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Centenary (Historiography)

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Innovative historical scholarship played an important role in the shaping of memory during the centenary of the First World War. It guided international public memory, was part of it and as such summarized the events. The war guilt question, global warfare and its social and cultural consequences as well as regional developments in all parts of the world contributed to new perspectives. Problems of peace, continuing violence and state-building in the aftermath of the First World War were also major themes of the centenary in scholarly publications. This article was written in January 2020.

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Introduction

Centenaries are good opportunities to memorialize events in the light of present affairs and upcoming developments. While scholarship ideally may be imagined as a constant flow of new sources and new methodological approaches, driven or at least accelerated by paradigmatic changes or intellectual modes, anniversaries like this are to a large degree driven by public interest. This interest may be supported by special funding, as was the case regarding the First World War. Several governments took this approach, which led to international competition. The French political approach was probably the most important one, which also gave a strong starting signal^[1] to other European governments and even world-wide engagements. The French website names more than 4,000 events world-wide which bear the signature of the “centenaire”. This gives only a rough estimate, especially as there is no equivalent in other languages, such as German.

“Centenary” does not signify a scholarly category, but scholars, too, felt invited or obliged to contribute or even form public memory on a national or international level. The French “*Mission du centenaire*” entertained an internationally composed scientific committee which published scholarly articles on its website. Even more, besides scientific monographs there are numerous public memorial events, exhibitions, and above all workshops and conferences, which often attempted to raise innovative questions or follow innovative approaches. In many cases, these public/discursive events have led, and will continue to lead, to collective book volumes one or two years later. Translations, especially from and to English, provide different national publics with a delayed secondary reception. All this, consequently, will contribute to fresh scholarly debates. In sum: a hermeneutic circle of innovation in the intellectual field has to be enlarged by the role which historians play in the formation of public memory.^[2]

Parts of centenary historiography can be seen, metaphorically, as similar to the war plans of the Prussian General Staff: they were prepared for a long time, and were complex and sophisticated. And the authors knew: there would be only one performance of their publication, which had to be timed with regard to the public, media and their competitors; it was a “great symphony” (as General Wilhelm Groener (1867-1939) characterized the [Schlieffen Plan](#)). These planned and anticipated moments marked the beginning of war in 1914 and its end and the following peace negotiations and treaties in 1918/1919. Already in the first phase, in 2014, besides the studies on [the origins of war](#), some general overviews were published. In the following years, new scholarship accompanied the main events of the Great War, while in the third phase, again, many books drew longer lines up to the Second World War or even to our time. As of now, a full review could be based on several dozens of literary overviews, many of them focusing on single countries or war theaters. This article cannot claim to be a digest of all of them.^[3]

The most elaborate one seems to be a series of national overviews, the *Journal of Modern History's* “World War I. Centennial Series”, published from 2014 to 2018, including authors [Roger Chickering](#), John Deak, [Peter Gatrell](#), [Susan R. Grayzel](#), [Hasan Kayali](#), Roberta Pergher, [Leonard V. Smith](#) and

Encyclopedias

The most important works of the centenary are two voluminous encyclopedias. One is the *Cambridge History of World War I*,^[5] the other one is this publication, *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. Both offer excellent overviews on the war as such, but also present an elaborate scheme of lemma. They include balanced research overviews, as well as covering themes, methods and geographical approaches which have been neglected so far and offer opportunities for further research. Most of the entries are essay-length articles, annotated with notes. Both series are organized by a hierarchy of responsible scholars who have, in turn, recruited large groups of well-known specialists.

The *Cambridge History* (formally not an encyclopedia) was loosely connected with the multinational *Histoire de la Grande Guerre* in Péronne, France (and the previously mentioned French *Mission du centenaire*). An advisory board of fifteen scholars worked under the main editor, [LinkTo::Project:Jay Winter|Jay Winter]. The three volumes are aptly divided into subsections with illuminating introductions by overseeing specialists. Volume one, “Global War”, covers the spatial dimension in twenty-four essays which also cover law, visual aspects and dimensions of violence. Volume two, “The State”, covers political institutions, but also the military, economy and also the institutions which drove the way to peace – again in twenty-four essays. Volume three, “Civil Society”, may be the most innovative one, starting with the section “Private Life”, followed by “Gender”, “Populations at Risk”, and “Bodies in Pain”, and concluding with “The Social History of Cultural Life”. The volume contains twenty-five essays, and covers many under-researched areas. The strength of the Cambridge encyclopedia is shown through the bibliographical essays as well as the attempts to address visual aspects in all three volumes, with, in total, some 220 pages.

