

THE PITY ABOUT NIALL FERGUSON

(a comment on *The Pity of War*, broadcast on BBC 2, Friday 28 February 2014, 9-10.30pm)

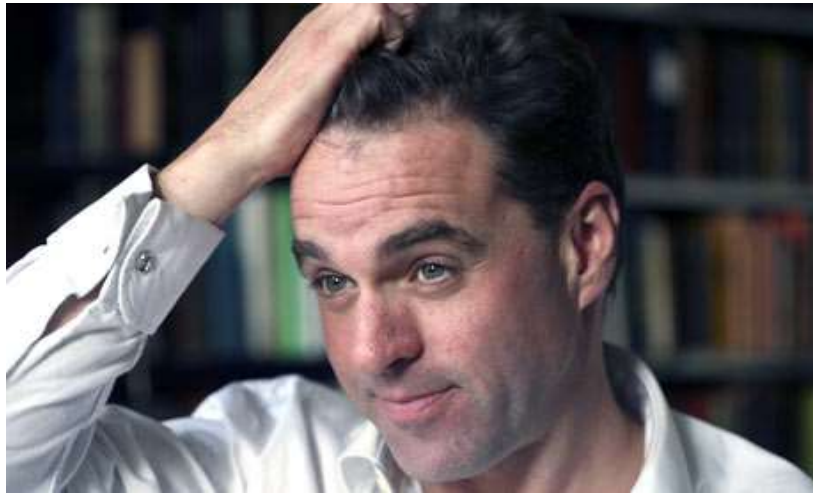
It must have been very disappointing for Niall Ferguson. The great TV historian draws up a plan of attack worthy of the Prussian General Staff. He will harangue a TV audience and the viewer for an hour, deploy his visual aids, give the academics in the studio half an hour to reply, act as question master and save the last word for himself. In this way he will persuade the less expert general public that there is something of merit in his thesis that it was a *tragic error* for the British ever to have entered the First World War in August 1914; and that, if we had not done so, something like the modern European Union would have resulted, fifty years ahead of its time, and without the pain caused by Hitler, Stalin and the Second World War.

But things were not all right on the night. Just as the Kaiser's legions failed to break through on the Western Front, so Ferguson's barbs failed to penetrate the armour of the orthodox. Stevenson, Sheffield, Reynolds, Strachan and others sat there and calmly pointed out that nothing Ferguson argued for made any sense. He appealed for support to the young Leninists whom he expected to find on the other side of the floor, but none came forward. He asked in vain if nobody shared his view that the Great War had been a *terrible mistake*. Answer came there none. So, in the end, the master simply intoned that this was his view.

In the eyes of this viewer, the other academics made Ferguson look like an amateur. They pointed out that the choice which Britain had to make in 1914 was a choice between two evils. If she had chosen to stay out of the War, that would not necessarily have secured peace and, even if it had, the outcome might have had dire consequences, not only for Belgium and France, but for Britain and the British Empire, and Russia and Eastern Europe too. There was a calculation to be made between the perils of intervention and the risks of non-intervention, as we have learned again recently in relation to the crisis in Syria.

Ferguson's book *The Pity of War* was first published in 1998; but it followed his *Virtual History*, published in 1997. This contained an essay on *The Kaiser's European Union*, which put forward the same thesis he has now presented on TV: that a German victory in 1914 would have resulted in something resembling what we have now – a European economic Union dominated by the German economy, but otherwise free, prosperous and contented. Ferguson now claims that he put this idea forward somewhat 'playfully'; but the essay published almost twenty years was clearly intended to be a serious contribution to historical discourse.

The academics in the TV audience were unanimous in dismissing this idea. They pointed out that Ferguson's counterfactual supposition makes several startling



assumptions: that the Germans would have imposed a benign peace in the West in 1914; that Germany was the same kind of country then as it is now; and that the Kaiser did not wish to dominate Europe, militarily as well as economically. It was interesting that the one person in the audience who pointed out that the supremely confident Imperial Germany of 1914 was to say the least highly ambitious, was German.

At the end of this thrashing, Ferguson stoutly repeated his counterfactual suggestion, as if it was merely a matter of interpreting known facts, rather than making them up. What nobody pointed out was that speculation of this kind is futile, because nobody can possibly know what would have happened if Britain had not intervened. The historian is no more qualified to answer that kind of question than the next man, because his expertise is in weighing evidence; and counterfactual, or virtual, history is not based on evidence but on speculation. If we adopt Ferguson's approach, we could equally well suggest that the world would be a better place today if Britain had not intervened in 1939. Without British intervention there would have been no American intervention; without American intervention, the Germans would have won; if the Germans had won, we would again have ended up with a European Union under German leadership. Nobody would accept that thesis about the Second World War, so why should we accept Ferguson's about the First?

Ferguson had opened the programme by showing an extract from a lecture by A.J.P. Taylor, the first TV historian, whom he called 'great'. It is a pity that, when he closed the proceedings, he did not remind us that Taylor's view of counterfactual history was that it was a parlour game, which it was no part of the historian's business to play.