

Cambridge History of the First World War

Review Number:

1618

Publish date:

Thursday, 3 July, 2014

Editor:

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ISBN:

9780521763851

Date of Publication:

2014

Price:

£90.00

Pages:

771pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/history/twentieth-century-regional-history/cambridge-history-first-world-war-volume-1?format=HB>

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

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Timing counts for so much in publishing and that is never clearer than when a major anniversary approaches. With the centenary of the First World War not yet actually upon us, there has already been a rush of publications. Meanwhile, just as many of the grandest television and radio programmes promised by the BBC have already been aired. Do we know anything we did not know a year or two ago? Have new perspectives been aired? Similarly, the big question for many centenary-type publications is how far they advance understanding, or perform a useful summative role, or merely take advantage of public interest?

The initial signs from the First World War centenary are encouraging. Of course, it is hard to distinguish books published specially for the centenary from those which were planned in the normal course of research. Quite possibly some were due out some years ago, but after all, it has been known for academics to miss publisher deadlines. However, among those published in 2012–14 we have already seen very significant contributions on the causes of the war from, for example, Christopher Clark and Sean McMeekin.⁽¹⁾ A number of books which are proving very influential on the way the war is being commemorated were published a little further back, such as William Philpott's *Somme* study ⁽²⁾, which is perhaps a very good example of forward planning yielding impact. Meanwhile, a number of important monographs issued in the past few years, often as the result of the development of PhD theses, have already started to affect, for example, media agendas on covering the war, notable examples including those by Heather Jones and Catriona Pennell.⁽³⁾

Such work keeps coming and there is thus a danger for any attempt to synthesise existing work (and this is part, though only part, of what *The Cambridge History of the Great War* aims for and achieves), at the start of a centenary period. That danger is of course that volumes will miss some of the most crucial work which appears during the centenary and render themselves obsolete rather quicker than the publishers would wish. As Jay Winter says in his opening words to the general introduction, 'Writing history is always a dialogue' (vol. I, p. 1). Is there a risk then that such a study will conclude part-way through the conversation, out of date and talking about yesterday's issues by 2018?

No doubt there will be some chapters which will, four years on (or sooner) be in need of some amendment. However, what is fundamentally timely about these volumes is that they represent a statement by a generation of historians of a type which has never been offered before in First World War studies. Characterised by Winter as the fourth 'transnational generation', and writing now for decades, the generation has taken a 'global' approach to the war, both in terms of what they study and where they have based their own academic careers. Not only has that meant attention to conflict beyond Europe, but also to the global ramifications of the war: revolution, decolonisation and economic crisis. This is different from an international approach in which nation states are still the building blocks. Instead, the fourth generation emphasises themes and issues which cut across national boundaries and experiences. Indeed, in this approach, there is often no such thing as a single national experience of mutiny, logistics or command (vol. one, pp. 6–7). Consequently, to find out much 'national history' of the First World War requires regular reference to the index; there is (very helpfully) a cumulative one covering all three volumes.

This fourth generation of historians is contrasted by Winter to the first, those with direct knowledge/experience of the war, the second, 'fifty years on', and third, 'Vietnam generation' (vol. one, pp. 1–4). The very existence of *The Cambridge History of the Great War* is suggestive of a crucial aspect of the fourth generation which is that it has self-consciously been a school of thought, approaching the war in a different way to earlier writers, referring to (but not necessarily always reverential towards) earlier schools of thought. It has even contributed to its own institutional manifestation, the Historial de la Grand Guerre at Péronne in the Somme department of Picardie. Unsurprisingly, the link between that museum and the *History* is close, with Historial's Comité directeur providing members of the editorial board.

