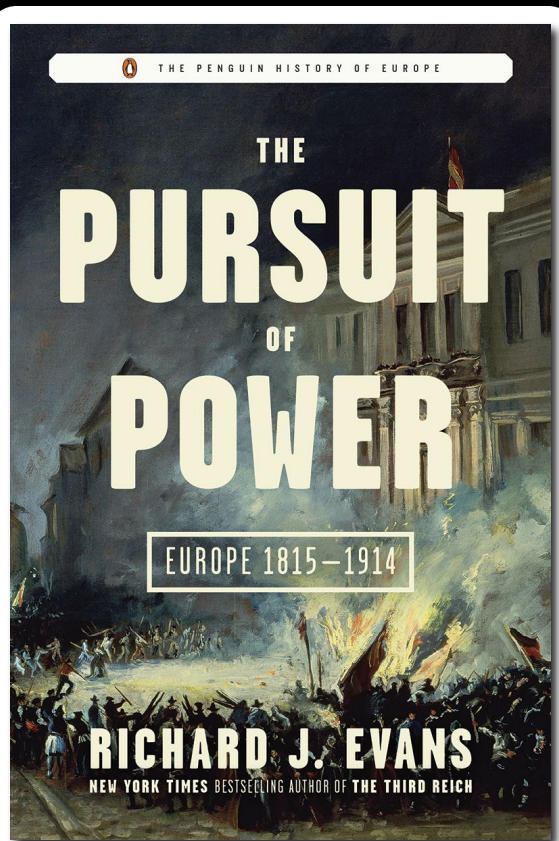


REVIEW ESSAY

The Pursuit of Power Europe 1815–1914

Richard J. Evans

Viking, New York, 2016, 848 pages



Mark Montesclaros

Sir Richard Evans adds his considerable powers of analysis to this work, the seventh volume in *The Penguin History of Europe*, which spans ancient to modern Europe in a series of nine single editions. The author is a professor of history and president of Wolfson College in Cambridge, and his contribution, *The Pursuit of Power*, is the most recent publication in the series. Chronologically it predates the next volume in the series, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914–1949*, by Sir Ian Kershaw, published earlier in 2015 and analyzed by this reviewer in the July–August 2016 edition of *Military Review*.

Evans employs the same holistic style that was so effective in his renowned *Third Reich* trilogy, which encompasses far more than simply political or military history. In that series—which spanned the Reich’s coming to power, its conduct while in power, and its prosecution of World War II—Evans covered such diverse topics as culture, the economy, religion, science, the Holocaust, and resistance movements. Aimed at the general reading public, if not the specialist, the *Third Reich* trilogy was a highly acclaimed

model of synthesis and scholarship. The same attributes are evident in *The Pursuit of Power*.

Evans began writing *The Pursuit of Power* in 2009, which attests to the level of effort and perseverance required to compose a history of Europe that spans one hundred years in a single volume. Evans’s slice of *The Penguin History of Europe* covers the post-Napoleonic period to the eve of World War I, specifically 1815–1914. Why those benchmarks? In his very useful preface, Evans explains that those years in particular signal the high-water mark for the continent; that is, during that timeframe, Europe stood first globally in a number of important areas, which he highlights throughout the text. Additionally, the author makes a keen early observation that sets the tone for the entire book: “Europe is best seen as a social, economic, political, and cultural region sharing many common characteristics and stretching from Britain and Ireland in the west to Russia and the Balkans in the east.” Thus, Evans places a premium on considering Europe as an entity whenever possible in his treatment, rather than as an accumulation of regional histories or individual

country narratives. *The Pursuit of Power* is thus unique and works on multiple levels of analysis.

