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Jay Winter, ed., *The Legacy of the Great War: Ninety Years On*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009. vii + 217 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8262-1872-8.

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The military conflict that everyone used to call “The Great War”—in the era before the events of 1939-1945 relegated that earlier lethal episode of modern history to the less exalted status of “The First World War”—is fading from contemporary consciousness as the last few survivors pass away. But in less than four years we will mark the centennial of the beginning of that transformational series of events that so profoundly affected the remaining decades of the twentieth century and even the first decade of our own: Communism, Fascism, the Wilsonian versions of liberal democracy and national self-determination and other developments too numerous to mention here were direct outgrowths of the four years of slaughter and suffering that began in the summer of 1914.

No one has written about this war and all of its aspects with more sensitivity and deep learning than Jay Winter. Among his many publications on the subject, those that address the role of memory in shaping our understanding of the war have had perhaps the greatest resonance.<sup>[1]</sup> It is this topic of memory that dominates the exchanges among the ten eminent historians who were invited to participate in a series of public forums about the legacy of the Great War and the Peace Conference that followed it that were held at the National World War I Museum at Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, the Kansas City Public Library, and the Harry S Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri. Winter served as chair for most of the sessions, joined the final one as a participant, and contributed an editor’s preface and introduction to the book under review that he edited.

To set the stage for what becomes in this work the overarching theme of memory, Winter divides the subsequent writing on the Great War into four chronological periods: What he terms “the Great War generation,” composed of men who either conducted or fought in the war and therefore wrote memoirs from first-hand experience, predictably emphasized the role of statesmen and generals and engaged in shameless self-justification. The second generation of historians writing in the late 1950s and 1960s, with greater access to visual evidence from film and the new medium of television, broke through the confines of academic history to bring the narrative of the war to the general public. This period saw the emergence of nostalgia for the world that was lost in 1914 and a greater sensitivity to the experiences of ordinary people—on both the battle front and on the home front—who had been largely ignored by the earlier history accounts written “from above.” The third “Vietnam generation,” of the 1970s and 1980s was marked by iconoclastic denunciations by American historians of the ignorant, heartless political and military leaders who had callously condemned millions of young men in the trenches of the Great War to a senseless death or a lifetime of physical or mental injury. On the other side of the Atlantic the devaluation of national identity associated with the movement toward European Union, reinforced by the rejection of military values as the old Continent enjoyed decades of peace after 1945, resulted in a critical interpretation of the war’s meaning. The fourth generation of scholars writing since the 1990s, attentive to the implications of globalization and transnational themes, have rejected the old Eurocentric bias of past historical writing to situate the Great War in global perspective. An increased

focus on the roots of anti-imperialism and the participation of soldiers and workers from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East confirmed that this was indeed not only a “Great” War but a “World” War as well.

In the first chapter Harvard’s Niall Ferguson and Yale’s Paul Kennedy square off on the highly contested topic of origins. Ferguson dwells on the war’s tragic destruction of the “first age of globalization.” The integrated world economy with its transnational connections of trade, finance, investment, transportation, and communication was irreparably torn asunder by the requirements of military, naval, and economic warfare. He reiterates his controversial claim that the Liberal government in London, with its pitifully small army and ideologically inspired opposition to conscription, made a colossal blunder in deciding to intervene in the defense of France in the summer of 1914. Indulging in his penchant for counterfactual analysis [2] and for drawing on historical developments for lessons for the present [3] Ferguson argues that rationality dictated British neutrality at the beginning of the Great War: “The point is, you have to be consistent, whether Britain in 1914 or the United States in 2003, in the way you allocate resources to foreign policy. There’s no point embarking on a military adventure without enough trained manpower (p. 49-50)”. Kennedy dusts off Norman Angell’s Pollyannaish prewar claim that the commercial and financial links among the Great Powers would render war unthinkable. Sharing Ferguson’s inclination for seeking past precedents for present policy, he notes that the “gap between the bankers and investors on the one side and the planners on the other side [before the Great War] is happening right now in this country.” When today’s economic leaders confidently declare a war between the United States and China impossible because of the two powers’ mutually beneficial economic ties, Kennedy reminds them that Britain and Germany were each other’s most important trading partners in 1914 (p. 56).

