

A Companion to World War I

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John Horne
Dublin, February 2010

Introduction

JOHN HORNE

From the moment it broke out, World War I proved something of an enigma. Few in 1914 doubted that it was an epoch-defining event of a kind not seen since the French Revolution. It was a European War, a “Great War” and even, for the Germans, a “World War,” since it promised to make Germany a world power. Yet it was all these things and more in ways that confounded contemporary ideas of what *war* actually was – of how it should be waged and its likely results. The nature of that enigma and its implications for the societies concerned is the subject of this *Companion*. It is what made the Great War the seminal event of twentieth-century history.

In the European tradition, war was a powerful instrument of political change in which military campaigns and climactic battles produced results that bore some relationship to the intentions of those who fought them, endowing commanders with martial glory and giving warfare as an activity both cultural prestige and an aura of heroic masculinity. In the nineteenth century, an entire genre of military painting that drew approving crowds at art exhibitions and graced the pages of the illustrated press testified to this view of war. Even if European general staffs by the early twentieth century knew that industrialization had begun to reshape warfare, from logistics to firepower, they subordinated that knowledge to a view of battle in which the infantry still conducted victorious offensives and wars themselves remained relatively short. But the Great War spread to Africa and the Middle East and was fought across the oceans of the globe. It was ultimately determined by prolonged siege warfare on the western front and it killed between nine and ten million soldiers, the bulk of them Europeans. The shock was profound.

The shock came not only from the transformation of war, with which the industrial age seemed at last to have caught up, and of the place of warfare in European culture, it also arose from the rupture between intention and outcome. The disparity between what caused the war (however this was viewed) and what the war in turn caused was the heart of the matter. In a previous climacteric of the European state system from 1789 to 1815, revolution was the explosive charge that altered war along with so much else. In 1914–18, by contrast, war was the great transformer that reshaped everything in its image, including revolution. In many respects war *was* the revolution, and this helps explain the gulf between intention and outcome. Those who led their states into the conflict were often conservatives who sought to shore up a dynasty and social system – sometimes by defending the

diplomatic status quo, sometimes by changing it, but with the aim of preserving the world as they knew it. It is not just that defeat saw them ousted or exiled but that their worlds were shattered. Tsar Nicholas II and his family were shot in a sordid cellar by the Bolsheviks. Kaiser Wilhelm II fled ignominiously to Holland leaving Berlin in the throes of revolution. The young Karl I, last Habsburg emperor, slipped into exile as the Dual Monarchy dissolved into the nation-states it had been designed to avoid. And this time, unlike in 1815, there was no Restoration. The gulf between intention and outcome has rarely been greater.

With hindsight we can identify deeper patterns that connected cause with effect in ways that begin to make sense of the enigma. The process by which nation-states became the organizing unit of European politics culminated in World War I – which is why the current map of Europe looks rather similar to that of the 1920s (with some obvious exceptions). Nation-state formation had accelerated in the wake of the French Revolution and supplied some of the key events (and wars) of nineteenth-century Europe, notably the unification of Italy and Germany and the emergence of successor states to the Ottoman Empire – Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia. The Great War was triggered by the conflict between a small but expansionist Serbia and the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, which since 1867 had been organized around the containment of nationalist aspirations within the Habsburg territories. Russia, despite being a multiethnic empire that found it hard to reconcile nationalism and democracy with the Romanov dynasty at home, championed “Slav” nations like Serbia abroad and was drawn into the quarrel. Germany since 1871 had become the most powerful nation-state in Europe. It made the survival of the Dual Monarchy the key to its diplomatic and military plans, and played a pivotal role in July 1914.

At this level World War I enacted the final, doomed defense of the dynastic multinational empires, all of which (Austria-Hungary, Tsarist Russia, and Ottoman Turkey) were defeated and replaced by nation-states. In fact, by an irony of history, the creed of the proletarian revolution, Bolshevism, provided the new bond to maintain the bulk of the Romanov lands in a federation of nations around their Russian core. But as that example shows, the war represented much more than the completion of an essentially nineteenth-century process. The war itself helped redefine the nation where it existed as well as where it was coming into being (as in Ireland and Eastern Europe). One revelation of the conflict was the potency of national identities and national communities. To be sure, this was well known in the longest established nations, such as Britain and France, but even there universal literacy, the mass press, electoral politics, and more inclusive notions of what it meant to be a subject or citizen were relatively recent and evolving processes. Elsewhere, as in Russia, Austria-Hungary, or even Germany, such developments were seen by many in power as potentially subversive. Yet identification with the nation explains why the outbreak of war in 1914 was not met with the protest and obstruction that Socialists and labour militants had long predicted but rather with a surprising degree of cohesion, though this was far removed from the mindless chauvinism of subsequent myth.