An encyclopedia like *1914-1918-online* covers different and wider aspects, and uses the potential of online publishing with a sophisticated system of linkages. One of them is the broad linking of articles and fields of research, another is the hierarchy of survey articles, thematic or regional, which may go down to individual biographies, objects or events. The possibility for quick updates goes along with the opportunity to include graphs, photographs, video and audio. *1914-1918-online* is remarkable for its truly global coverage, but also for a broad conceptualisation of the First World War which includes aspects of the prehistory. These sometimes reach back to the Vienna congress of 1814/1815 or the second part of the 19th century. They are followed up by post-war remarks up to the time of the Second World War or even today. Among the more than 1,000 articles which have been published since first going online in October 2014, several dozen of them specify exactly the topic of this essay; according to the index, 121 contributions include the word “centenary”, fifteen of them already bear the word in their title.^[6] This article cannot claim to be a kind of secondary review of this encyclopedia, and can only deliver some aspects and facets of the centenary.

Prehistory: The Road to War

No single book had a greater impact on the international debate than Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers*.^[7] It became a bestseller in Germany, but also was broadly discussed in the English- and French-speaking worlds. Clark's main focus was on the decision-making process. He attached great importance to the interaction of the five great powers in the decade before the First World War, concentrating on 1914. Thus, the structure of politics, civil-military relations, short-term assumptions and long-term expectations were dealt with in meticulous detail. "The book [...] strives to understand the July crisis of 1914 as a modern event, the most complex in modern times [...] It is concerned less with why the war happened than with how it came about."^[8] This systemic interest, nevertheless, went along with harsh criticism of single actors and their more or less short-sighted horizons which proved to be wrong and had to be adjusted. It was the "multilateral interactions" of the five great powers, but also terrorism, which challenged the international system. Arguing from a multipolar international system in the post-cold war era, Clark is critical of military and civil protagonists, their "shared political cultures" and their interactions on the basis of this.^[9] It is an actor-based narrative which demonstrates how top officials felt enormous pressure, which led them to a chain of fateful decisions. This failure of traditional elites is what is meant by the term "sleepwalkers". Clark explicitly did not want to deal with the responsibility or guilt of single persons or nations and was not interested in a new assessment of the individual great power politics which had started immediately with the [July Crisis](#). By doing so, he implicitly exonerated [Germany](#) of a concrete or major share of responsibility.

In a similar way, [Thomas Otte](#) demonstrated the interaction of the great powers in the prehistory of the First World War, also with a broad base of earlier research and archival studies, but with emphasis on the politics of each of them.^[10] Sean McMeekin, too, who had earlier focused on the Russian side of events, published a comprehensive day-by-day study of the July Crisis, in which he distributed "responsibility" and "guilt", and even placed nations on the "dock", without special emphasis on one power – in his case more on the Russians as was usually done.^[11] This systemic approach with regard to the First World War was immediately taken up in a newspaper article by some historians with German background of a younger generation. If Germany had been a "normal" great power in 1914, then German normalcy in international politics in our times should also enable the country to adopt a more interest-based foreign policy.^[12] A symptomatic, but so far not intensive revisionist debate attributing responsibility to [France](#) or Germany in a 1960s style has only taken place in the *Historische Zeitschrift*.^[13]

The parallel between German "normalcy" in 1914 and 2014 guided much of the scholarly public debate following Clark. In the first place, the well-known process of detailed critique and contextualisation of sources started again in a way which had not taken place since the Fischer controversy fifty years ago. In a major conference at the German Historical Institute London in 2012 on international reception, the different and differing positions were still juxtaposed.^[14] But after the

publication of *The Sleepwalkers*, [Annika Mombauer](#) contradicted the very notion and argued that the recourse to the actions on all sides of the great powers could be accepted, but, “war broke out, because influential circles in Vienna and Berlin wanted to effect it [*herbeiführen*] and risk it willingly and because people in Paris and Petersburg were prepared to wage it when it came”.^[15] In a similar way, [Gerd Krumeich](#) argued:

As the central powers in my conviction bear the main responsibility for the outbreak of war, because just they set fire on the powder keg, but it was not only they alone responsible that this amount of fuel was assembled.^[16]

A major public debate followed, mainly in Germany. Many protagonists were professional historians who had, over decades, contributed to the sharpening of (West) German historical consciousness during and in the aftermath of the Fischer debate. [John Röhl](#), [Hans-Ulrich Wehler \(1931-2014\)](#), [Heinrich-August Winkler](#) and [Volker Ullrich](#) were among them.^[17] They attached great importance to the missing or incorrect interpretations of some or single documents which they claimed clearly showed the German or Austrian primary responsibility. Many other authors followed a basic line which laid more importance on the general international situation than on the weighing of national guilt. For example, [Jörn Leonhard](#) argued that most actors did not develop a sense of reality and thus also a sense of the possibilities. “Their self-image to be attacked and to defend themselves finally could not stop the language of escalation.”^[18] [Hans-Ulrich Wehler](#), one of the sharpest critics of [Clark](#), applauded [Leonhard's](#) author's book as “the start of a new epoch in world war history”.^[19]

A similar, but calmer debate starting from [Clark's](#) book was conducted in the United States, but took place against the background of economic, social and political issues. [Marc Trachtenberg](#) in principle joined [Clark's](#) views, while [Stephen Schuker](#) and [Jay Copeland](#) underlined German responsibility without reaching a common judgement.^[20]

General Surveys

Already at the beginning of the centenary some general surveys were published. Because most of them were rather voluminous, they defy easy theses or conclusions. Most of them are characterized by a permanent change of method, geographical or sectional view, or scope. Most of these studies also contain shorter or longer narratives about the road to war and/or out of the war.

