'To End All Wars' review: Adam Hochschild reminds us of the divisive waste that was World War I

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By Special to The Oregonian

TO END ALL WARS

Adam Hochschild
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
$28, 464 pages

In 1914, a recruiting poster in Great Britain depicted two children asking a guilty-looking man, clad in civilian clothes, "Daddy, what did YOU do in The Great War?" The best response, proclaimed Bob Smillie, leader of the Scottish mine workers, would be, "I tried to stop the bloody thing, my child."

World War I, Adam Hochschild reminds us, divided English families. Charlotte Despard, the sister of John French, the commander-in-chief on the Western Front, was a pacifist. In violent disagreement over whether to rally round the flag, the Pankhursts, the nation's most notorious "suffragettes," who had conducted hunger strikes in jail together and derided war as "something male," imploded.

In "To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918" Adam Hochschild uses these civil -- and uncivil -- wars in a compelling account of World War I in England. Along with virtually all historians, he sees the conflict as unnecessary, as an appalling waste of human life and as the principal cause of World War II. If we could roll back history and undo one -- and only one -- event in the 20th century, he has no doubt that it should be the war that became the world's first "total war."

A gifted storyteller, with an eye for the telling detail, Hochschild effectively and eloquently brings to life the senselessness of the war. Tsar Nicholas II, he writes, took personal control of the Russian army, touring the countryside in a Rolls-Royce, watching parades, playing dominoes, reading novels and "issuing odd orders, at one point promoting all officers who happened to attend a ceremonial dinner."

Convinced that his fellow Englishmen "lament too much over death," Douglas Haig, commander of the armed forces, saw the war as a "wearing out fight," defining high casualties as a measure of success because they would surely be matched -- or exceeded -- by those of the enemy. Haig didn't see -- or comment on -- a flow of dead so great that soldiers had to be buried in mass graves. He didn't feel the heat of an officer's joke that if the British continued to gain ground at the present rate, "they would reach the Rhine in 180 years."

Hochschild ends his book with cemeteries, real and imagined. He might just as appropriately have given the last word to Lord Lansdowne, the former viceroy of India, secretary for war and architect of the alliance with France that virtually guaranteed England's participation in the war. As the casualties mounted (and included his son), and stalemate seemed certain, Lansdowne told Prime Minister Herbert Asquith that the nation was "slowly but surely killing off the best of the male population." Struck by "the prostitution of science for purposes of pure destruction," he predicted that the next war "would be even more dreadful than this."
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