

Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (eds.), *Capital Cities at War: London, Paris, Berlin, 1914-1919*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xvii + 622 pp. Tables, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 US (cl). ISBN 0 521 57171 5.

Review by Alan Sharp, Magee College, University of Ulster, for H- France, May 1998.

There can be no doubting the ambition or the achievement of this volume, the first of two, on the comparative experiences of Paris, London and Berlin before, during and after the First World War. Whether the achievement fulfils the aims of the original ambition is perhaps questionable, but the wealth of information and the quality of the comparative approach offer tangible compensations.

What Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert have attempted to do in assembling this remarkable collection of scholarly work is to suggest better methodologies for comparing urban experiences but also, and more ambitiously, for comparing the national war efforts of France, the United Kingdom and Germany. "Our assumption is that the only way to write the history of nations without nationalist blinkers is to do so through the study of critical groups within those nations" (p. 549); "... we have tried to show that an effective way of writing the history of nations in wartime is by isolating a smaller, yet significant, unit of analysis. That unit is the metropolitan centre... the history of this subset of the nation can reveal what was common to similar units in other countries as well as what was specifically national about wartime experience" (pp. 552-3). It is really only in the concluding chapter of the volume that this objective is clearly stated, and one criticism which might be made of the introductory chapter by Winter is that it is not sufficiently clear or direct as to the book's objectives or hypotheses. Winter claims that the volume tells the story of what happened to people of London, Paris and Berlin from outbreak of war in 1914 to peace in 1919, using the city as the meeting point between the imagined community of the nation and the experienced community of the neighbourhood (pp. 3-5). The overall context is that "The history of the Great War has been told time and again within a national framework. Almost all students of the period have been imprisoned, to a greater or lesser degree, within this framework of analysis" (p. 3). What is not made clear at this point is why the authors believe that their approach is superior. Perhaps the "critical groups" idea should have been made clear earlier in the text and justified in greater detail.

Does the approach work? In terms of providing a detailed and well-researched comparison of the experiences of the three capital cities, the work is a stunning success. The scholars come from the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany and have contributed a series of erudite and informative chapters based on

their own research and a synthesis of the work of others. Many of the chapters are attributed to a particular researcher but acknowledgement is made of the efforts of the wider research team. Their interdisciplinary approach does indeed offer an original study of the economic, political, moral and physical experiences of the three cities at war. There are studies of the three cities on the eve of war (Robert); on the impact of military casualties on each of them (Adrian Gregory); on the image of the profiteer (Robert); on the transition to war (Jon Lawrence); on the labour market and industrial mobilization 1915-1917 (Thierry Bonzon); and the transition to peace 1918-1919 (Joshua Cole). Lawrence investigates the material pressures on the middle classes; Jonathan Manning considers wages and purchasing power and Bonzon looks at transfer payments and social policy and (together with Belinda Davis) at the problem of feeding the cities. Armin Triebel's study of the attempts to supply the capitals with coal is particularly revealing about the resources available to both sides and the differences in their bureaucratic approaches and efficiency. Susan Magri considers the issue of housing whilst Catherine Rollet and Winter have studied the impact of the war on public health both in terms of improvements and setbacks and the overall chances of surviving the war enjoyed by civilians in each city. Robert and Winter contribute a concluding chapter looking towards a social history of capital cities at war. The proposed second volume will deal with the wartime perceptions of families, social groups and social movements.

In order to make their comparisons the scholars concerned have had to overcome a number of difficult methodological problems. Defining precisely what was meant by London, Paris and Berlin is not easy because of the overlapping possibilities of the inner core and the widening suburbs and the competing jurisdictions involved. Rarely were the types of records or the statistics maintained within each city directly comparable; and there are a number of interesting discussions as the authors explain and justify their approach, for example, Winter (pp. 8-13), Robert (p. 25), Gregory (pp. 57-85), Lawrence (pp. 136-9), Manning (pp. 255-60). There will no doubt be those who will dispute their methods but there is certainly evidence here of much ingenuity and originality in seeking to create valid comparisons. Sometimes the figures do not add up--Robert tells us (p. 45) that "Fully 76 per cent of [London] households lived in individual houses, mostly rented. In contrast 20 per cent lived in apartments and 7 per cent in rooms adjacent to shops or offices"--but the overall wealth of statistical material and the interesting observations and conclusions, more than compensate.

