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Review of Elli Lemonidou, Ιστορία και μνήμη του Α΄ Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου στην Ευρώπη

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Elli Lemonidou

Ιστορία και μνήμη του Α΄ Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου στην Ευρώπη

[History and memory of the First World War in Europe]

Athens: Papazisis, 2019. 148 pp.

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In recent decades, memory has become a leading historical concept, a key to the understanding of past societies, especially those at war.¹ Nevertheless, this scholarly shift was far from obvious. It lay both in trends within the historical discipline and in social and cultural evolutions. For example, in Alfred Enser's classic *A Subject Bibliography of the First World War* (1979), the index does not include memory and remembrance among its listed subjects.² Hence, Paul Fussell's classic *The Great War and Modern Memory*³ appears under the heading "Britain". There is a striking contrast between Enser's subject classification and the latest bibliographical series on the First World War, which features a growing number of titles focused on the remembrance of the Great War.⁴ The "memory boom" in First World War studies has increasingly attracted the attention of historians in recent years, leading to numerous important articles and monographs dealing with both the growing historiographical interest in the memory of the war and the response of public opinion to the unprecedented carnage and destruction it entailed.⁵

Elli Lemonidou's *History and Memory of the First World War in Europe* aims to introduce the Greek reader to the rich historiographical production addressing the national narratives of the First World War and the different legacies and perceptions of it that have existed through time and space in Europe (13). From this perspective, Lemonidou offers two complementary viewpoints, that of the cultural turn in First World War historiography and that of public remembrance. The author notably uses a rich array of examples in her approach, including contrasting historical narratives and remembrance traditions, from both countries with a strong commemorative and historiographical tradition of the Great War and countries where the First World War has constantly had a minor role in official history and contemporary culture.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first four examine the gradual entanglement of history and memory in France, Britain, Germany, and Italy since 1918. The Austrian case is also briefly presented as a counterexample to highlight the challenges of transmitting the memory of the war in a country that played a prominent role in the outbreak

of the war but was totally reshaped after the defeat in 1918 (65, 87). The chosen examples effectively illustrate the differences and similarities in collective memory and academic discourse on the Great War in Western Europe. While Italy represents an interesting case study due to its particular cultural and commemorative context and, like Austria, to the minor significance given to the war in its national consciousness (14), Belgium provides an intriguing example for the revival of the memory of the war, as well as the controversial legacy of occupation, migration and collaboration, in a state deeply shaped by recurring communal communitarian conflicts since the late nineteenth century. This section of the book represents an updated version of a book chapter by the author published in a collective volume that she co-edited.⁶

Lemonidou proposes to examine the interest in the memory of the First World War from a historical perspective, considering both the changing attitudes within the historiographical field and the shifts in public opinion regarding the historical reality of the war. Regarding the social and psychological impact of the conflict, she focuses on collective representations and images of the war as they have been shaped and conveyed, initially, in interwar commemorations and eyewitness testimonies, war literature, cinema and, later on, in the second half of the twentieth century, in popular television documentaries.

Concerning the thematic structure, each of the first four chapters corresponds to a major period in historical writing and public remembrance. The first chapter covers the interwar years, which were marked by, on the one hand, a boom in war literature and personal narratives, such as novels and diaries, written by First World War veterans aiming to document the brutality of the conflict and, on the other, by national narratives shaped by officials and political leaders to control, or even manipulate, historical writing. During that period, prominence was given to official narratives and documents to the detriment of the testimonies of soldiers from the frontline. Apart from Austria, this contradictory tendency was also accompanied by an intense commemorative activity to honour the fallen. As for historical writing, historians had the mission to conduct research on the military operations and the war's origins; memoirs, testimonies and personal narratives were not, in general terms, of historical interest. Chapter 2 deals with what the author calls the "decades of silence" from 1939 to 1960, while the following chapter analyses the social and historiographical factors that contributed, from 1960 to 1990, to shifting the focus of research from the existing dominant politico-military reading of history towards the social and ideological aspects of the war. Finally, chapter 4 explores the commemorative fever in modern Western societies and the growing importance they give to past catastrophes. It also discusses the dominance of cultural and psychological approaches to the war in the 1990s and scholarly debates on European experiences of the conflict. The chapter also focuses on several scholars whose research on the commemoration of the Great War in Britain and France has influenced subsequent generations of historians.

