

Evidence, History and the Great War. Historians and the Impact of 1914–18

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This book can be viewed in several ways. Each of its ten chapters by a different author deals with a discrete topic (women, gender, public opinion, photography and food supply) without any pretence of thematic unity. Six of the chapters are wholly or partly concerned with Britain, while one each deals with its topic in relation to France, Germany, Italy and Russia. The inclusion of the latter two countries is welcome, going beyond the all-too familiar focus on the western-front powers, but the volume remains firmly centred on Europe. The result is distinctly eclectic. With the exception of a chapter on 'shell shock', soldiers do not figure, and little attention is given to race, empire or the USA. This does not necessarily matter but suggests that the unity of the volume does not lie in its formal subject matter.

Yet from a different perspective, that subject matter acquires more coherence. Six chapters deal with women and the war, suggesting that this is the heart of the project. Susan Grayzel looks at Britain and France, James McMillan considers French women, Deborah Thom discusses the photographic collection of women in the Imperial War Museum, and Peter Gatrell and Simonetta Ortaggi discuss respectively the war experiences of Russian and Italian women. Gail Braybon's chapter, 'Winners or losers: women's symbolic role in the war story', indicates the intellectual agenda of most (though not all) of these contributions, which is to scrutinise the work of gender historians on the war from the standpoint of an older, socially-oriented history of women. In her editorial introduction, Braybon states her impatience with what she sees as an approach derived from cultural studies which has 'fragmented' the sharp focus on women's history of the earlier tradition and resulted in often 'superficial' claims that the war was a 'watershed' in gender relations.

However, this critique of the newer cultural history of the war extends to other topics. Laurinda Stryker criticises some of the more fanciful interpretations of 'shell-shock' as a crisis of 'masculinity', finding that contemporary sources show little evidence of such concerns. The editor remarks in her introduction that 'we have [...] seen far too many books which are weighed down with symbolism, or dominated by over-arching theories' (p. 2), resulting in unsustainable claims about the 'devastating' effect of the Great War. From this third angle, then, the book seeks a debate between social and cultural histories of the war.

Yet a fourth approach is perceptible in the fact that six of the chapters adopt a revisionist position toward some established orthodoxy, although the target is not always the current dominance of cultural history. Keith Allen's chapter on provisioning Berlin contests the argument of recent scholarship that German civilians were poorly fed during the war not just because of the Allied blockade but because administrative chaos and an insensitive military government from 1916 made a bad situation worse.⁽¹⁾ Allen finds that an impressive coalition of municipal authorities and voluntary bodies experimented with the collective provision of midday meals and also ensured bread supplies, not just during the war but down to the end of the great inflation in 1923 – a striking example of the resilience of German civil society noted by Peter Fritzsche's study of the longer-term legacy of the war for Nazi Germany.⁽²⁾ Adrian Gregory scrutinises the myth of 'war enthusiasm' in Britain in August 1914 and paints a far more nuanced picture in which the acceptance of the conflict was widespread but remained muted until the German forces overrunning Belgium and northern France seemed to endanger Britain itself.

Yet, as Gregory remarks, the striking thing is the absence of previous scholarship on British public opinion and the outbreak of war, in contrast to France and Germany, so that the 'myth' he deconstructs is one created in the inter-war period not by historians but by politicians justifying a decision to go to war which had become shrouded in retrospective ambivalence.⁽³⁾ Here Gregory touches on the construction of the memory of the war as such, a theme taken up by Catherine Moriarty's excellent chapter on war memorials and family photographs which amounted to a contrapuntal system – public and private – for commemorating separation and death. The institutional construction of particular visions of the war is also the subject of Deborah Thom's revealing study of how the contemporary photos by Horace Nicholls, which heroised women's wartime work and were deposited in the Imperial War Museum (itself a wartime creation), fixed certain images of women's war experience to the exclusion of others. In a fifth and final perspective, then, the volume contributes to the work (pioneered by cultural historians) on how individual and collective memories of the war were constructed.

Inevitably, multiple perspectives risk of a loss of focus. But Gail Braybon anticipates the problem in her introduction. For she claims that the ultimate purpose of the book is to break down big, simplifying theories while also challenging the continued dominance of national histories by showing how the re-examination of familiar themes and the opening up of entirely new ones is a continuous necessity. The very heterogeneity of the book testifies to these activities, and becomes an invitation for the reader to engage with whatever seems most rewarding in the perspectives on offer. While all the chapters can be read with profit as independent essays, their collective importance for this reviewer lies in two issues – the reassessment of women's history in relation to the Great War, and what cultural and social historians have to offer each other on this and other aspects of the conflict.

