well as among civilians, but Russia was the country where that opposition found its highest expression, in the overthrow of one of the regimes responsible for the mass slaughter. (“Go Home And Sit Still,” about Scottish nurses, provides a hint of this, but no story treats the subject head-on.)

Overall, in any event, *To End All Wars* is a powerful reply to those who now seek to rewrite the history of the First World War to hide its reactionary and imperialist character. Over the course of its 326 pages, readers will find a number of moving stories and images—and plenty of parallels to the sinister lies and machinations of the great powers today.



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