[Herfried Münkler](#) delivered 924 pages and attached special importance to the political events against a background of military events in a narrower sense.^[21] The history of the war forms a flowing and steady learning process on different levels. There was tactical learning, through which the organisation of defense and the performance of attacks changed. There was strategic learning, permanently searching for the strong and weak points of the enemy. And there had been also political learning on the problems of when and why to enter the war or conclude a separate peace.^[22] Much of [Münkler's](#) explanation is directed towards the discrepancy between the different levels in

different situations in different countries. The author, a political scientist, constructed alternative courses which could have been taken and demonstrated various paradoxes, not least in generalizations for the 20th century up to the present times.

The most voluminous book comes from Jörn Leonhard, with 1,157 pages;^[23] it also figures as the richest with regard to changing perspectives. Superficially, the book is structured by the years 1914, 1915, etc., each characterized by a label which already hints at the dialectic relationship of such characteristics. Thus 1917 is named “expansion and erosion”, and 1918 “suddenness and decay”. The cumulative effects become evident through more general reflection about the war after five, seventeen, and twenty-nine months of war respectively. Leonhard’s permanent change of perspective succeeded in demonstrating the openness of the situations, with an undetermined outcome almost up to the end of war. In the book he discussed the changing role of the individual as well as the cumulative effects of violence during the war. Politics and violence entered into a new relationship for the coming decades. It offered a military history, but one that is interwoven with social, cultural and political perspectives and often surprising details. Especially his use of examples on a microlevel result in a rewarding read. Finally, the book could be seen as an encyclopedia in its own right.

In his comparably slim volume of 415 pages, [Oliver Janz](#) followed a sectoral approach.^[24] Between chapters dealing with the road to war, the turn of the war (1917) and its end, he dealt with industrial war, war without boundaries, global war, and cultural war in the mass media. In general, he delivered astute essays without ending up in strong theses. In a different way, [William Mulligan’s](#) *The Great War for Peace* provided an ambitious overview which already bears a thesis in the title.^[25] He left no doubt about the cumulating violence which made peace more difficult the longer the war lasted. The [governments](#) of the warring powers developed different notions about what peace should be concluded, which was one of the main reasons why the war lasted so long. However, some lessons were learnt for the post-war period, a topic to which we will return below.

It is impossible to honor the overviews written from a national perspective. Most of them also provide a general background of the war in Europe and elsewhere. Among them range in the first places Peter Jackson’s revisionist look at French policy-making, *Beyond the Balance of Power*.^[26] Gerhard Hirschfeld and Gerd Krumeich have written a collection of mutually supporting essays which center on the mental effects of the war among civilians as well as soldiers.^[27] [Manfried Rauchensteiner](#) did something similar for [Austria-Hungary](#) when he expanded an older version from 1993, with over 700 pages, to 1,222 pages, switching between chronological and structural chapters.^[28]

Cultural History

There are many ways to write cultural history.^[29] One is to deal with [the arts](#) in general. Ernst Piper claimed to write a “cultural history of the First World War” in a thick description in the tradition of

Clifford Geertz (1926-2006).^[30] He quoted [literature](#), from poems to letters and novels, fine arts and sometimes music. The book is centered on Western Europe, especially on Germany, and puts great emphasis on [Switzerland](#) as a country of exile. The author is highly critical of German intellectuals, starting with the infamous “*Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*” in 1914, [mobilizing for a just war](#). Other authors such as Leonhard used fine arts or literature, but also all kinds of intellectual voices to comment on events and give today’s readers a sense of the atmosphere during the war. Many of these felt obliged to play a somewhat patriotic part in the war.

It is common with almost all authors to characterize the First World War as a [propaganda war](#), a war in which mental mobilization played an undisputed role for societies as such. Eberhard Demm is the last author who has tried a general overview,^[31] dealing with the organisation of propaganda, its distribution and its content and drawing from a rich variety of various sources. This encyclopedia contains more than thirty articles on [press, journalism](#) or [propaganda](#) in the respective countries.^[32] A different approach is taken by the *Kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch* on the First World War.^[33] In almost twenty chapters the authors attempted to diagnose the war as “an interruption of continuity as narratives which made sense, as questioning of traditions and until then untested knowledge [*Wissensbestände*]”. This led them to the media ([Bernd Hüppauf](#)), to the “war of nerves and war of will” (Bernd Ulrich) or to “making sense of the senseless” (Thomas Rohkrämer). All in all, this collective volume succeeded at making sense of a broader notion of culture, including a way of living, feeling and thinking. The Cambridge encyclopedia as well as this encyclopedia provide more and methodologically innovative entries.

