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An “Unknown” War in Greece?

Elli Lemonidou

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An “Unknown” War in Greece? Perceptions and Historiographical Approaches to the First World War in the Wake of the Centenary

Elli Lemonidou

University of Patras

The First World War constitutes one of the most interesting historiographical fields for the examination of convergences and divergences between European and local historiographies. The long-time dominant historiographical narrative, which focused very much on the history of the Western Front and underestimating all “secondary” fronts, is strikingly different when compared with the way each national historiography talks (or, in many cases, falls into silence) about the general history of the war or the country-specific events. As a general rule, it can be said that most national historiographies in Europe (with a few, very significant exceptions) have historically failed to fully appreciate the importance of the Great War, for a rich variety of reasons, even though this event has been crucial not only for the entire European history, but also for many cases of the state-building process across the continent. This claim is clearly visible in the case of Greek historiography, where both the general and the local dimensions of First World War history have been reduced to a number of standard narratives about the main political, diplomatic and military developments, while the multilayered dimensions and the transnational perspectives of the war have been to a great extent neglected. The recent centenary constituted inevitably a turning point in the examination of the historicisation process of the event, at both international and local level. This article presents an overview of the main pillars of European historiography of the war throughout the years, with a special regard to the impact of the recent commemorative period, while it also discusses the presence of the First World War in Greek historiography, from the interwar period to the initiatives undertaken on the occasion of the centenary.

An international overview

The most common analysis of international historiography on the First World War focuses on the works written in English and French (and less on those in German, Italian and other languages), introducing some major periods with a distinctive character in the development

of research. In this text we follow the scheme proposed by Antoine Prost and Jay Winter and widely accepted nowadays,¹ despite some recent amendments proposed by Winter himself.² According to this proposal, First World War historiography is categorised in three major periods, each one of them presenting some special features that help understand the development of research production on that field.

The first period coincides with the interwar years and is characterised by the overwhelming presence of testimonies, the traditional focus on military and diplomatic history, the emphasis on the lives and deeds of great political and military leaders and the almost total absence of the simple soldier's viewpoint. As the events were fresh in private, public and official memory, states and individuals were trying more to find a meaning for what happened in the slaughterhouse of the war and less to learn and understand the real facts and procedures that led to it all. History became a tool in the hands of politicians, who tried to serve national aims through the publication of large volumes of diplomatic documents, especially regarding the heated argument of the causes and responsibilities for the outbreak of the war. In this context, academic historiography was rather unwilling to deal with the event, due also to the limited development of contemporary history studies in academic environments of that time. Apart from some major contributions, such as the well-known book of Pierre Renouvin,³ the most fertile historiographical production of that time came from the United States, a country that had the luxury to distance itself from the competition of the great European powers. It is not by chance, therefore, that the main alternative viewpoints about the war in the aforementioned period appeared mainly through literature and art, that is expressive modes to a much lesser extent dependent on political and diplomatic boundaries.

After a 20-year period of rather expected silence about the First World War, in the wake of the new and larger global catastrophe, the 1960s marked a new milestone in the historiographical production. The 50th anniversary of the war presented a great occasion for reflection, while the wider spirit of the period directly influenced the way in which the war was dealt with. This tendency was further facilitated by the opening of important archival sources about the war. For the period under examination, which runs from the 1960s up to the late 1980s, we can highlight the influence of new historiographical trends (most of all, social history) on First World War studies, the renewal of military and diplomatic history, the development of history of international relations, the gradual shift to a meticulous study of the various forms of discourse on war, in the context of the much-discussed *literary turn* in historical studies,⁴ as well as the publication of major works which are now considered real turning points in the historiography about the war, such as Fritz Fischer's books on the German foreign policy and war aims.⁵

The next big step in First World War historiography is marked by the major changes after the end of the Cold War. The general resurgence of public and academic interest in

the past led, among others, to the development of memory studies, a branch that has thrived particularly in the context of First World War studies, mainly thanks to Winter's groundbreaking contributions.⁶ Particular emphasis was also placed on cultural history, focusing on the way in which the war was lived and experienced by specific individuals or groups, both on the battlefields and at the home front. The beginning of the 1990s was marked by the founding (in 1992) of the museum and research centre of the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne, which constituted the first, very influential effort of transnational cooperation in the field of First World War studies. It is equally important to emphasise that this period sealed the definitive passage of the First World War into the realm of historicisation, following the death of the last surviving war veterans in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In any case, we should never forget that the above periodisation covers almost exclusively, with few exceptions, the case of major Western historiographies, due to their quantitative and qualitative advantage, as well as their influence in academic research all over the world.