The problems come with the more ambitious aim of using cities to isolate what was common to their experience and thus to be able to define more accurately what was specifically national about the wartime experiences of the United Kingdom, France and Germany. In the first place, as Robert and Winter acknowledge: "In wartime,

these cities were never for one moment disengaged from the rest of the life of the nation at war" (p. 549), and municipal authorities had neither the resources nor the power to determine their fate. "Virtually all of the key decisions were taken elsewhere" (p. 548). Thus it is almost impossible to separate the experiences of the three cities from the states to which they belonged. Although there might be interesting and important statistical variations in, for example, the age and composition and casualty rates of soldiers coming from the capitals, compared to the national averages, the general trend of the book is to confirm the national pictures which we already possess. There can be little doubt that if war was "a test of the entire state's legitimacy (Erich Kaufmann's 1911 claim, cited by Triebel, p. 342), then the German government's failure to convince the citizens of Berlin that it was capable of governing fairly in the interests of all was not an experience unique to that city. It was the government's failure, literally, to deliver the goods throughout Germany which eventually robbed the state of its moral right to govern and contributed to the German defeat. What Triebel's study of coal distribution in the three capitals confirms is that the British and French had more material resources to exploit, especially after 1916, and that they governed more effectively than the Germans.

The other difficulty with this approach is that, although each was the capital of its state, these were three very different cities in terms not only of their demography, geography and economies, but also of their political role and function. It is thus not clear whether, despite their obvious importance as governmental nerve-centres, these were, in fact, the best examples to choose. At different ends of the spectrum came London with a population of 7 million, the centre of a world-wide empire and the world's financial capital, and Berlin with 4 million, still, in 1914, a provincial city at the heart of one of the most powerful nations in the world (p. 28). Might results more helpful to the broader purpose be obtained by a comparison of the experiences of three towns with greater original similarities in population, location and economy?

There is a continuing debate about the effects of war on social change and it is rather strange that not one of Arthur Marwick's many books on this topic is cited in the bibliography. The recent balance of the argument between those who argue that war, rather than longer term structural transformation, is the major influence on social change in the twentieth century has tilted in favour of the latter. Here the evidence, though by no means conclusive, does offer some comfort to those arguing for the role of war as an agent of social and economic change. Generally London proved the most stable and showed the most continuity from pre-war to post-war, whilst Berlin experienced the most change. However, Thierry Bonzon argues that, in terms of social policy, all three capitals saw profound alterations. "In Berlin, a pre-war system in some respects in advance of that in Paris and London turned from a system of rights to a system of privileges, especially for those able to work the black market. In the

Allied capitals, privileges became rights, with lasting consequences for the history of social policy in this century" (p. 302).

What is striking, in the experience of all three capitals, is the perceived need for fairness although as Winter points out "The cry 'fair shares for all' meant fair shares for all those entitled to a share" (p. 15). Thus those closest to the war were felt to be the most worthy. "The standing of those far from the front, those not provisioning the armies, could not compete with the entitlement of those in uniform, of their families, and of essential war workers" (p. 530). A strong moral sense lay at the heart of the war effort and the British and French governments proved more capable of satisfying their peoples' demands for equality of sacrifice than their German counterpart.

This is a weighty tome in every sense and it will certainly stimulate argument and excite some controversy about both its methods and its conclusions. It makes a very valuable contribution to existing debates, but also suggests new approaches and areas for study. We may await its companion volume with interest.

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