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Philippe Poirrier, ed. *La Grande Guerre: une histoire culturelle*. Dijon: Éditions universitaires de Dijon, 2015. 300 pp. Illustrations and bibliography. 20.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-3644-1139-5.

Review by Martha Hanna, University of Colorado Boulder.

When Antoine Prost addressed the annual meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies in April 2014, he reminded us of the rich array of events France had planned in order to mark the centenary of the Great War. From the individual acts of families donating precious mementoes for public keeping to the inauguration on November 11, 2014 of the *Anneau de la Mémoire* at Notre Dame de Lorette, on which is inscribed in alphabetical order the names of all soldiers, regardless of nationality, killed in the Artois, France resolved to remember an event that had touched every family and transformed the world. And thus it is not surprising that, among the thousands of commemorative events planned for 2014 and beyond, there would be many academic conferences and many new works of scholarly inquiry and reflection. From one such conference, sponsored by the Université de Bourgogne, emerged *La Grande Guerre: une histoire culturelle*, a wide-ranging collection of essays intended to bring to the French reading public's attention new insights into the cultural history of the war. If one goal of this book is thus to bridge the gap between scholarly inquiry and public knowledge, another is to call for a truce in the historiographical battle that has divided French scholars of the Great War for the past two or more decades.

In his essay, "Un tournant historiographique: l'histoire culturelle de la Guerre," Hervé Mazurel deftly explains the points of contestation separating these two camps. But he also emphasizes that their methodological (and political) differences notwithstanding, the two camps--on the one hand, the scholars affiliated with the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne and, on the other, the affiliates of CRID (Collectif de Recherche International et de Débat sur la Guerre de 1914-1918)--are both interested in understanding "comment les soldats de 14-18 ont tenu" (p. 36). The question then is: how does an analysis of culture help us understand this most fundamental question? And what, indeed, is meant by "culture" in the context of the Great War?

From his vantage point as a scholar of the early-nineteenth century, Mazurel politely reminds both sides in this rancorous debate that the distinction between "high culture" and "low culture" is intellectually unproductive. If, as their opponents allege, the scholars of the Historial ground their analysis of a national "war culture" primarily on the reflections of the highly educated elite; and if the scholars of CRID are too focused on determining how the "low culture" of the rank and file, informed by their class identity, makes manifest their opposition to military authority; and, finally, if the former thus embraces a "cultural" approach to understanding the war and the latter, a "social" approach, then surely it is now time to understand that the dividing line between social and cultural history is too indistinct to make either approach tenable. Rather than thinking of "culture" as exclusively the production of artistic and intellectual elites or as the collective expression of a community's core values through the ritualized acts and communal practices of ordinary people, it makes sense to understand it as both. *La Grande Guerre: une histoire culturelle* makes a good-faith effort to embrace this important insight. In his essay, "Repos du

guerrier et loisirs populaires: que nous disent de la culture de guerre les pratiques culturelles des poilus?," Nicolas Mariot, for example, urges us to think about the cultural practices of rank-and-file soldiers. Although I believe he undervalues the letter-writing practices of ordinary soldiers--the significance of which is made evident in the rich variety of sources Clémentine Vidal-Naquet draws upon in her wonderful contribution to this collection, "La Grande Guerre des couples"--his larger point, that we need to be attentive to the cultural practices of ordinary men (and, I would add, women), is surely incontestable. Yet for all of its intellectual ecumenism, the structure of *La Grande Guerre: une histoire culturelle* inadvertently reinforces the "high culture vs. low culture" binary.

The editors divide the book into two main sections, "Les Acteurs" and "Artefacts et objets culturels." The "actors" are, in the main, creators of what we would ordinarily call "high culture": classical composers, scientists, novelists and poets, painters, journalists, athletes, and (in an interesting addition) advocates of urban planning. In this section, only Vidal-Naquet's married couples really bridge the divide between "high" and "low" culture. In some of these essays, the analytical net is spread widely to analyze the cultural production of several nations. In others, the focus is restricted to France alone, even when the topic might profitably lend itself to a comparative approach. When our attention turns to the "artifacts and cultural objects" of the war, we find ourselves immersed exclusively in the cultural practices and production of the French rank and file: their songs, the photographs they took of the frontlines, the artistic objects they fashioned from the debris of industrialized combat.