Kennedy then holds his fellow Ivy League interlocutor’s feet to the fire by drawing out the probable results of Britain’s abstention, gently suggesting that “a German dominated Europe [in 1914] would not be as benign as Helmut Kohl’s or Angela Merkel’s European Union” (p. 51). Ferguson counters with the riposte that British leaders grossly exaggerated the German military and naval threat as well as the iniquitous political consequences of a German victory. “[W]hat was really motivating the Germans was insecurity vis-à-vis Russia,” he insists. “There was no Napoleonic design in their minds” (p.54). Ferguson then ups the ante by asserting that Britain repeated the same mistake on the eve of and in the early months of the Second World War, bringing him perilously close to the provocatively revisionist argument of John Charmley and more recently, Pat Buchanan, that Churchill made a colossal and costly mistake in pressing for and, when in office, maintaining Britain’s opposition to Germany’s second bid for continental dominance.[4]

In the second chapter the military historians Holger Afflerbach of the University of Leeds and Garry Sheffield of the University of Birmingham address the strategic and tactical aspects of the war. They agree that the political leaders abdicated their responsibilities when the military chiefs committed blunder after blunder on the battlefield. Afflerbach emphasizes that this failure of civilian control stemmed from the politicians’ utter dependence on an officer corps which alone could bring victory, since they were unwilling to contemplate the only alternative: a negotiated peace that would deprive each belligerent of the war aims its leadership could not relinquish. He reserves his sharpest criticism for behavior of the government in Berlin in 1917, whose amateurism (the Zimmermann telegram) and failure to offer the necessary concessions (such as the evacuation of Belgium) prevented an early negotiated peace. Afflerbach reminds us of the paradoxical fact that as the Allied counteroffensive drove the German army out of Northern France in the fall of 1918, the American commander, General John J. Pershing, advocated a march on Berlin to bring home to the German people the reality of military defeat, while the French generals opposed a prolongation of the war once the Germans sued for peace as a needless sacrifice of more lives. Sheffield laments the fact that the rejection of Pershing’s advice left the armistice of November 1918 an incomplete victory for the allied forces that had the German army on the run. But he correctly observes that an invasion of Germany and the prolongation of the war into 1919 would have been dominated by American forces and would have enabled Wilson to dictate the

terms of the peace settlement, something Washington's European associates desperately wanted to prevent.

Descending from the lofty heights of strategy and tactics, John Horne of Trinity College, Dublin and Len Smith of Oberlin College ponder the existential question: what kept the millions of men in uniform for four years of suicidal offensives, the greatest concentration of artillery and machine gun fire in history, unprecedented casualties, and the psychological strain of combat in a war with no end in sight. In addressing the historiographical conundrum of "coercion vs. consent," they both endorse the latter explanation for this astonishing record of human endurance. Although the state's power to compel its male citizens to put their lives on the line always remained in the background, the soldiers internalized the disciplinary codes of patriotic duty that made such compulsion unnecessary. Smith, whose first book followed the travails of a single French infantry division throughout the war [5], carves out a special exception for the stoical service of the front-line troops in the French army in the early years of the war: France had been invaded and its northeastern region occupied by the enemy. For the French *poilu* the war was not a matter of choice but one of national survival. As Horne observes, even when one too many of the orders to go over the top to certain death prompted mutinies in the spring of 1917, the French mutineers did not abandon their defensive position in the trenches. They simply "refused to sacrifice themselves on the altar of the high command's inability to come up with a workable offensive plan" (p. 108). As Smith reminds us, the absence of conscription in Britain before 1916 required an energetic campaign of patriotic persuasion. But even the anti-war broadsides by poet-soldiers such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon did not prevent them and their comrades in the trenches of Flanders and France from fulfilling their duty as they saw it to the end. While most of the discussion in this chapter centers on the experience of soldiers on the Western Front, the commentators offer a few observations about the desperate situation of the Russian soldier. In one of his periodic interventions, Winter's characterization of the Russian Revolution as "the outcome of the greatest anti-war movement in history" prompts him to reject the argument of consent and to see the "soldiers as victims" of incompetent, heartless military and political leadership" (pp. 115-116).