National cohesiveness could not be sustained in that form. The war forced societies into unprecedented and largely unanticipated patterns of activity and organization. Prewar opinion had in the main held that the sheer disruption occasioned by a war (as economic production halted and the bulk of adult men left for the armies) was one good reason why it could not last very long. But as it turned out, societies displayed a remarkable capacity to improvise and adapt. Women replaced men in many functions while continuing to sustain the couple and the family through the trials of separation. The mobilization of industry for war production reconstituted the working class (including skilled workers summoned back from the front) and pioneered new relations between

the state, organized labor, and business. Food had to be farmed more intensively than ever or substitutes found abroad to sustain both soldiers and civilians, while the essential fuels without which neither war production nor daily life could continue also had to be secured. In World War II, the lessons of the earlier experience were there to be drawn on. But in World War I the need to harness society and the state to war on the scale that became necessary was one more disjuncture between anticipation and reality.

Each of the adaptations in question held major implications for the communities fighting the war since they raised issues of equity and sacrifice and affected relations between different social groups. Conflicts arose along lines of class as workers gained unlooked-for strength, and ethnicity as national groups related variously to the war, especially within the multinational dynastic empires. Gender was also affected as women consciously assumed a role in the national effort while men faced the ultimate sacrifice of death from battle. This multiple effort shaped the nations that fought the war or resulted from it. As a community of experience and as a source of political legitimacy, the nation-state in Europe was transformed by World War I.

Nowhere was this truer than in relation to the core experience of the conflict, industrialized warfare. For the enigma within the enigma was the discrepancy between the requirement of victory and the means of achieving it. Not only was the prewar conception of battle profoundly at odds with the force of modern firepower that resulted in a million dead on all fronts by early 1915, but the warfare that emerged in response to this was marked by the superiority of the defensive over the offensive. Solving the conundrum took the next four years, and the answer that emerged was a matter of trial and error in a thousand different ways rather than one grand plan or a decisive technical transformation. Historians still debate what caused the collapse of the Central Powers (Germany and its Austro-Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Ottoman allies). But the dominance of the defensive proved the distinctive experience of World War I in the sense meant by Carl von Clausewitz in his classic work, *On War*, when he noted that “every age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions.”¹

It is important not to reduce this characteristic of the Great War to the western front as such, and to the all-too familiar images of trench warfare and bloody futility that have provided some of the most enduring stereotypes of the conflict. The war was fought on other fronts, between the Central Powers and Russia in the East (Galicia, Poland, the Baltic states, and the Ukraine), between Russia and Ottoman Turkey in the Caucasus, and between the Western Allies and the Turks in the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign of 1915. The French and British confronted the Bulgarians on an immobile front in Macedonia. Italy entered the conflict against Austria-Hungary in 1915 (precisely to complete the nation forged in the wars of unification) and opened up a front around the rim of the Alps and on the plains of the Veneto that cost 600,000 Italian dead by 1918. Romania joined the Entente in autumn 1916 but was rapidly subdued by the Central Powers. Moreover, as a global and imperial conflict, the war spawned secondary theaters in Africa (where the German colonial empire was eventually liquidated) and in the Ottoman Middle East (Mesopotamia and Palestine). Deep in the background, the maritime war was a relentless struggle for control over international supplies of war materials and food that pitted the British blockade of German-occupied Europe against German efforts to break Allied supply lines by means of the U-boat campaign. Along with the birth of aerial warfare, which provided a “third dimension” to the battlefield and an independent arm as bombing the enemy’s homeland became possible, these theaters and forms of combat were all part of the “kind of war” 1914–18 turned out to be.

Yet the deadlock of trench warfare and the costly experimentation with ways to break it constituted the heart of the conflict in military terms. It found its most chronic expression in France and Belgium, where three major powers, Britain, France, and Germany (and the colonial contingents of the former two), suffered the bulk of their casualties. But it was replicated in near-identical forms on the Austro-Italian front and in distant Gallipoli and Macedonia. On the eastern front sparse communications and vast distances made sudden breakthrough more likely (leading to the massive capture of prisoners); but even here, new trench lines restabilized and the decisive battle proved as elusive as elsewhere.² More mobile warfare in Africa and the Middle East was a refraction of the deadlock in Europe – either allowed by the latter (as with the conquest of Germany’s African colonies) or an attempt to unlock it, as with the efforts to eliminate Turkey and take the Central Powers by the back door.

