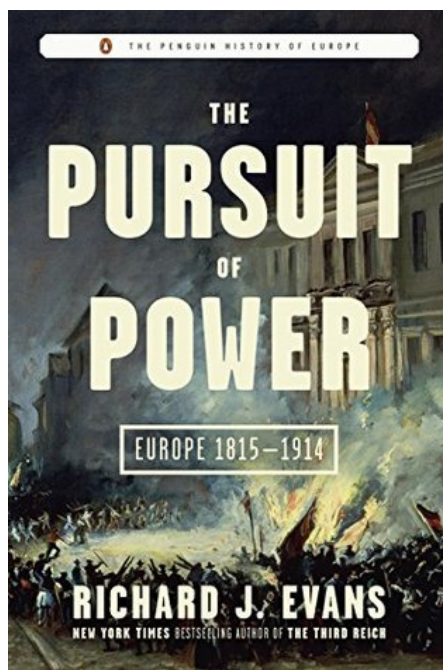




The Pursuit of Power: Europe 1815-1914

Richard J. Evans

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From the bestselling author of *The Third Reich at War*, a masterly account of Europe in the age of its global hegemony; the latest volume in the Penguin History of Europe series

Richard J. Evans, bestselling historian of Nazi Germany, returns with a monumental new addition to the acclaimed Penguin History of Europe series, covering the period from the fall of Napoleon to the outbreak of World War I. Evans's gripping narrative ranges across a century of social and national conflicts, from the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 to the unification of both Germany and Italy, from the Russo-Turkish wars to the Balkan upheavals that brought this era of relative peace and growing prosperity to an end. Among the great themes it discusses are the decline of religious belief and the rise of secular science and medicine, the journey of art, music, and literature from Romanticism to Modernism, the replacement of old-regime punishments by the modern prison, the end of aristocratic domination and the emergence of industrial society, and the dramatic struggle of feminists for women's equality and emancipation. Uniting the era's broad-ranging transformations was the pursuit of power in all segments of life, from the banker striving for economic power to the serf seeking to escape the power of his landlord, from the engineer asserting society's power over the environment to the psychiatrist attempting to exert science's power over human nature itself.

The first single-volume history of the century, this comprehensive and sweeping account gives the reader a magnificently human picture of Europe in the age when it dominated the rest of the globe.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Pursuit of Power: Europe 1815-1914 Details

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Justin Evans says

Evans chooses the encyclopaedic approach here: an endless number of mini-essays on various topics, with huge information dumps included. That sounds awful, but the genius of this book lies in i) its organization; ii) Evans's prose; iii) Evans's eye for detail.

i) No matter what you're interested in, you can find it in this book, and it will all be in one place, and it will be coherent. He covers the entire continent, the entire history of the continent, and all aspects of that history. Do you want to read all of the parts with equal attention? No. I could care less about the details of battles fought in the German hinterlands, but if I ever need to know about it, by golly do I know where to look.

ii) Pristine, clear and balanced.

iii) He has an astonishing eye for anecdotes and details that help most subjects come to life.

My main criteria for judging history written about periods I'm not knowledgeable in is very simple: does this book make me want to learn more? The answer in this case is, very much yes. Why do I know so little about the Balkans? Why do I know so little about anything?

My only real complaint is that Evans is awful on 'culture'. He has a historian's taste, which means a more or less philistine-level understanding of literature: does this novel provide an anecdote I can use in a lecture? That's no way to judge books.

He does seem slightly better when it comes to music, though.

Marks54 says

This is the newest volume of the Penguin History of Europe, It covers the period from the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna in 1815 until the start of the First World War in August 1914. The author is best known for his magnificent three volume history of the Third Reich. This book is the prelude to the volume on Europe in the 20th Century by Ian Kershaw entitled "To Hell and Back" - which was also quite good.

