

Historein

Vol 21, No 1 (2023)

Where was 1821? Space and Territory in the Greek Revolution



Review of Elli Lemonidou, Ο Α΄ Παγκόσμιος Πόλεμος (1914-1918): Ιστορία μιας οικουμενικής καταστροφής

Christina Theodosiou

doi: [10.12681/historein.27486](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.27486)

Copyright © 2024, Christina Theodosiou



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Theodosiou, C. (2023). Review of Elli Lemonidou, Ο Α΄ Παγκόσμιος Πόλεμος (1914-1918): Ιστορία μιας οικουμενικής καταστροφής : [The First World War (1914-1918): History of a universal catastrophe]. *Historein*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.27486>



Elli Lemonidou

Ο Α΄ Παγκόσμιος Πόλεμος (1914–1918): Ιστορία μιας οικουμενικής καταστροφής
[The First World War (1914–1918): History of a universal catastrophe]

Christina Theodosiou

doi: 10.12681/historein.27486

To cite this article:

Theodosiou, Christina. 2023. "Elli Lemonidou, *Ο Α΄ Παγκόσμιος Πόλεμος (1914–1918): Ιστορία μιας οικουμενικής καταστροφής* [The First World War (1914–1918): History of a universal catastrophe]". *Historein* 21 (1).

<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.27486>.

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. 216 pp.

Christina Theodosiou

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

The centenary of the Great War in last decade saw renewed interest in the first global conflict of the twentieth century, both at a public and an academic level. In regards to historical studies, this revival has featured a significant amount of research projects, international conferences and high-quality publications (in the form of monographs and edited volumes) that consider the war experience from a multifaceted perspective or advance new approaches and questions that focus, among others, on gender, landscape, everyday life and war experience, the transnational history of the war as well as its chronological framework. The centenary has also given new impetus to First World War historiography in a number of countries where this key event of modern history had not always received the due attention of scholars, or society, or, depending on the case, where it had even left a controversial legacy, often associated with a sense of historical injustice. This is notably the case in central or southeastern European countries. Elli Lemonidou's 2020 book *The First World War (1914–1918): History of a Universal Catastrophe* fits into this wider historiographical context.

The book opens with an introduction outlining some key arguments of First World War studies and describing the main goals of the book, which is followed by four chapters of different length. As the author says, the book aims to provide Greek readers with “a brief but comprehensive overview of the war’s core aspects” (13). This perspective sees special emphasis put on the causes of the war, its characteristics and historical events, historiographical debates and perspectives as well as Greece’s tumultuous involvement in the conflict.

The first chapter explores the build-up of events in Europe leading to the war (17–71). It is a well-rounded analysis of the war’s origins based on the vast background literature on this topic. As regards the thematic structure, Lemonidou first focuses on the

long-term structure, by closely examining the distant causes of the war. Therefore, she successively discusses a series of factors which steadily led to the outbreak of war, such as the changing balance of power on the European continent during the nineteenth century, intra-European economic and territorial competition, expansionism and colonial rivalry, the Great Power alliance system and military planning at the turn of the century, and also the prewar ideological framework and contemporary societies' mental preparation for a European armed conflict. Concerning this last point, the book under review could have afforded more prominence to the analysis of nationalism in the years preceding the Great War. The author rightly recognises the awakening of national identities within old multinational empires, and the construction of new nation-states during the second half of the nineteenth century, as major factors that triggered the war in Europe (24, 28). Her analysis, nevertheless, could have benefited from a further discussion highlighting the impact of belligerent nationalism, emerging nationalist political movements and the promotion of war values and stereotypes regarding rival nations in old European nations such as France and Britain, all of which fuelled countries' desire to go to war.

Lemonidou then discusses, from a medium-term perspective, the intensifying Great Power's competition on the eve of war, and goes through a timeline of the colonial crisis and regional armed conflicts that affected, from 1898 to 1913, the upcoming hostilities (45–50). The analysis of the war's origins and background is completed by a conscientious presentation of the chain reaction of diplomatic and military events that, following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, led to Europe's descent into war (50–63). The chapter closes with an account of the long-lasting debates around the shared responsibilities for the war's outbreak, and the reasons that led the July Crisis to escalate into an intense armed conflict.

Chapter 2, entitled "A historical diagram of World War I", consists of three main sections that focus in turn on the course of warfare, the Paris Peace Conference, and finally the war's significance and impact in shaping the modern world (73–161). The chapter thus opens with a very instructive overview of the war's theatres of operations and continues with the recounting of significant battles, and their outcome in terms of casualties and strategic successes, as well as political and diplomatic events, that occurred during the four-and-a-half years of war. The choice of a chronological and geographical classification of the events is very effective and allows the author not only to clearly demonstrate how the war progressed from 1914 to 1918, but also to feature the global dimensions of the conflict and underline the importance, and contribution, of each front to the war's outcome. The author is also careful to highlight concepts such as the "Union Sacrée" and "Burgfrieden", both referring to the spirit of national union, and political truce, observed in France and Germany as they entered the war, or the "Spirit of 1914" depicting the feeling of widespread joy that allegedly erupted in Germany at the news of the declaration of war (73–133).

