Perspectives on War in the Twentieth Century

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Jeremy Black, *Introduction to Global Military History: 1775 to the Present Day* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 294 pp., £60.00 (hb), ISBN 0415353947, £18.99 (pb), ISBN 0415353955.

Gail Braybon, ed., *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914–18* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2003), 248 pp., £16.97 (pb), ISBN 1571818014, £47.00 (hb), ISBN 1571817247.

Chris Ealham and Michael Richards, eds., *The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 282 pp., £59.00 (hb), ISBN 0521821789.

Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914–1940*, Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare 23 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 357 pp., £50.00, ISBN 0521854156.

Ephraim Kam, *Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2nd printing with new preface, 266 pp., $22.50 (pb), ISBN 0674013549.

Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 250 pp., £45.00 (hb), ISBN 0521850835, £17.99 (pb), ISBN 0521616336.

'War, ladies and gentlemen, is ultimately about combat.' That telling comment was made a few years ago by the distinguished American historian Dennis E. Showalter during a discussion that struck him as being dominated far too much by perspectives in cultural history. The books here reviewed suggest that military history of the twentieth century until the present oscillates between two poles: the history of war, oriented to military combat, and a socially grounded history of culture, although the emphasis has in the meantime clearly shifted towards the pole of cultural history.

Be that as it may, the traditional history of war is still very much alive, as evidenced in Jeremy Black's introductory volume on global military history since 1775. Such a historical overview, which is becoming ever more common in the European academic

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book market, is best assessed in terms of two key criteria: the aim of completeness of coverage, which is generally realised at least in part, and plausibility in the selection of examples to illustrate in depth certain 'typical' mechanisms or processes, thus preparing them more readily for didactic presentation and pedagogical ends.

Yet in the present instance it would appear that Jeremy Black was unfortunately unable to decide on a clearly structured approach to his chosen topic, or even on a solid definition of his object of investigation. The upshot is that, in the end, somehow 'almost everything' is included in this rambling purview: wars and civil wars, uprisings and military coups – and naturally the 'war on terrorism'. It is only to be expected that in a book that targets a North American student readership, there is clear emphasis on the history of the North American wars, even if that leads to some problematic weighting in overall coverage: thus, for example, the space accorded to the war in Vietnam is roughly equivalent to that given to the First World War. It is likewise not surprising that proceeding from such a comprehensive definition of 'military history', the author has difficulty achieving his own stated aim of including the political–diplomatic aspects of all the wars, along with economic factors and the influence of technological developments. Yet it is precisely here, in stressing the importance of economics and technology, that Black is successful in presenting quite readable and instructive passages – for example in his description of the wars of the nineteenth century, caught up as they were in the forces of industrialism, nationalism and imperialism. But these sections seem to work well for a good historiographical reason: he can rely here on a broad base of research bolstered in part by a certain presupposed knowledge. He can readily assume among the readers he targets that they have heard more about the US civil war than, say, the Taiping Rebellion in China, which coincided, in part, with the American war. This in turn points to a fundamental problem inherent to these global histories: on the one hand, the repeatedly stressed multiple perspectivity of this modern history of war is doubtless impressive, especially at those points where the author can substantiate cross-connections and reciprocal influence. However, in the final outcome this impression remains analytically without consequence – if one is innocent of any basic knowledge about, say, the history of the Indian subcontinent around 1830, or the countries of the Andes in the first half of the twentieth century. Unless, that is, a person is simply overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the extent of war and death in human history.

In the present study, for example, the reasons for the Somalis to start a civil war in the early 1960s in north-eastern Kenya remains as unclear as are the motives of the insurgents in Sri Lanka. Thus these wars and their actors continue to remain basically incomprehensible. Given the comprehensive scope, any author would be hard-pressed to realise such an ambitious aim. In Black's book, it leads at many points to a simple enumeration of events, a tendency to remain at the level of phenomenology. And this ultimately, even if unintentionally, perpetuates the North-American–Eurocentric perspective that informs Black's present study – headings such as 'Elsewhere in the Third World' or 'Elsewhere in Africa' are a rather declamatory illustration of this tendency. The boxes, excursions and source citations built into the text, the latter quite arbitrarily, do little to illuminate the analysis. Nor are most of the illustrations

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helpful, aside from the maps that provide the reader at numerous points with at least some geographical orientation.