The Greek case

The Greek case is a typical example of a peripheral country in relation to what has been analysed so far. In general, Greek historiography has dealt with the great event of international history in a way that can be called “descriptive”: in all works of European history written by Greek authors – and which, in any case, are not many in number – there are sufficient references to the basic facts and major aspects of the Great War. These relatively brief mentions, however, do not cover the full dimensions of a particularly complex event. The void of a general monograph about the First World War in Greek has been covered by the publication of some translations, unequal in their content and in the quality of their language.⁷ The contribution of Greek historians to the negotiation of international dimensions of the war is very modest, in most cases limited to the link between the domestic aspect and the role of major European forces or the general political and diplomatic context of the time.

Greek historiographical production includes a series of compositions that have been established as reference works on the subject and which are often – some of them – mentioned in the international literature about the Macedonian Front and the war in Southeastern Europe.⁸ These are certainly essential contributions, as their authority and importance in the field of political and diplomatic history cannot be called into question. However, with few exceptions, the resonance of international historiographical debate on the First World War has been scarce in Greece.

In terms of school history, which is a privileged vector for the transmission of historical knowledge to future generations, the picture is not much different. For many decades, references to the First World War in history textbooks for primary and secondary education have been short, mainly focused on the Greek dimension, with only general

references to the developments in the European field. This general image has only partially and sporadically improved since the 1980s.⁹

The above-described image brings inevitably into question the overall slim interest in the First World War in Greece and the reasons behind it. Only during the interwar period there were, expectedly, many references to that event in Greece. Even with little activity from academic history, a series of political and public interventions kept the memory of the war (including its European dimension) alive throughout that period.¹⁰ After the 1940s, the interest of Greeks in the war diminished dramatically, under the huge impact of the dramatic events that shuttered the country and the entire world in that decade. Never again did that conflict come again to the focus of academic and public interest in the country, with the exception of a limited number of historiographical contributions. Much can be said and argued about this “indifference”, which can be attributed, among else, to the “remote” and “irrelevant” character of the war for most of Greeks (there was the sense that the action of the war happened predominantly far away from Greece and had no real impact on the fortunes of the country), the complex character of Greek (direct or indirect) involvement in it and its almost complete identification with the domestic trauma of the National Schism.¹¹ It is also very important to stress that the First World War has been completely overshadowed by other major events in the history of twentieth-century Greece, such as the victorious Balkan Wars of 1912-13, the Asia Minor Catastrophe in 1922 and, above all, the highly traumatic Greek 1940s.¹² For all its partial merits, academic historiography has clearly contributed, through choices and silences, to the consolidation of that situation.¹³ In addition, it is not by chance that even the Public History channels in Greece have been much rather inactive and scarcely influential regarding the First World War. The collective perception of that war has been univocally attached to the fragmental images of the Western Front trenches, without a real and deep awareness of the full dynamic and the universal repercussions of the event.

The centennial anniversary as a turning point in international research

As expected, the 100th anniversary of the First World War was marked by an impressive series of initiatives, which by their mere quantity and variety redefined unavoidably the landscape of First World War studies. Even though the first attempts to evaluate the impact of the centenary in this academic field are already underway, a full and complete appreciation of what has really changed will take years to be realised. The scholarly production about the Great War continues to thrive well beyond the “formal” end of the anniversary period.¹⁴ Jay Winter, one of the most prominent historians of the war, claimed in 2019 that a thorough account of the academic impact of the centenary will not be

possible before the mid-2020s, when most pending publications, as well as dissertations and research projects initiated on the occasion of the centenary will have been concluded.¹⁵

Taking the above into consideration, we can still suggest out that the most striking feature of this period is the coexistence of well-established, traditional approaches to the First World War with fresh visions in terms of subjects, disciplines and countries involved. These parallel paths reflect in a perfect way the very nature of that war, where the old and the new intersected in many aspects of warfare, strategy and management of daily life in the battlefields as well as in the home front.