In "La Grande Guerre des écrivains," Nicolas Beaupré provides an excellent analysis of how writers from almost all combatant nations, including the United States, shaped social perceptions of the war at the time and afterwards. His essay is notable for its appreciation of the many ways in which writers contributed to the "war culture" of their respective nations: as men in uniform, as civilians engaged in cultural work (i.e., propagandists and employees of national censorship offices), as supporters of the war, as witnesses to it, and as critics of it. Similarly, Esteban Buch offers a comparative analysis in "La Grande Guerre des musiciens." Focusing on three classical compositions--one by Max Reger, a modernist with a patriotic attachment to the German fatherland; a second by Igor Stravinsky, the ardently Francophile Russian living in Switzerland; and a third by Erwin Schulhoff, an Austrian veteran sympathetic to Dadaism--he reveals how classical music reflected the dominant themes and deep antagonisms of European "war culture." And in "La Grande Guerre des scientifiques," Marie-Eve Chagnon analyzes how French and German scientists contributed to the development of a "war culture," which had long-lasting, deleterious effects, especially for German scientists whose support for the infamous "Manifesto of 93" led to their marginalization within the international community during the war and for many years after.

Given this book's intended audience, it is not surprising, however, that most of the essays concentrate almost exclusively on the French experience. This is true of Anne Simon-Carrère's "Chanter la Grande Guerre," of Odile Roynette's "La Grande Guerre: un événement de langage?," and Jean-Charles Capronnier and Elsa Marguin-Hamon's essay, "La Grande Guerre du patrimoine." Simon-Carrère explores how popular songs acquired a central significance in the lives of soldiers and civilians alike. Some were predictably patriotic, denouncing the barbaric enemy and celebrating France's valiant allies; some were targeted expressly at children, reinforcing their hatred of the enemy and their affection for a now distant father. What is more surprising is the way in which these songs evolved during the course of the war to describe the squalor of the frontlines, to express the anger and bitterness of *poilus* disgusted by what they took to be the indifference of profiteers and *Parisiennes*, and to confess their sexual misery.

In "La Grande Guerre: un événement de langage?," Roynette offers first an overview of German, British, and French linguists' fascination with the argots of the trenches, before concentrating her attention on how the intermingling of men, whether from the many provinces of France or the nation's far-flung colonies, transformed idiomatic French. "Boche" acquired a distinctly pejorative connotation, and Arabic or African locutions that had lingered on the edges of idiomatic French before the war became more commonplace. Roynette also provides some examples of how English terms and phrases--the most famous

of which was “no man’s land”—also found their way into everyday French. French readers might be amused to learn that this linguistic exchange worked two ways: if we are to believe collective lore, when linguistically-challenged Tommies acquired a taste for *vin blanc*, ‘plonk’ entered the English lexicon.

“La Grande Guerre du patrimoine” explores how damage to the architectural and historic patrimony of France became a subject of grave and understandable concern. Buildings dating to the Middle Ages, art collections housed in museums vulnerable to artillery and aerial bombardment, archives housing irreplaceable manuscripts, and archaeological sites offering evidence of pre-historic life: all were endangered—and, in some instances, obliterated—by the war. Debates quickly ensued. Was it preferable to restore the ruined buildings to their prewar condition or allow them to stand as permanent reminders of the barbaric character of the enemy? The patrimony of France was, thereby, inevitably politicized. The destruction wrought by war became part of a larger enterprise to demonize the enemy and reinforce national resolve. It is interesting to read this essay in tandem with Vincent Chambarlhac’s “La Grande Guerre des urbanistes,” which shows how the destruction inflicted on Reims and Arras, for example, gave advocates of scientific, rational urban planning a cause to rally around and, not incidentally, a justification for their professional existence. Each of these essays is carefully researched and rich in detail. The topics they analyze, however, lend themselves just as easily to a comparative or transnational approach: British Tommies sang songs, all soldiers developed their own (often rather salty) forms of expression, and the protection and restoration of the French patrimony was much discussed and significantly financed by France’s allies.