The *History* is comprised of three volumes, *Global War*, *The State*, and *Civil Society*. Volume I, *Global War*, tackles the war's military history in four parts. The first offers a narrative history, beginning with long-term origins and considering the war on a year-by-year basis in six chapters. Volker R. Berghahn skilfully and with brevity considers issues ranging from imperialism to European optimism/pessimism, concluding that Berlin and Vienna remain the 'best places for historians to look closely for clues as to why war broke out in 1914' (vol. one, p. 37). His prediction that the role of other powers in the causes of the war will continue to be scrutinised is borne out by recent publications already mentioned. It is with foresight that he picks out Russia for special mention as it has probably been the recipient of the most important fresh attention by McMeekin. In their subsequent chapter on 1914, Jean-Jacques Becker and Gerd Krumeich conclude that war was not inevitable. The idea of *agency*, though it is not explicitly stated, runs throughout this chapter as it does through Clark's *Sleepwalkers*. In the chapters on 1915–1918 we see the merits of the transnational approach at their strongest. The stages of the war – stalemate, impasse, global and endgame – are considered as they applied across nations. However, this does not prevent appropriate consideration of specific national issues, down to the level of key individuals, for example in Robin Prior's discussion of British generalship (pp. 101–8). There is also, in Christoph Mick's chapter on 1918, consideration of the relationship between the home fronts and the fighting fronts (pp. 154–7). Winter mentions the considerable doubt over when the war ended (p. 15) and Bruno Cabanes concludes the first narrative part of the volume by saying 'When did 1919 end? No one knows' (p. 197).

The narrative approach of volume one's first part is supplemented by three more thematic sections. In *Theatres of War*, the three European fronts and the Ottoman are analysed in a broadly narrative manner, usefully burrowing deeper into issues raised in the earlier overtly chronological chapters. Both Paul Kennedy's chapter on the war at sea, and John H. Morrow Jr.'s chapter on the air war veer more to the

thematic while maintaining a chronological spine. One is reminded of the Musée de l'Armée in Paris, with its progress through technological change year by year. Gary Sheffield and Stephen Badsey provide a valuable analysis of the strategic command problems across theatres. They highlight the extent to which the First World War saw problems which had never been seen before due to the scale of industrialised warfare, and would not be seen in the same way in future wars due to post-war developments. Part three moves beyond Europe to address the global war, both in terms of imperialism in general, and with specific chapters on Asia, Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and the Americas. Running through all these chapters is the thread that the war was to have long-term global consequences, indeed right down to the end of the Soviet Empire in the early 1990s. Some of the chapters which are most likely to challenge students to think beyond the more traditional approaches to the war are in the final section of volume one, dealing with issues such as atrocities and law. John Horne writes effectively about the end of the distinction between soldier and civilian, pointing out that related issues would re-emerge in response to the Second World War (p. 584). Indeed, the issue's reach goes far beyond that and is one faced across the globe by thousands if not millions today.

Volume two deals with issues around *The State*: politics, armed forces (crossing over with several chapters in volume one), the economics of war, and peace-making, in a further 24 chapters. Winter sets out the aim of the volume as being to tell the story of the war 'as a test of state and imperial power' (p. 1). It is also a story state/imperial collapse, and above all of change and growth in the role of states as they sought to organise life within their borders in unprecedented ways. A crucial chapter in the section on politics is Stig Förster's on 'Civil-military relations'. A series of short case studies on major combatants explores the veracity of Clausewitz's argument that war was politics 'carried on with other means' (p. 92), and examines the conflicts between military and civil power. Where victory was gained, Förster concludes, it was 'in part by sheer luck' (p. 125). In part two, on the armed forces, it is recognised that supposedly new trends such as the use of heavy artillery had been developed in some cases 50 years earlier. However, the First World War saw their application on a previously unseen scale, with new intensity and the dominance of defensive warfare over offensive (p. 148). These factors made the 'ideological conflict' discussed in Alexander Watson's chapter on morale a new and important dimension of the war. They also saw the logistics discussed by Ian Brown become more demanding than ever before in wartime.