Likewise global in intention, although limited to the twentieth century, is the study by the Israeli political scientist Ephraim Kam. He deals with the outbreak of wars, examining eleven 'surprise attacks' for his analysis: the German and Japanese attacks in the Second World War, the outbreak of the Korean War, the Chinese incursion there and in India, and the Israeli–Arab wars of 1956, 1967 and 1973. Let me state right from the outset: the expectations evoked by the book's subtitle, 'The Victim's Perspective', and the moving cover photograph (a Frenchman in tears as he witnesses Wehrmacht troops marching into Paris) are scarcely realised, at least in the eyes of this reviewer who comes from a perspective of social history and the history of mentality. Because behind all this lies another history: that of the failure of the political–military leadership and the intelligence services in the countries surprised by such attacks. So it is not surprising that it was Ehud Barak, former prime minister and current defence minister of Israel, who specifically recommended this book to all those working in this sphere.

The fact that it was recently reprinted (after the first edition in 1988) can probably be explained by the 'shock' in the West in the wake of the attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001. But readers interested more generally in the history of the secret services will find fascinating material here; Kam's presentation is compelling, reminiscent at many points of the drama of relevant films or novels on the topic – although, in contrast to Hollywood, the stories he selects have no happy ending. This book, which argues along the lines of both structural history and the history of mentality, centres on the question of why those in positions of responsibility repeatedly failed in differing situations to recognise and read the 'writing on the wall', why again and again they made dramatic errors in analysis and judgement. Tangentially, one is also reminded of the subsequently acknowledged gross failures in intelligence-gathering underlying Washington's attack on Iraq in March 2003. The core here is a focus on perception, both failed and false: the question of how a historical situation is grasped, and the way in which information is inserted into one's own dominant 'belief systems,' or jettisoned from those same systems. The book is thus of evident interest to historians, at least those who still need to be convinced that military history also has something to do with cultural patterns of perception, communication structures and social models for interpretation.

But the publications of the last decade and a half or so indicate that such historians are now in a distinct and growing minority. The triumphal procession of a military history grounded in social history and supplemented by cultural history is abundantly evident these days, especially in the historiography of the First World War. By contrast, the historical analysis of other military conflicts in the modern period, including and most specifically the Second World War, is still clearly lacking in this regard. But the time of the great syntheses, encyclopaedic treatments and comprehensive interpretations has now arrived for the 'primal catastrophe of the twentieth century'.

Outstanding among these in many respects is the joint 'historiographical essay' by Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, first published in French and now in English.

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These two masters of the historian's craft have compiled a thoroughly impressive stocktaking of the research. It combines an overview of the major fields of inquiry with an analysis of the history of interpretation of the Great War, grounded in the history of scholarship. This is achieved on the basis of an impressive knowledge of international research and popular culture, encompassing novels, films, museums and even travel guides dedicated to the memory of this war. To manage to present all this in a compact space of roughly 200 pages is in itself an accomplishment in conciseness. The book's clarity of language and thoroughly convincing reflective argumentation make it a genuine historiographical reading experience for students and professional historians alike.

To contain the abundance of material covered, the authors have made use of a double structure, which necessarily engenders a certain number of repetitions, although this does no harm to the text as a whole: initially they sketch in rough strokes the history of historiography on the war, divided into three basic 'configurations'. First came a phase of positivistic analysis of the events of the Great War in the 1920s and 30s, concerned in particular with the reasons underlying victory or defeat. After 1945 there was an often Marxist-inspired interpretation of its purported underlying socioeconomic factors; now, since the 'cultural turn', the trend has been toward an approach where the generating of meaning, new readings and forms of memory lie at the centre of historiographical inquiry and debate. Subsequent chapters investigate the products of these 'configurations' for the various thematic fields, ranging from the history of diplomacy and the political–military leadership to the experiences of the 'ordinary soldier'. They then move on to the social and economic history of the war and the revolutions it sparked, as well as everyday wartime life on the 'home front' and the associated emergent discourses and practices of remembrance.

Given the extent of this venture in historical inquiry, any reader may well note gaps or dark corners here and there, depending on their own field of inquiry and interest. That is hard to avoid. Thus the present reviewer found the European Jewish dimension of the war somewhat misplaced under a heading 'religion inside and outside the churches', and given too little requisite attention with but a few lines of commentary. I would also have preferred a more comprehensive treatment of the aspect of gender, here limited to two brief pages, since the perspective of gender not only encompasses women, women's work and family structures, but also looks at men as gendered beings. Despite these limitations, the book can be recommended to all who would like a solid, internationally oriented overview of the First World War, even though clearly centred on France and Britain. In passing, they will also be treated to a valuable concomitant lesson in how history was written in the twentieth century, what topics were focused on at what point in time, and with what generational and political agendas they were associated.

