

Introduction

The war of 1914–18 belongs to no one, not even to historians. Since its outbreak, there has been a veritable tide of publications destined for many different audiences throughout the world on the subject of the war. Certainly, interest has fluctuated; indeed, during some periods the First World War has been marginalized by the Second World War, but at no time has there been a consensus that the history of the Great War has been written once and for all. Even today, the subject remains an open one, and inspires passionate debate; although receding over the horizon of living memory, the subject remains vivid, and this fascination is evident in new books produced by well-known historians who are not particular specialists in this period. The eminent scholar Jean-Baptiste Duroselle completed his career by writing a new synthesis on the French people and the Great War (Duroselle, 1994).¹

The volume of work in this field is dizzying in its magnitude. It would take several working lives just to read the existing literature on the Great War: more than 50,000 titles are listed in the library of the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine in Paris. The French journal *Revue historique* published 757 reviews or bibliographical notices between 1919 and 2002; in the same period, there were 420 articles and reviews in a cluster of Anglo-Saxon historical journals, whose holdings have been digitized and preserved by the on-line repository, JSTOR. In the French case, since the 1970s the *Revue historique* has ceased to serve as a place of publication in this field, even though it has grown dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s. From 1983 to 1998 there have appeared more than 1,100 new books on the Great War in French, and over 100 were published in the year 1998 alone.² Each week new books are published in France or elsewhere, some of which break new ground, some of which go over the old ground again. Many articles, at times more important in the development of the subject than books, are published by journals, the number of which is growing as well. We must add too films, television documentaries, exhibitions, museums, and internet sites whose narratives both draw on and contribute to the work of professional historians.

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It was surprising, therefore, that over a century after the war we still lacked a general analysis of the ways in which this history had been written. Histories of the war, of its battles, its machines, its many facets, fill entire libraries, but no one to our knowledge had put the question as to whether this literature is structured in particular ways, or if, at particular moments, particular topics or questions were dealt with, or how successive developments related to one another. Is it the case that these studies repeat each other or do they pose new questions and provide new answers for different audiences in different contexts? Here is the heart of this book's enquiry.

To begin to respond to these questions, we must limit our field of vision to the history of the war itself, its conduct and its immediate consequences. To study the middle-term and long-term consequences of the war for the major belligerents and for the world it overturned is beyond our reach. Above all, we privilege books, and not scholarly articles, which are less accessible, although many of these play an essential role in the making of historical knowledge.³

In this dense and multiform forest, we have tried to trace the most important pathways. We certainly do not intend to provide prizes for outstanding works, or to pretend to offer an exhaustive review of such a huge body of writing. Of course we are well aware that there are many important books we have not cited. We hope readers will forgive us, and not conclude that our objective, already daunting, is thereby unattainable. First and foremost we aim to describe the trends or patterns of historical enquiry and knowledge in one particular field. We aim to show how the historical category 'The First World War' has been constructed. We are interested in the way historians and non-historians have contributed to this task, and by the different themes adopted in different periods by writers in different national contexts. This task transcends professional, chronological, and national boundaries. Our aim is to explore what questions have been posed, what definitions used, what themes have been broached. In sum, how has the history of the Great War been written?

Such a project requires as broad an approach as possible in order not to prejudge our findings. We have rejected three simplifications of this subject which would have eased our task, but which would have barred us from our objective. First, we do not restrict our discussion solely to professional historians, who after all do not hold a monopoly in this field. We do privilege the work of our colleagues, past and present, but accept that the boundaries of our profession are porous in at least two respects. Not only

within the English-speaking academy, historians have been joined in this field by other specialists, by literary scholars and sociologists in particular, whose similar and different points of view help to deepen historical enquiry. But the academy itself is not a closed environment. Many historians write for a general public, and many central figures in the war itself published their memoirs in the form of historical accounts. Some writers and journalists have tried to write history, at times with success. In the chorus of voices which have contributed to the history of the war, historians have not been alone.

