

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 16 (2019)

The  istorical Review
La Revue  istorique



VOLUME XVI (2019)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

Review of: Elli Lemonidou (ed.), CENT ANS APRÈS:
LA MÉMOIRE DE LA PREMIÈRE GUERRE
MONDIALE. ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER: THE
MEMORY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR, Athens:
École française d'Athènes, 2018, 234 pages.

Sotiris Rizas

doi: [10.12681/hr.22829](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.22829)

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To cite this article:

Rizas, S. (2020). Review of: Elli Lemonidou (ed.), CENT ANS APRÈS: LA MÉMOIRE DE LA PREMIÈRE GUERRE MONDIALE. ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER: THE MEMORY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR, Athens: École française d'Athènes, 2018, 234 pages. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 16, 287–290.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.22829>

Elli Lemonidou (ed.),
CENT ANS APRÈS: LA MÉMOIRE DE LA PREMIÈRE GUERRE MONDIALE.
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The centenary of World War I sparked a debate all over Europe that was concerned less about the historical facts and their interpretation and more about memory. This volume, published by the French School at Athens and edited by Elli Lemonidou, makes a remarkable contribution to this debate. This collection of well-written and -argued papers, arising from a conference held in Athens in 2014, deals mainly with the memory of the war in individual nation-states. Two of them, though, trace the broader issues of an emerging European and transnational dimension in the memory of the Great War.

Referring to the French context, Frédéric Guelton points out that society – the communes and families – tends to emphasise its own commemorations in contrast to the official practices of the state. Individualism has contributed to this situation as non-state actors and citizens assert themselves and pursue this approach “from below”. Still, the state retains vast resources to project its agenda and related message. In contrast to the official discourse of the 1980s that reduced the memory of the war to a Franco-German context, the commemoration of the centenary

tended to be couched in relation to the anxieties generated by globalisation and the economic, societal and cultural transformation it entails. In these circumstances, the military aspects of commemoration have been somewhat neglected.

With regard to the commemoration of the Great War in Britain, William Philpott shows that the interjection of World War II attached a sense of “futility” to the memory of World War I. The experience of warfare (“what the war was like”) was deemed a primary question by the general public, as opposed to the agenda of military historians who tended to focus on “what the war was about”. World War II is nonetheless still valued much higher than the Great War, with A.J.P. Taylor’s moral judgment of the former as a “good war” against fascism still prevalent.

Christoph Cornelissen’s chapter deals with an ideological aspect of World War I, the involvement of German historians in the justification of the violation of Belgian neutrality as the defence of a particular form of German freedom which was distinct from the parliamentary institutions of Britain and France, which were represented as synonymous with

“plutocracy”. Cornelissen argues that this stance owed much to the intimate relation of the German historical community with the state in terms of occupation and status and the self-perception of historians as state functionaries who felt compelled to assist the German war effort.

Nils Löffelbein deals with the impact on Weimar Germany of the disabled and bereaved. As they constituted one-tenth the population, their experience of World War I and the value they were accorded by the state and citizenry would be crucial for the Weimar Republic. He argues that despite the generous financial treatment by the state, under the auspices of the Social Democrats, who conceived their policies in the broader perspective of social welfare, the recipients of state provisions saw the social welfare bureaucracy as impersonal and anonymous. Moreover, the inability of German society to deal with defeat led to the “repression” of the problem of the disabled, which left them feeling marginalised and completely disregarded for their services to their country. In this context, not only did the Social Democrats fail to benefit from the generous financial approach they took on the issue, they were outmanoeuvred by the politics of symbolic valuation of the invalids and the bereaved as projected by the National Socialists.

Nicola Labanca’s article focus on the evolution of Italian military historiography from 2000 to the centenary of World War I. A key issue for Italian historiography was whether the mass call to arms instilled a great degree of national identification in the conscripts. The issue remains open, although it is rather generally accepted that the Italian general staff

was able to inculcate a “massive dose of nationalisation” in the recruits. What has also emerged from this latest generation of Italian historiography is the partial revision of the thesis of Italy’s failure to organise an army that was up to the task of building an empire, which was the ultimate aim of liberal Italy. Italian historians tend to dismiss this thesis, mainly propounded by British historians, as a rather exaggerated representation of the failures of Italian statecraft which, though, can be interpreted within a broader European framework. Furthermore, the Italian military effort was approached from below in the context of cultural history. Court-martial proceedings, soldiers’ correspondence from the front and diaries attracted the attention of historians, who had to resolve a puzzle that permeates sources of this kind: does the content of letters and diaries genuinely reflect the thoughts of the conscripted or does it highlight the impact of state propaganda? It is also interesting, as Labanca points out, that whereas in the 1970s and 1980s the interest of the historians was directed to the soldiers, the combatants in the field, there has been a discernible shift to biographies of generals and, in broader terms, “great men”.

