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978-0-521-76385-1 - The Cambridge History of the First World War: Volume I: Global War

Edited by Jay Winter

Excerpt

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General Introduction

JAY WINTER

Writing history is always a dialogue. When historians put pen to paper, they carry with them the accumulated interpretations their colleagues have developed over time. Frequently, it is against the grain of these interpretations, in opposition to them, in exasperation with them, that historians decide to write. To be sure, there are many occasions when historians concur with their colleagues or draw their attention to previously untapped sources on matters of common interest. But most of the time historians argue, make objections, and present through their writing a portrait of the past different from those available in print.

This is true both within a generation of historians and between generations. Today's scholars engage with colleagues still at work, and they do so dialogically. The critical point, though, is that the dialogue is also with those historians in the past whose works still inspire reflection, confirmation, elaboration and, on occasion, refutation. We historians are part of a very long engagement with the Great War, an engagement that will continue long after we cease to practise our profession.

The dialogic nature of historical practice therefore makes it necessary to place one generation's thinking about the Great War alongside those of early generations. And we are now the fourth generation of historians who have approached the history of the war of 1914–18.

There have been three earlier generations of writing to which current scholars refer, sometimes explicitly, most times, implicitly.¹ The first was what I will term 'the Great War generation'. These were scholars, former soldiers and public officials who had direct knowledge of the war either through their own military service or through alternative service to their

¹ For a fuller elaboration of this interpretation see Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Jay Winter (ed.), *The Legacy of the Great War: Ninety Years On* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009).

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country's war effort. They wrote history from the top down, by and large through direct experience of the events they described. The central actor portrayed in these books was the state, either in its *dirigiste* forms at home or at the front. The most voluminous of these efforts was the 133-book effort to write the economic and social history of the war, sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Most of these tomes were penned by men who helped run the war or who had to deal with its aftershocks.

This first generation was also composed of men whose memoirs went over the ground again for evident purposes of self-justification. This took many forms, from books by generals and cabinet ministers about their contributions to victory, to exculpatory reminiscences about those trying to evade responsibility for defeat. There were also official histories, many of which were written by former soldiers for the benefit of the various national staff colleges, trying one at a time to frame 'lessons' for the future. These works were frequently highly technical and so detailed that they took decades to appear. The delay diminished their significance for planning the next war in more efficient ways.

The second generation may be termed the generation 'fifty years on'. This group of historians wrote in the late 1950s and 1960s, and wrote not only the history of politics and decision-making at the top, but also the history of society, defined as the history of social structures and social movements. Of course the two kinds of history, political and social, went together, but they were braided together in different ways than in the interwar years. Many of these scholars had the benefit of sources unknown or unavailable before the Second World War. The 'fifty year rule' enabling scholars to consult state papers meant that all kinds of documents could be exploited by those writing in the 1960s, which threw new light on the history of the war.

In the 1960s, there was much more use of film and visual evidence than in the first generation, though in the interwar years battlefield guides and collections of photographs of devastation and weaponry were produced in abundance. After the Second World War, the age of television history began, and attracted an audience to historical narratives greater than ever before. This became evident in the size of the audience for new and powerful television documentaries about the war. In 1964 the BBC launched its second channel with the monumental twenty-six-part history of the war, exhaustively researched in film archives and vetted by an impressive group of military historians. Many of the millions of people who saw this series had lived through the war. In 1964, the young men who had fought and survived were mostly above the age of seventy, but what made the series a major

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cultural event was that the families of the survivors, and of those who did not come back, integrated these war stories into their own family narratives. The Great War thus escaped from the academy into the much more lucrative and populous field of public history, represented by museums, special exhibitions, films and now television. By the 1960s, the Imperial War Museum in London had surpassed many other sites as the premier destination of visitors to London. It remains to this day a major attraction in the capital, just as does the Australian War Memorial, an equally impressive museum and site of remembrance in the Australian capital, Canberra.

There was more than a little nostalgia in the celebration by survivors of 'fifty years on'. By 1964, the European world that went to war in 1914 no longer existed. All the major imperial powers that joined the struggle had been radically transformed. The British Empire was a thing of the past; so was *Algérie française*, and the French *mission civilisatrice* in Africa and South Asia. The German Empire was gone, and so were most of its eastern territories, ceded to Poland and Russia after 1945. Austria, Hungary and Yugoslavia were small independent states. And while the Soviet Union resembled Tsarist Russia in some respects, these continuities were dwarfed by the massive transformation of Soviet society since 1917.