This book has gotten good reviews but I was a bit wary in approaching it. There is a lot of material to cover and most of it has already been covered before and well by other historians, albeit in separate volumes. What is the point of a new one volume history of the 19th century? I think there is a lot to be gained, especially by a quality volume. The overall story that emerges from historians over time matters for how we think about the past and how that thinking affects us going forward. Many people don't read much history at all and so a volume that provides some access to how Europe moved from triumph over Napoleon to devastation in WWI is valuable - to students who read it, to general reader who reads even part of it, and to many who want to know how things fit together. Evans does a really fine job of establishing a few general story lines and then following them through consistently while at the same time presenting accounts of the more numerous but limited dramas that together comprise the century.

I increasingly have come to appreciate the deep history behind many of the crises going on in the present -

whether in the Middle East, China, Russia, Ukraine, Germany, Greece, France, Britain, or whatnot. Not only is there a history behind current events, but there are interconnections that are startling and thought provoking. I have been reading European history for a long time and this book was able to inform and startle in most of its chapters. While this is not an account for specialists, it is very good and consistent with what the specialists have been finding with all of the new archival openings since 1989.

As might be expected, Evans is wonderful on the military, political, and diplomatic lines of the story. That is essential of course, since the volume runs from Napoleon through 1848 and Bismarck and up through the Balkan Wars and the onset of WWI. The last chapter is amazing for what he presents in a limited space. There is a lot more to this book, however. Most chapters begin with a feature on some individual you have likely never heard of but whose life figures into the narrative. The social, intellectual, and culture developments that move Europe into modernity are well covered. Evans is also very persuasive on the economic history of the century, whether discussing the two industrial revolutions, the changes in diet and food production, or the changes in medicine, public health, life spans, and the growth of cities. There is a lot going on but the book holds together well and is very satisfying. There is also copious guidance for further readings.

This is a long book - perhaps better viewed as a well integrated series of essays. It is very much worth a try.

The past few months have been a bit depressing. Reading a good book that helps put things in historical context helps to convince me that perhaps things might not be so bad or that at least it will take more time to see how everything develops out of the confusion of current messes. Perhaps it is not as bad as it seems. Time will tell.

Christine Brooks says

10 pages of further reading and bibliographic content in lieu of a traditional list of references at the conclusion of a 700-page book would normally be an enormous red flag that proper research and citation were lacking. As Evans is well established as one of the finest and most thorough historical researchers of our time, this isn't a concern in the usual sense. However, it's an indicator in this case of the central problem with "The Pursuit of Power"---that despite its great length, there simply isn't enough space to cover the breakneck speed of social, political, and religious change that occurred during the 1815-1914 period of time the book addresses.

This presents a structural problem. While Evans utilizes a traditional chronological format through the first 2/3 of the book, he then shifts to a more thematic approach---arts, for example, or advances and concerns of medicine and hygiene. Not only is this jarring for the reader, who is made to shift in their perception of the content, but it gives the impression that the topics now presented in brief vignettes were irrelevant to the previous sections. It leaves a falsely disjointed concept of how varying aspects of European civilization were woven together as they unfolded.

The content of Evans' research is fascinating, but the unfortunate presentation does it a disservice in terms of the rushed, barrage-of-facts presentation that seems to pick up speed around halfway through. While Penguin's "History of Europe" series is certainly a project to be lauded, in this particular instance, the segment length is a failed experiment. Kershaw's "To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949" is a much more reasonable division---624 total pages to cover 35 years, versus "The Pursuit of Power"'s 848 total pages to cover 99 years. While a kneejerk reaction may be to consider that Kershaw's book covers two world wars and thus needs more space to expound on its subject matter, Evans' has the formidable task of covering the 19th century predecessors to world warfare, the Napoleonic and Crimean wars (among other conflicts and

peaces, of course). Had Penguin allowed these eras to be pared off into another book, Evans surely could have done wonderfully devoting his 700 pages (this again, excludes references, suggested reading, and the index) to around 50 years instead.

Andrew says

The Pursuit of Power: Europe 1815-1914, by Richard Evans, is a history of Europe in the years between the Congress of Vienna, and the start of WWI. It is in the *annals* style of history, looking at every aspect of this time period in some detail. Evans is an excellent historian, and author of the Third Reich series of books (all fantastic reads), and he is excellently qualified to tackle this subject matter. His style of writing mixes grand strokes of history with intimate narrative details from those who lived it.