The 'watershed' view, which presents the war as a decisive moment in women's 'emancipation' or in relations between the genders, has a double origin, as explained by Gail Braybon in her chapter. An older tradition of women's history, impressed by the roles opened to women by the war and the introduction in some countries of women's suffrage, saw the conflict as a positive episode, a view reinforced by Arthur Marwick's influential *Women at War 1914–1918* (1977) and his Open University course on war and society. The subsequent emergence of gender history (often practised by feminist scholars coming from literary or cultural studies) reframed the 'watershed' view by presenting the war as a pivotal moment in cultural representations of femininity and masculinity. While this did not necessarily lead to an optimistic view of the war's impact on women, it placed the tensions of gender at the heart of the war and its impact on society – with men both emasculated by war and seeking to 'remasculinise' society, and women sensing

emancipation while accommodating themselves to the preeminence of male sacrifice. As Mary-Louise Roberts wrote in one of the best-known works in this genre, gender was central to 'postwar France's cultural self-representation, as well as to its organization of identity and power'.⁽⁴⁾

One undoubted benefit of the newer gender history has been the insistence on the need to study constructions of masculinity as well as femininity and to see the two in relation to each other. But the thrust of the criticism in this volume is that a preoccupation with what Roberts called 'the cultural production of change', rather than with real social evolution, has inflated the importance of the war and neglected the deeper continuities in women's roles along with the sheer diversity of their wartime experience – much of which (by reason of the sources) is difficult to study. Both James McMillan and Susan Grayzel pursue this critique. Grayzel probes some of the contemporary stereotypes which, used uncritically, have fed the idea that the war freed up codes of female conduct. She suggests that contemporary campaigns against female drunkenness, illegitimate births and prostitution expressed wartime anxieties rather than fundamental changes in these patterns of behaviour. Even if the war did create a slightly greater latitude for women's sexual behaviour, this was not accompanied by freer social attitudes, and thus was not experienced as 'liberation'. McMillan concludes that measured against three yardsticks – power relations, sexuality, and the boundary between private and public life – a careful reading of wartime debates and campaigns confirms the conclusion of earlier social historians (including himself) that the war had a conservative effect on French women.⁽⁵⁾

The chapters on women in Russia and Italy, though not explicitly addressing this conceptual agenda, contribute valuable insights. Peter Gatrell shows how the crisis triggered by the Russian army's retreat in the summer 1915, during which six million civilians were displaced and often mistreated, was particularly harsh on women, exposing them to exploitation and prostitution, evils which large-scale rural emigration before the war had already turned into subjects of official concern. But resettlement also opened up opportunities for middle class voluntary action on a large-scale. In the Italian case, the deep unpopularity of the war among rural and working class communities in many regions created a culture of anti-war protest in which women, because of their key role in wartime rural life and in the burgeoning munitions works of Milan and Turin, played a central role. Nonetheless, there were also parts of Italy without a left-wing political culture, or which were occupied by Austro-German forces after Caporetto, where women's responses must have been different. Middle-class women also mobilised behind the war and performed voluntary social work as they did in France, Russia, Britain and elsewhere. These points would have nuanced the otherwise convincing portrait presented by Simonetta Ortaggi. Despite the post-war political turmoil and new regimes, Bolshevism in Russia and Italian Fascism reaffirmed male authority and accorded women's wartime role no more recognition than it achieved in France or even Britain.

Clearly, the war affected women in complex ways that both challenged and reinforced existing roles. Yet the exceptional nature of the event and the even greater change in men's roles (with mass military service) framed the larger context within which women responded. The relevant contributions in this volume rightly draw our attention to the need for much more research on the varieties of that response, which went well beyond munitions work and nursing, before we can safely generalise. It seems reasonable to suggest that when women entered traditionally male sectors of the engineering industry or when middle-class women volunteered en masse for nursing, they were conscious of forging new roles, however temporary, which also gave them opportunities for new experiences. Other women, about whom we know much less, did what they had long done but largely in the absence of men. This was the case with peasant women in France, Germany, Italy and elsewhere, and also of women in occupied areas of France and Poland, all of whom shouldered the economic burden of the family. Yet wives, mothers and daughters remained the custodians of the family as an emotional unit in the face of unprecedented separation, all too often confronting permanent loss or the return of a handicapped man.

Women were thus called on to act in different ways, which aroused the anxieties referred to by McMillan and Grayzel about prostitution, drunkenness and infidelity, while counterbalancing the transformation in men's roles. Out of these conflicting imperatives were forged key aspects of the substantially feminine world of the home front, to which were added the differing degrees of hardship, military occupation, and political upheaval which women (like other civilians) faced in the various societies. The task of reconstructing many

of these experiences still remains, and the authors of this volume rightly call for nuanced, empirical studies to do so.

