

Controversy: War Culture

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Summary

Cultural approaches to the Great War have played a key part in the renewal of First World War Studies. French historians were instrumental to this process, not least with the introduction in the 1990s of an important and much debated concept, that of “war culture”. In France itself however, the discussion of the “war culture” soon became the central if not exclusive focus of the scholarly debate. It soon degenerated into a full-blown controversy. The dispute does however raise a number of important questions for our understanding of French and European experiences of the conflict.

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Introduction

The ceremony held in Paris on 11 November 2018 under the aegis of the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, offered a fitting and moving conclusion to the official [French commemorations of the centenary of the First World War](#). In part designed to meet the

political exigencies of that particular moment, this inclusive and multicultural ceremony was used by the French leader to reassert republican civic values and to defend multilateralism in the face of national-populist movements and leaders. Most significantly however, the ceremony marked the culmination and the symbolic end of a long and intense commemorative sequence. The preparations for the French centenary had officially begun in the spring of 2011, when then President Nicolas Sarkozy commissioned Joseph Zimet, a senior civil servant and historian, to produce a prospective mapping exercise. His report both testified to and foresaw what would be a hallmark of the commemoration between 2014 and 2018: a very high degree of mobilisation of local authorities, cultural institutions, and of the heritage and tourism sectors. Such a degree of investment, if not perhaps unprecedented, had not been seen at least since the bicentenary of the French Revolution in 1989. The report set out the principles that guided the French government and all stakeholders thenceforward and should be seen and studied as a critical piece of evidence in the history of the centenary as public policy.

The report also called for the creation of a scientific board tasked with the definition of the intellectual and commemorative orientations of the French centenary. The board was to “reflect all historiographical sensitivities (*sensibilités*).”¹ That this most reasonable recommendation came couched in a language often associated with ideological and partisan debates did not surprise scholars familiar with First World War studies in France. For the report thus diplomatically acknowledged the bitter [historiographical dispute](#) that had riven the field since the late 1990s and split the historical profession over a critical question: how to account for the resilience of French soldiers and civilians in the face of the demands of industrial warfare in 1914-1918. For over twenty years, this dispute has mainly focussed upon the existence, nature, and significance of what [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#) and [Annette Becker](#) called the 1914-1918 “war culture.”² The term now often serves as a convenient if misleading shorthand for a critical debate about the respective importance of patriotic mobilisation and state-enforced discipline in explaining the cohesion of wartime [France](#). The argument was soon framed as an alternative between consent and coercion and as the irreconcilable opposition between two distinct groups of historians now at intellectual and professional loggerheads.³

In this context, the French *Mission du Centenaire* did not simply oversee a busy and generally successful commemoration; it also proved remarkably effective in bringing and in keeping around the same table a number of historians who often were not on speaking, let alone collegial, terms before 2014. This article will not attempt a sociology of this controversy. Suffice it to say that, as it is often the case in intellectual milieus or milieux, this debate revealed a toxic combination of political differences, institutional rivalries, professional

ambitions, and personal enmities. However, the resources and opportunities that the centenary offered, along with the increased workload it entailed, underlined the pragmatic necessity of cooperation and helped lower the polemical tone of a still simmering controversy. For the First World War (WWI) remains a searing scar in the French historical consciousness and an important point of reference in cultural and political debates. This, more than the attention devoted to the most recent commemorations, explains why the dispute regularly escapes seminar rooms to resurface on the pages of newspapers and magazines.⁴

This controversy raises a number of issues of great importance for historians of the French and European experiences of the war, but has been artificially maintained to impose a binary and profoundly misleading vision of the French historiography of the war. This article will first address the controversy in its own terms, considering in turn the “war culture” and the responses it generated. It will then discuss two of the key issues raised by the dispute: the nature and significance of patriotism in WWI France and the role of the state in social mobilisation.

The War Culture: a Paradigm?