The nostalgia of 1964 was, therefore, for a world which had fallen apart in the Great War. For many people, the blemishes and ugliness of much of that world were hidden by a kind of sepia-toned reverence for the days before the conflict. 'Never such innocence, / Never before or since', wrote Philip Larkin in a poem whose title referred not to 1914, but to the more archaic 'MCMXIV'. This poem was published in 1964.

In much historical writing, as much as in historical documentaries, the dramatic tension derived from juxtaposing this set of pre-lapsarian images with the devastation and horror of the Western Front, and with the sense of decline, a loss of greatness, which marked the post-1945 decades in Britain and beyond. Whatever was wrong with the world seemed to be linked to 1914, to the time when a multitude of decent men went off to fight one war and wound up fighting a much more terrible one.

Decencies were betrayed, some argued, by a blind elite prepared to sacrifice the lives of the masses for vapid generalisations like 'glory' or 'honour'. This populist strain may be detected in much writing about the war in the 1960s, and in the study of social movements which arose out of it. The fiftieth anniversary of the Gallipoli landing provoked a surge of interest in the Great War in Australia and New Zealand, where the loss of the battle was eclipsed by the birth of these two nations. Similarly heroic were narratives of

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the Bolshevik Revolution, celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 1967. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many scholars told us much more about the history of labour, of women, of ordinary people during the conflict than had scholars working in the interwar years.

The third generation may be termed the 'Vietnam generation'. Its practitioners started writing in the 1970s and 1980s, when a general reaction against military adventures like the war in Vietnam took place in Britain and Europe as well as in the United States. This was also the period in Europe when public opinion turned against the nuclear deterrent, and when the 1973 Middle Eastern war had dangerous effects on the economies of the developed world. The glow of the 'just war' of 1939–45 had faded, and a new generation was more open to a view that war was a catastrophe to both winners and losers alike.

This was the environment in which darker histories of the Great War emerged. There were still scholars who insisted that the Great War was a noble cause, won by those who had right on their side. But there were others who came to portray the Great War as a futile exercise, a tragedy, a stupid, horrendous waste of lives, producing nothing of great value aside from the ordinary decencies and dignities thrown away by blind and arrogant leaders.

The most influential works were written by three very different scholars. Paul Fussell, a veteran of the Second World War who was wounded in combat, produced a classic literary study, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, in 1975.² He was a professor of literature, who fashioned an interpretation of how soldiers came to understand the war they found in 1914–18 as an ironic event, one in which anticipation and outcome were wildly different. It was a time when the old romantic language of battle seemed to lose its meaning. Writers twisted older forms to suit the new world of trench warfare, one in which mass death was dominant and where, under artillery and gas bombardment, soldiers lost any sense that war was a glorious thing. Fussell termed this style the 'ironic' style and challenged us to see war writing throughout the twentieth century as built upon the foundations laid by the British soldier writers of the Great War.

Sir John Keegan produced a book a year later which paralleled Fussell's. An instructor in the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, but a man whose childhood infirmities ensured he would never go to war, Keegan asked the disarmingly simple question: 'Is battle possible?' The answer, published in *The Face of Battle* in 1976,³ was perhaps yes, long ago, but now in the twentieth

2 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

3 John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Allen Lane, 1976).

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century, battle presented men with terrifying challenges. The men who fought at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 could run to the next hill to save their lives. Foot soldiers converging on Waterloo four centuries later could arrive a day late. But in 1916, at the Battle of the Somme, there was no way out. Given the industrialisation of warfare, the air above the trenches on the Somme was filled with lethal projectiles from which there was no escape. Mass death in that battle and in the other great conflict of 1916 at Verdun, pushed soldiers beyond the limits of human endurance. Nothing like the set battles of the First World War followed in the 1939–45 war, though Stalingrad came close to replicating the horror of the Somme and Verdun. Here was a military historian's book, but one whose starting point was humane and to a degree psychological. The soldiers' breaking point was Keegan's subject, and with power, subtlety and technical authority, he opened a new chapter in the study of military history as a humane discipline.

In 1979, Eric Leed, a historian steeped in the literature of anthropology, wrote a similarly path-breaking book. *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*⁴ borrowed subtly from the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner. He had examined people in a liminal condition, no longer part of an older world from which they had come, and unable to escape from the midpoint, the no-man's-land, in which they found themselves. Here is the emotional landscape of the trench soldiers of the Great War. They were men who could never come home again, for whom war was their home, and who recreated it in the years following the Armistice. Here was the world of shell-shocked men, but also that of the *Freikorps*, militarised freebooters of the immediate post-war period, who prepared the ground for the Nazis.