While the analysis undoubtedly offers the reader a comprehensive overview of the most significant works and authors, along with the evident historiographical trends in the writing of First World War history, it could have explored the question of public remembrance in greater depth. For instance, the topic of interwar commemorations is only briefly touched on in chapter 1 (24–25). To truly understand the global impact of the war on contemporary societies, it is essential to consider the vast number of public rituals and commemorative events that took place during that period, along with the various ways in which people at the time interpreted them. In addition to the war memorials and symbolic tombs dedicated to the unknown soldier, this also includes the remembrance poppy in the UK and the cornflower in France, the very popular 11 November Armistice celebrations in the UK, France and Belgium, or the 4 November national ceremonies in Italy, tributes to the war dead on All-Saints Day and at the anniversaries of decisive battles, as well as veterans' and war widows' banquets and mass battlefield pilgrimages. It is also important to note that controversies over the war's legacy did not only affect Germany's postwar politics and culture but also other countries that took part in the war, including the winners (25). All the same, although historical interest in the Great War lost ground from 1939 to 1960, this was not always the case for commemorations during this period. In fact, the memory of the Great War remained vivid during the Second World War, before being overshadowed by the subsequent conflict after 1945. In France, for instance, the demonstrations on 11 November in 1940 and 1943 against the German occupation attest to the resistance's intention to reactivate the collective memory of the First World War and symbolically relate its actions with the victory of 1918. This is also the case of the Vichy regime and its close supporters, the French Legion of Veterans (*Légion française des combattants*), created by the regime to unite Great War servicemen associations, and which sought to reappropriate the symbols and collective experience of the Great War in an effort to gain historical and moral legitimacy.

As regards the interplay between war experience, war narratives and academic writing about the Great War discussed in the first three chapters, a few observations can be made about the autobiographical material related to the conflict. Indeed, the first generation of historians, like the eminent French historian Pierre Renouvin, did not, in general terms, use their personal war experience to understand and explain the Great War. As already mentioned, it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that academic research considered eyewitness accounts as a legitimate source to depict the war, convey its memory and finally write its history. The initial shift was made in 1929 with the publication of Jean Norton Cru's critical essay on ex-soldiers' testimonies and war novels. A professor of French literature and veteran of the Great War himself, Cru endeavoured, in this book, to compare a great amount of war narratives published between 1915 and 1928 and therefore to assess the extent to which the descriptions of the collective experience were true or fictional.⁷ Cru was in fact the opposite of Renouvin. While both were preoccupied by questions of veracity, Cru used, for his part, his personal experience in the trenches as

evidence. His book is actually the first of a long series of secondary works linking war memory and war literature. In many ways, it paved the way for younger scholars, like Fussell, a veteran of the Second World War, to embrace their subjective experience of the war as intellectual tool to understand what really happened on the military front between 1914 and 1918.⁸

Chapter 5 introduces the question of vanished memory in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The author outlines how this key event was downplayed throughout the twentieth century in Russia, in countries that were part of the Habsburg Empire before 1918 and in the Balkans. The analysis offers some conclusions on the recent renewed interest in First World War history concerning most of the above-mentioned examples. The book's final chapter deals with the impact of the Great War's centenary on historical research and on commemorations. It represents a solid analysis of the most recent fields of historical inquiry and historiographical perspectives. Furthermore, Lemonidou demonstrates how the Great War continues to resonate in collective memories while also highlighting the interaction between modern historical and official public discourse within the European Union, which has rethought the First World War as an "European civil war" (114), with painful lessons to be learned and remembered.

This well-researched and insightful book addresses key issues in First World War studies and effectively demonstrates the complex and varied relationships that European societies, as a whole, have maintained over time with their shared historical past.

¹ Alon Confino, "History and Memory," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 5, *Writing since 1945*, ed. Axel Scheinder and Daniel Woolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36–51.

² Alfred Enser, *A Subject Bibliography of the First World War: Books in English, 1914–1978* (London: A. Deutsch, 1979).

³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

⁴ See, for instance, Barry Wintour, "Part 4 Remembering the War," in *Britain and the Great War, 1914–1918: A Subject Bibliography of Some Selected Aspects* (Englefield Green: Greenengle Publishing, 2014), 341–429.

⁵ Jay Winter, "The Memory Boom in Contemporary Historical Studies," *Raritan* 21, no. 1 (2001): 52–66; Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the 20th Century* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁶ Elli Lemonidou, "Ιστορία και μνήμη του Μεγάλου Πολέμου," in *Ιστορικά τραύματα και ευρωπαϊκή ιδέα: Από τη φρίκη των πολέμων και των ολοκληρωτισμών στο όραμα της ενοποίησης*, ed. Giorgos Kokkinos, Elli Lemonidou, Panagiotis Kimourtzis, and Sotiris Dalis (Athens: Papazisis, 2016), 17–104.

⁷ Jean Norton Cru, *Témoins: Essai d'analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928* (Paris: Les Étincelles, 1929).

⁸ Leonard V. Smith, "Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*: Twenty-Five Years Later," *History and Theory* 40, no. 2 (2001): 241–60.