Philippe Vatin’s essay, “La Grande Guerre des artistes” is more attentive to how French artists’ experience of and employment during the war differed from their British counterparts. Whereas British artists captured the tragic effects of combat—producing in the process some of the most iconic paintings of the Great War—French artists had access only to the rest areas behind the frontlines. Here they focused on the humanity of the frontline soldier and the devastation inflicted on the landscape—a useful trope for reinforcing the notion of the barbaric enemy. What these commissioned artists did not paint, however, is as important as what they did. They did not paint combat or its gruesome after-effects. By contrast, as Benjamin Gilles demonstrates in “La Grande Guerre en images. Produire et diffuser, 1914–1918,” frontline amateur photographers captured in still images the grotesque reality endured by battle-hardened *poilus*, and then sent these photographs home to their wives and parents. Ignoring military regulations that prohibited the private use of cameras in combat zones, soldiers also submitted their photographs, sometimes intentionally staged for dramatic effect, to illustrated weeklies eager to pay for eye-catching, even unsettling images.

The evidence Gilles presents constitutes an excellent complement to Laurent Martin’s informative analysis, “La Grande Guerre des journalistes,” which, like Simon-Carrère’s essay on popular song, reveals how cultural expression evolved over the course of the war to capture both the patriotic resolve and the profound misery of ordinary men and, to a lesser extent, women. Like Gilles, Martin challenges the entrenched mythology that the wartime press peddled nothing but hyperbolic nationalistic nonsense, rightly maligned as *bourrage de crâne*. Martin does not deny that the French press printed a lot of patriotic palaver, but he resists the simple conclusion that that is all it produced. The press evolved over the duration of the war, slowly abandoning the most outrageous lies characteristic of 1914. Yet patriotic optimism, the denigration of the enemy, and the legitimization of violence persisted. Ultimately, the war undermined popular confidence in the credibility of the press and thus marked the end of the “golden age” of the French press that had started in 1881.

To read Paul Diestchy’s essay, “La Grande Guerre des sportifs,” in conjunction with Bertrand Tillier’s “Bricoler, passer le temps, s’abstraire: anthropologie de l’art des poilus à l’âge de la guerre industrielle,” is to sketch the outlines of an answer to Nicolas Mariot’s question: “How did *poilus* pass the time when not in the frontlines?” Perhaps surprisingly, sport as a form of relaxation had very little place in the *poilus*’ universe. Sport was, as Diestchy reminds us here, very much an elite enterprise in prewar France. How

many *poilus* would have had occasion before 1914 to watch—let alone participate in—an auto race, an air show, or even a boxing match? Team sports, primarily in organized and pick-up games of soccer, came late to the French Army, being integrated into the “leisure” activities of French troops only in 1917 after considerable contact with the avid amateur athletes of the British Expeditionary Force. There was nothing comparable in France to Captain Nevill’s famous gambit on July 1, 1916, when he kicked two soccer balls into No Man’s Land, urging his men forward with the “goal” of sending the ball into the German trenches. The footballs survived; Nevill and many of his men did not. Why an impromptu competition around a football could have resonated so powerfully in the ranks of the BEF, and not in the French Army, invites further examination.

If the French rank and file were not kicking footballs to pass the time, what were they doing? Playing cards, to be sure, but also fashioning jewelry and ornamental household objects from the detritus of industrialized warfare. Bertrand Tillier’s fascinating essay, “Bricoler, passer le temps, s’abstraire: anthropologie de l’art des poilus à l’âge de la guerre industrielle” makes the persuasive case that, in so doing, frontline soldiers deserve to be counted among the artists of the Great War. It is not that the “knick-knacks” they manufactured were always—or even often—original aesthetic objects, but their very production constituted an affirmation of human identity, a defiance of the brutalization of industrial, static warfare, and a conscious affirmation of a soldier’s identity as something more than a cog in a military machine. When soldiers transformed the dross of modern war into manufactured domestic objects to adorn living rooms and women’s fingers, they purposefully turned instruments of death into affirmations of life.

La Grande Guerre: une histoire culturelle concludes with Daniel Sherman’s summary of his important study of war memorials. In its analysis of how ordinary citizens memorialized their dead by inscribing their names on mass-produced memorials and of how art critics then lamented the aesthetic shortcomings of the memorials thus created, Sherman is simultaneously respectful of the cultural enterprise of ordinary people and yet attentive to the cultural divide between “elite” and “popular” culture in postwar France. Almost two decades after he first analyzed the French culture of memorialization, it would be interesting to know what he makes of the *Anneau de Mémoire*. One hundred years after the outbreak of the war, this striking memorial embodies both the commemorative essence of France’s simplest memorials and the aesthetic elegance longed for by her most refined critics. Perhaps it is possible to bridge the gap between “elite” and “popular” culture after all.

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