

*Introduction*

# UNDERSTANDING WORLD WAR I

One Hundred Years of Historiographical Debate  
and Worldwide Commemoration

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Even one hundred years after it broke out, World War I still interests and energizes public attention. That is true not just of the global community of historians but also of broad segments of a public that is no longer limited solely to just those countries that once waged the war. In fact, the events in and around World War I are now the focus of a broad and worldwide historical-political reflection that seeks to grasp the global manifestations of this totalizing war. It seems as though more recently, with the end of the Cold War and subsequent developments, the perception has sharpened yet again that the world in the years between 1914 and 1918 may have much more to do with our present day than many observers have been used to believing. Take just the current geopolitical situation of Europe and the resurgence not only of nationalism but, in some cases, also of an undisguised chauvinism and one might come to consider that it is always worth the effort to investigate the causes and implications of the historical crises that led to World War I in 1914. The same is true for the circumstances in which the war was waged, and which fundamentally changed the face of Europe as well as of many areas beyond its borders. The desire to understand World War I ultimately represents an

attempt to grasp the twentieth century in its worldwide dimensions. It is consequently anything but a coincidence that the truly global impact of the World War between 1914 and 1918 is currently attracting historians' attention more so than has long been the case.

The history of World War I-related research faithfully mirrors all the twists and turns that have been a part of this dynamic. Hardly ever have there been so many books and articles published as in recent years, not to mention the overabundance of films and other media productions, among which are numerous internet portals about the history of World War I. As elegant witness to this, just take the breathtaking number of works published worldwide in the context of the centenary and the ongoing publication of research contributions. While countless monographs and edited volumes seek to examine individual aspects of the war, its origins, and its aftermath, the authors of the many comprehensive histories (whose scholarly quality is distributed somewhat unevenly) have dared to take on the difficult task of doing justice to the total phenomenon. More often than not, this has been done from within a national history point of view, but there have been quite a few attempts to adopt a global history perspective. Yet there is obviously a limit as to how far any given individual author can go in his/her effort to embrace World War I's complexities with all its far-reaching global, national, and subnational implications and ramifications. So the most credible claim to providing an overview is best found in international collaborative projects, such as *The Cambridge History of the First World War*,<sup>1</sup> published by Jay Winter and translated into several languages, or the Berlin-based online encyclopedia *1914-1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*,<sup>2</sup> which is directed by a group of leading World War I historians united by Oliver Janz. Both highlight the high level of the internationalization of current World War I research, and each in its own way brings together research approaches that result in a "total history" of the war.<sup>3</sup>

A noticeable gap in the flood of actual publications is, however, the lack of substantial contributions that endeavor to fit the research itself into a larger "history of historiography" context. In other words, there has been no real attempt to look back over one hundred years of World War I historiography and review the now "historical" controversies, methodologies, and trends. Of course, there is no scarcity of articles cutting a path through the recent historiography of World War I.<sup>4</sup> However, the historical depth dimension, the historicity of the historical research about World War I, has generally been left underexposed.<sup>5</sup> What is true for any kind of historical research is to a special degree true for World War I research: namely, that historical issues, positions, controversies, and the like (indeed even the idea of what it means to be a historian in any given

society) all stand in a close reciprocal relationship to the whole social and political framework as well as to the changing memory cultures in which the historical scholarship takes place. Consequently, leaving the actual historicity of World War I historiography inadequately addressed seems particularly unsatisfying.