From cultural history to “war culture”

The introduction of the concept of “war culture” was one of many manifestations of the comparative and cultural turns that have renewed our understanding of the First World War since the 1990s.⁵ This “new cultural history” was first defined and practiced by an international group of scholars associated with the *Historial de la Grande Guerre*, a transnational museum of the war created at Péronne on the [battlefield of the Somme](#). This intellectual and curatorial project was not solely devoted to cultural history but had also been designed to challenge conventional national narratives, both popular and scholarly. Its key premise was that belligerent societies developed a specific system of representations in response to their common experience of industrial warfare and that national identities inflected but did not fully determine the cultural dynamics of social mobilisation across the continent.⁶ As a result, it called for a reconsideration of the relationship between belligerent states, their armies, and civilian populations. This globalising perspective thus took issue with national exceptionalisms. It also strove to encompass front and home front in an integrated approach, where [popular memory](#) and conventional histories of the war had usually reinforced the perceived gap between the military and civilian experiences of the conflict.⁷

In France, this “new cultural history” was soon associated with Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and

Annette Becker who developed a coherent programme of research focussing on the 1914-1918 “war culture” to understand the “investment of the European populations in the conflict.”⁸ Published in 2000, their essay – *14-18 Retrouver la guerre* – set out to consolidate and systematise the interpretation offered by the cultural history of the war around three key ideas: consent, eschatology, and violence. A scholarly argument, their book was also meant to push back against the grain of collective memory which often reduced the war experience to victimisation. The archival record, they argued, does not simply document the undeniable horrors of industrial warfare; it also testifies to the [popular consent to the war](#).⁹ This “defensive acquiescence” to the war was rooted into a political and emotional attachment to the nation, often expressed through the language and images of the sacred. Becker’s work on wartime spirituality here reinforced Audoin-Rouzeau’s initial study of national sentiment.¹⁰ They went on to stress the syncretic [convergences of religious creeds and secular ideologies](#) and to place an “immense collective tension of an eschatological kind” at the heart of the “war culture.”¹¹ Finally, their reading of [George L. Mosse \(1918-1999\)](#) and his concept of “brutalization” provided the keystone of their interpretative framework.¹² It ascribed a critical centrality to the violence of the conflict as a fundamental determinant of the “war culture”, now defined as the “true matrix” of the conflict. The cultural dynamics of the First World War therefore made it the harbinger of the industrialised massacres of the Second.¹³

From concept to paradigm

Within a decade, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker had amply demonstrated the value of cultural approaches to the First World War.¹⁴ But the “war culture” did not simply stand for a programme of study that they would lead and carry out along with their respective students. The particular intellectual context in which it emerged explained why their cultural exploration of the First World War came to be seen as a fully-fledged historiographical paradigm. The mid-1990s represent a particular juncture in the development of the historical discipline in France. Initiated long before the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, the gradual abandonment of Marxism as a central point of reference accompanied the decline of the type of social and economic history associated with the second generation of the *Annales* school, which had dominated French historiography since the 1960s. The bicentenary of the French Revolution had for instance been marked by the debates and controversies over [François Furet’s \(1927-1997\)](#) revisionist arguments. In the following years, French historians would produce a vast literature devoted to the analysis of what some perceived as a damaging fragmentation if not a full-blown crisis of the historical discipline.¹⁵ Representatives of different fields and sub-disciplines were thus encouraged, often by entrepreneurial

publishers, to offer their own paradigm as a path towards the reconstruction of the discipline as a whole. Indeed the first systematic elaboration of the “war culture” argument appeared in a volume championing cultural history.¹⁶ In this context *14-18 Retrouver la Guerre* reads as much as a historiographical manifesto as a synthesis of the work of historians affiliated with the Historial de la Grande Guerre. To be sure Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker successfully defined the agenda for First World War studies in France over the last twenty years. The volume and quality of the scholarship it generated is no little vindication of an approach that also benefitted from their institutional recognition beyond academia.¹⁷ Indeed, the “war culture” did find its way into school textbooks and has now been fully absorbed by the curriculum prescribed to secondary schools by the French Ministry of Education. More than a simple academic concept, “war culture” therefore revealed, if not a paradigm in [Thomas Kuhn's \(1922-1996\)](#) sense of the word, at least a clear paradigmatic ambition.