In the case of the centenary, the traditional aspect is represented by the dominating role of the countries that have always been at the forefront of academic research and public interest in the First World War, namely the UK and France. This was mirrored in the central organisation of commemoration activities, followed by a high number of publications and conferences with big international appeal. On the thematic level, the centenary has seen the reemergence of some traditional issues of First World War studies, like the one of the origins and responsibilities for the outbreak of the war. This topic, which could even be regarded as an autonomous branch of historiography, fully dominated the beginning of the centenary period, thanks to a number of influential publications, which, among else, reintroduced the study of personalities in order to shed new light into the role of specific actors during the July crisis.¹⁶

On the other hand, the centenary has been strongly characterised by the multifaceted expansion of First World War Studies. It is true that the highly symbolic commemorative period came at a moment of maturity for First World War research, after the huge progress achieved in the last decades. The scholarly community was now ready to face thorny and challenging issues regarding the Great War, definitely free from the limits set by the living memory and the direct consequences of the event in previous times. Echoing earlier demands, academic historians prioritised expanding research to the lesser known fronts of World War I, as it is now clear to everyone that no general history of the war can be complete unless it takes into account its real dimensions and the horizontal presence of various phenomena (from trench warfare to desertions, from violent population movements to home front sufferings) in more than one fronts. This expansion was not only reflected in the general history works, which are increasingly covering (or aspire to cover) all the war fronts to the fullest possible extent; it was also enhanced by the rise of interest in the First World War even in countries that had almost banished this event from their national historiographical narratives until a few years ago. This trend has had, of course, different pace and qualitative characteristics, depending on each country. In any case, it can be claimed that the anniversary served as a trigger for all national historiographies to reflect on the role of the respective countries in the Great War. As a result, there is now a much richer pool of studies on issues that had been left out of the dominant tendencies of historiography (for example, studies of social and cultural history regarding the Habsburg Empire), while, in other cases, such as Russia and other Eastern European countries, the

centenary marked the resurgence of academic and public interest in the First World War, with results expected to be visible in the years to come.

A similar case regards the expansion of the temporal limits of study of the war. If previous generations of historians had focused on the integrated study of the two world wars, the centenary was characterised by the demand for a review of the limits of the First World War itself. This proposal is based on the admission that episodes of armed conflict before and especially after the war constitute ultimately an integral part of the same event. Therefore, their understanding is essential in order to properly assess the political, diplomatic and military developments of 1914–1918, as well as the consequences of war on the European and world map of the twentieth century. In this context, terms such as “Long First World War”, “Greater War”, or “Second Great War” are becoming increasingly common in the literature, with the discussion still ongoing in the period after the First World War centenary, marked by the anniversaries of the peace treaties and the conflicts of the early years after the war.¹⁷

This new spirit is directly related to the further development of the transnational perspective in the First World War studies, which has been facilitated by the growing communication between historians through all possible ways. Some of the most important works of recent production have been specially designed to serve the needs of a fully transnational approach, focusing on the universal character of the war and adopting an inclusive viewpoint.¹⁸ Even though the quest for a fresh, fully integrated historical account of the war remains open, the historiography of the centenary can be considered a very promising base to ensure a prolonged interest in the war even after the conclusion of the highly symbolic period of 2014–2018.

The Greek centenary

In a provisional review of the four-year anniversary period in Greece, the picture can be described as “tricky”. It can hardly be claimed that the First World War anniversary has gone unnoticed, at least at the level of the academic community. But it would also be difficult to say that the various activities on this occasion have radically changed the level of awareness among the general public. It is very important to point out that in Greece the centennial events did not have a central coordinating body, as opposed to what happened in France, the UK and other countries;¹⁹ therefore, the activities undertaken were based on individual, public, local or academic initiatives, and were characterised, for the most part, by fragmentation and absence of coherent links between them. The main initiatives include a number of conferences, workshops, or research programs (with or without international participation), a small, but significant number of new independent publications or translations,²⁰ a rather remarkable number of exhibitions, with an expected emphasis on

aspects of Greek involvement, ceremonies of remembrance in cemeteries or monuments of foreign fallen soldiers in Greek territory, as well as in battlefields of the Macedonian Front; last but not least, occasional reports in print and electronic media, especially in the first year of the centenary, as well as a number of special TV productions.