Following a rather classic narrative path, the part referring to the pivotal historical events of 1918 concludes with the defining of a specific endpoint to the conflict, that is the suspension of hostilities in the Balkan, Middle Eastern, Italian and Western fronts in autumn 1918. Nevertheless, the analysis could have encompassed the extension of hostilities and, in general, the persistence of violence in parts of Europe, in the wake of 11 November 1918 Armistice between Germany and the Allies.¹ That would have introduced the reader to one of the most prominent fields of First World War research, namely the study of the postwar period as a complex critical process from war to peace, which, just as much as the conflict itself, has had a durable effect on European societies.² From this standpoint, the ending of war and peacebuilding can be viewed beyond the scope of a peace settlement. Regarding the peace talks held in Paris after the signing of the 1918 armistices, the book provides a clear overview of the protagonists' objectives, key issues and challenges in the negotiations, but also of the outcome of the five peace treaties (Versailles, Saint-Germain, Neuilly, Trianon, Sèvres) concluded between the Allied and Central Powers from 1919 to 1920 (134–41).

In what follows, Lemonidou undertakes the difficult task of summing up around 60 years of fertile historiographical research concerning the social ramifications and cultural implications of total war on modern societies (141–53). Accordingly, she defines nine thematic units of study: 1) the brutal realities of the war, including its unprecedented carnage, the devastating consequences of industrialised warfare on combatants' lives, attacks on civilians, persecutions and exile; 2) the influence of modern technology on the conduct of the war; 3) the experience of war as a threshold between modernity and tradition; 4) the global dimensions of a war involving military forces from around the globe; 5) the concept of brutalisation; 6) the blurring of the lines between the frontline and home front; 7) the rapid circulation of information and images during the war; 8) mnemonic practices, symbols and the cult of the fallen; and 9) the war's political and ideological legacy in the twentieth century, as regards to left-wing and right-wing political radicalisation, pacifism and European reconciliation. This insightful classification could, however, have benefited from the contributions of other important subfields of sociocultural history. For instance, other themes to consider include cultural exchange and the circulation of ideas in a globalised war, shifting identities and mentalities at play, gender roles or women in the war (covering a range of topics such as masculinity and femininity, model roles, combatants' return to civilian life, women on the front, female workforce, or the struggle for voting rights in the aftermath of the war), daily life, including wartime nutrition, the aftermath and reconstruction.

Additionally, it would have been beneficial if the analysis, at this point, was more descriptive and lengthy to include additional key terms and practical examples, as the author already does very fittingly in her detailed account of the war's origins. For instance, a reference to "shellshock", a term which is closely related to the war's history, could have helped the reader – as this general volume is also written for a general audience – better

understand the general notion of war trauma, and its associated posttraumatic stress disorder. Another example is that of the home front and war culture during the war. John Horne's famous concept of cultural mobilisation and demobilisation is essential to the understanding of the war as a total phenomenon, and subsequently of the home front's contribution to the war effort.³ The author demonstrates an excellent knowledge of the war's international historiography, admirably citing in her work books published in five languages. However, one regrets the absence of a number of important monographs relevant to the war's sociocultural history, and which have played a significant part in the renewal of First World War studies, in the bibliography.

The strength of chapter 3 is to frame Greece's involvement during the war in a comparative and transnational context (163–94). Here, it is worth noting the author's accurate reflections on Greek neutrality during the war, and more precisely the depiction of its specificities compared to that of other neutral states. The same holds true for observations on Greece's extended war experience, in regards to war violence as generated by the Bulgarian invasion of eastern Macedonia and the Allied forces' presence on Greek territory, long before Greece's official declaration of war against the Central Powers.

In the final chapter, Lemonidou considers the past and present trends in research on the war over the past one hundred years. Chapter 4 is thus divided into two complementary parts (197–205). The first deals with the evolution of First World War studies up to the present, following a standard periodisation approach articulated around three major writing periods as set out by professors Antoine Prost and Jay Winter. The second discusses new research orientations, innovations and perspectives as explored in recent years, on the occasion of the centenary commemorations for the war. Finally, this last chapter encompasses the book's general conclusion.

Overall, Elli Lemonidou's book is a valuable contribution to the Greek historiography of the Great War, and an indispensable guide for both for academics and students, as well as for a general audience interested in gaining a clear insight in the history of a major event that shaped the twentieth century.

¹ Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

² On this subject, see: Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Christophe Prochasson, eds., *Sortir de la Grande Guerre: Le monde et l'après 1918* (Paris: Tallandier, 2008); Bruno Cabanes and Guillaume Piketty, "Sortir de la guerre: Jalons pour une histoire en chantier," *Histoire@Politique* 3, no. 3 (2007), <https://www.cairn.info/revue-histoire-politique-2007-3-page-1.htm>; Martin Conway, Pieter Lagrou and Henry Rousso, eds., *Europe's Postwar Periods: 1989, 1945, 1918: Writing History Backwards* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

³ John Horne, ed., *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First War World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Horne, ed., “Démobilisations culturelles après la Grande Guerre,” special issue, 14–18, *Aujourd’hui. Today. Heute*, no. 5 (May 2002): 45–53.