In the end, the defensive advantage of the enemy could only be resolved in Europe and, after Bolshevik Russia quit the war in 1917, on the western front. While High Commands innovated and learned from each other, the process was hesitant and hampered by the weight of traditional thinking on strategy and tactics. Consequently, the soldiers experienced a mix of growing mastery of the battlefield, continued high casualties in many sectors of the front, and catastrophic episodes when a predicted successful offensive subsided yet again into a brutal logic of attrition. We must be careful not to attribute our own sensitivities to a different age: it is hard to imagine a current western public accepting a daily death-rate of 1,306 for four and a half years, as was the case in Germany, or 881 and 582, respectively, for France and the British Empire. But contemporaries knew that they faced mass death, and even if the exact figures were secret this was both novel and traumatic. As Freud (with two sons and a son-in-law at the front) put it in 1915: “Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it. People really die; and no longer one by one, but many, often tens of thousands, in a single day.”³

Making sense of death on this scale was thus a further enigma of the Great War that continued for at least a generation. Both at the time, for soldiers contemplating the losses incurred in proportion to the results gained, and also afterward, when whole societies engaged in the reckoning, this was the most general yet also the most personal measure of the gap between intentions and outcome. Not surprisingly, all the social and cultural resources of the countries concerned were deployed to give the sacrifice meaning and to make the war worthwhile.⁴ The focus everywhere was the ordinary soldier and above all the war dead. The sole exception was Russia, swept up in revolution and civil war, where the Bolsheviks rejected the Great War as an “imperialist” conflict.⁵

The Great War was not the first in which soldiers were individually honored by the fatherland for which they died. Already the French inscribed the names of the fallen on the battlefield monuments of the Franco-Prussian War while both sides after the American Civil War devoted considerable effort to identifying bodies and creating suitable monuments for the three-quarters of a million war dead.⁶ The idea that the ordinary soldier’s death in battle was the crucible of the nation was perhaps born with Lincoln’s address on the battlefield of Gettysburg, but as in so many other ways, the American conflict was not widely understood by Europeans as a harbinger of things to come. Hence, the cult of the millions of dead of the Great War was by its scale and import a new experience for European nations. Nothing speaks more eloquently to the way in which the war transformed nationhood than the geography of collective mourning and commemoration that was organized in the decade that followed it, with local monuments complementing the vast cemeteries along the former fronts. The Unknown Soldier emerged as a new

embodiment of popular sovereignty, at once anonymous and individual, the democratization of death.

Yet the ability to make sense of the sacrifice also turned on victory or defeat. Whereas the Western Allies (and the “victorious” successor states in Eastern Europe) invented national rituals to sanctify the sacrifice by the result achieved (the defense or creation of the fatherland, the “war for civilization”), this was impossible in the face of defeat or a “mutilated victory,” such as that condemned by Italian nationalists. Here “sacrifice” underlined the impossibility of accepting the outcome of the war or of a postwar politics that seemed to do so. The shame of defeat, the burden of an unfulfilled sacrifice, and a political activism that drew on the idealization of the “front soldier” were vital ingredients in the fascism that formed immediately after the war both in Italy, where it began in March 1919, and on the nationalist right in Germany.⁷ In both cases paramilitary formations inspired by the war expressed the sense of grievance through violent combat in civil and class war and in frontier conflicts.

Perhaps the ultimate explanation of the discrepancy between anticipation and outcome lies here. The scale of the effort and the size of the sacrifice inclined many who fought in the war to believe while it lasted that such an experience must have a decisive result, a closure that would be worthy of the conflict. That was one reason why it proved impossible to arrange a compromise, negotiated peace in 1916–17. But such a clear-cut diplomatic and political outcome was just as elusive as a decisive battle had been during the war itself. World War I was not an end, but rather a beginning, and the forces and quarrels that it unleashed – and transformed – continued to destabilize the world. The consequences seemed greater and more unmanageable than the origins, and the outcome, in retrospect, ever more disproportionate to the causes.

This was shown by the way peace was made in 1919–20. While the Western Allies dated victory precisely to 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918, the moment when the guns fell silent along the western front, ambiguity surrounded both the timing and the terms of the ending of the war. An expansionist and military-dominated German government had already imposed a harsh treaty on Bolshevik Russia in March 1918 that stripped the former Empire of the bulk of its non-Russian borderlands. Yet in 1919, the new German government (along with much of German opinion) believed that the Armistice was rather less than a defeat and entitled Germany to be part of the peace conference in the tradition of European diplomacy going back to the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The Allies, by contrast, and especially the French, who had borne the worst physical devastation of the war, assumed they were unilaterally imposing peace terms on a defeated and guilty adversary in what had been a war of survival. The gulf was fundamental. In 1945, in reaction against the Treaty of Versailles, the Allies would impose just such a peace on Nazi Germany after insisting on “total surrender.” But in 1919–20, peace was transitional in its very form, and the misunderstandings on which it was based accentuated the feelings of dissatisfaction on both sides. Meanwhile, Russia was doubly absent – excluded as a great power and as the source of the revolution spawned by the war – while in a series of aftershocks, the borderlands of the former dynastic empires sank into conflict and civil strife until the early to mid-1920s.