Some topics which the *Handbuch* touched upon are masterly summed up by Jay Winter,^[34] who can build on many of his own earlier studies both on the First World War and for the whole 20th century in presenting an almost universal overview on remembrance of the war and the 20th century. Although this has become a widely researched theme, especially in France, another person could hardly achieve this as eloquently as Winter, or add such a rich choice of pictures.^[35] In another original way, Daniel Schönplflug effectively used literary testimonies from all over the world to reconstruct how emotions shaped the end of the war and especially the post-war period, with hate being one of the most important among them.^[36]

Battles and Warfare

Single battles, whole battlefields or the military events as such maintained an important role during the centenary, but in many cases acquired a special function in scholarly debates. One was the question: why did soldiers fight and accept the loss of their lives under the conditions of mass killing? Approximations can be made and centered between patriotism and hatred, on the one side, and resignation, forced discipline and longing for survival on the other. A second motive had much to do with [commemoration](#). The Battle of Vimy Ridge – the theme of [Tim Cook’s](#) book – was important in

Canadian nation building;^[37] the same could be demonstrated for the Battle of Gallipoli as an important part of Australian and New Zealand war efforts and thus nation building.^[38] A topic of special interest was the Battle of Verdun in 1916. It figured prominently in all general books about World War I. This holds true in an early popular summary by Olaf Jessen,^[39] but especially in a book co-authored by the French and German historians, Antoine Prost and Gerd Krumeich.^[40] It stands out as a special memorial event during the centenary. Both authors succeeded at delivering a common narrative for the subsequent political cultures and memories in both countries.

The German conquest of Belgium in 1914 belongs to another category. In 2001, John Horne and Alan Kramer established that contrary to accepted wisdom a large number of violations of international law against Belgian and French civilians, or “atrocities”, took place in the first months of the war.^[41] In 2017, a German art historian, Ulrich Keller, questioned this diagnosis and argued that there was irregular warfare organized by the Belgian state which legitimized the German retaliation.^[42] This approach started with a critique of the sources used and quickly became not only a question of the assessment of the contemporary German soldiers as eyewitnesses, but also a political revisionist debate about German political culture, not least because Gerd Krumeich, in an introduction to Keller’s book, insisted on the necessity of a new source-based look on the Belgian side. As of 2020, this appeal for fresh research especially in local Belgian sources has produced no results. The majority of international scholars rejected Keller’s uncritical and selective use of German sources.^[43]

A more voluminous challenge to this case study, also on the atrocities of 1914 in Belgium but on the opposite side of the argument, is Isabel Hull’s *Breaking and Making International Law during the Great War*.^[44] A specialist on the bellicose mentalities in imperial Germany, Hull offered an archive-based comparison of the acceptance and handling of international law, mainly in Germany, France and Great Britain. The main title of the book, *A Scrap of Paper*, alludes to Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg’s (1856-1921) official defence of the violation of Belgian neutrality and claims to show that only Germany was, from the outset, programmatically determined to violate international law, while the other powers in some cases also did so, but in principle accepted law “as a fundamental guarantor and a sensitive expression of community and of the expectation to uphold social behavior”.^[45] German claims of “war necessity” as a typical justification stood in contrast to the mentalities in the other war-waging countries. This comparative claim, that there was basic acceptance of international law in the international reality of war through and during the First World War, will be taken up later in this review. In his thorough study on France during the First World War, Peter Jackson found some arguments that this country indeed tried to wage the war in principles beyond the power politics of balancing,^[46] while William Mulligan, as quoted, also attached some importance to this argument.

When was the war lost or won? In most books, this question is answered in an ambiguous way. The importance of the U.S. entrance into war in 1917 is widely confirmed, but there is a consensus that

the situation remained open almost up to November 1918. In a volume edited by [Holger Afflerbach](#), established specialists for all the great powers provided an overview of military fighting during the war in general, and also showed “the complex interplay between political war aims, military strategy, morale at home and at the front, economics and war financing”.^[47] The (unsurprising, but generally confirmed) result was that [war aims](#) constantly changed during the war, but that the powers proved to be more or less unwilling to conclude peace in their “hand-to-mouth approach” and lacked the ability to compromise. William Mulligan, as quoted above, developed a similar argument. In his own monograph on the German side, Afflerbach argued that the Entente Powers did not give German peace efforts a chance.^[48] “After a certain time [...] a victory, regardless of either side, could not avert the disaster; on the contrary, a victory, not depending on which side, had to aggravate the situation.”^[49] With an important switch of argument, Krumeich argued, in another book, that Germany had had a chance to continue her war efforts after November 1918 and thus would have gained a milder peace in 1919,^[50] a notion which was contested in several reviews. More convincing for the openness of the situation seems to be Leonhard’s dichotomy in the title of his 1918 chapter: “Suddenness and Decay” (*Plötzlichkeit und Zerfall*) in which he combined structural factors with short-term surprising situations.^[51]

