

“The Great Class War 1914-1918”, There Is Nothing Great about War...

Review of Jacques R. Pauwels Book on World War I

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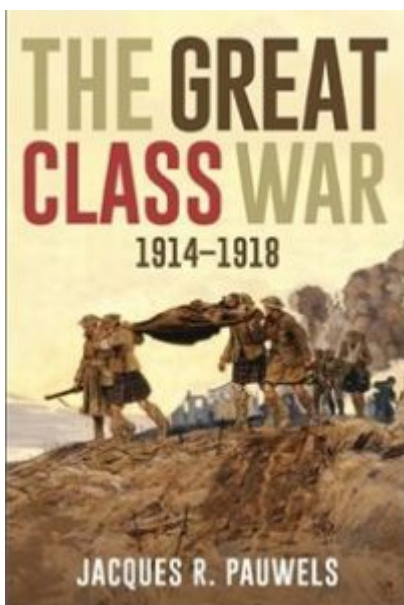
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Region: [Europe](#)

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*In all countries socialists renounced the class struggle and proceeded instead to go to war for their fatherland and their people. Jacques R. Pauwels, *The Great Class War 1914-1918*, p. 69*

War is anathema. I hate war and I am sure the majority of humanity does. So why does war still happen? Earlier wars continue to evoke a mythology that pervades the public discourse. Since much of humanity remains mired in war, it is crucial to cut through the crap of disinformation that beguiles people and involves them in wars that they don't want. If indeed a knowledge of history prepares humans to avert the mistakes of the past, then for the sake of present and future humanity learning about critical past events is important. People must also learn how to discern what best approximates the truth. When seeking to identify the etiology of monstrous events such as wars, the requisite question is: who benefits?



In his book [The Great Class War 1914-1918](#) (Lorimer, 2016), historian Jacques R. Pauwels lifts the fog of war. *The Great Class War 1914-1918* identifies those who want war, those who scurrilously manipulate information, consciousness, and the citizenry to wage war.

Pauwels examines the war among nations and among classes within a nation. WWI (what Pauwels refers to as the Great Class War, and one understands what he means, but because of the double entendre, I prefer to avoid calling a war “great”) has its roots much further

back in history. Pauwels takes the reader back to the French Revolution, an uprising against the aristocrats and bourgeoisie, and he brings readers to the time of the Paris Commune and up to WWI and beyond.

Pauwels presents the assassination of archduke Franz Ferdinand as a pretext for war. However, the war was launched by elitists¹ who feared the *hoi polloi* eating into profits by forming unions and demanding higher wages, and demanding greater democracy. There was also competition among nation states to grab colonies and gain economic advantage. The elitists believed that a war would crush revolutionary zeal, aspirations for democracy, and replace socialism with nationalism.

The Great Class War discusses factors antebellum and year-by-year through WWI, the immediate aftermath and postbellum, even discussing the *casus belli* for WWII and connecting events to the present day. The focus throughout the book is on the classism at the root of the war. Pauwels' thoroughly compelling narrative leads the reader to the ineluctable conclusion that elitists have been manipulating and leading the masses, unwilling or not, to the killing fields.



Lincoln in Dali-vision

Pauwels draws on myriad threads in weaving his marvelous portrait of the class war. He draws from art, film, song, poetry and other writings. He hits at the various angles to the war, likening this to Salvador Dalí's "Lincoln in Dali-vision." He praises Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* as a vivid depiction of classist conditions within the French military.

I was spurred to watch the film, which I would urge others to watch as well.²

Pauwels explores the many-sided tensions/rivalries/fights at play: socialism vs capitalism, internationalism vs nationalism, union leadership vs the rank-and-file ("... union leaders travelled around the country to encourage the rank-and-file not to strike but to volunteer for the army." p. 196), conservative political parties vs social democrats vs communists, officers vs soldiers, civilians vs military, feelings of one country's troops about another country's troops, etc. The author looks at language, propaganda ("Civilians appeared to swallow whatever authorities and the 'yellow press' told them..." p. 357), imperialism, monarchism, colonialism ("In many ways, the first World war thus functioned as the last

phase of the “scramble for Africa.” p. 293), religion (“The gospel of patriotism and bellicosity was preached from the church pulpits...,” p. 186), Social Darwinism, revolutions, counterrevolution, the Russian Revolution, dirigism, why the USA entered the war (“If the United States stayed out of the war, it would not be present when the Chinese prizes were distributed among the victors...” p. 449), and much more than can be a book review can do justice to. So get the book.

The Great Class War 1914-1918 is a magnificent opus. After reading it, I have to read Pauwels’ [Myth of the Good War](#) which looks at the US role in WWII.

Notes

1. Pauwels called them “elites,” but that is another word that I would prefer to avoid since it paints people of wealth and power as being of the highest class. But the actions of these “elites” in using the peasants as cannon fodder to further enrich themselves and crush socialism and revolutionary agitation indicates that these people are “elitists” — believing that they are better than others. There is nothing elite about people who are morally bankrupt.
2. The film can be viewed [online](#).

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