Stefan Goebel's study of the politics of memory in Germany and Britain continues from where the final thematic chapter in Prost and Winter concludes, namely the ongoing debate about the importance of the culture of memory in the countries affected by the Great War. Goebel is a German historian teaching in the United Kingdom, and focuses here on this topic with the express aim of building a bridge

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between the still influential interpretations of George L. Mosse and Jay Winter. While Mosse has put stress on the political instrumentalisation of the memory of the Great War, Winter regards the monuments and places of remembrance principally as sites of individual mourning, memory and commemoration. Goebel attempts here to link these two poles through the concept of 'medievalism' as an organising trope of remembrance. This is a transfigured mode of drawing on and linking up with the Middle Ages, one that already in the nineteenth century served to help people come to terms with the experience of industrialisation and after 1918 served to structure memory, remembrance and commemoration in Germany and Britain. In order to drive home his point, Goebel investigates the local and national culture of commemoration in the two countries, extending to 1939 and utilising an impressive wealth of material. Material culture in the form of memorials, monuments, church windows, statues, postcards and cemeteries is investigated, along with official proclamations, associational life, newspaper articles and literary treatments.

Since the study is structured along the lines of main themes, developing a consistent comparative analysis of certain topoi in the two countries, the author succeeds at various points in uncovering a cross-flow of reciprocal influences. He is thus able to lay the initial foundation for a truly *transnational* historiography, a demand often raised but rarely realised in concrete historical inquiry. Yet Goebel's presentation suffers at points from the typical weaknesses of a book centred on a 'single shaping thesis'. Whether it is a matter of how the dead are memorialised, or how the war is justified as a crusade or enterprise of national defence; whether fundamental values such as fulfilment of duty, honour, sacrifice or chivalry are foregrounded, or ultimately the form of the hope of national salvation – that complex is always viewed as an expression of what Goebel terms 'medievalism'. Constant and central in his analysis is the romanticising reference back to the medieval period. This is certainly meaningful in impressive examples of material culture, such as the 'fortresses of the dead' (*Totenburgen*), the so-called 'heroes' groves' (*Heldenhaine*), the images of the saints, the countless graves. Yet it becomes less convincing and compelling if the generation of meaning at the level of the individual is involved: not every reference back to religious consolation is medieval, and various values such as 'honour' and 'chivalry' were solidly anchored in the bourgeois gender code, shaped principally in the nineteenth century.

In short, 'medievalism' as a mode of remembrance seems in my view to be a perspective that can doubtlessly explain a great deal – yet certainly not everything. Nonetheless, the author has succeeded in crafting an engrossing study; it draws its strength less from the grand thesis it posits than from the numerous smaller examples that enrich the debate about the culture of memory, particularly with one core insight: the importance of its local topography. It was not just in London and Berlin that everything occurred; rather, we must also look at the local and regional forms of remembrance and commemoration. These were far more varied and imbued with contradiction than the voguish parlance about an overarching 'collective memory' tends to suggest. One thus can hope that these stimulating suggestions will also have an impact on research on the culture of remembrance *after* 1945 as well. In that context

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of inquiry, what are urgently required are richly documented concrete studies – rather than another spate of treatises top-heavy with theory or moralising discourse.

If Goebel's study is (almost) a paradigm for a comparative cultural history of the Great War, the volume edited by Gail Braybon would seem to be just the contrary. That is not only due to the circumstance common to all collective volumes, namely that they tend to bring together essays that inevitably vary in quality. Rather, even after intensive reading of the chapters, it remains unclear what the unifying conception here can be, unless one simply accepts the editor's contention that all the essays bring 'something fresh to debates about the war' (p. 8).

The very title of the collection – 'Evidence, History and the Great War' – is somewhat confusing. The heading may perhaps fit with Adrian Gregory's essay dealing with the question of British war enthusiasm, interrogating it on the basis of evidence in a reading of the contemporary local press, but it works with few of the other chapters. Even more puzzling is the second half of the title – 'Historians and the Impact of 1914–18' – because this volume does not deal in any way with the history of historiography in its proper sense. At most, one might subsume Laurinda Stryker's critical analysis of the theses of Eric Leed and Elaine Showalter on interpreting 'shell shock' under such a heading.