The Paris Conference: An Ambivalent Peace

After the first wave of publications on the origins of World War I before and in 2014, a second major wave on the follow-up of the war can be observed before and after 2018. As the general books about the First World War as such all ended up with the peace and memory of war, the new monographs about the peace mostly started their narrative around 1916/1917, but also followed the story up to the early 1920s, which can be seen as a period of somewhat continued violence and even war. Three books with a general, i.e. global, coverage are outstanding in this sense. Jörn Leonhard has written a second, even more voluminous book, *Der überforderte Frieden*,^[52] with 1,531 pages, Eckart Conze’s *Die große Illusion* spanned 538 pages,^[53] and Klaus Schwabe’s *Versailles* is a slimmer book of 293 pages.^[54] They all agree: it does not make much sense to assign one nation or politician with the responsibility that a lasting peace was not achieved. On the contrary, they each demonstrated the amount of problems with which the “peacemakers” were confronted. While Schwabe concentrated his argument on the failed “Wilson peace” and his “self-determination”, Leonhard and Conze did not identify one specific concept as a guiding one, but distinguished multiple actors (and ideas) – or even a multitude – [in Paris between 1918 and 1920](#) who achieved much under severe time pressure, while facing both old and rapidly emerging new problems. They did not only take the actors into consideration, but focused on the problems of the post-war period everywhere in Europe and in the global sphere, which became pressing. Thus, contrary to what their main title may signal, the focus which Leonhard and Conze chose is not only the Paris negotiations, but also the political, social and cultural challenges which existed in different countries or regions which required quick, sometimes immediate, responses and solutions. The great strength of

Leonhard's second book was a rich description of what happened simultaneously and the questions he posed. He thus gave a glimpse of "world moments". In the end he seemed skeptical about whether, and how, he could succeed at demonstrating this complexity. Conze, in comparison, was more devoted to political decisions; he was sometimes more critical towards some which were inadequate for the challenges to which they responded.

[Robert Gerwarth](#) went a step further with *The Vanquished*.^[55] After the earlier publication of a collective volume about [paramilitary violence](#) all over Europe,^[56] in this volume he ostensibly concentrated on the vanquished powers, but in reality gave a general view of how interstate, civil and ideological wars, which in many cases started in the second half of the war, often continued up to 1923. This is a topic to which authors like Conze and Leonhard also attached great importance when they dealt with the wider problem of how [societies](#), notwithstanding this kind of violence, finally succeeded in (re)structuring both themselves and states. This led to the release of a wealth of monographs with national approaches, which attempted to cover the complexities of domestic and international rebuilding on that level. At least in the German context, more than a dozen books would have to be mentioned, addressing continued violence, the building of democracy, cultural innovation, economic hardship and new gender roles, to name but a few topics.

An International Order between Violence and Law

There is scholarly consensus that the First World War marked a new quality of collective violence through [warfare](#) as such, but also – as just mentioned – in several other aspects, as a kind of European civil war. To what extent did this lead to a new quality or dimension of law in international relations? The most important book in this regard is Marcus Payk's *Peace by Law?*.^[57] The subtitle, *The Rise of Modern International Law and the Conclusion of Peace after the First World War*, offers a glimpse of the main thesis. Starting in the second half of the 19th century, the author argued that a new acceptance of law as a part of warfare guided the western allies during the war; this is similar to Isabel Hull's studies, mentioned above. But he went further: ranging from the armistice to the conclusion of the [Versailles Treaty](#), Payk recognized that there was a basic principle of building a new international order based on law. He constantly discussed the implications for power politics, but insisted on a change of character in international relations. "Peace by law", in Payk's interpretation, created a new basis, which one could call a new constitutionalisation of international law. The [League of Nations](#) was not only an institution, its covenant also codified this new role of law. In a more general way and with an overview on war, peace and the aftermath in a longer period, Jean-Michel Guieu covered the same field with similar conclusions.^[58]

In the general discussion of power, politics and law, all the relevant books mentioned here offer observations, but authors such as Mulligan would basically agree with Payk's diagnosis, while Münkler, for example, would probably stand on the other side, arguing that law largely served as a convenient instrument for somewhat disguised interests.^[59] Krumeich, again on the other side of the

argument, implicitly contended that German complaints of being denied a lawful peace and especially the German people's renunciation were justified.^[60] (This author has elsewhere preferred to address a German collective denial of reality).^[61]

Recently, Payk and Perger have assembled a number of innovative, wide-ranging case studies on the relationship between power, politics and law after the war.^[62] Volker Prott's post-war era topics are the problems of "self-determination", the value of which is only self-evident at first sight, and the creation of new states.^[63] In a similar way, but with another strong point, Leonard V. Smith has placed the notion of sovereignty at the forefront of his study, as a new quality in international law.^[64] International legal historians also joined genuine historians in studying historical sources in depth. An excellent example for this was William Schabas' *The Trial of the Kaiser*, in which the author demonstrated how the first "international criminal court" was planned and debated in Versailles, but finally failed, giving way to an ineffective [German national tribunal](#).^[65] With and without argument for a new guiding role of international law or a change in the fabric of international relations, there are several books which cover this trend.