This volume claims to close this gap a step or two. Consequently, its objective is not to comprehensively assess all the latest centenary-related research, even though in this regard it does offer some instructive insights. Instead, it seeks to trace out and to contextualize the *trajectories* of the way historical scholarship has engaged with World War I in selected national contexts.<sup>6</sup>

The decision to organize the volume according to national categories—and thus to follow, at least to a certain extent, a national history approach—is justified for two reasons. First of all, there can be no doubt as to the fact that the overwhelming majority of the historians working on World War I in the course of the last hundred years have been *acteurs* primarily in national scholarly cultures and discourse communities. The strong internationalization—indeed, globalization—of research teams and networks is a relatively recent phenomenon compared to the decades of research conducted in primarily national contexts. This is not to deny the fact that the centenary has of course accentuated the recent dynamic in favor of internationalization: the abovementioned *1914-1918-online* and *Cambridge History of the First World War*, both of which have united an impressive international network of scholars (among whom is an equally impressive number of scholars affiliated to a research institution not situated in their country of origin), offer ample proof for this. Likewise, the unprecedented degree to which centenary-related scholarly activities in many parts of the world reached out to foreign historians in order to take into account different perspectives on the war pleads in favor of this argument. In the French case, for instance, among the 2,597 historians, archeologists, social scientists, etc., to actively participate at least once in the last five years in a French academic conference on World War I (a number itself indicative of the magnitude of the scholarly involvement into the French centenary), no less than 822 were foreigners. And roughly one-half of the 73 World War I-related doctoral research projects that are being pursued in French universities at the moment are either dealing (at least partly) with a non-French *sujet* or are transnational/comparative in nature.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, we lack comparably detailed data for other countries. Still, beyond any doubt, we find the same push for internationalization in the German case or in the Anglo-Saxon world, to cite but these two examples. In that regard, it makes perfect sense to term the current generation of scholars working on World War I the “transnational

generation,” as suggested by Jay Winter.<sup>8</sup> This does not mean, however, that the impetus for transnationalization is equally strong everywhere or that scholars all of a sudden cease being part of national academic cultures and contexts. Even today, when the sense of being part of a global scientific community is arguably more developed than ever before, academic careers remain nationally framed in the sense that there are quite a few countries where the recruitment of non-nationals on permanent posts is common practice. Moreover, one might argue that even today the degree of integration of different national scholarly cultures into the global scientific community is indeed quite uneven, and that there are many national cases where there is only a relatively small number of researchers who participate in international debates.

Secondly, and even more importantly, it is the fact that the memory of World War I by and large remains a national memory, which leads us to adopt a national framework. For even when in individual cases the influence of the dominant memory culture over a historical study—at first sight in any case—may not be evident, it is of great significance for the overall direction of the historiographic field. The World War I-related debates and controversies offer extensive illustrative material for this: what emerges is a clear correlation of the relationship of the research intensity with the memory culture status of the historical event. How else could one explain that the researching of World War I, in spite of all its cyclical ups and downs, traditionally is strongly positioned in those countries (for example, Great Britain, Australia, or France) where the war is not only *history* but also—and perhaps primarily—*memory*? It was hardly by chance that it was in these nations that the war continued to be termed the “Great War.” On the other hand, one cannot fail to notice that the research about the war in the countries of Eastern and Middle Europe, which suffered massively during the war years but where the war for various reasons never became a central element of collective memory, lagged behind for a very long time and has only recently started to catch up with Western (or Western Front) historiography.

When we take a look at the big questions and debates that have led historians to cross blades with one another for quite a long period of time, we cannot fail to notice that there, as well, the prevailing national memory cultures are of paramount importance. For example, that the public discussion in Germany about World War I (for decades and also again in the years 2013–14) has concentrated itself nearly exclusively on the question of German responsibility for the war’s outbreak is certainly not to be understood as solely immanent to just the scholarship. Instead, this debate has to be seen as part of a much larger debate that reaches far beyond World War I and deals with the question as to what extent the Ger-

man history of the twentieth century in general should be viewed through the prism of historical guilt. This touches a central *topos* in the Federal Republic's collective memory.

Analogue logics were and still are at work in other countries. There is the controversy as to why the French soldiers kept to their posts until the victorious conclusion of the war—whether it was more so compulsion and repression or in the end a broad identification with the nation at war that kept the *poilus* by their banner. This was as much grounded in the prevailing memory culture as was the British discussion about the “lions led by donkeys” thesis or the “futile war” argument. And this does not even take up those national cases in Central and Eastern Europe, and also in the former European overseas territories, where national independence from the remnants of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires, the Bolshevik revolution, or also the omens of decolonization provided radically different points of reference for scholarly debate.