Topics covered in this book range widely. He examines the post-Napoleonic European political scene, with a backlash to Napoleon's revolutionary ideals, and a brief implementation of reactionary Monarchist forces throughout Europe, aided and controlled by the "Holy Alliance" of Russia, the UK and Austria-Hungary. However, Napoleon's reforms within Italy and Germany led to deep changes in the composition of the nation-state. The Church lost much ground, as governments hungry for revenues seized ecclesiastical properties, revoked clergy privileges, and so on. Greater representation by the Bourgeois within the political and economic sphere's of European nations came at the expense of the established aristocracy. Ideals of nationalism began to take root in regions of Europe, notably Italy and Germany, who would eventually unite under moderate conservative Monarchies (the Kingdom of Sardinia in Italy, and Prussia in Germany). However, notable nationalist movements were present in Poland (split between Prussia, Austria and Russia), Hungary under the Hapsburg monarchy and throughout the Balkans leading up to WWI.

Evans explores various ideas and concepts throughout this time period as well. Women's rights and agitations for women's suffrage began to take form in this period. Industrialization led to rapid economic growth throughout the continent, but led to poor working conditions for an increasingly literate and agitated working class. Socialism and Communism were defined and took the working class by storm, clashing with the notion that lower class individuals were more apt to be conservatives and religious. Nationalism in various parts of Europe began to take on racial terminology, and the growth of antisemitism and other forms of racism became institutionalized.

Evans explores time and spacial concepts as well. An agreement on dividing the world into time zones was begun and completed in this period. Weights and measures, although still highly localized, began to move to a centralized system often controlled by the government. Railroads and telegraphs cut the time news took to filter throughout society by exponential numbers. Steamships allowed imperial nations to quickly transport goods and armies to far flung parts of the globe. The population of most states began to urbanize, as peasant farmers moved to urban areas to work in factories producing steel, fuel, chemicals and consumer goods.

This period was a period of relative stability in terms of warfare. The Congress of Vienna created a system of states that remained fairly stable for a century. Monarchies flourished in the early part of this period, with the July Monarchy in France, Metternich in Austria, and Tsar Alexander I in Russia working to suppress any hint of Revolutionary rhetoric in continental Europe. However, in 1848 and beyond, a series of revolutions broke this iron grip. Metternich was overthrown in Austria, and nationalists in Hungary began to alter the Hapsburg's system. The French monarchy was overthrown, and Napoleon III took power. Prussia was forced to open the doors to greater influence by the Reichstag. These revolutions were short lived, but paved the way for immense political changes throughout Europe. The serfs in Russia began to agitate for emancipation, and greater representation was the key to cooling down revolutionary unrest in most nations.

Wars did take place. The Crimean War sought to prop up a weak Ottoman state against Russian aggression, with France, Austria and the UK all uniting to fight off the Russian advance. Napoleon III supported the Kingdom of Sardinia and Italian rebels in their quest to create a united Italy. Austria was beaten back by these combined forces, and Sardinia was able to annex Milan, Central Italy, and the Kingdom of Two Sicilies, to create a strong Italy (notably missing Venetia - this was taken later). Prussia first took Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark, turned on their Austrian allies to untie the German Confederation under Prussian rule, and then incorporated the southern German states and Alsace-Lorraine in their war with France in 1871. Chancellor Otto von Bismarck formed Germany as a state as German troops marched through France. In the later portion of this period, multiple wars erupted in the Balkans as Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman's struggled to retain control of an increasingly restive region. Russia interfered multiple times to shave more territory off of the Ottoman's and promote pan-Slavic political ideals.

I could write more, suffice to say that this is a very detailed book. As with any book within the *Annals* school, a long stretch of history is examined in great depth. There is no overlying thesis, besides the idea that revolution in this period was often followed by conservative reaction, although this is not a new or novel concept. Evans has written a very interesting account of a fascinating period. 1815-1914 was the birth of the modern world, as the systems, ideals and concepts that we currently understand and live under were incubated, explored and became established systems. This book is well written, has a great mix of narrative and long durée style history. It explores its concepts and themes in great depth, and offers an excellent account of many aspects of every day life in this period of time, as well as the grander geopolitical events that took place. This was a lot of fun to read, and an excellent history book of its style. Easily recommended as a comprehensive account of this time period, as it covers every topic one could possibly wish to learn about.