The organization of the book is elegant in its use of thematic “lines of effort.” It also reflects Evans’s intent to approach his history of Europe in a manner different from previous writers. The author divides the book into eight chapters of roughly equal size, each in turn consisting of ten sections. Exactly half of the chapters—1, 3, 7, and 8—cover political history and are organized chronologically. They include, amongst an impressive scope of topics, an excellent synthesis of 1815 Europe, the French Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the Italian and German unifications of the 1870s, and the dissolution of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. Chapters 2 and 4 cover socioeconomic themes, each encompassing roughly a half century in time. Here, Evans tackles such seminal developments as the emancipation of the serfs, the rise of industry and the working class, the decline of the aristocracy, urbanization, and European emigration. Chapters 5 and 6 are uniquely titled “The Conquest of Nature” and “The Age of Emotion,” respectively, reflecting what the author considers as broad “cultural” history. The former describes the state of nineteenth century “globalization” and the shrinkage of time and space with developments in transportation, commerce, medicine, and the adaptation of standard time as well as the metric system. The latter focuses on broad intellectual and cultural movements, in particular the transition from Enlightenment principles to those of Romanticism and later, Realism. In this fascinating chapter, Evans spans an eclectic variety of subjects, including religion, literacy and language, education, the arts, gender issues, and the rise of nationalism. Organizationally, *The Pursuit of Power*’s unique design provides the basis for a holistic synthesis of European history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, the even-numbered chapters provide a respite to the book’s political emphasis in the odd-numbered ones, giving the book a unique balance, increased readability, and immense breadth.

As indicated by the book’s title, all of the lines of effort outlined above lead to the author’s underlying end—to describe how multiple actors and entities in Europe pursued power. (Indeed, the author’s choice of “power” in the volume’s title contrasts with the one that precedes it in the *Penguin History* chronology—Tim Blanning’s *The Pursuit of Glory, Europe 1648–1815*). Evans’s periodization is thus bookended by the Napoleonic Wars and World

War I—continental and global conflagrations, respectively. Why the intervening years were peaceful in comparison is at the core of Evans’s explanation; although Europe was not at war, there were a number of forces at work that combined to make the next one possible, if not inevitable. As the author articulately explains, multiple entities pursued power against the backdrop of the Napoleonic legacy and the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Some were desperately trying to hold onto power—the aristocracy, the decaying Habsburg and Ottoman empires, and collective, “conflict prevention” groupings such as the Concert of Europe and the Holy Alliance. Others entities, borne of the forces of change throughout the century, were intent on obtaining or accumulating power. These were as varied as nations seeking global or regional hegemony via the “great game,” or individuals seeking greater levels of emancipation and basic civil rights. As Evans weaves this hugely complex tale, the pursuit of power in all of its manifestations provides the basis for the global conflagration to come: “Well before August 1914, the outbreak of a general war was widely anticipated across Europe, hoped for by some, feared by others. Nevertheless, when war actually did come, it was a surprise to almost everyone.” Thus, in the context of the three aforementioned *Penguin History* titles, glory gives way to power; power precedes the “hell” of the world wars. Evans’s book superbly connects the dots between the volumes that bookend it; collectively, the three encompass over three centuries of European history.

In essence, *The Pursuit of Power* displays Evans’s sheer ability to synthesize and analyze a vast amount of historical information and communicate it to the reader in a way that makes sense. This ability to connect the dots—that is, to draw relationships and comparisons between disparate events and trends, is the greatest attribute of the book. The author has a way of putting things clearly yet concisely in order to help one understand complex ideas. For example, when describing the European context at the outset of the book, the author observes, “Had the Europe of 1785 looked at itself in a mirror thirty years later, in 1815, it would not have recognized what it saw.” He also does not hesitate to question other historians’ conclusions; for example, one of the prevailing views is that the revolutionary upheavals of 1848 and the national unifications of 1871 are separate and distinct events. Evans offers a different perspective: “In

many respects, it makes sense to see the whole period of 1848 to 1871 as a single period of revolutionary change, rather than focusing individually on each of the short-term upheavals that followed one another with such breathtaking speed during these years.” *The Pursuit of Power* is replete with such commentary and analysis, adding context and breadth to an understanding of the seminal events and trends in European history between 1815 and 1914.