How those experiences relate to the longer-term evolution of women's roles and of gender relations more broadly is a different, no less complex issue. It may well be true, as several of the contributors suggest, that on balance the impact of the war was conservative and that it did not disturb gender relations as much as some have pretended. The French historian, Françoise Thébaud, has recently stated that the real transformation came as a result of longer-term changes (in work, consumption, control over fertility, and in domesticity itself) rather than from the drama of wars.⁽⁶⁾ Certainly, the fact that women had less success than other groups (e.g. the labour movement or veterans) in converting their war service (officially acknowledged by wartime rhetoric) into permanent reforms, supports such a view. Yet some changes did occur. These included women's suffrage in Germany (even if the consensus now is that the war had little to do with its introduction in 1918 in Britain), broadened access to some areas of industrial and clerical work, and greater freedom in dress and personal comportment. The war widow, who embodied female suffering during the war, would repay detailed comparative study as a figure who attracted a new legal and economic status, and possibly some political influence, between the wars.

At the same time, official anxiety about women's supposed wartime autonomy and a concern with maternity and natalism – which were particularly strong in a demographically weakened France, but by no means limited to that country – fostered a climate of sexual orthodoxy. Yet here, too, nuances are in order. Campaigns were waged for birth control, especially in Weimar Germany, and just as we should not mistake the moral anxieties of wartime officialdom for women's actual behaviour, neither should we do the same with post-war natalism. Indeed, to the extent that the campaigns for a higher birth-rate or a return to 'traditional' morality were taken up by conservatives and the extreme right, they lend weight to the contention of Marie-Louise Roberts that issues of gender became more charged after the war (even if they did not define social relations more generally), and were experienced as such by contemporaries.

Which brings me to the question of the differences between social and cultural approaches to the history of the war. While the authors who raise this issue criticise some of the pioneering studies of gender relations for concentrating on representation rather than 'reality', to contrast 'the cultural historian's examination of rhetoric' with 'the social historian's preoccupation with people' (McMillan, p. 150) scarcely does credit to the breadth and substance of the cultural histories of the Great War which have appeared in the last fifteen years.⁽⁷⁾ One might characterise these as studying, certainly, the codes and value systems by which societies imbued the war with meaning and memory but also, and no less importantly, the subjective experience of the groups and individuals who lived through it.

Still, the call for dialogue is welcome. For the best social history has always been sensitive to language, beliefs and experience, while a cultural history that ignores economic, social or political processes is disembodied. Although cultural history has emerged as the dominant approach to the Great War, it has scarcely effaced social history or the older tradition of military, diplomatic and political history.⁽⁸⁾ Cross-fertilising these different approaches or establishing fruitful collaborations between them will provide the most innovative and exciting research on the Great War, including in the field of women and gender.

To give a few of examples, official fears and anxieties about the unbridled sexual behaviour or financial independence of women during the war may well be no guide to women's actual behaviour. But together with similar currents of concern evident in soldiers' letters, songs and trench newspapers, they form one strand of the experience of gender relations, and the myths that informed them had a real social impact. Conversely, the nature of intimacy between married couples, which both partners expressed in probably unprecedented ways owing to separation, became a central thread in the gendered relationship between home and fighting fronts, which can be studied through surviving correspondence. Or again, the concept of 'marginality', which figures in both social and cultural history, is one that can be adapted to studying other sexual relations and gendered identities in wartime, such as prostitution and homosexuality. Finally, the gendered dimensions of situations or identities also defined by other criteria, such as race, ethnicity, region, or class (e.g. the Armenian victims of genocide or the million or so indigenous men brought from the

colonies to work and fight in France) offer challenges of historical method which are both social and cultural. The fact that many of its chapters are alive to the need to combine the cultural and social makes this volume, hopefully, a harbinger of future developments.

Notes

1. C.f. Thierry Bonzon and Belinda Davis in *Capital Cities at War. Paris, London, Berlin, 1914–1919*, ed. Jean-Louis Robert and Jay Winter (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 305–41, and Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning. Food, Politics and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), esp. p. 13–82.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C.f. Jean-Jacques Becker, *1914. Comment les français sont entrés dans la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 1977), and Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914. Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge, 2000).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Mary-Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes. Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago and London, 1994), p. 213.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See James McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot. The Place of Women in French Society, 1870–1940* (Brighton, 1981).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Françoise Thébaud, 'La Guerre et après?', in ed. Evelyne Morin-Rotureau, *1914–1918: combats de femmes* (Paris, 2004), pp. 185–99.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. A good sense of what those appearing in French, English and German have entailed can be gleaned from the annual yearbook of the Research Centre of the Historial de la Grande Guerre (Péronne), *14–18 Aujourd'hui-Heute-Today*, issues 1 (1997) to 7 (2005).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 2004).[Back to \(8\)](#)

Gail Braybon replies: 'My thanks to John Horne for his review and his perspicacious comments. Like him, I hope that this book will play its part in encouraging collaborative and comparative research, and that we will indeed see "innovative and exciting research" in the the years to come. We are at a very interesting point in our study of the Great War.'

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