What should now be clear is that this volume takes seriously the close, although in no way always unambiguous or unidirectional, interrelations between memory culture and historical scholarship. This is in fact reflected in the structure of the individual chapters, which all begin with a historical overview of the role of World War I in the popular and/or political culture of the countries or the geographical entities discussed. The overall picture that emerges is not homogenous, something that lies in the very nature of the subject matter. When it comes to both the intensity and the content of commemorative discourses, the national (or for instance in the case of Belgium, regional) features and characteristics are still so strongly pronounced that one cannot speak even in Europe, let alone on a global scale, of a transnationalization of memory. That does not mean that in the last hundred years there have not been (at least to some extent) considerable convergences in the perception of World War I, especially in the German-French case, where substantial memory-political efforts have been made. Whether this already allows one to speak of a shared memory is something we, however, find highly questionable.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the memory narrative of World War I that has been developed and well-tested in the German-French context views the war as a catastrophe and is therefore at least partly compatible with many other national memory discourses, a fact that explains why the commemorations during the centenary (in a level unprecedented historically) could take on an international dimension. Yet even shared commemorative events cannot, on balance, hide the fact that ultimately quite different things are meant when people speak about World War I. And the further one moves away from Western Europe, especially toward the east, the clearer the limits of the catastrophe thesis can be seen: for countries such

as Poland, the Baltic states, Finland, or the Czech Republic, World War I marks no catastrophe but, instead, the beginning of national independence. And in Russia, a (partial) rediscovery of the war (or rather the years before 1917) is taking place under the banner of the glorification of the soldiers in the czar's army, an inflection that is somewhat at odds with the generally postheroic commemoration of fallen soldiers in Western Europe.

The main body of each chapter has a historiographical section that is divided into two chronological segments: first of all, the developments in the historical research from 1914 through 2000 are laid out, and the second part is reserved for current trends in the research. This division into two parts is motivated by the hope of making it possible for those readers who want to gain quick access to recent World War I historiography to do exactly that.

In view of the diversity, varying emphasis, and dynamics of the scholarly engagement with World War I in the countries discussed here, it is not possible to overlay a developmental grid in which all the national historiographies could in equal measure fall into line. Nevertheless, four common features may be mentioned which in each case do not relate to actually all, yet still to the greater part of the countries discussed in this volume.

The first of these would be the far-reaching historicization of World War I that has surely not progressed linearly nor everywhere the same. On the one hand, the warrant of the following statement remains strong: "The First World War belongs to no one. Not even to historians,"<sup>10</sup> which is how Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, a little more than ten years ago, introduced their reflections on the place of World War I in international historiography. Yet what is also true is that the relative weight of historians in the public debate about the years 1914–18 has over the course of time without a doubt increased enormously and that in the context of commemorations, etc., there is an increasingly great demand for a scholarly (that means, dispassionate and factual) commentary and contextualization of the war. Yet what is even more significant is that national taboos (e.g., in the German case—up until the Fischer controversy—the assertion of German war guilt) have for the most part disappeared, even if there are a few countries where there is still (or again) political pressure (or peer pressure let loose by political pressure) on certain subject matters (for example, in Turkey when dealing with the genocide of the Armenians in 1915).

A second point deserving mention is the evolution of methodologies and approaches. If classical diplomatic and military histories dominated the field for many years across the board, gradually almost everywhere

social and cultural history approaches were also being, or rather are being, pursued, even though these “changes of paradigm” have not even remotely occurred simultaneously. Certainly, the relative emphasis on the different methodological approaches was at no previous point, or at the moment, everywhere the same: classical military history, for instance, is relatively strong in the Anglo-Saxon area (but also in Russia), while cultural history approaches, which in the Anglo-Saxon world—but also in France and Germany—tend to dominate the field, are less prominent in Eastern Europe. And social or economic history research about World War I is currently (one sees this by looking at recent publications) almost nowhere being conducted systematically, or on a large scale. Nevertheless, one can say that an appreciation of the benefits of a methodological pluralism has gained acceptance.