This, finally, also led to new approaches to (early) League of Nations history and includes such topics as the role of the League of Nations in the crisis of [empires](#),^[66] their activities in social questions,^[67] and the role of law in the transfer of populations, mostly outside the League of Nations.^[68] Connected to but not identical with the question of law is the rise of internationalism. In recent years, Glenda Sluga has elaborated on a dialectic relationship with [nationalism](#). Internationalism had already developed around 1900, but took another turn during the war and thus influenced the foundation of the League of Nations through several influential civil movements.^[69] This builds a kind of flip-side of a new start, in comparison to the continuing wars and violence.^[70]

Global Dimensions of the First World War

As the common name "First World War" indicates (besides the "Great War"), there was a world-wide or global dimension, which has only recently been adequately taken into consideration. It is self-evident that the entry of the [United States](#) into the war in 1917 marked an important caesura, but the deeper dimensions were subject to notable publications. One of the most innovative books is Adam Tooze's *The Deluge*.^[71] It starts in 1916, with the upcoming U.S. entry into the war as the beginning of a new order of the world, and ends in the early 1930s. Tooze underlined the suddenness, as well as the speed and extension, with which this rise of the United States to a leading role in the world took place. Another strength of Tooze's approach is the emphasis on economic developments, which are balanced with political, military and mental strategies overlapping within and between states to create this kind of new world order.

While all other major studies recognize the new role in world politics which the U.S., and especially

[Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), played, there are some new aspects addressed in a collective volume, *Beyond 1917*, namely the war's global legacies, primarily for the United States. It makes sense to look at the consequences of a multi-ethnic society embarking on the road to war after 1914, as [Michael S. Neiberg](#) argued in this volume. This had global consequences beyond the creation of direct zones of U.S. influence in and after the war.^[72]

But it was not only and not even primarily the United States which marked the global dimension. More important in the global dimension of war were the European colonial empires and the consequences for world trade. All the major monographs touched on these problems, mostly in separate chapters, but a programmatic title like [Daniel Segesser's](#) *The First World War in Global Perspective* was not published in this review period.^[73] The closest during the centenary may be some collective volumes, such as Robert Gerwarth and [Erez Manela's](#) case study on the empires^[74] and [Richard Fogarty](#) and Andrew Jarboe's thirteen essays on different aspects of this phenomenon, ranging from colonial troops, also in Europe, to the legacies.^[75]

The global aspects of the Great War have ever since covered the [non-European world](#), but mostly as sites of battle, e.g. in the [Middle East](#), the "colonial wars" in [Africa](#) or the [war at sea](#). Yves-Marie Adeline's popular book offered an example of this conventional global view.^[76] For decades, David Stevenson has been one of the most prolific scholars specialised in international relations before and during the war. In his *1917*, he presented an illuminating account of the interdependence of European events with the global developments in a wider sense, here exemplified with the spread of interventions in [Greece](#), [China](#), [Siam](#) and [Brazil](#).^[77] In Germany, a 2014 special issue of the journal *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, edited by Oliver Janz, offered an early overview of all continents outside the common focus on Europe and North America.^[78]

[Latin America](#) was only indirectly affected by the war. However, in terms of the change in international trade and also cultural forms such as transnational communications, it played an important role, not only as a catalysator, as [Stefan Rinke](#) among others has demonstrated.^[79] The [Ottoman Empire](#) as a belligerent and defeated power was included in all the major studies. This is a major field of specialized research which cannot be covered here. By far the most interesting of them is [\[LinkTo::Project:Yigit Akin|Yiğit Akin's\]\]](#) study, which attempted to combine a history of everyday life in the empire with imperial politics in the declining Ottoman Empire.^[80] Besides this convincing book, only a few major studies were published during the centenary. One of the authors is Eugene Rogan, who placed more emphasis on military events, while Leila Fawaz dedicated more space to social history.^[81] Of course, for the British Empire, the performance of the Indian army and the role of Australian and New Zealand involvement in this region played a major part. With special emphasis on inner-empire violence and the [genocide of the Armenians](#), [Hans-Lukas Kieser](#) has presented two collective volumes.^[82]

A similar observation of a few centennial innovations may be made for Africa. The war as such and

especially the fight for the German colonies in East Africa, which lasted until the armistice, are well-researched. But the question which [Hew Strachan](#) raised more than a decade ago has yet to be discussed: how “total” warfare was waged on this continent. Little research has been carried out on the influences of the war on African ethnicities and societies, while the role which African soldiers played in warfare, also abroad in Europe, is more well-known. This leads to the transnational aspects of social and cultural life as well as questions of race and gender. When looking at global exchange, comparative studies on the local and transnational aspects of the war are of special interest. Many of them were presented at innovative conferences and found their first condensation in collective volumes. For example: There were [Chinese contract labourers](#) digging out trenches on the [battlefields of the Somme](#). What does that mean for them, and for Chinese-European relations as such?^[83] The [Spanish flu](#) was a global event, the spread of which is still not fully understood.^[84] These transnational social interchanges do not necessarily have to do with warfare as such. In another collective volume, there can be found such subtle studies as that on the role which water lilies have played in Indian psychological warfare.^[85] These entangled histories received special importance through the acceleration of social and cultural life worldwide, but so far can only be regarded as an integral part of the major monographs.