Sebastien says

I've enjoyed Richard Evans' series on the Third Reich, I appreciate both his writing style and his analysis. But tbh this latest huge tome of his was a nasty slog for me. Maybe it comes down to the material, especially first half of 19th century European history is less interesting to me? There's a ton of material in this book, lots of info-dumping (maybe this is unavoidable? but it kills flow when you're getting drowned in fact after mind-numbing fact), and at times I guess I got lost with all the various actors and currents and countercurrents. Huge sections where my interest and focus wandered, got bored. And yes, there were sections that shined, for instance I particularly enjoyed the overview on Bismarck. But this didn't make up for slog I had to go through to get to these sections. I do appreciate the depth of research and synthesis of material, and how hard it must be to put together a book on such a vast subject. But sadly in the end it just wasn't my cup of tea.

PS. I listened to the audiobook version of this book. Right after any new figure is introduced/mentioned their birth and death dates are listed. It is shockingly annoying, mostly because there are thousands of people referenced in this book. Sometimes I was rather amused at how annoying I found the listing of these birth and death dates, but seriously, please anyone who listens to the audiobook I'm curious to find out if this stupid little thing drives you as bonkers as it drove me!

Emma says

I quickly realised that this was not the most suitable book for audio, yet I persevered because the period is so turbulent that it makes our contemporary process of social and political change seem rather tame. The book

is crammed with detail and dates, which have to be recited after each person (from politician to philosopher, from diarist to monarch) is named, so that it often feels like nothing more than a list of things that happened or what people did without much scope for analysis and evaluation. The assessment is there, Evans is a brilliant historian, and he integrates the immense information needed to cover the wide scope of the book with his own interpretations, but the effect was lost in the listening. If anything, he gives the reader too much, the equal weight given to the tremendous and the trivial undermine the power of both things.

Yet if he hadn't aimed so high, the book might not have included what became my favourite sections. All the highlights of the period are covered, of course, but what about bits like: The Wages of Empire: The Explorers Here we learn about Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1778-1823), a circus strong man turned explorer and archaeologist of Egyptian antiquities who was the first European to enter the Tomb of Kings. His horrifying stories include the crushing of mummies while exploring and the theft of their papyri, the wholesale removal of all types of antiquities from throughout Egypt, carving his name in to stone figures so others would know it was his property, as well as fights with rival adventurers and collectors, one of whom was Bernardino Drovetti (1776-1852) who, after finding a cache of 20 vases, crushed half to increase the price of those he kept. As a classicist, these men made me throw up in my mouth just a little, can you imagine what has been lost and destroyed by people like this? Or The Conquest of Nature: Taming the Wild which focuses on the dangerous beasts living in the European wilderness, with wolves the most feared. While largely avoiding people, they would attack if desperate or hungry: 200 people a year were eaten by wolves every year in Russia through most of the century; up to 1900 and beyond, wolf hunting was legal duty in Sweden; wolf packs roamed parts of Spain, Italy, Portugal, and the Balkans, especially the mountainous regions. One wolf in Poland in 1817 was 'accustomed during the late campaigns to living upon the bodies of dead soldiers' and so acquired a taste for human rather than animal flesh. He was eventually shot when he attempted to eat a two year old child who had been fastened to a tree by his father as bait. If this is not the most interesting thing you've read today, I don't know what to say.... It's these vignettes that bring real vibrancy and appeal to what is, for the most part, a very dense, dry read.

Overall, it's a work that reflects the immense amount of research Evans put in, but it fails somewhat in the execution. Other than the chapters noted and the occasional fact that leads to an 'oh that's interesting' moment, the book leaves you with more of a feeling of emptiness that a history book should, like it made you forget more than you learned.

Steven Peterson says

This is a good solid book. It takes a multidisciplinary perspective to trace the arc of European politics from the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo to the outbreak of World War I. The book focuses on important areas, such as the evolution of government structure, economic change (among the most important of which was the role of the peasantry), the growth of information availability (such as newspapers), the working out (or not) of multiethnic countries (such as Austria-Hungary). Some states resisted change more aggressively than others (such as Russia).