In another sense, too, the war’s consequences seemed to bear little relation to its origins. While the ascendancy of the nation-state was a long-term trend, the explosion of an ideological conflict that would reshape national politics and the European balance of power in the interwar period was altogether more unexpected. Of course, the struggle between democracy, communism, and fascism had deep origins in nineteenth-century political thought and movements. But the war itself – not its origins but the internal

dynamics and requirements that both destroyed the multinational empires and transformed the nation-state – produced the ideological contest that was one of its most profound consequences. The crusading edge imparted to the Allied cause as the United States replaced Russia in 1917 (summed up by Woodrow Wilson’s clarion call to “make the world safe for democracy”), as well as the desire by British and French politicians in the interwar period to create a new international order based on the renunciation (or at least the limitation) of war, helped reformulate democracy as the creed that most clearly characterized the “victors.” Defeat played a pivotal (if contrasting) role in the emergence of communism and fascism. Not only did the failure of the wartime regimes to secure victory help both creeds come to power, they both in their different ways internalized many of the experiences and impulses of the war. The Russian Civil War was a direct outgrowth of the Great War that profoundly influenced the shape of the new regime, including its permanent mobilization against internal and external enemies, a command economy pioneered in the improvisation of “War Communism” and the recourse to Terror. Fascism was a political remobilization for future war that drew on the “sacrifice” and military experience of World War I to supply radically new forms of political authority and national community along with aggressive and revisionist foreign policies.

Finally, perhaps the least anticipated outcome of all was the gnawing uncertainty on the part of many Europeans that they still occupied the central place in the world to which they were accustomed before 1914. At its outset, the conflict was a world war not just because Germany, as the strongest European state, aspired to be a “world power,” but even more because Britain and France were able to bring the resources of the world (both their colonial empires and their maritime access to the international economy) to bear on the contest in Europe. Yet if the war in Europe transcended the struggle for survival of the multinational dynastic states, it did so because it meshed that issue, by means of the alliance of Germany and Austria-Hungary, with Germany’s potential to exercise hegemony over the Continent. This was only a possibility of German policy before 1914, not a clear-cut goal. But once again, the process of the war turned it into reality as Germany’s initial failure to defeat the major Entente powers, France and Russia, left the German army in possession of a sizeable portion of Europe, both east and west, and in a position to dream of future empire on the Continent. The resultant struggle over the shape and dominance of Europe concerned the entire world and brought in a non-European power, the United States, as protagonist and arbiter (a role the Americans would perform again, and more durably, after 1945). The exhaustion of the European states in this battle over their own balance of power helped displace them from the center of worlds affairs and redistribute global influence toward America and Japan.

Paradoxically, this was true also in relation to colonial empires. For if Britain and France appeared superficially to be at the height of their power at the Paris Peace Conference as they assigned themselves the German colonies and the provinces of the Ottoman Middle East in the form of League of Nations mandates, the price they paid for involving their empires in a democratic crusade was heightened political expectations on the part of the colonized and a transfer of rhetoric that challenged imperial relations. After a further world war it would lead to full decolonization.⁸ Europeans might still travel the globe and administer their empires with ingrained assumptions of superiority. But the emerging theorists of a “European idea,” such as the Austrian pacifist, Baron Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi (inventor of “Pan-Europa”), or the French Foreign Minister, Aristide Briand, with his 1929 proposal for a European Federal Union, explicitly addressed the catastrophe of a war that had divided Europeans and weakened their

place in the world.⁹ The poet Paul Valéry wrote in 1919 of this self-destructive legacy for Europe: “We modern civilizations [like the vanished civilizations of antiquity] now know that we too are mortal.”¹⁰

Owing to this enigmatic quality, to the gulf between cause and effect, and to the ways in which it set in motion more than it resolved, World War I has proved particularly difficult to assess historically, despite the libraries of books that have been written about it. Popular perceptions and official memory have likewise reflected the divisive legacies of the conflict.

Most obviously, the nation-states that the war helped consolidate, and their subsequent evolution, shaped how the history was written and the conflict remembered. In Britain and France, alongside the conviction that the war had been both just and justified because it had defeated Germany’s bid for continental hegemony, a more pacifist sentiment emerged that emphasized the cost of the victory in human terms (proportion again) and affirmed that such a war should never be repeated.¹¹ Defeat rendered the war far more divisive in Weimar Germany. It proved impossible to establish a consensus on national commemoration, and while moderate opinion shared the aspiration to reconciliation with the former enemy (though still considering Versailles an unjust settlement), the nationalist right inveighed against the shameful peace and with the help of a state-backed campaign of history-writing declared Germany’s “innocence” of the Allied charges of war guilt.¹²

In all three countries, however, the war dominated national memory, a situation that changed fundamentally after 1945. The far greater catastrophe of World War II for Germany, which led to “total defeat” and the subsequent division of the country in the Cold War, effaced the earlier conflict from public memory and marginalized it as a subject of historical inquiry. The major controversy concerning World War I in West Germany arose, significantly, because Fritz Fischer in the 1960s argued on the basis of new evidence that Germany was responsible for war in 1914 and engaged in expansionist policies during the conflict. This suggested continuities with the Third Reich and challenged the prevailing consensus that Nazi Germany was an exception to national history.¹³ Although scholarly interest in World War I has grown steadily since the end of the Cold War, public interest remains low as shown by the muted interest in a major exhibition mounted on the subject by the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin in 2004.¹⁴