CRID 14-18 and the institutional challenge to the “war culture”

Popular testimonies and “culture de paix”

This ambition did not go unchallenged and the intellectual and institutional response to the “war culture” soon turned a legitimate debate over its nature and significance into a fierce controversy. It publicly erupted at a conference organised in 1998 to take stock of eighty years of historical writings on the First World War.¹⁸ At that time, the key point of contention was the treatment and status of soldiers’ memoirs and testimonies and the discussion specifically focussed on testimonies emphasising victimisation over consent, like that of [Louis Barthas \(1879-1952\)](#).¹⁹ It then moved on to the interwar critique and anthology of war books and literature by [Jean Norton Cru \(1879-1949\)](#).²⁰ [Rémy Cazals](#) and Frédéric Rousseau, soon joined by [Nicolas Offenstadt](#), organised their response to Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker with the creation of the *Collectif de Recherche International et de Débat sur la Guerre de 1914-1918* (CRID 14-18) in 2005. This group of academic and amateur historians set out to formulate an alternative interpretation of the conflict. They denounced and derided the “war culture” as a “peronnist (sic)” vision whose dominance in their view stifled academic debate. They argued that the “war culture”, predicated upon the testimonies of social and cultural elites, unacceptably rode roughshod over the experiences of the common soldiers and the memory of their unwilling sacrifice. By contrast to Audoin-Rouzeau’s and Becker’s emphasis on “consent”, they argued that the coercive and ideological state apparatus, its capacity to suppress dissent and to maintain the discipline within both army and society, accounts for the resilience of belligerent societies. The latter, they contend, should never be confused or equated with a positive commitment to the war. In their conscious effort to mobilise

conceptual tools drawn from French radical sociology, they define the cultural history of the war as that of the resistance of alienated combatants. Logically, they highlight the expression of dissent in the face of state-directed [propaganda](#) and oppose “war culture” and “*culture de paix*.” Their argument contributed to but never accurately reflected the wider critical discussion of the “war culture” that this article will address below. In France however, the strategy pursued by the CRID 14-18 ended up framing the discussion in profoundly misleading and problematic ways.

A rival paradigmatic ambition

In many ways, the ambitions of the CRID 14-18 mirror those of the *Historial*. Both consider it a duty to challenge what they perceived to be dominant narratives in the academic and public spheres. Though keen to denounce the confusion of history and memory and their political usages, the CRID 14-18 chose to establish their group and to hold their meeting at Craonne, an iconic site in the [pacifist](#) memory of the war. In doing so, they appropriated a site that might be construed as the “anti-[Verdun](#)” to reject consensual and patriotic narratives. Such an association of their historiographical project with a symbol of wartime dissent reinforced their public strategy as well as their focus on the French experience and memory of the war. By contrast to most academic networks or societies, the CRID 14-18 defines itself, in the parlance of contemporary social movements, as a collective. They conceive First World War studies as a “field” in [Pierre Bourdieu’s \(1930-2002\)](#) terms; a domain wherein actors mobilise their resources and capital to stake their claim to dominance in a field here mainly defined in national terms. Indeed, despite their stated international remit, the CRID 14-18 primarily invested First World War studies in France and never fully engaged in transnational debates. Its leaders set out to mobilise their networks in the media and publishing worlds to give the larger echo possible to their intellectual enterprise. The fact that this controversy regularly found its way onto the pages of leading newspapers and magazines demonstrates the protagonists’ ability to successfully mobilise the social capital afforded them by their eminent professional and social status. For the controversy is not simply a procedure used to adjudicate between scholarly interpretations. It is a strategy to impose one’s domination in a particular field. This was notably illustrated in 2008 and 2009 after the publication of series of review articles in the left-leaning, online cultural magazine, *La Vie des Idées*. They included an attempt by an independent scholar, [Jean-Yves Le Naour](#), to suggest ways to move beyond the controversy. This earned him a rather virulent and revealing attack from four leading members of the CRID 14-18.^{[21](#)} Their response was remarkable for a number of reasons. It was first aimed at a historian who, despite its significant contribution to the field, operated outside the academy and who therefore did not present an institutional threat.^{[22](#)} The media presence of Le Naour, a prolific historian and