The story begins with the states meeting after the end of the Napoleonic era, to try to create a European system that would be stable and that would be conservative. On the political side, the author traces the time from 1815 to the latter 1840s, when cries for greater freedom and more power to citizens (and outbreaks of efforts to overturn governments (e.g., in France) emerged. There was much fear among elites, but--for the most part--a degree of tranquility returned.

Change can be manifest by the arts. Thus, his treatment of music and other arts is nicely related to the political. It provides another dimension to the work.

This is a fine work that covers a lot of territory without getting 500 far into the weeds.

Wendell says

In my experience, there are few subjects, historical or otherwise, more encrusted with past and reactionary rumination than nineteenth-century Europe (there's a plot point in the Prisoner episode "The General," I suspect, in explicit mockery thereof), and despite Evans' excellence as both a historian and writer (if I haven't done so already, I highly recommend his three-volume history of Nazi Germany), I was a little leery of further pursuing the Penguin History of Europe (of which this is a volume) as a result. I needn't have worried; Evans does a masterful job of synthesizing the usually dreary political (and especially diplomatic) history with thoughtful, eloquent analysis (and I haven't really gotten yet to the social and economic factors, which I expect will be even better explicated). It helps that he opens each chapter with a potted biography of a nineteenth-century European, occasionally obscure (a Napoleonic foot soldier, a Russian serf, etc.), that helps put many of the issues and developments discussed into a more intimate perspective. Not to mention that there are a number of issues I don't remember cropping up in my old undergrad reading on European history that figure not only in prominence but current relevance: what it means to be European, who decides what that means (and the consequences), and the impact Europeans of the nineteenth century had on their natural environment (and vice versa).

Peter Mcloughlin says

A little dry and I had a hard time getting into the presentation.

Bou says

This renowned British historian shows in this history of Europe in the 19th century that - despite our national differences - our continent has a common history, in which most developments were part of an unifying thread: the quest for power

This book appeared as part seven in the new series Penguin History of Europe, the individual parts of which were written by renowned historians like Mark Greengrass and Ian Kershaw. Part six, written by Tim Blanning, runs from 1648 to 1815 and is called The Pursuit of Glory. Evans (1947) offers a unifying thread: the quest for power, which was sought after by all Europeans, over each other, nature and the rest of the world.

The quest for power had basically two faces. First of all, you can see the century as an elongated struggle for control and self-determination, of the body, of the poor, of women, of workers and from citizens. At the same time, of course, it was the century in which colonial expansion was ideologically supported by imperialism, the century in which nationalism replaced the magic of the kingdom and in which nature with new technology was increasingly subjected to humanity. The struggle for more control of the power and powerlessness and the desire for dominance, oppression and brutal exploitation together form the dynamics that Evans sees as pivotal in the 19th century.

To avoid the impersonality of such a grand overview, a relay of mere evidence of facts and figures, he summons at the beginning of each chapter on a life that is exemplary for the tensions of that time - a

recruiting that returns to Napoleons Russia, the early feminist writer Flora Tristan, the popular Swedish writer Fredrika Bremer, Hungarian poet Bertalan Szemere and the British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst. Those little stories are well written and bring the history of the nineteenth century to life.

Through his approach, Evans shows convincingly that Europe has a common history, in which the individual national histories each have a distinct cultural and political taste and color, but in which most developments are the same. That peace could last for a relatively long time was usually the result of well-defined self-interest; that the rights of unmarried peasants, citizens and minorities were gradually expanded, as well. The ideologies with which colonialism was founded were also commonplace.