Part three examines the 'sinews' of war: economics, workers, cities, agriculture, finance and science, with a theme of strain (on war economies) throughout. In these areas, as Antoine Prost points out, 'The Allied nations retained their legitimacy because they had won the war on the home front and on the battle front.' (p. 357) Stefan Goebel thoughtfully links wartime cities to 'Commemorative cityscapes' as recent as the 'memory boom' of the 1990s (pp. 377–81) The final section of volume two deals with attempts to find peace, with Gerd Krumeich reminding us that throughout the war, all belligerents claimed to be sincere peace-seekers. More than any other section of the three volumes this one recognises that much more work needs to be done on its subject matter. Krumeich urges future researchers to focus on 'mental frameworks or *mentalités*' to help understand more about the failure of peace efforts. Should that happen, it will be interesting to see whether much can be said to challenge the view put forward by, for example, David Stevenson, that no side gave up hope of winning at crucial stages of the war.[\(4\)](#)

Perhaps the greatest service done by the publication is in volume three, *Civil Society*, where the issues tackled are those which are often much harder to find work on than, for example, generalship or the causes of war. The material drawn on in volume three is far more likely to be found in a very wide range of journals (often not history ones as such), or in edited volumes with a small circulation. Certainly for anyone teaching the First World War at university level, this volume will be an invaluable shortcut around limited library budgets. The most marked example of that is probably Anne Rasmussen's chapter in the *Bodies in pain* section on 'The Spanish flu', a truly global feature of the war. However, the same can be said of the other five sections covering private life, gender, populations, culture, and outcomes.

Highlights from volume three include two pieces translated from French which draw on much work not available in English: Manon Pignot on children, and Nicolas Beaupré on 'Soldier-writers and poets'. Adrian Gregory's 'Beliefs and religion' assesses the war's impact on religion, with much of interest on the ways in which those of faith both endured the war and carried out acts seemingly at odds with their beliefs. The

concluding section includes an important chapter on the living, so often forgotten in today's popular mind and often unduly neglected even by many historians. In this chapter John Horne points out that, 'The dead ... defined the living' (p. 592), but the ways in which that happened were heavily mediated by the result of the war. If the result justified the sacrifice, then that not only affected how the dead were seen, but also how those who served viewed their own experiences. That was partly affected by different judgements made by people about when the war had ended (p. 617), a theme running through so many of chapters in all three volumes.

Aside from the subject sections in each volume, all three contain well presented illustrations, many of which will be unfamiliar even to specialists. These are accompanied by visual essays, and each chapter is accompanied by a short bibliographical essay. It is unclear whether the essay format will be the most useful one for those looking to find titles. By its nature, such a book includes references under some fairly unpredictable themes and over three volumes. One of the few criticisms that can be made of this project, and it is a very small one, is that perhaps a more traditional bibliography, under a more limited list of subject headings, would have been a little more user-friendly.

This leads to a question as to whether this magnificent achievement will get the use it deserves simply because of its price. Retailing at £90 a volume, or £240 for the set, this is going to be beyond almost all individuals, even specialists in relevant fields. For some libraries it will be a subject of discussion rather than an automatic purchase. At the very least, CUP need to rush out paperback editions for something closer to the price of its *Capital Cities at War* series which are broadly comparable in length. But the reality is that for many potential readers one or a few articles in most volumes will be all they will wish to purchase for regular use. That raises a question for publishers about these sorts of volumes. As a reader and reviewer, there is something special about owning such an important and well produced collection, but one has to wonder whether the future is not digital for such volumes? Perhaps making individual chapters or sections downloadable for, say, £5 a chapter or some multiple thereof for sections, might be more effective at giving the work the attention and impact it deserves.

Notwithstanding such considerations for the publisher, the three-volume series *The Cambridge History of the Great War* is an astonishing achievement. It is a comprehensive, insightful and challenging collection, beautifully produced. The range of authors is impressive. Some edited volumes can drift towards nepotism, but these truly reach across the profession and the editorial committee is to be commended on that. New work will be produced in the next few years which will revise some of the conclusions of the chapters in these volumes. There will also be new dimensions on remembrance, not least because the digital revolution will profoundly affect the ways in which the public engages with remembrance of the war, especially through genealogy. However, those developments are still to take place and even when they have done, these three volumes will remain an important testimony to the fourth generation of First World War historians. If there is ever a fifth generation, it will owe a considerable debt to its forebears.

Notes

1. Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012); Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (London, 2013) and *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA, 2013). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. William Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme* (London, 2010). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Heather Jones, *Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914–1920* (Cambridge, 2011); Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2012). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. David Stevenson, *1914–1918: The History of the First World War* (London, 2004), pp. 320–70. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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