Besides the great powers, there were small states that participated in the war. Although dwarfed by the immense resources of the great powers, they tended to promote their national agendas and their relation to the war was mediated by their national interests and aspirations. That is reflected in their commemoration of it.

In Bulgaria, as Gueorgui Peev argues, the memory of the war was directly

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linked to political developments in the country. The defeat was tantamount to a “national disaster”, as it was officially termed in legislation passed in 1919. Although criticism of the conduct of war by the king, his governments and the general staff was pervasive, the rationale of entering the conflict was vindicated as it was represented as the corollary of the process of national unification initiated in 1878. The main issues were the means and the alliances. After the advance of the Red Army in Bulgaria in 1944 and the imposition of a people’s republic in 1946, the Great War was overshadowed by World War II. The historical re-evaluation in the early 1980s, initiated by a process of the kind undertaken in the Soviet Union, led to the conclusion that the participation of the country in World War I was the policy of the crown and bourgeois class. Prior to this reassessment, though, already in the early 1960s and in the mid-1970s some important works tended to justify Bulgaria’s participation in the war as a means of redressing the “injustices” of the Treaty of Bucharest that sealed the end of the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and perceived the alliance with Germany as the only way to realise the country’s national aspirations.

The impact of Marxism-Leninism in the commemoration of World War I is also evident in Romania, as discussed by Florin Turcanu. The perception of the country’s participation in World War I as a condition for the fulfilment of national unification was dismissed after the establishment of the people’s republic in 1947. However, the gradual shift of the Communist Party’s policy to national

communism permitted a blending of the Marxist-Leninist conception of history with older, nationalist-inspired schemes.

The issue of alliances was central to the policies of small states but participation in World War I was not necessarily deemed primary in terms of national commemoration. This is amplified in the case of Greece. As Lemonidou states in her contribution, Greece’s participation in World War I was a fact both preceded and followed by events that were deemed much more important from the perspective of the Greek nation-state. The Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and the Greek-Turkish War of 1919–1922 are cases in point. Furthermore, Greece’s participation in the battlefields was rather limited, taking into account the scale of warfare in the Great War. Therefore, in general, the country was not directly involved in the war effort. On top of that, the coming of World War II and the ensuing cleavage in the 1940s has overshadowed Greece’s involvement in the Great War.

Georges-Henri Soutou argues that a European dimension has emerged in the commemoration of the war. He points out that, next to the national perceptions and memories of World War I, there is a European vantage point which does not supplant the existing national frames of reference. This European vantage point emerges from a notion of World War I as a European “catastrophe”, that is, the loss of life and the decline of the importance of Europe in world affairs. Additionally, the notions of World War I as the first part of a “thirty years’ war”, that is, as a prelude to World War II, and of the “brutalisation of the war” are elements that contributed

to the emergence of a European approach to World War I. On top of that, a gradual realisation ensued that the causes of war should be explored in a system of international relations, marked by a complex set of diplomatic practices and military arrangements determined by the logic of escalating armament. These made an alternative conception of decision-making difficult or impossible. Finally, the Treaty of Versailles is approached more critically than before as a rather legalistic settlement, heavily influenced by the preoccupations of the victors. On top of that, it was probably conceived unrealistically as a result of the eventual withdrawal of the United States from the postwar international system.

Jay Winter points out that there is now a transnational generation of historians that tends to approach World War I in trans-European and trans-Atlantic terms. Issues and fields like mutinies, finance, technology, logistics, command and the overall war economy

are approached in transnational terms. The wartime revolutions that erupted in Russia and other revolutionary movements that followed the end of the war, the history of women during the war and the movements of populations during it showcase the transnational aspects that transcend the study of World War I in the traditional terms of an affair between states, which characterises the history of international relations. This transnational approach is facilitated by the online *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, presented by Oliver Janz in the concluding paper of the volume.

Overall, the volume presents clearly the coexistence of European, transnational and national commemorations of the centenary of the Great War, a much – but not hotly – debated issue in Europe.

Sotiris Rizas

Academy of Athens