And when nationalism is introduced in the second half of the nineteenth century, imperialism is seen as an unwavering European destiny, and racism gains virulence, one goes collectively towards cataclysm. To underline, Evans ends his book with the prophetic verdict of the British Foreign Minister Sir Edward Gray, who in his ministry on August 3, 1914, turns to a friend: "Everywhere in Europe the lights go out and we will not see them inflamed during our lifetime"

Tariq Mahmood says

As a Pakistani living in UK, I have found the history of nineteenth century Europe very interesting indeed, especially when you consider very similar challenges faced in the Pakistan of today; Loss of traditional livelihood in the wake of industrial growth, movement of population from rural to urban areas, and the shift of power to the population from feudal elites. This fantastic history book has answered a long standing question about Pakistani apprehension of western styled democracy. I am now convinced that the Pakistani urban population have to learn to wrest power from the feudal business nexus controlling them at the moment. There are signs with sporadic attempts made by the urban population with impromptu riots and demonstrations from time to time. So instead of dismissing these attempts as 'anarchic' and 'archaic', I shall now view these events as normal progression towards a successfully democratic model sometimes in the future.

David Nichols says

I have read a few general histories of nineteenth-century Europe (notably the first volumes of Eric Hobsbawm's trilogy), and their authors usually characterize the era as the dawn of Western modernity. Europe in the 1800s became an industrial and military powerhouse, adorned with railroads and vibrant cities, glittering with electric light, its population growing rapidly in size, literacy, and wealth. Evans doesn't entirely disagree with this assessment; he just notes that it only applied to select parts of Europe, namely Britain, central France, Belgium, and Wilhelmine Germany. Europe included far more countries than these, and many if not most people lived their lives outside of the continent's urbane North and West. The author's determination not only to bring these lives into his study, but to argue for their typicality, their "European-ness," makes PURSUIT OF POWER a special and provocative book.

Popular culture encourages us to envision the archetypal nineteenth-century European as a middle-class urbanite, like Sherlock Holmes or one of Dickens's clerks. Most Europeans, however, lived in rural areas, and most rural Europeans tilled the soil as their ancestors had done. French farmers eschewed machinery until quite recently, and Russian peasants used wooden plows until the First World War. Many country folk looked to spell books and hedge magic to ensure a good harvest or heal minor ailments. Magic proved no more useful than ever, alas, and despite some big improvements in farm output famine remained a periodic

threat. Hunger killed thousands of Germans in summerless 1816, cut down one of every eight Irish in 1846-47, assailed the Finns in 1867 and the Cypriots a half-dozen years later. Even in good times, marginal countries like Iceland struggled with malnutrition. Even in times of plenty and fecundity, human settlements abutted undeveloped wilderness: wolves stalked Russia's muzhiks, and game animals proliferated so widely that a privileged hunter like Franz Ferdinand could in his lifetime bag 300,000 animals. Until Gavrilo Princip bagged him, of course.

Europe's political culture also remained traditional, indeed rather primitive by twentieth-century standards. Law and justice were becoming the exclusive purview of national courts, but exceptions remained. Southern Europe still contained villages pursuing blood feuds; in one region of Greece feuding families lived in fortified towers like medieval barons. Absolute monarchies slowly, grudgingly allowed their people constitutions and consultative assemblies, but politicians rigged elections and destabilized legislatures. Delegates disrupted the Austrian Reichsrat with fighting and demonstrations, and Italian politicians stuffed ballot boxes – in one district the voting rolls included forty cows. France did manage to create a stable republic (after 1871), primarily by grounding the new state's power and authority in the nation's conservative provincial elites. Protest culture sometimes looked forward to a new classless society, but more often than not protesters looked back to a better past – to a “traditional” economic order or to the glory days of 1789, which inspired the rebels of 1848 to their enthusiastic but ultimately sterile revolt.

Europe's artists and arbiters of culture also eschewed progress in favor of nostalgia, as often as not for the Middle Ages. Pre-Raphaelite painters, popular novelists like Victor Hugo and Sir Walter Scott, and composers like Wagner expressed the elite's yearning for a feudal past when castles stood in place of factories, knights excelled in courage and spiritual purity, and commoners knew their place. Britain's heavy Victorian architecture recalled the Gothic and Tudor past, and the French refurbished old cathedrals and built new ones. (The architect who restored Notre Dame added gargoyles to the building to make it more “authentically” medieval.)