In all three cases, and by reference to very different sources, the subject at hand was the tragedy of the millions of men who went into the trenches and who came out, if at all, permanently marked by the experience. They bore what some observers of the survivors of Hiroshima termed the 'death imprint'; the knowledge that their survival was a purely arbitrary accident. Here we may see some traces of the anti-nuclear movement, putting alongside one another Japanese civilians and Great War soldiers. The moral and political differences between the two cases are evident, but the wreckage of war, so these writers seemed to say, is at the heart of the civilisation in which we live. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that these three books, alongside others of the time, helped create a tragic interpretation of the Great War, one in which victimhood

4 Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).

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and violence were braided together in such a way as to tell a fully European story of the war, one to which the founders of the European Union clearly reacted. From the 1970s on, European integration was an attempt to move away from the notion of the nation-state as that institution which had the right to go to war, as Raymond Aron put it. The result has been a progressive diminution of the role of the military in the political and social life of most European countries. James Sheehan asked the question in a recent book, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?*⁵ The answer is, they and most (though not all) of their leaders have fled from the landscape of war so devastatingly presented in the works of Fussell, Keegan, Leed and others.

Now we are in a fourth generation of writing on the Great War. I would like to term it the 'transnational generation'. This generation has a global outlook. The term 'global' describes both the tendency to write about the war in more than European terms and to see the conflict as trans-European, transatlantic and beyond. Here was the first war among industrialised countries, reaching the Middle East and Africa, the Falkland Islands and China, drawing soldiers into the epicentre in Europe from Vancouver to Capetown to Bombay and to Adelaide. Here was a war that gave birth to the Turkey of Atatürk and to the Soviet Union of Lenin and Stalin. Demands for decolonisation arose from a war that had promised self-determination and had produced very little of the kind. Economic troubles arose directly out of the war, and these were sufficiently serious to undermine the capacity of the older imperial powers to pay for their imperial and quasi-imperial footholds around the world.

A word or two may be useful to distinguish the international approach, common to many of the older Cambridge histories, from what I have termed the transnational approach to the history of the Great War. For nearly a century, the Great War was framed in terms of a system of international relations in which the national and imperial levels of conflict and cooperation were taken as given. Transnational history does not start with one state and move on to others, but takes multiple levels of historical experience as given, levels which are both below and above the national level.⁶ Thus the history of

5 James Keegan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

6 For some discussions of the emergence of transnational history, see Akira Iriye, 'Transnational history', *Contemporary European History*, 13 (2004), pp. 211–22; John Heilbrunn et al., 'Towards a transnational history of the social sciences', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 44:2 (2008), pp. 146–60; and C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol and Patricia Seed, 'AHR conversation: on transnational history', *American Historical Review*, 111:5 (2006), pp. 1441–64.

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mutiny, developed in Volume II, is transnational, in that it happened in different armies for different reasons, some of which are strikingly similar to the sources of protest and refusal in other armies. So is the history of finance, technology, war economies, logistics and command. The history of commemoration, cited in the discussion on remembrance in Volume III, also happened on many levels, and the national is not necessarily the most significant, not the most enduring. The peace treaties following the Great War, discussed in Volume II, show the meaning of the transnational in other ways. Now we can see that the war was both the apogee and the beginning of the end of imperial power, spanning and eroding national and imperial boundaries. Erez Manela's work on 'the Wilsonian moment' is a case in point. He reconfigures the meaning of the Versailles settlement by exploring its unintended consequences in stimulating movements of national liberation in Egypt, India, Korea and China. Instead of telling us about the interplay of Great Power politics, he shows how non-Europeans invented their own version of Wilson in their search for a kind of self-determination that he, alongside Lloyd George, Clemenceau and Orlando, was unprepared to offer to them. Who could have imagined that the decision these men took to award rights to Shandong province, formerly held by Germany, not to China but to Japan would lead to major rioting and the formation of the Chinese Communist Party?⁷

Historians of the revolutionary moment in Europe itself between 1917 and 1921 have approached their subject more and more as a transnational phenomenon, as we can see in Volume II. After all, both revolutionaries and the forces of order who worked to destroy them were well aware of what may be termed the cultural transfer of revolutionary (and counter-revolutionary) strategy, tactics and violence. In recent years, these exchanges have been analysed at the urban and regional levels, helping us to see the complexity of a story somewhat obscured by treating it solely in national terms. Comparative urban history has established the striking parallels between the challenges urban populations faced in different warring states. Now we can answer in the affirmative the question as to whether there is a metropolitan history of warfare. In important respects, the residents of Paris, London and Berlin shared more with one another than they did with their respective rural compatriots. These experienced communities had a visceral reality somewhat lacking even in the imagined communities of the nation.