Quite different is the situation in Britain and France where World War I has remained a focus of public interest as well as scholarship and attracted increasing attention since the 1990s. While the two countries had different experiences of World War II, the military casualties of both remained lower than in World War I since the land conflict in World War II was fought overwhelmingly in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Pacific.¹⁵ World War I thus remained the great blood sacrifice of the twentieth century, its monuments providing the commemorative framework for subsequent wars. In France, for some, it marks an episode of national cohesion in contrast with the defeat of 1940 while for others it symbolizes the horror and disproportionate suffering entailed by modern warfare.¹⁶ In Britain, since the 1960s, popular understanding of the war has moved decisively in this latter direction (the “pity of war” expressed by the canonical poetry of Wilfred Owen), although military historians emphasize the “learning curve” of the British army which, they suggest, achieved one of its finest performances ever on the western front in the last three months of the war.¹⁷ Variants of the British and French cases obtain in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, for which the war provided foundation myths of independent nationhood. Especially in Australia, the “legend” of the Anzacs (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) has been of enduring relevance.¹⁸

The nation-state provided the frame of reference in Eastern Europe too, albeit more hesitantly. Where the war was a founding moment of national history (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Romania) or even a national disaster (Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria), the lens through which it was viewed was that of post-war nationhood rather than the multi-national empires of the conflict, although some supporters of the Dual Monarchy attempted to account for the Habsburg defeat and, in the inter-war series of economic and social histories of the war published by the Carnegie Foundation, to deal with the monarchy's war economy.¹⁹ More recently, historians have started to renew the study of Austria-Hungary in World War I in trans-national terms, but the linguistic and archival challenges are daunting.²⁰

By contrast, the Bolsheviks' dismissal of what they considered to be an "imperialist" conflict meant that in Russia the war was long ignored, treated as a mere backdrop to the real foundation of the Soviet Union by the Russian Revolution. Only in exile (and in the Russian contributions to the Carnegie series) was the war effort of Tsarist Russia taken seriously, a situation that began to be rectified with the fall of Communism and the opening of the archives.²¹ This same ideological dismissal marginalized the war in the memory and historiography of Eastern European countries during the Cold War where, as in Germany, the experience of World War II predominated. This resulted in the paradox of Poland. For in the country that was split between three Empires (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia), in whose opposing armies three and a half million Poles fought (and nearly 400,000 died), and whose territory was the cockpit of the eastern front, World War I, according to a leading Polish historian, remains a "forgotten war."²²

The predominantly national historiographies of World War I thus reflected wide variations in public and scholarly interest and militated against comparative or transnational approaches to a subject that was intrinsically European and global. They also explain the slow evolution of different approaches to historical research and writing on the war. Down to World War II, the discrepancy between causes and consequences made diplomatic "responsibility" for the outbreak of war in 1914 the primary issue. The "innocentist" campaign of German historians was paralleled by the "revisionism" of British, French, and especially American historians who now pointed to the responsibilities of their own governments for the catastrophe. In the American case this implied retrospective disavowal of US participation in the war and support for renewed isolationism.²³ While the revisionist critique by no means carried the day, especially in Britain and France, the focus on the origins and also on the conduct of the war ensured that political and military history prevailed.

The Carnegie volumes on the economic and social impact of the war remained an exception. However, the books were written by officials and by experts as much as by historians, and the enterprise did not transform the professional historiography of the subject. They are an underused resource to this day. It might be assumed that the place of the ordinary soldier in national commemoration and the significance of the veterans' movements would have guaranteed a flourishing history of combat experience. The soldiers' war was indeed a major subject during the interwar years, but not of historians. The veterans took charge of transmitting their own messages in a flood of memoirs and novels. Works such as the letters of fallen German students published by Philipp Witkop in successive editions in Germany, the "literature of disenchantment" by soldier-writers in Britain, or the attempt by a French literary critic and veteran, Jean Norton Cru, to evaluate the soldiers' literature published in France, testify to the omnipresence of the soldiers' memory in postwar society.²⁴ But it moved in a different sphere to the historians' concern with high politics as the fulcrum of historical causality.