Evans does remind us that all Europeans, even in the countryside and the remote fringes, made some progress toward the ambiguous blessings of modernity. Farmers continued to adopt the strange but productive American crops that had first appeared in Europe in the 1600s. Romania became a major producer of maize, and Greek peasants adopted Andean potatoes after the prime minister tricked them into thinking spuds valuable. Better nutrition and improvements in urban sanitation lowered infant mortality rates and increased lifespans. Life expectancy across the continent rose by at least one-third between 1815 and 1914. Europe's population grew and expanded, into the cities and across the Atlantic. And while not everyone had access to technological marvels like electric lights and motor cars, the technology of war spread, as it always does, into every corner of Europe. In 1815 the muzzle-loading cannon and socket bayonet represented the battlefield state-of-the-art. By 1913, these had given way to barbed wire, machine guns, and bomber aircraft, which even isolated countries could afford. Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece debuted the new armamentarium in the Balkan Wars, an isolated conflict that still killed 200,000 people. The next year the Balkan conflict and its cruelties spread to the rest of the continent, and the old order, the unstable mixture of rusticity, faux-medievalism, and bourgeois respectability that Europe's elite had tried to hold together, perished in the trenches.

Matt says

The Penguin History of Europe asks its authors to perform heroic feats of synthesis. In *To Hell and Back*, the first book of the series I read (it is number eight in sequence), Ian Kershaw had to cram World War I and World War II into a single volume. That's quite a task! Any topic within that topic could be worth a book of many hundreds of pages. This job requires not only a brilliant historian and writer, but someone who can

streamline and condense, who can choose what needs highlighting, and what can be excised. It is a tall order.

Fortunately, Richard Evans picked up the phone when Penguin came calling.

The Pursuit of Power covers Europe between 1815-1914. That's a lot of ground to walk. A century is busy, even if it doesn't contain two gigantic world wars. Not surprisingly, based on his reputation, Evans is up to the challenge.

There are different ways to approach a one-volume history of this type. Kershaw went after the high points, and favored broad strokes over granular details. In this way, he covered two World Wars and a depression in just over 500 pages.

Evans uses a vastly different tactic. He tries to swallow the world. In 716 pages of text, he endeavors to embrace it all. Ninety-nine years of humanity between two hard covers. The politics, the culture, and the economics. The wars, the rebellions, the revolutions, and the regime changes. He introduces world leaders, artists, writers, doctors, and inventors. The famous, the infamous, and the unknown. He traces the changes in technology, and the upheavals of social movements. Evans moves boldly across the map, covering not only the "great powers" but the lesser nations of Europe as well.

This book is a breathtaking accomplishment. It is also way, way too much.

Evans tries to impose some order by structuring the book thematically. There are eight total chapters, with each chapter subdivided into ten sections. Four chapters focus on political history; two on social and economic history; and two on cultural history. By utilizing theme rather than chronology, there is a lot of moving backwards and forwards through time.

The overarching premise is given us by the title. According to Evans, the "pursuit of power permeated European society in the nineteenth century." States, governments, armies, revolutionaries, political parties, bankers and industrialists, serfs, women, workers, all vying for power. As theses go, this is not exactly mind-bending stuff. Anyone who watches *Game of Thrones* knows that it is power – not money or love – that makes the world go around.

Rather than proving some larger point, Evans is offering a panorama of the last years when Europe ruled the world. I learned things that I didn't know could be learned. The sheer amount of factoids Evans dispenses could fill a lifetime of bar trivia nights.

Did you know, for instance, that over a six month period in 1840, English and Scottish factory commissions reported 1,114 cotton mill accidents caused by machinery, resulting in 22 deaths and 109 amputations? Speaking of cotton, the number of cotton spindles in Austria rose from 1.3 million in 1851 to 2 million in 1885 to nearly 5 million in 1913. Meanwhile, pig iron production in the southern provinces of Russia grew from 210,000 tons in 1890, to 1,483,000 tons in 1900. To no one's great pleasure, the gross number of lawyers rose in England by a distressing 39% between 1851 and 1891. On a more drunken note, 36 million liters of absinthe was consumed by the French in 1910. That's a lot of green fairies!

From the profusion of pigs in Prussia to the literary nationalism of Boleslaw Prus, seemingly no detail goes unmentioned.