If the Great War has inspired a wide range of scholarly interpretations, an even more spirited debate has surrounded the peace settlement at the end of that war, a topic that is taken up by John Milton Cooper of the University of Wisconsin at Madison and Margaret MacMillan of St. Antony's College, Oxford in chapter four. Winter lays the groundwork for the discussion by characterizing the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 as "one of the foundational moments of international history" (p. 123). Cooper, a largely sympathetic biographer of Woodrow Wilson, concedes that the florid wartime rhetoric of the American president about his mission to establish a new world order of peace and security after the guns fell silent raised hopes that could never be satisfied. But in the end he absolves Wilson of primary responsibility for the failure of his grand design--"breaking the heart of the world," as Cooper put it in his study of the failed treaty fight [6]--asserting that "Wilson seems to me to have been the only one [at the peace conference] absolutely dedicated to preventing the return of war and all of its ravages to the world" (p. 141). In her interventions MacMillan reiterates the main arguments of her influential study of the peace conference [7]: The Big Four have been unjustly vilified for a settlement that was far from perfect but much more workable than the caricature of a "Carthaginian peace" popularized by Keynes, Harold Nicolson, and other disillusioned participants in the deliberations. "Yes, Germany did lose territory," she notes, "but virtually all the territory it lost was not occupied by Germans but by other peoples" (p. 130). The allied leaders never expected Germany to pay the exorbitant reparation bill in the Versailles Treaty (which had been inserted as a sop to their own citizens who were clamoring for heavy indemnities and prepared to cashier leaders who failed to obtain them). After a succession of reductions in Germany's reparation obligation during the 1920s the defeated power ended up paying very little in reparations and, according to one estimate, less than France had paid Germany after the Franco-Prussian War. Both MacMillan and Cooper agree that two of the major causes of the failure of the peace settlement of 1919 were the German public's refusal to recognize its army had lost the war and the allied governments' loss of will to enforce it.

In the final chapter, titled “The Great War: Midwife to Modern Memory?” Winter partners with Robert Wohl of the University of California at Los Angeles to flesh out the general theme that had prompted this series of scholarly exchanges: How do we remember the events of a century-old conflict in the absence of anyone with first-hand knowledge of it? It is obvious that the Great War had much less of an impact on American than on European society, and therefore left a much lighter trace on Americans’ memory of the war: the 126,000 deaths of doughboys during their less than six months of combat pale beside the 1.7 million Russians and Germans and 1.4 million French who perished in more than four years of total war. The “home fronts” of the European belligerents—victors as well as vanquished—suffered painful, long-lasting social and economic effects from the war that America, with its booming economy and geographical isolation from the carnage and physical destruction, never experienced. The Second World War also served temporarily to dim the memory of its predecessor. And yet, as Winter astutely observes, the Vietnam War, a “war without sense, without logic, with huge casualties...drew attention of scholars away from the Good War” towards the earlier conflict (p. 161). Building on the argument in Paul Fussell’s classic study of the transformational nature of the Great War [8], Winter bluntly concludes that “The Vietnam War was the American First World War, a war which turned innocence into experience, naïveté into irony, noble language into the visceral expressions of disillusioned soldiers” (p. 162). Wohl fully endorses this conceptual connection between the Vietnam War and the Great War, placing particular emphasis on the theme of irony that pervades Fussell’s work. The ironic sensibility is not a stance that fits comfortably with the practical requirements of combat: acceptance of hierarchical authority in the chain of command, intense concentration on the immediate mission at the expense of personal reflection about the larger meaning of the war, and the tendency to demonize the enemy as part of a Manichean vision of the event. But, as Wohl and Winter both appreciate, the sense of irony has been at the center of cultural representations of war, from *All Quiet on the Western Front* to the television program *M\*A\*S\*H*.

One puts down this slim volume with a sense of having sat in on a salon of serious scholars engaged in a thoughtful and wide-ranging conversation about a historical subject that all have addressed in their writing. The occasional differences of interpretation that emerge are overshadowed by the broad consensus that characterizes these discussions. This is particularly true of the penultimate chapter in which MacMillan and Cooper deliver the *coup de grâce* to the discredited notion that the Versailles settlement was responsible for all the ills that would afflict Europe and the world in the following quarter-century.

## NOTES

[1] Jay M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jay M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between History and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2006).

[2] Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[3] Niall Ferguson, *The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

[4] John Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995); Patrick J. Buchanan, *Churchill, Hitler, and “The Unnecessary War:” How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009).

[5] Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[6] John Milton Cooper, *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[7] Margaret MacMillan, *Paris, 1919: Sixth Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003).

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

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