former student of Audoin-Rouzeau's, might well have got under the skin of ambitious academics crying out for similar recognition. Be that as it may, the tone as much as the substance of the criticism levelled at Le Naour did betray the properly existential nature of the controversy that provided the CRID with its *raison d'être* and accounts for its organising principles. Membership of the CRID 14-18 is indeed limited to those whose application has been seconded by existing members. Each application is then vetted by the group's advisory board, which must unanimously agree to the fitness of the would-be member. Such procedure stands in sharp contrast to the collective's professed commitment to open debate and to their very public protestations against the political uses and abuses of history.

Social history vs. cultural history

Whatever reservations one may express at the methods and strategy the CRID 14-18 deployed to prevail in the "field", it did produce a considerable and useful body of work. Unfortunately, the CRID's insistence on framing the historical discussion in polarising terms undermined its reception and diminished its overall contribution. For instance, Rousseau's *La guerre censurée* undercut his own comparative ambition by placing the experience of European combatants in the analytical straightjacket of the French debate. As he strains to elevate coercion, propaganda, and the state suppression of dissent to the central and ultimate determinant of the war experience, it artificially homogenises its undeniable plurality. It also radically underestimates the agency of subaltern soldiers and civilians. Most problematically, the years leading to the centenary saw the CRID 14-18 turn their critique of the "war culture" paradigm into a wholesale repudiation of cultural history itself. This recent development is no little paradox when one considers the contribution made by [André Loez](#) or Nicolas Offenstadt to the cultural history of the war. Such is however the logical endpoint of a controversy which hinged on the relentless pursuit of a historiographical straw man. Its construction did not simply entail a *reductio ad absurdum* of Audoin-Rouzeau's and Becker's paradigmatic ambitions. It also requires the assimilation of all types of cultural history to their interpretative framework. This systematic critique of the "war culture" eventually turned into a radical rejection of cultural history. While the CRID's interventions now routinely dismiss "culturalist" interpretations,²³ its denunciation of cultural history was most forcefully articulated in 2014 by Philippe Olivera. Olivera characterises the "new history" of the Great War as an elitist and eminently political project pursued by powerful intellectuals anxious to negate the historical reality and contemporary political potential of class distinctions and social conflicts.²⁴ In vehement and often condescending terms, Olivera effectively accuses other historians of evading a necessary debate over the "war culture", of compounding intellectual failure with political cowardice. Regardless of the political implications of his charge, Olivera inexplicably gives short shrift to the methodology of cultural history and to its

French practitioners. Roger Chartier, to name but one, demonstrated long before the dispute erupted that there was no contradiction between the history of representations and that of social identities and class relations.²⁵ And *pace* Olivera, historians of the First World War did not wait for the centenary commemorations to mobilise the very references he invokes, from [Antonio Gramsci \(1891-1937\)](#) to Bourdieu, to explore the interaction of consent and coercion as well as the role of [social conflicts](#) in wartime mobilisation.²⁶ In the end, this attempt to fan the flames of the controversy achieved little but to promote a distorted and partial view of French historiography in general and of the debate over the “war culture” in particular.