Of course, these are meaningless numbers. Figures and minutiae for me to lose almost immediately. When all is said and done, I may forget more things I learned here than in any other book.

That is one of the issues I had with *The Pursuit of Power*. It is easy to get overwhelmed, or simply lost, in all the information. I needed a better idea of why this detail mattered. This book is at its best when it tethers

events to peoples' lives, from women seeking the vote to workers seeking fair wages and a workplace that doesn't maim them. *The Pursuit of Power* is at its most indigestible when it's just rattling off abstract production increases. Fortunately, Evans makes a smart choice by beginning each chapter with a detailed biography of a normal (relatively speaking) European whose life emblemized the events to follow. This helps put a face and a name and a life on all these otherwise impersonal events. Still, there were times when the facts and figures become unmoored from humanity, and this started to feel like a reference book.

The Pursuit of Power obviously covers all the major historical moments. It begins after Waterloo, with most of Europe united against the destabilizing influence of revolutionary and Napoleonic France. The status quo ante guillotine did not last. The echoes of the French Revolution reverberated in the many political movements that rattled the crowned heads of Europe, and foretold the end of monarchical rule. The Revolutions of 1848 are a major topic of conversation. In a book sometimes lacking a narrative backbone, the Revolutions and their aftershocks provide a unifying thread. The years after 1848 were marked by social and political trends that led to both democracy and nationalism.

The Pursuit of Power ends on the eve of World War I. It would have been very easy for Evans to have structured this project around that epochal conflict. He could have limited his scope to the political-military-diplomatic machinations of Great Britain, Germany, France, Austria-Hungary, and Russia, as they warily circled each other in the decades leading to 1914. I give Evans credit for eschewing this tactic. Those books have already been written. Evans tries to capture so much more. (And just to be clear, he covers the road to war; he just doesn't give it his sole attention).

This is an engrossing, erudite, and extremely rewarding book. It is also exhausting. I had to put it down a lot. Its density made it hard to read in big gulps. In many ways it is an achievement. Parts of it are simply spectacular. I especially liked the nonpolitical chapters that focused on advances in science, medicine, and technology. In other ways, *The Pursuit of Power* falls a bit short. It needed more big-picture touches. It sometimes felt like Evans had placed all these beautiful threads on a loom, but never got around to operating the treadle. Those threads just sit there, waiting to be transformed, to be completed.

Before I go, I leave you with one more nugget. In Lille, France, during the Second Empire, there were 63 drinking clubs, 37 card playing clubs, 23 clubs for bowls, 13 for skittles, 18 for crossbow shooting, and a paltry 10 devoted to archery. I can't do anything with this information. In a few minutes, it will likely slip into the deep recesses of my brain, to remain dormant, possibly forever. Yet, for a brief, glorious moment, I had this knowledge at my fingertips. And who knows? Maybe in the future, in some distant year, on some random day, the thought will pop into my head, emerging with crystalline brilliance from the fog of the past, unbidden though not unwelcome: *For whatever reason, the people of Lille clearly preferred crossbows to normal bows.*

I look forward to that day.

(I received a copy of *The Pursuit of Power* from the publisher in exchange for an honest review)

Liviu says

a weak 5 star - erudition galore and some interesting stuff I didn't know plus showcasing various periods through lives of fairly regular people; main negative, the writing style is not as engaging as the one of the previous volume in the series, Pursuit of Glory, so the book was a read some pages when tired/no energy to read something more engaging, put it down, repeat, rather than read long chunks, cannot put down for a while the Glory one was; still quite recommended for the pluses

Erik Graff says

This, volume seven of the Penguin History of Europe, spans the period from the fall of Napoleon I to the onset of WWI in 843 pages. It's both too much and too little: too little in that a history of such compass, covering social, technological, ideological and political developments, can only be impressionistic; too much in that the details, the facts are virtually overwhelming, the author jumping from country to country. Unlike, say, a Marxist history, there is no central thread connecting the whole, no clearly traceable dynamic, no plot. Economics plays a role, but so does chance and inertia. Consequently, while quite the substantial meal, it's a hard one to digest--except, perhaps, for readers very well versed in the period who will read it with critical appreciation.