This historiography bears the marks of two kinds of crossing vectors, one outside the historical profession, one inside it. Public expectations and preoccupations have changed; the questions posed about the First World War have been transformed by the Second World War, by the wars in Algeria and Vietnam. For our generation, attitudes to tolerable levels of violence, and to the body, patterns of consumption, and modes of living, are radically different from those of a century ago. French or British children pass through Europe now much more frequently than their grandfathers passed through Britain or France. National sentiments are no longer expressed about the same questions. The reading of history has changed under the impact of different or complementary narratives. Professional history is not immune from these changes, but it follows particular trends and has massively expanded. There are new research centres; new archives have been opened. The mode of writing history has changed, and each generation writes its own dictionary of what it terms the 'new history'. The history of the Great War never escapes from this broader context, and forces us to ask how different this body of writing is from other fields of specialization.

Secondly, we refuse to recognize thematic or narrow temporal boundaries. The majority of books which bear the title 'history of the war' generally deal only with its military, diplomatic, or political aspects. If we had limited our discussion solely to these books, we would have been unable to understand how this kind of history intersects with others – social, cultural, and economic history in particular. In more general books, in which the war appears only in some chapters or which deal with a longer span of time, new interpretations of the war can emerge. We therefore do not ignore studies which begin before or continue after the Armistice, since many of these books account for the significance of the war through their very periodization. A broad and inclusive approach to the field we are studying is necessary in order to account for the relative significance of political, diplomatic, military, economic, social, and cultural histories at different times and the ways in which these approaches take on different configurations.

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Thirdly and finally, since war is a multinational phenomenon, it would have been absurd to restrict this study to the historiography of one country. If we were to focus on French writing in this field alone, we would be unable to appreciate the upward inflection of Anglophone scholarship. As the audience for French publications wanes, that in English grows ever larger, reflecting the growth of the English-speaking academy. In addition, we have taken into account aspects of the German literature in this field, either in the original or translated into English, and some studies written by Italian scholars. On the other hand, in chapters 1–7, we have neither treated the complex historiography of nationalities inside the Austro-Hungarian Empire, nor have we included works in Soviet and Russian historiography. Another deliberate omission in the first edition of this book is the growing literature on the Great War from the vantage point of Asian, African, and Latin American history. In the new chapters at the end of this, the second edition, we open a discussion of these topics.

This threefold framework provides us with a flexible mode of analysing change over time and over themes. This interest in the diachronic and thematic requires us from time to time to return to similar subjects. We have tried to limit such overlaps, but eliminating them all would have diminished our treatment of particular subjects. Many publications are not restricted to a particular domain, and in light of recent scholarly work earlier sources take on new significance. For example, the series sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has to be seen first as the testimony of those who ran important facets of the war effort. Secondly, it is the earliest pillar of our understanding of the economic history of the war. Thirdly, no one can write the social and cultural history of the conflict without reference to many of its volumes. After all, when visiting a town, if one passes time and again a central square, it does not mean that the visit is ill-planned, but that the square is indeed a central one.

These assumptions which we share inform our collaboration, which has emerged from discussions and a friendship decades long. But this wish to write in two voices, for each of which we both take responsibility, has been enlightening. It has enabled us to emphasize the dialogue between different national histories, and to stress the national framework which still dominates historical writing about the war. Hence this book about the history of the disintegration of an older Europe may serve as a kind of introduction to a more European history of the First World War, which one day must be written if Europe is ever to forge its own identity.

NOTES

1. In order to lighten the weight of references in the text, we refer to works cited in the bibliography in this form, familiar to sociologists, in which the author's name and date suffice to indicate first publication of the work in its original language, and page references are given for quotations from individual works.
2. Jean-Charles Jauffret, 'Quinze ans d'historiographie française sur la Grande Guerre 1913–1918: essai de bilan', in Maurin and Jauffret, 2002, pp. 39–67, followed by a research bibliography, pp. 68–143.
3. Key references to scholarly articles will be cited as endnotes to the text of each chapter.