The diplomatic, political, and military history of the war has remained a preoccupation of historical scholarship, particularly in a national context.²⁵ However, the opening of the wartime archives in Western Europe in the 1960s and the revival of interest occasioned by the fiftieth anniversary of the war in the same decade shifted the focus to collective experience and to causality understood in economic and social terms. World War I benefited from the primacy of social history and began to be reinterpreted as a conflict determined by economic and social forces as much as by high politics. Class conflicts and the workings of the wartime economy became the relevant issues; social groups, collective movements, strikers, food protestors, and women were the new protagonists.²⁶ Morale and public opinion became vital for understanding both wartime societies and the legacy of the war.²⁷ By and large, this was a home-front war. The soldiers' experience remained largely exempt from rigorous study, perhaps tainted for social historians by association with an unfashionable military history.²⁸

By far the most fundamental reorientation in the historiography of World War I occurred as part of the larger turn toward cultural history from the 1990s on – though as with political and military history, the social history of the war continued to attract attention.²⁹ The disintegration of Marxism with the end of the Cold War hastened the search for alternative paradigms. The enlargement of women's studies (already a fertile field of the social history of World War I) to gender and the discursive and symbolic practices that defined the sexes suggested new ways of thinking about experience.³⁰ Theoretical approaches borrowed from philosophy and sociology (notably the power inherent in intellectual and epistemological categories analyzed by Foucault and others) tended in the same direction. Literary criticism and studies of cinema and the visual arts showed the importance of representations for unlocking the codes of contemporary meaning.

Of course, such developments applied to other fields of history and other disciplines. But they coincided with the historical caesura of the fall of Communism, the reunification of Germany, and the reintegration of Eastern and Western Europe – not to mention the countershock of the brutal wars in the former Yugoslavia with a long artillery siege at (of all places) Sarajevo. The end seemed to reconnect with the beginning, supplying a new measure for the violence unleashed by World War I, which had permeated the interwar period and beyond. The result was a flowering of studies that were less concerned with the origins of the conflict, let alone the responsibility for it, but explored instead its internal processes and legacies.

At the heart of this renewed interest in the war were the people who experienced it and the ways they did so. The gulf between the causes and consequences of the war, between the intention and the outcome, meant that contemporaries between the wars had real difficulty in reconstructing the sense they had given to the conflict while it was going on. This was discounted in retrospect as propaganda and self-delusion, or more subtly transformed into memories compatible with peace and the postwar world – such as the veterans' tendency to cast themselves as victims.³¹ When historians since the late 1990s have used a kind of cultural archaeology to disinter the experiences and practices of the war, they have rediscovered the very dynamics that drove its transformative violence and translated its momentum into the postwar period. This does not mean that all contemporaries approved the war – far from it – but rather that they were absorbed by the violence that defined their universe for four and a half years. It is in this sense that some historians have coined the term “cultures of war” to describe that universe.³²

The result has been studies of heterogeneity and richness – of soldiers in combat and prisoners of war, of women maintaining the home but also engaged as nurses and munitions workers, of children caught up in the conflict, and of civilian victims of violence.³³ As the

interwar frameworks of memory were unpicked and the retrospective myths untangled, forgotten categories and untold experiences came to light. These included refugees, civilians under enemy occupation (the bulk of the population in Belgium, Poland, and Serbia), and the victims of atrocities, war crimes – and genocide. For at the heart of the war, in the case of the Young Turk movement, was a negative mobilization against the “enemy within” that turned into the deliberate elimination of the Armenian minority, resulting in the death of about a million people. A subject for so long marginal, if not hidden, in the history of the war, has begun to assume its central place.³⁴ It is an extreme example of a more general trend.

Although many of these studies have been undertaken in the context of a single nation or state, some have been comparative and transnational, and the historical literature has increasingly become international. In effect, the spaces of World War I have begun to be denationalized, though it is perhaps still not clear what a truly European or global history of the war might consist of.³⁵ Likewise, the timeframe of the war has been disencumbered of the artificial rigidity of the years 1914 to 1918. The war was the epicenter of a larger cycle of violence that went from 1912 to 1923, from the Balkan Wars in 1912–13 to the end of violence in the collapsed border zones of the former empires in Eastern Europe, the forced exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey, and the stabilization of Bolshevik Russia with Socialism in One Country instead of world revolution. That larger cycle both prepared and prolonged the war itself. Moreover, the powerful and diverse effects of the war on memory and commemoration within and beyond Europe are part of the subject. So too are the myths (the “stab in the back,” “Jewish” Bolshevism, cheering crowds in 1914) by which contemporaries addressed the outcomes that no one had predicted. To the extent that much of this new scholarship is the work of a younger, international generation, there is no better place to explore it than through one of its main expressions, the International Society for First World War Studies.³⁶

Yet if cultural history has informed the renovation of historical scholarship of World War I, it has by no means displaced the approaches characteristic of earlier and continued history writing. How to reconcile causal explanation (the preoccupation with cause and effect), which has been the forte of political and military history, with the emphasis on experience, representation, and memory that has been the strength of cultural approaches, is a major question in historical scholarship more generally, and the study of World War I would seem particularly well placed to tackle it. Already, the best military history is comparative in approach and takes due note of myth and experience – the “fog of war” that was cultural as well as physical.³⁷ Likewise, questions of class, social structure, material living standards, and the impact of war on the economy have lost none of their importance.