Rather, the editor appears to be concerned (as her own chapter makes clear) with interrogating an interpretation of the war as a 'watershed' for women's history (in the sense of women's emancipation, suffrage and general betterment). This raises an initial quite fundamental question in my mind, namely whether such a one-sided perspective actually reflects the current state of gender research on the Great War in the first place. I do not think it does. The two strong chapters by Susan Grayzel and James McMillan indirectly corroborate this; using the example of debates on morality and sexuality in Britain and France they present an analysis of just how differentiated this was at the level of discourse, let alone on the associated social level. Their contribution is supplemented by Peter Gatrell's and Simonetta Ortaggi's chapters, although these do not provide much more than a cursory overview on the situation of women in the war in Russia and Italy at the time. But how is all this linked with the quite convincing analysis of food supply and its management in Berlin by Keith Allen, or the essays by Catherine Moriarty on a collection of portrait photographs and Deborah Thorn's contribution on the representation of gender in the Imperial War Museum? In this diverse collection, topics, perspectives and approaches form a lively jumble. That conglomeration does not per se have to be negative if one can discern a unifying concept in the background. Yet the key terms 'detail' and 'context' cited by Brayborn (p. 21) are in any case insufficient.

By contrast, in their collective volume on Spain's splintering, Chris Ealham and Michael Richards provide an example of how multiple perspectives and methodological diversity can be woven into a convincing and especially innovative whole. In my view, their edited volume on the cultural history of the Spanish Civil War actually forms a substantial contribution to advancing historiography on this central conflict in Europe in the twentieth century. Here the editors and contributors consciously distance themselves from the long-dominant view of this war in terms of

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the history of politics, ideology and, later, social history, instead stressing its distinctive Spanish, domestic dimension. They anchor their cultural–historical approach in the three interlocking concepts: language, locality and identity. And these in turn structure all the essays in the volume, albeit with differential weighting.

Again and again, analysis returns to the three great themes of mobilisation of the war: violence, nationalism and religion. Eduardo Gónzalez Calleja proves how the rhetoric of violence had taken hold of all political camps long before the outbreak of the armed civil conflict, and thus how a practice of violence had necessarily to appear as a logical continuation of politics by other means. Xose-Manoel Nunez Seixas's study on the nationalist discourse of the two camps reads to a certain extent like some Spanish sequel to Goebel's 'medievalism', since both Republicans and insurgents drew their national images from a transfigured past (albeit more early modern than medieval). Nunez Seixas suggests that this kind of formation of identity was far more problematic for the peripheral nationalisms of the Galicians, Basques and Catalans in the framework of the Republic. In subsequent sections Enric Ucelay-Da Cal and Francisco Javier Capistegui develop this further, looking at the examples of Catalonia and Navarre. Rafael Cruz sheds light on the struggle for religious and national symbols among the rebels, while Chris Ealham and Pamela Radcliff examine the importance of the respective, very different local political cultures and their place in urban space, exploring the examples of Barcelona and Gijón.

Religion's unruly power to mobilise is the focus in essays by Michael Richards and Mary Vincent, centring on the linkage between religion and violence. Vincent shows how illuminating a gender-oriented historical approach can be, interpreting the eruption of anti-clerical violence in the summer of 1936 as the symbolic destruction of a repressive order, one where – among others – poorly defined and repressed male identities collided with one another. Michael Richards's analysis of the instrumentalising of Easter processions in Málaga in the context of Francoist repression closes this collection of essays. The volume impressively shows how cultural–historical approaches can expand and enrich our understanding of mobilisation and the generating of meaning before, during and after a war.

In the context of ongoing political debate on the memory and remembrance of the war in Spain itself, this book can also be read as a plea for social recognition of the deep social divisions and trauma, the 'splintering' which the war and post-war period left in Spain in their wake. However, for the history of war in the twentieth century, this volume is a first and long overdue step moving beyond the previous isolated historical focus on the Spanish Civil War, which was after all also a European conflict. It presses forward towards embedding that conflict in the ongoing broader historiographical debate on military culture and war in the twentieth century. War is most surely about combat, but the history of war ultimately also encompasses the experiences, hopes, disappointments and subsequent interpretations of those who had to fight and live through these conflicts and their ravages.

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