⁷ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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Here we must be sensitive to the way contemporaries used the language of nation and empire to describe loyalties and affiliations of a much smaller level of aggregation. A journalist asking British troops on the Western Front whether they were fighting for the Empire, got a 'yes' from one soldier. His mates asked him what he meant. The answer was that he was fighting for the Empire Music Hall in Hackney, a working-class district of London. This attachment to the local and the familiar was utterly transnational.⁸

Another subject now understood more in transnational than in international terms is the history of women in wartime, discussed in Volume III. Patriarchy, family formation and the persistence of gender inequality were transnational realities in the period of the Great War. Furthermore, the war's massive effects on civilian life precipitated a movement of populations of staggering proportions, discussed in Volume III. Refugees in France, the Netherlands and Britain from the area occupied by the Western Front numbered in the millions. So did those fleeing the fighting in the borderlands spanning the old German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires. One scholar has estimated that perhaps 20 per cent of the population of Russia was on the move, heading for safety wherever it could be found during the Great War. And that population current turned into a torrent throughout Eastern Europe during the period of chaos surrounding the Armistice. What made it worse was that the United States closed its gates to such immigrants, ending one of the most extraordinary periods of transcontinental migration in history. Thus population transfer, forced or precipitated by war, transformed the ethnic character of many parts of Greece, Turkey, the Balkans and the vast tract of land from the Baltic states to the Caucasus. Such movements antedated the war, but they grew exponentially after 1914. This is why it makes sense to see the Great War as having occasioned the emergence of that icon of transnational history in the twentieth century, the refugee, with his or her pitiful belongings slung over shoulders or carts. The photographic evidence of this phenomenon is immense, as we see in the photographic essays accompanying all three volumes.

This three-volume project is transnational in yet another respect. We live in a world where historians born in one country have been able to migrate to follow their historical studies and either to stay in their adopted homes or to migrate again, when necessary, to obtain a university post. Many of the authors of chapters in these volumes are transnational scholars, practising

8 Jay Winter, 'British popular culture in the First World War', in R. Stites and A. Roshwald (eds.), *Popular Culture in the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 138–59.

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history far from their place of birth and enriching the world of scholarship thereby. Seeing the world in which we live at a tangent, in the words of the Greek poet Kafavy, opens up insights harder to identify from within a settled order. The world of scholarship today may be described in many ways, but the term 'settled' is not one of them. This unsettledness is a major advantage, one which someday will enable more transnational histories to emerge alongside national histories, and for each to enrich the other.

It is important to repeat that these new initiatives in transnational history have built on the work of the three generations of scholars that preceded them. The history of the Great War that has emerged in recent years is additive, cumulative and multi-faceted. National histories have a symbiotic relationship with transnational histories; the richer the one, the deeper the other. No cultural historian of any standing ignores the history of the state, or of the social movements which at times have overthrown them; to do so would be absurd. No military historian ignores the language in which commands turn into movements on the field of battle. War is such a protean event that it touches every facet of human life. Earlier scholars pointed the way; we who have collectively constructed this three-volume history acknowledge their presence among us in our effort to take stock of the current state of knowledge in this field.

The potential imbedded in this transnational approach is reflected as well in one institution explicitly committed to going beyond the strictly national confines of the history of the war: the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne, France. The Historial is a museum of the war, designed by historians and presented in three languages – English, French and German – located at the site of German Headquarters during the Battle of the Somme, that vast bloodletting in 1916, which the German writer Ernst Jünger termed the birthplace of the twentieth century. Together with four historians of the Great War from France and Germany – Jean-Jacques Becker, Gerd Krumeich, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker – I joined a collective which reached out across national frontiers to create a new kind of museum, one which treated the Great War as a transnational catastrophe.⁹ This blending of different national viewpoints and emphases suited the new Europe of the 1990s, when it became apparent that to understand the integration of Europe at

⁹ For the story of the creation of the Historial, see *Collections de l'Historial de la grande guerre* (Péronne, Somme: Département de la Somme, 2010); and Jay Winter, 'Designing a war museum: some reflections on representations of war and combat', in Elizabeth Anderson, Avril Maddrell, Kate McLoughlin and Alana Vincent (eds.), *Memory, Mourning, Landscape* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodolphi, 2010), pp. 10–30.

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the end of the twentieth century, you had to understand the disintegration of Europe at its beginning. It is this optic which guides these three volumes, as it has guided the Historial in the first generation of its existence.

The board of directors of the International Research Centre of the Historial de la Grande Guerre served as the editorial committee which guided this book through its long gestation. We note that all authors and editors have foregone payment in order to direct the royalties these volumes earn into a fund for postgraduate work in First World War studies anywhere in the world. It is to the young scholars whose work we have supported and to those still to come, those whose perspectives are still unfolding, that this transnational project is dedicated.