Such matters will help set the agenda of World War I studies up to and through the centenary reevaluations. It is precisely in order to foster that process, and to bring to a wider readership the richness and mutual dialogue of the different approaches to the subject, that this *Companion to World War I* assembles contributions from some forty leading scholars in the field working in nine countries and four languages. It puts military history in its rightful place at the heart of the war with a set of analytical narratives that give due weight to the western front while restoring to their full importance other fronts in Europe and beyond, including on the sea and in the air. It also provides a set of largely international and comparative chapters on the different “faces of war,” those aspects that helped give World War I its distinctive character and that have variously engaged the military, political, economic, social, and more latterly cultural histories of the subject.

The *Companion* recognizes the continued significance of the wartime states as the entities that mobilized and fought the war with profound (and differing) effects on the

peoples involved, both at the time and subsequently. Yet it also insists that other spaces mattered because they either contributed to the war and were altered by it (the British and French Empires) or were wartime creations – the German-occupied territories of Northeast Europe and in a way, also, Belgium. The volume addresses the larger time-frame of the war with two opening chapters, one on how the war imagined before 1914 bore little relationship to the event that it helped produce, and a second on how the gulf between prediction and outcome resulted in a debate on “guilt” and “responsibilities” that lasted from 1914 to the present. It concludes with three chapters on the war after the war – the first on peacemaking and its ultimate failure in the interwar period, a second on the conflicts arising from the war, and a third on memory and commemoration.

Readers will use the volume in different ways. Some will want an overview, others a detailed survey of the entire field, and yet others some information or insight on a precise point. Some will simply wish to browse for pleasure. As well as the individual chapters, which are accompanied by suggestions for further reading in several languages (where relevant), there is an extensive bibliography of secondary literature in English categorized under various headings. An annotated bibliography of published primary sources in English gives some indication of the wealth of contemporary material on the war experience that is readily available, much of it translated and relating to the major continental powers. Whatever the purpose the reader has in mind, it is hoped that in every sense of the term, the *Companion* will live up to its name.

Notes

- 1 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 1832, edited and translated from German by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 593.
- 2 On the predominance of the eastern front among prisoners of war, see Alon Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front*, Oxford, Berg, 2002.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915), in Penguin Freud Library, vol. 12, *Group Psychology, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works*, London, Penguin, 1991, pp. 79–80.
- 4 Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: European Culture and the Great War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- 5 Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia*, London, Granta, 2000, pp. 125–7.
- 6 Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, New York, Knopf, 2008, pp. 250–65.
- 7 George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 159–200.
- 8 Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.
- 9 Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, *Pan-Europa*, Vienna, Pan-Europa Verlag, 1923; Carl H. Pegg, *The Evolution of the European Idea 1914–1932*, Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1983, pp. 103–14.
- 10 Paul Valéry, “Crise de l’esprit” (1919), in *Oeuvres*, vol. 1, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 988.
- 11 Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919–1946*, Oxford, Berg, 1994; Antoine Prost, *In the Wake of War. “Les Anciens Combattants” and French Society, 1914–1933*, Oxford, Berg, 1992.
- 12 Holger Herwig, “Clio Deceived. Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany after the Great War” in Steven E. Miller, Sean Lynn-Jones and Stephen Van Evera (eds.), *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 262–301.

- 13 Fritz Fischer, *Germany's War Aims in the First World War*, 1961; translation from German, London, Chatto and Windus, 1967, and id., *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914*, 1969; translated from German, London, Chatto and Windus, 1975; see also John Keiger, chapter 2 below.
- 14 Rainer Rother (ed.), *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918. Ereignis und Erinnerung*, Berlin Deutsches Historisches Museum/Edition Minerva, 2004.
- 15 Pieter Lagrou, “Les Guerres, les morts et le deuil: bilan chiffré de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale” in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker, Christian Ingrao and Henry Rousso (eds.), *La Violence de guerre, 1914–1945*, Brussels, Editions Complexe, 2002, pp. 313–27.
- 16 For an insight into this controversy, see Christophe Prochasson, *14–18: Retours d'expériences*, Paris, Tallandier, 2008.
- 17 On British military history, Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, and Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory. The First World War: Myth and Realities*, 2001; new ed., London, Review, 2002. On changing public perceptions of the war in Britain, Dan Todman, *The Great War. Myth and Memory*, London, Hambledon Continuum, 2005.
- 18 Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories. Living with the Legend*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994; Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1997.
- 19 Edmund von Glaise-Horstenau, *The Collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire*, 1929, translation from German, London, Dent, 1930; Gustáv Gratz and Richard Schuller, *The Economic Policy of Austria-Hungary during the War*, New Haven, Yale, 1928. The Carnegie series also published separate volumes on Austrian and Hungarian war government.
- 20 On the military history of Austria-Hungary, see Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers: Österreich-Ungarn und der Erste Weltkrieg*, Graz, Styria Verlag, 1993. Professor Mark Cornwall conducted a research project from 2004 to 2007 on the comparative and transnational study of the legacy of World War I in the former Dual Monarchy, scheduled for future publication as *Sacrifice and Rebirth: the Legacy of the Habsburg Empire's Great War*. See also chapter 25 below.
- 21 See the summarizing volume on Russia in the Carnegie series, Michael Florinsky, *The End of the Russian Empire*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1931, and chapter 32 below.
- 22 Robert Traba, “Der vergessene Krieg 1914–1918” in Andreas Lawaty and Hubert Orłowski (eds.), *Deutsche und Polen. Geschichte-Kultur-Politik*, Munich, Beck, 2003, pp. 53–60. See, however, the volume on Poland in the Carnegie series, Marcel Handelsman (ed.), *La Pologne. Sa vie économique et sociale pendant la Grande Guerre*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1933. I am indebted to Dr Julia Eichenberg for the first reference.
- 23 See chapter 2 below.
- 24 Philipp Witkopp (ed.), *German Students' War Letters*, translated from German, London, Methuen, 1929; new ed., Philadelphia, Pine Street Books, 2002 (foreword by Jay Winter); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975, and Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, London, Bodley Head, 1990, on the “literature of disenchantment”; Jean Norton Cru, *Témoins*, Paris, Les Étincelles, 1929, new edition, Nancy, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 2006 (preface by Frédéric Rousseau). Unfortunately, Norton Cru has not been translated into English. On the soldiers' literature in Germany and France, respectively, Wolfgang Natter, *Literature at War, 1914–1940: Representing the “Time of Greatness” in Germany*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, and Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2007.
- 25 For the successive phases in the historiography of World War I in what remains the only modern study of this subject, see Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies 1914 to the Present*, 2004; translated from French, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

