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0521850835 - The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present

Jay Winter and Antoine Prost

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The Great War in History

Since the Armistice, a vast literature has been produced on the First World War and its repercussions. For the first time, two leading historians from the United States and France have produced a fully comparative analysis of the ways in which this history has been written and interpreted. The book identifies three generations of historians, literary scholars, film directors and writers who have commented upon the war. Through a thematic structure, it assesses not only diplomatic and military studies but also the social and cultural interpretations of the Great War as seen primarily through the eyes of French, German, and British writers. It provides a fascinating case study of the practice of history in the twentieth century and of the enduring importance of the national lens in shaping historical narrative. This groundbreaking study will prove invaluable reading to scholars and students in history, war studies, European studies, and international relations.

JAY WINTER is Charles J. Stille Professor of History at Yale University. He is a specialist of the First World War and its impact on the twentieth century. His numerous publications include *Sites of memory, sites of mourning: the Great War in European cultural history* (1995), and *1914–1918: the Great War and the shaping of the twentieth century* (1998).

ANTOINE PROST is Emeritus Professor of History at the Université de Paris-I. He is the author and editor of many books, including *Republican identities in war and peace, representations of France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (2002) and *The emergence of European trade unionism* (with Jean-Louis Robert and Chris Wrigley, 2004).

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Preface to the English edition

At the beginning of his book *French war aims in the First World War*, the British historian David Stevenson writes, ‘For later generations, the First World War has seemed before all else to exemplify futility’ (Stevenson, 1982, p. 5). What is evident for a British historian is not evident in any respect for either French historians or others. This difference in basic assumptions is in part the subject of this book. Its origins were French, and have come out of an active and growing literature produced by French historians about the Great War. It is obvious, as even a glance at the bibliography of this book suggests, that this field is entirely multinational and multilingual, and yet scholars remain separated from each other not only by linguistic barriers but also by more general frames of reference and basic assumptions. This book approaches the history of the writing of history in different national frameworks as a subject essential for an understanding of the vast literature produced on the 1914–18 war and its repercussions.

This version of the book has been changed in significant ways. We have extended the statistical material presented in chapter 1, and filled in gaps in our treatment of many particular issues. Nevertheless, as the book was originally written and published in French, there will be certain references and emphases that may strike an English-language reader as unusual, in the same way as Stevenson’s assumption appears astonishing to French scholars, who tend to configure the war as a monumental struggle for the life of the nation. Futility there was, to be sure, but there was much more than that. It may be refreshing for English readers to recognize how unusual their own thinking is on the Great War, when placed alongside that of readers who bring to the subject entirely different assumptions.

One of the purposes of this book is to begin to transcend the national boundaries of historiographical enquiry, while affirming their continuing vitality over time, and by examining their different contours. But another is to view this mountain of writing on the Great War longitudinally. Once we approach the development of writing about the subject over time, we can see that certain themes and patterns of understanding preoccupied

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different generations in different ways. In addition we can examine the exponential growth in publications about the Great War through an examination of scholarly journals. Here we see a common upward inflection of historical interest in this subject from the mid-1970s to the present. Indeed this book is part of this rapidly growing field of interest.

A word or two is necessary about the problems of rendering into English a book originally written for a French audience. The title in French, *Penser la grande guerre*, is untranslatable. So are many terms and concepts we will address in the course of this book; we have tried our best to find a common language which does justice to the wealth of scholarship we here survey. If we have succeeded in showing the excitement as well as the obstacles in the way of creating a fully European history of the Great War, then we will have realized part of our aim.

Orléans, 17 July 2004