A key dimension of Greek participation in anniversary events is, of course, the participation of Greek historians in international conferences, collective volumes and special editions. While their interventions had generally a Greek focus, there exist some good examples of creative osmosis between Greek historiography and new trends in international literature.²¹ However, much more remains to be done in this direction, as there is no doubt that the overall picture of reception of the First World War in Greece remains deficient. Considering the international interest raised by the centenary and the general belief that, even after the end of this milestone, the Great War will still be a major reference point in historiography and public discourse at international level, it is obvious that the antennas of Greek historiography have to be more open than ever.

The current situation offers a historical opportunity: the opening up of research to the regional fronts of war, aiming at the substantial integration of events and situations from all fronts into the overall narrative of war, requires the international cooperation of historians and passes through the expansion of primary research and elaboration of existing findings from individual national historiographies. The Greek historical community faces a double challenge: on one hand, to transform the acquired wisdom of international research into knowledge accessible to the largest possible extent to the Greek public, a process in which the role of school history and the full exploitation of all Public History channels are crucial; on the other hand, to participate actively in the international interest in local and regional research, benefitting from the international experience in inadequately studied fields of Greek history during the First World War and integrating the Greek case into the broader regional and European historical context of the war experience. The example of other countries has proved how important is the scholarly work at the local history level for the regeneration of First World War studies – in the cases of Germany and Italy, local history has been a precious vehicle for the adoption of modern historiographical trends and the widening of knowledge about the war. Even though there have been isolated efforts in Greece in this context, it is sure that further work can surprisingly change the entire landscape of First World War reception in the country. This prospect, in addition to the “internationalisation” of study of key issues in the history of that period, which by no means are Greek exclusives (from the blockades and the sufferings of the population to the problems in soldiers’ recruitment and even the civil conflict itself), may create new, challenging perspectives for First World War studies in Greece. It may finally occur that in the case of Greece, like in other countries, the centenary may not be a conclusive landmark, but a “starting” point for First World War Studies.²²

- ¹ Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre: Un essai d'historiographie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004). A new, partly revised edition of this book appeared recently in English, with a detailed overview of the last 20 years of First World War historiography. See Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- ² Jay Winter, "Approaching the History of the Great War: A User's Guide," in *The Legacy of the Great War: Ninety Years On*, ed. Jay Winter (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 1–31.
- ³ Pierre Renouvin, *La crise européenne et la Grande Guerre, 1904–1918* (Paris: Alcan, 1934).
- ⁴ Mario Isnenghi, *Il mito della grande guerra: da Marinetti a Malaparte* (Bari: Laterza, 1970); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).
- ⁵ Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschlands 1914/18* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961); *Weltmacht oder Niedergang: Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1965); *Krieg der Illusionen: Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1969).
- ⁶ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
- ⁷ See, for example, the translations of the well-known works by Sir Hew Strachan (*The First World War*; published in Greek in 2013 by Govostis Editions) and Niall Ferguson (*The Pity of War*; published in Greek in 2008 by Iolkos Editions).
- ⁸ Some works in this category are George B. Leon, *Greece and the Great Powers, 1914–1917* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1974); Yannis G. Mourélos, *L'intervention de la Grèce dans la Grande guerre* (Athens: École française d'Athènes, 1983); George B. Leontaritis, *Greece and the First World War: From Neutrality to Intervention, 1917–1918* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1990).
- ⁹ The textbook written by Skoulatos, Dimakopoulos and Kondis, introduced in the second level of secondary education in 1985, included references to very sensitive aspects of the European dimension of the war, such as the morale crisis of 1917 and the case of soldiers executed for example – at the time of publication of the book, those issues had yet to be incorporated in the emblematic case of the respective French textbooks.
- ¹⁰ A particularly interesting aspect of that period is the publication of war memoirs or novels through the columns of the biggest Greek dailies. A special mention has to be made to the influence of the famous novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, which was serialised twice in Greek newspapers (*Rizospastis*, 1929; *Makedonia*, 1931) in the years under examination.
- ¹¹ This term is used to describe the highly dramatic division in Greek politics, which, besides other factors, was directly linked to the decision about the position of the country in the ongoing Great War. King Constantine opted for the neutrality of Greece, a stance considered by his opponents as serving in practice the interests of the Central Powers, while Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos was a fierce supporter of involvement in the war by the side of the Entente. The crisis began in early 1915 and culminated in the period from the autumn of 1916 to the summer of 1917, when the country was de facto ruled by two separate poles of state authority based in Athens and Thessaloniki, respectively.
- ¹² Elli Lemonidou, "La Première Guerre mondiale des Grecs: Une guerre oubliée," in *100 ans après: La mémoire de la Première guerre mondiale/100 years after: The Memory of the First World War*, ed. Elli Lemonidou (Athens: École française d'Athènes, 2018), 194–96. See also Erik Sjöberg, "National Memory, National Amnesia: The First World War and the Greek Asia Minor Expedition in Greece's Memory Wars," in *Entrer en guerre, 1914–1918: des Balkans au monde: Histoire, historiographies, mémoires*, ed. Robert Frank and Catherine Horel (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2018), 349–65.
- ¹³ It is important to mention that the multifaceted Greek involvement in the First World War is often discussed in Greek historiography as an integral part of the so-called "war decade" of Greece, which began with the