This applies particularly to the general role which Asia played during the war and in the post-war period. Leonhard and Conze included this continent in their monographs, where they could build on a rich specialized literature. [Guoqi Xu](#) is, here, one of the most prolific authors. He has integrated this research into an overview of the First World War in Asia, in an essay-style monograph.^[86] He demonstrated that there was not only hope for Wilsonianism. Genuine nationalism rose and was amplified in [China](#), [Japan](#), [Korea](#) and [India](#). This led to different, but common reactions of disappointment during and after the peace conference when, for example, [Japan’s draft for a convention against racism failed](#). China was the only country which refused to sign the Versailles Treaty. In the Chinese and Japanese cases, this had lasting effects up to the present time. Heather Streets-Salter showed how the character of British and French colonial rule changed during the war in Southern Asia. Different “mutinies” formed an interconnected trend and paved the way for stronger assertiveness after the war.^[87]

Central and Eastern Europe

Especially rewarding in recent publications has been a stronger focus on Central, Eastern and South-East Europe. The centenary of the [Bolshevik revolution](#) and [Russia](#) as such has found comparatively smaller attention. In a two-volume publication, which was quickly translated from Polish into German, Włodzimierz Borodziej and [Maciej Górny](#) covered the whole region between “Riga and Skopje”, not only [Poland](#). They wrote about the period from the [Balkan Wars 1912-1913](#) to the end of the [Polish-Soviet War in 1921](#), in some aspects also up to 1923.^[88] This “forgotten war” – which, in scholarly reality, has not been so under-researched – signalled that the perspective had, until recently, in many cases been a Western view which had regarded the East mostly as a

backward region which had to accommodate to general, i.e. Western European, standards, or was seen as an object of their tutelage. These authors indeed presented a region of violence, which was not only or primarily a battlefield for the Great Powers, but also a conflict zone in which national, regional, ethnic and sometimes local factors mattered more. They distinguished several forms of war, but their clear narrative is embedded in often anecdotal scenes, which always lead to innovative analytical observations in social and cultural history. [Jochen Böhler's](#) *Civil War in Central Europe* is a more in-depth special study than the Borodziej-Górny book.^[89] It was centered on Poland, but sometimes also covered wider regions in South-East Europe. This author showed that “self-determination” in a Wilsonian sense did not make much sense in the different mixed-ethnic situations in which international, civil and ideological violence overlapped and were entangled. The peace conference and the Western Allies – this can be concluded from Borodziej and Górny more than from Böhler – was one factor among others in the restructuring the region. This “war after the war” was not an additional war which broke out after the war of the Great Powers was over, but signified a continuing process of restructuring, in which state-building proved to be a difficult process.

Seen in this way, a collective volume on German-Polish relations, again during and after the war, was a welcome addition. The work contains twenty contributions, which cover a wide range, from battles to the social and cultural relations of Germans and Poles.^[90] This bilingual Polish and German publication deals with the period from the [occupation regime](#) to the interwar years from various perspectives. At a first glance, [Alexander Watson's](#) voluminous book appears to only deal with the coalition warfare of Germany and Austria-Hungary.^[91] In fact, it offers much more, such as a description of the war and battles in coalition warfare, but also of the zone of violence in which the two great powers operated. Finally, it should be remembered that Leonhard, Conze and Gerwarth also attached great importance to this region, thus overcoming the traditional emphasis on the act of nation-building in a zone where three empires lost their sovereignty in war and civil war under difficult conditions. The shifting nature of nationalism on different levels on a European scale is the theme of a collective volume edited by [Nico Wouters](#) and [Laurence van Ypersele](#).^[92] Especially for Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, their book included fresh observations of the change of the multitude of loyalties, which were mostly not based on a coherent notion of a unified fatherland.

Outlook and Conclusion

The First World War had lasting consequences; the centenary is one of them. These legacies pertain to public memory as well as to [historiography](#). Although influenced by transnational and international exchange, most parts of memories have remained national. A good collection on the history of commemoration can be found in the special issues of journals. *Diplomatic History* presented sixteen national essays in a September 2014 “commemorative issue”,^[93] but also included research notes on topics such as international law. *Ventunesimo Secolo*, to give another example, presented five “national” overview papers.^[94] The fundamental importance of the so-called “war guilt question” and its ensuing incorporation in the Versailles Treaty has, ever since, been part of Germany’s contested

political culture, as the documentation of the fifty-year anniversary of the Fischer (and arguably also the Clark) controversy demonstrates. For France, Norman Ingram now has demonstrated that the “war guilt question”, more than any other topic, determined political culture and debates at least until the Second World War.^[95] To sum up: it should be noted that almost all of the above-mentioned overall views deal with national or international memorial cultures.