- 26 Two characteristic examples, both relating to Germany, one by an American, the other by a German historian, are: Gerald D. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor in Germany, 1914–1918* (1966); new ed., Providence, RI, and Oxford, Berg, 1992; and Jürgen Kocka, *Facing Total War: German Society, 1914–1918* (1973); translation from German, Leamington Spa, Berg, 1984.
- 27 In France three major examples are Jean-Jacques Becker’s study of civilian opinion on the entry into war, *1914: Comment les français sont entrés dans la guerre*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1977; Antoine Prost’s analysis of the postwar veterans, *Les Anciens Combattants et la société française*, 3 vols., Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1977, and Jean-Louis Robert’s study of the Paris working class and labor movement, *Les Ouvriers, la patrie et la révolution : Paris, 1914–1919*, Besançon, Annales Littéraires de l’Université de Besançon, 1995.
- 28 A rare exception was Guy Pedroncini’s pioneering study of the French mutinies of 1917 based on the military archives, *Les Mutineries de 1917*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1967.
- 29 A good example is the first volume of the major collaborative project led by Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert that chose three capital cities as a framework for a comparative social history, Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (eds.), *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914–1919*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997. This had been preceded by a collective volume on the social and demographic history of the conflict, Richard Wall and Jay Winter (eds.), *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914–1918*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988. Significantly, however, the second volume of the Capital Cities project, published in 2007, was subtitled *A Cultural History*.
- 30 For an influential early example, see Margaret Higonnet et al. (eds.), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987; for a critical assessment from a women’s history perspective, see Gail Braybon, “Winners or Losers: Women’s Symbolic Role in the War Story,” in Braybon (ed.), *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914–1918*, Oxford, Berghahn, 2003, pp. 86–122.
- 31 On this point see Smith, *The Embattled Self* pp. 148–94.
- 32 Among other examples, see Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *1914–1918: Understanding the Great War*, 2000; translated from French, London, Profile Books, 2002.
- 33 See sections 6, 7, and 10 of the Extended Bibliography below, on soldiers, gender, and culture, respectively. It is striking how extensive the work on gender and culture now is by comparison with that on economic and social history.
- 34 See chapters 13 and 33 below. For an attempt to place the genocide in the context of the radicalization of other types of violence by the war in 1914–15, see John Horne (ed.), *Vers la guerre totale: le tournant de 1914–15*, Paris, Tallandier, 2010.
- 35 See, however, the first volume of the projected trilogy by Hew Strachan, *The First World War. Vol. 1: To Arms*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, and in a different vein, Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.
- 36 The International Society for First World War Studies (firstworldwarstudies.org) was established in 2001. Volumes showcasing the work presented at its biennial conferences are: Jenny Macleod and Pierre Purseigle (eds.), *Uncovered Fields. Perspectives in First World War Studies*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2004; Pierre Purseigle (ed.), *Warfare and Belligerence: Perspectives in First World War Studies*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2005; Heather Jones, Christoph Schmidt-Supprian and Jennifer O’Brien (eds.), *Untold War: New Interpretations of the First World War*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2008. The Society’s journal, *First World War Studies* (Routledge), was launched in 2010.
- 37 To take two of the most recent examples, Alex Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, and William Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme and the Making of the Twentieth Century*, New York, Little, Brown, 2009.