Balkan Wars in 1912 and ended with the disastrous outcome of the Asia Minor Campaign in 1922. This practice puts in evidence the existing strong interconnections between the events of that period; it also echoes perfectly the ongoing discussion in the international field about the need to review the real boundaries of the First World War. On the other hand, this integrated approach has not helped identifying and understanding the real importance of First World War events for the history of Greece, as the developments of 1914–1918 are easily underrated and overlooked due to the huge impact of the 1922 defeat in Asia Minor and its lasting repercussions.

¹⁴ A quick overview showed that more than 1,000 works were published from 2019 to 2022 in the four most important languages of First World War research (English, French, German and Italian) – the real statistics are even higher, as our indicative research was limited to single-volume works with the exact phrase “Great War” or “First World War” in their title.

¹⁵ Jay Winter, “The Centenary of the Great War: Unfinished Business,” lecture at the Royal Historical Society Symposium on Contested Commemorations: Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War, 2013–2019, Open University, Milton Keynes, 17 May 2019, <http://stadium.open.ac.uk/stadia/preview.php?whichevent=3263&s=1&schedule=4289>.

¹⁶ Some indicative works: Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012); Margaret MacMillan, *The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Random House, 2013); Thomas G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 2nd edition).

¹⁷ Peter Gatrell, “War after the War: Conflicts, 1919–23,” in *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 558–75; Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2016); Elli Lemonidou, *Ιστορία και μνήμη του Α΄ Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου στην Ευρώπη* [History and memory of the First World War in Europe] (Athens: Papazisis, 2019), 81, 105–7.

¹⁸ Jay Winter, “The Transnational History of the Great War,” in Lemonidou, *100 ans après*, 23–45. The transnational approach is present in works like Jay Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) or the online encyclopaedia of the First World War (<https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net>), created by the Free University of Berlin and edited by a team of international experts.

¹⁹ It is worth mentioning, among other examples, the indicative case of Slovenia. See Petra Svoljsak, “Centenary (Slovenia),” in Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, eds., *1914–1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11301>.

²⁰ See, for example, the books of Elli Lemonidou, *Ο Α΄ Παγκόσμιος Πόλεμος, 1914–1918: Ιστορία μιας οικουμενικής καταστροφής* [The First World War, 1914–1918: History of a universal catastrophe] (Athens: Estia, 2020) and George Mavrogordatos, *1915: Ο Εθνικός Διχασμός* [1915: The national schism] (Athens: Patakis 2015). Lemonidou’s collective *100 ans après* and book *Ιστορία και μνήμη* cover issues of First World War historiography and memory at the European level. In addition, University Studio Press in Thessaloniki published no less than 16 books on the First World War, with an almost exclusive focus on the Macedonian Front. Some special issues in established reviews of different type and target group should also be added.

²¹ Two indicative examples of this tendency are the book of Emilia Salvanou, *Η συγκρότηση της προσφυγικής μνήμης* [The formation of the refugee memory] (Athens: Nefeli, 2018), where the author places the refugee flow in Greece after the Asia Minor Disaster in the general framework of massive population displacements across Europe during and immediately after the First World War, as well as the recent volume of Dimitris Kamouzis, Alexandros Makris, and Charalampos Minasidis, eds., *Έλληνες στρατιώτες και Μικρασιατική Εκστρατεία: Πτυχές μιας οδυνηρής εμπειρίας* [Greek soldiers and the Asia Minor campaign: Aspects of a painful experience] (Athens: Estia, 2022), where focused on the ways ordinary Greek soldiers experienced the war during the expedition in Asia Minor.

²² John Horne, “The Great War at its Centenary,” in Winter, *Cambridge History of the First World War*, vol. 3, *Global War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 635.