Book Review


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*A Higher Form of Killing: Six Weeks in World War I That Forever Changed the Nature of Warfare* is an awe-inspiring account of the role technology played in one of the largest conflicts of the twentieth century thus reflecting on both political and social history of World War I. Diana Preston demonstrates the ethical impact of warfare while providing a concise analysis of the three most influential technological advances that revolutionized World War I: the development of chlorine gas, the U-Boots or U-boats, and the Zeppelin. The book is broken down into twenty-two chapters to include the origins of each technology, the role these advancements played in World War I, and the lasting impact they have had on modern warfare. The author uses eye witness accounts from the perspective of both the Allied and Central Powers, situating the reader in the immediate reality of warfare. From there, a predominantly unbiased analysis outlines the extent to which these technologies affected the nature of warfare within the context of World War I itself. And finally, Preston makes a concerted effort to demonstrate that these advancements during World War I are still felt today, including the current conflict in Syria.

The book first addresses the political discord felt throughout Europe preceding the war by highlighting the Boer War of 1899, the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902, and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, as well as the creation of the Red Cross. From here, the book moves on to examine the German perspective on warfare technology. Despite the presence of many Luddites within the German government, the military was intent on building up a modern German navy—and specifically, the development of the U-Boat to compete against the expansive British navy and newly developed HMS Dreadnought. It also introduces the origins and developments of both chlorine gas and Zeppelins as weapons of war. Forming the core of the book, we see the usage and impact that these three new technologies had on the war effort, as, for example, in the Second Battle of Ypres, the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and the Zeppelin attacks on Britain. The author demonstrates extensive research by incorporating journal entries from those directly involved such as Jean Jules Henri Mordacq, who witnessed the first chemical warfare attack in history, along with Captain Richard Webb, director of the Trade Division who established the guidance for merchant shipping during war time, and Major Cuthbert Lawson, who witnessed the spring gas attack from the Ypres Salient (205). The remainder of the book address the lasting impact of these technological innovations: in the final chapter, Preston argues that the creation and use of these advances amounted to war crimes and that the lack of either pursuing or charging those involved directly influenced the nature of warfare today. The author juxtaposes the use of chlorine gas to the modern day sarin attacks in Syria, the chemical attacks favored by Saddam Hussein, and the development of the nuclear bomb. (274-75). The usage of Zeppelins and U-boats is compared to the Battle of Britain in World War II and the Japanese rapid invasion of China and Southeast Asia. (268-71).
A Higher Form of Killing is an excellent initiation into understanding how technology changed the face of warfare throughout World War II. The book dives into the historiographic study of war—at least from the author’s perspective—providing an extensive bibliography mixed with primary and secondary sources from a wide spectrum of books, journals, newspapers, and archival documents. These sources are interwoven throughout Preston’s analysis of the cause, development, and subsequent effect the three main technologies would have on the conduct of war. However, it is important to note that with such an extensive use of sources they tend to be more qualitative rather than quantitative.

The thesis is incorporated throughout the book, but at times takes a backseat to the narrative: Preston often regales the reader with anecdotes, diverging from the analysis and argument that technology changed the nature of warfare. The strongest example of this diversion comes with Preston’s recount of the U-boat attack on the Lusitania. The author spends a disproportionate part of the book detailing the events surrounding the Lusitania, suggesting to the reader that the author would much rather write about this topic than the technologies themselves. This can easily be deduced by the fact that the book’s first appendix is entitled “The Lusitania Controversies” and that Preston has written three other books surrounding the events of the ill-fated British ocean liner. Although the Lusitania argument is fascinating and well developed, it comes at the expense of the Zeppelin argument. The Zeppelin argument feels rushed and not on the same level as the U-boats or gas analyses, thus making the Zeppelin the weakest of the arguments. This is evident throughout the entire argument and in the final chapter, as the author’s analysis of the impact of the Zeppelins is significantly smaller than the arguments for the other two technological advances.

Despite this proclivity for storytelling, the author provides clear examples of the development and implementation of these technologies throughout the theaters of war. The author’s argument regarding chlorine gas is the best part in the book: Preston provides a near perfect balance between arguing the complexity of the development—including arguments for and against the usage of chlorine gas—and providing an easily digestible presentation to those not historically inclined. The author takes great effort to incorporate a variety of examples as a means of reaching out to various age groups and to make the reading more accessible. The best examples of this comes from the direct quotes used in the argument which really cements the fears, impacts, and continued usage of chemical weapons throughout the war. The author achieves this by taking examples from World War II, the Vietnam and Korean Wars, and the contemporary conflicts in the Middle East.

Aside from belaboring the Lusitania and limitations within the Zeppelin argument, A Higher Form of Killing is great example of bridging the gap of historical events by evaluating them within a modern frame of reference. Considering that 2017 marks the centennial of the US entrance into the World War I, the general public is becoming more aware of the events that unfolded throughout the war as we look back through a century of historical analysis and recognize echoing themes within modern conflicts. Preston’s historiographic approach and thoughtful analysis evokes the question, “Considering what we learned so long ago, why is war still conducted with such unethical means?”