This spread of new methodological approaches is in large part a result of the advancing internationalization of World War I research. What is meant here by internationalization is of course not (merely) the banal fact that historians are working and publishing on other countries than their own, thereby enriching the scholarly discussion in other countries. In reality this form of interaction is as old as historical scholarship itself and (using an example from World War I) has from the very beginning characterized the international war guilt discussion. Instead, internationalization means the daily collaboration with colleagues from abroad, being engaged in international research networks and projects, and above all the fundamental insight that World War I as a global war can indeed only be globally reflected upon. This does not mean that this insight has adequately been followed up on; further attention to the global and imperial implications of the war and the marginally researched theaters of war still seems to be the greatest desideratum of World War I research. Still, it is a conceptual renewal that is rather consensual.<sup>11</sup>

A final convergence is of an interpretative nature. The significance of World War I is generally today taken much more seriously than it was a few years ago. Surely for some time now there have been theses such as “seminal catastrophe” (George Kennan) or the years 1914–18 as the beginning of the “age of extremes” (Eric Hobsbawm).<sup>12</sup> But what is new is that World War I, in the meantime, is seen as a key event as well in the history of Middle and Eastern Europe or in the former European colonies, being there the “epicenter of a cycle of armed conflict” that lasted until 1923.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, this even calls into question the classic Western European periodization of the war as taking place in the years 1914–18, and simultaneously also plumbs anew the weight of the many military and home fronts. This is exciting and shows how the acceptance of a transnational or in places even a global perspective can change the view

of the larger whole. Above all, however, it shows that the historiographic debate over the first global and total war of human history continues.

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## Notes

1. Jay M. Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). The International Research Center of the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne, Northern France, served as the project's institutional core.
2. <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/home.html>.
3. Roger Chickering, "Militärgeschichte als Totalgeschichte im Zeitalter des totalen Krieges," in *Was ist Militärgeschichte*, ed. Thomas Kühne and Benjamin Ziemann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010), 301–12.
4. Alan Kramer, "Recent Historiography of the First World War," *Journal of Modern European History* 12, no. 1 (2014), part 1: 5–27, part 2: 155–74; Roger Chickering offers an almost exhaustive overview of the recent literature on the German Reich during the war years: Roger Chickering, "Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg: Betrachtungen zur Historiografie des Gedenkjahres," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 55 (2015): 395–444. See also John Horne's recent assessment of recent trends in the cultural history of the war: John Horne, "End of a Paradigm? The Cultural History of the Great War," *Past and Present* 242, no. 1 (February 2019): 155–92.



5. The last major effort in this direction was undertaken by Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
6. The countries (and national historiographies) represented in this volume are: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain and its former dominions, India, Italy, Japan, Poland, Serbia, Russia, Turkey, and the United States of America. Inevitably, there are nations and regions that are not covered here, most notably those of the African continent. From the very outset of the project, the editors had hoped to include at least one chapter on African historiographies of the war, but it proved impossible without significantly delaying the volume's publication.
7. See the chapters written by Elisa Marcobelli and Simon Catros in the soon-to-be-published *Quel bilan scientifique du Centenaire?* (Paris: Sorbonne Université Presses, forthcoming).
8. See Jay Winter's contribution to this volume, 95–113.
9. On the German-French commemorations of World War I, see Laurent Jalabert, Reiner Marcowitz, and Arndt Weinrich, eds., *La longue mémoire de la Grande Guerre: Regards croisés franco-allemand de 1918 à nos jours* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2017).
10. Prost and Winter, *Great War in History*, 1.
11. See for instance Andrew Tait Jarboe and Richard S. Fogarty, "An Imperial Turn in First World War Studies," in *Empires in World War I. Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict*, ed. Andrew Tait Jarboe, and Richard S. Fogarty (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 1–22.
12. George Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order. Franco-Russian Relations 1875-1890* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994).
13. Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds., *Empires at War 1911–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

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