The analysis of the long-term consequences for domestic policy and international systems has to be sharply distinguished from this. Methodologically, there is an important difference between political instrumentation and the practice of attaching meaning or importance, in the past decades and up to the present times. In this sense, political demonstrations of a multipolar international system in 2014, 100 years later, as historian Christopher Clark does, make sense as part of civic education, while the political use of a new “July Crisis” in our time does not, or only a little. In a similar way, almost all authors presented in this review caution against the direct conclusion that the First World War and especially the Versailles Treaty must have led to National Socialist rule in Germany and to the Second World War, when they hint at the alternatives open for contemporaries. This is different from the instrumentalisation of the Versailles Treaty as a parallel, as today’s Russian president Vladimir Putin has done for a decade, most recently on 20 December 2019 when he compared the German “humiliation” in 1919 in Versailles with the treatment of Russia today.^[96] This transcends the perspectives of serious historiography.

The perspectives of memory and political consequences notwithstanding, recent research on the First World War has been more strongly embedded in its prehistory and aftermath. This does not signify the traditional question about long or short ways into the war, with the first ones being more structural, and the second depending on situational factors (the equivalent could be said of the post-war period). At least for Europe, many studies published in a centenary perspective attached importance to violent and military events, at least since the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, which only continued in the Great Power war after 1914. Respective developments are frequently observed for the period after the armistices and peace treaties of 1918 to 1920, which were often characterized by continuing war in different forms. There can be no question that the declarations of war in and after August 1914 marked an important point, that the Armistice and the Paris Peace Conference meant an important *caesura*, but with some hyperbole, recent historiography has *decentered* “August 1914” as well as “Versailles”, or at least added more and other dimensions to the battles and carnage between the Great Powers. In this way, the traditional strongpoint of the European [Western Front](#) and its Great Powers warfare has also been supplemented by a closer look at Central and Eastern Europe. More importantly: the character of the First World War as a global war and a military struggle, but more so as a war with complex political, economic, cultural and social dimensions, has received new impulses.

This review underlined that there were two major phases of centenary historiography. The first one started in 2012 and touched upon questions of responsibility, but also led to insightful comprehensive monographs. The second wave began in and after 2017 and mostly dealt with the end of fighting, the

transitions to the end of bloodshed, and the efforts to conclude peace while wars still continued. Given the rhythm of historiographical publications and their role in public memory and debates, in early 2020 this phase is still going on – also for the centenary of the First World War.

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Important New Scholarship Published During the Centenary

Adeline, Yves-Marie: *Histoire mondiale de la Grande Guerre 1914-1918*, Paris 2017.

Afflerbach, Holger (ed.): *The Purpose of the First World War. War Aims and Military Strategies*, Berlin et al. 2015.

Afflerbach, Holger: *Auf Messers Schneide. Wie das Deutsche Reich den Ersten Weltkrieg verlor*, Munich 2018.

Akın, Yiğit: *When the War Came Home. The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire*, Stanford 2018.

Beaumont, Joan: *Broken Nation. Australians in the Great War*, Sydney 2014.

Böhler, Jochen: *Civil war in Central Europe, 1918-1921. The Reconstruction of Poland*, Oxford 2018.

Borodziej, Włodzimierz / Górný, Maciej: *Der vergessene Weltkrieg. Europas Osten 1912-1923*, 2 volumes, Darmstadt 2018.

Bromber, Katrin et al. (eds.): *The Long End of the First World War. Ruptures, Continuities and Memories*, Frankfurt et al. 2018.

Clark, Christopher M.: *Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London 2013.

Conze, Eckart: *Die große Illusion. Versailles 1919 und die Neuordnung der Welt*, Munich 2018.

Cook, Tim: *Vimy. The Battle and the Legend*, Toronto 2018.

Demm, Eberhard: *Censorship and Propaganda in World War I. A Comprehensive History*, London et al. 2019.

Fawaz, Leila Tarazi: *A Land of Aching Hearts. The Middle East in the Great War*, Cambridge 2014.

Fogarty, Richard / Jarboe, Andrew: *Empires in World War I. Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict*, London 2014.

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Hull, Isabel V.: A Scrap of Paper. Breaking and Making International Law During the Great War, Ithaca 2014.

Ingram, Norman: The War Guilt Problem and the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, 1914-1944, Oxford 2019.

Jackson, Peter: Beyond the Balance of Power. France and the Politics of National Security in the Era of the First World War, Cambridge 2013.

Jarboe, Andrew Tait / Fogarty, Richard (eds.): Empires in World War I. Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict, London et al. 2014.

Keller, Ulrich: Schuldfragen. Belgischer Untergrundkrieg und deutsche Vergeltung im August 1914, Paderborn 2017.

Kieser, Hans-Lukas et al. (eds.): The End of the Ottomans. The Genocide of 1915 and the Politics of Turkish Nationalism, London et al. 2019.

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Leonhard, Jörn: Der überforderte Frieden. Versailles und die Welt 1918-1923, Munich 2018.

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