Also of note is Evans’s insistence that the book not be a collection of individual national histories, without linkages either to each other or to the continent as a whole. He is also a master at covering regional variations, which he does across a wide variety of topics—the state of the peasantry, industrialization and rise of the working class, and political and intellectual movements, to name but a few. As expected, Evans gives ample coverage to the Great Powers such as Britain, France, and Russia. Nevertheless, he also provides sound insight into developments in the Iberian Peninsula, the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and eastern as well as southern Europe, with particular attention to the fascinating and complex demise of both the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. This remarkable breadth is refreshing for those accustomed to narratives that focus almost exclusively on events in central Europe, with little to no coverage of peripheral states. In the same vein, Evans also incorporates a global approach in *The Pursuit of Power*. He constantly reminds the reader of the position of Europe in the worldwide hierarchy, again, discussing a wide range of issues—trade, commerce, the abolition of slavery, and the spread of culture and ideas internationally. This is most evident in chapter 8, “The Wages of Empire,” where the author makes cogent observations regarding the acquisition of colonial possessions: “Such acquisitions reflected Europe’s worldwide hegemony in the nineteenth century. They were made possible by industrial growth, military supremacy, and above all by improved communications.” He also argues that European prominence in international commerce was underwritten by the power of continental navies, in particular that of Great Britain. With the risk of sounding repetitive, Evans is superb at drawing relationships between events and trends in nations or regions, tying them in with continental developments, and then articulating a European perspective in a global context.

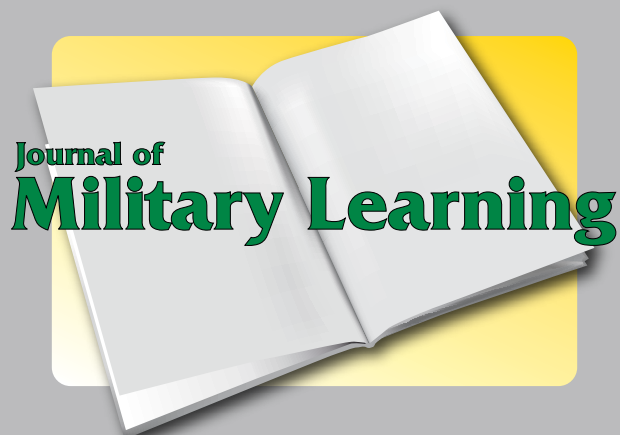
In addition to covering broad brushstrokes such as revolution, intellectual thought, and sweeping social change affecting the whole of Europe, Evans is equally adept at describing the life of “ordinary Europeans” who witnessed such events as they occurred. In this regard, one of his helpful innovations is using personal vignettes that introduce and place into context the main themes to follow. His first chapter on the immediate post-Napoleonic aftermath in Europe, for example, effectively uses the diary of a German foot soldier, Jakob Walter, who accompanied Napoleon on his ill-fated Russian Campaign of 1812 as a conscript in the Grand Army. Walter not only survived that horrific ordeal but also, quite remarkably, captured his personal thoughts in a diary that did not surface until the 1930s. Through the example of Walter, the author contextualizes the general war-weariness in Europe and attitudes toward Napoleon in particular. In a similar vein, the author opens “The Challenge of Democracy” with a narrative featuring Emmeline Pankhurst, an Englishwoman who symbolized the British suffragist movement and campaigned tirelessly for female emancipation in Great Britain. Again, Evans uses the Pankhurst example as a basis for exploring the general topic of emancipation, not solely female, across the European continent. The author’s use of vignettes such as these not only sets the historical context but also helps the reader form a personal connection to distant, nineteenth century voices.

There are a few potential criticisms of *The Pursuit of Power*, some imposed by the limitations placed on the series’ authors. For example, because of the single volume format, the book is densely packed with facts and analysis, over eight hundred pages worth, and requires concentration and perseverance on the part of the reader, especially those not familiar with the nuances of European history. (Evans recommends that the reader tackle the book from start to finish). Additionally, format rules dictate that the *Penguin History* contributors use primarily secondary sources, without the use of endnotes

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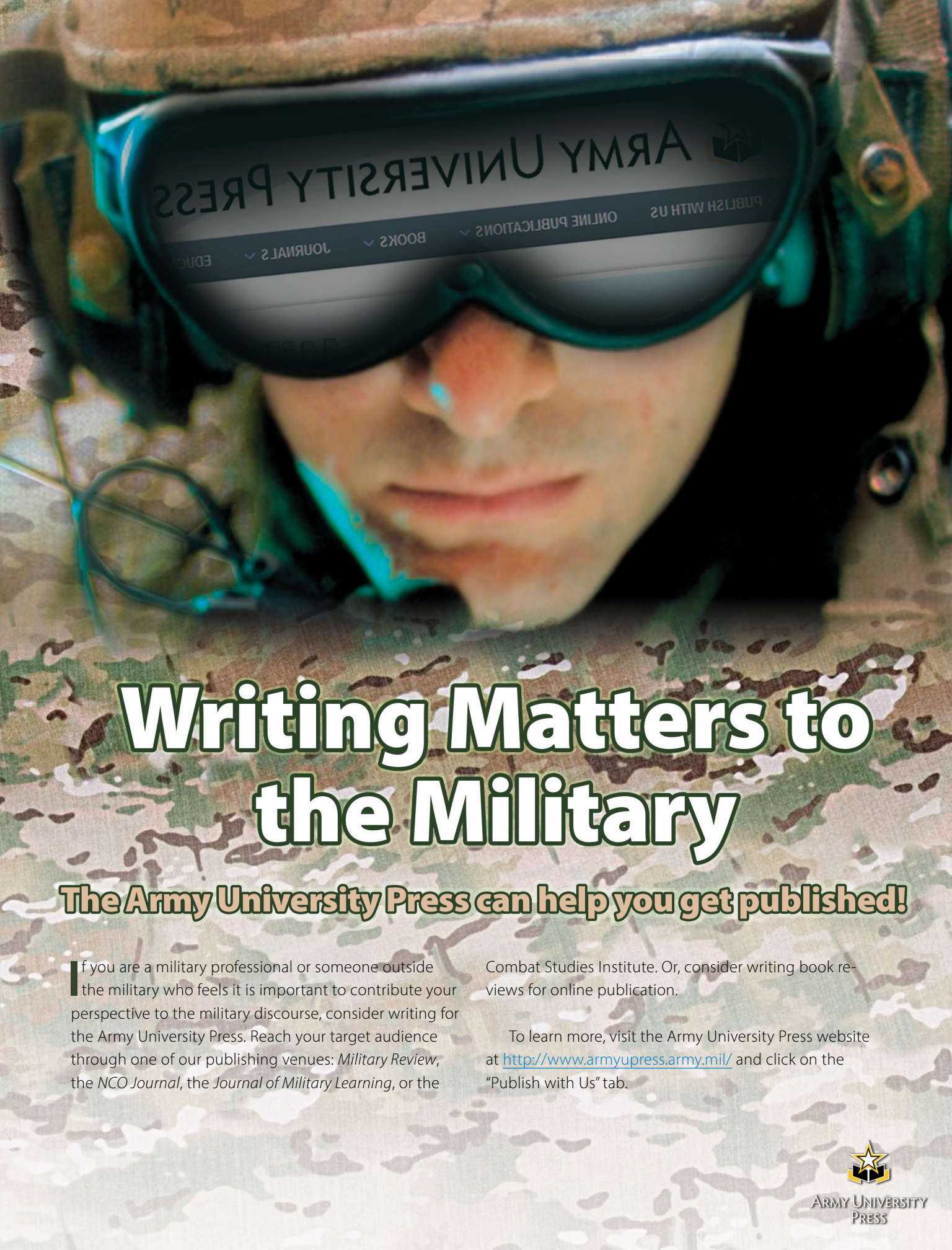
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or footnotes. This may be off-putting to some who are looking for additional detail or more specific source information. Finally, Evans's command of the material, acquired over decades of teaching and writing, may intimidate some due to the multiplicity of complex relationships, not to mention places, names, dates, and so forth.

These shortcomings, however, pale in comparison to Evans's superb analysis and unique ability to make complex relationships clear and understandable to the general reader. As stated, this is his most significant contribution. All told, *The Pursuit of Power* is a superb addition to *The Penguin History of Europe* series and effectively sets up the final two volumes by Sir Ian Kershaw, the first published in 2015, as noted above. With Kershaw's upcoming *Fractured Continent: Europe 1950–The Present*, the series will be complete and brought up to date. Richard Evans's new work is indispensable to an understanding of twentieth century as well as today's Europe, and is highly recommended to the general reader as well as the specialist in European affairs and nineteenth century history in particular. Anyone who reads *The Pursuit of Power* will benefit from an enlightened as well as broadened perspective of the continent from a master historian. ■



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