War and belligerence

In fact, the controversy never gave a comprehensive and accurate picture of the healthy and vigorous discussions that the “war culture” prompted within and outside France. This debate is testament to the importance of the contribution that cultural history made to First World War studies and raised key issues of importance for historians of the French and European experiences of the conflict. Scholars first took exception with the primacy that Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker ascribed to the “war culture” as the normative matrix of the conflict.²⁷ Military historians also reminded us that culture can hardly be described as the ultimate determinant of the war experience when tactical and operational constraints, as well as [technology](#) or [logistics](#), also defined the character of the conflict.²⁸ If the violence of the First World War reached unprecedented thresholds and challenged the conventional demarcations between combatants and non-combatants, many historians have expressed doubt about George Mosse’s brutalization thesis, too. Mosse’s analysis of the German experience of the conflict raised fascinating questions about the continuation of war and the process of cultural demobilisation in Europe. It thus opened up a now vibrant field of inquiry.²⁹ It does not however account for the different ways in which the war altered the political and cultural foundations of belligerent societies or affected [veterans’](#) personalities.³⁰ [Jay Winter](#) recently suggested that WWI testified less of a brutalization conceived in Mosse’s terms than in the degeneration of the norms of [warfare](#), particularly after 1917.³¹

Consent and belligerence

The scale and complexity of the national, let alone European or global, experiences of an industrial conflict such as the Great War is enough to dampen any grand generalising ambition that scholars might entertain. Yet Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker identified key aspects of the cultural dynamics that underpinned the social and military mobilisation for war in Europe. Across many belligerent countries, and irrespective of their actual strategic

positions, the conflict was perceived as a defensive war, waged against an uncivilised and often dehumanised enemy, whose victory threatened one's own culture, identity, and way of life. That this narrative formed a central part of [state-directed propaganda](#) does not mean that the populations were hoodwinked into the conflict by [nationalist](#) lies and maintained in a state of mental subjugation by propaganda and [censorship](#). In this regard, one can hardly overstate the significance of the invasions of 1914. In France, the initial success of the mobilisation and the continuing resilience of soldiers and civilians was construed as a response to an illegitimate and brutal aggression. By contrast to 1940, the imperative of national defence was never seriously questioned. Consent, however, was not synonymous with enthusiasm for war as [Jean-Jacques Becker](#) demonstrated in the late 1970s.³² The need for an operative definition of consent is indeed an area of agreement among French scholars of the Great War.³³ Sociologist and CRID member Nicolas Mariot thus drew on the work of [J. D. Wright \(1947-2019\)](#) and M. Dobry, to suggest an interesting typology of wartime attitudes and elaborates on the notions of "consent", "dissent", and "assent".³⁴ Wright's "assent" does however imply a depth of sociological alienation that only ever affected the most marginal sections of the belligerent societies.³⁵ The "totalizing logic" ([John Horne](#)) of the war and the compound impact of [human losses](#) and economic dislocation meant that the conflict pervaded virtually all spheres of social and individual life. Yet Mariot's case for a critical and sociological approach to consent is eminently sensible as the invocation of a singular "war culture" misrepresents the nature of social mobilisation. The core narrative identified by Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker was indeed constantly reconfigured through a process of acculturation and appropriation that committed most social groups to the war effort. The plurality of the war cultures sustaining their mobilisation was indeed rooted in concomitant senses of belonging (national, class, religious, [gender](#), local identities, etc.) and in their respective social history. While consent tends to understate this plurality, the notion of belligerence underlines by contrast the social construction of wartime mobilisation, acknowledges the unequal power relations that defined social interactions, and underscores the conditionality of consent. Belligerence was indeed constantly reconfigured in the course of this industrial conflict and refers to the process of negotiation that accounts for individual and collective commitment to the war effort or its rejection.³⁶

Mutinies and negotiations

The debate over the 1917 mutinies in the French army further underlines the limitations and pitfalls of the alternative consent/coercion imposed by the controversy. The most illuminating study of these mutinies, arguably the most severe crisis faced by France during the conflict, was published in 1994 by an American historian, [Leonard V. Smith](#). His book, *Between Mutiny*

and *Obedience*, is an investigation into the experience of the 5th Infantry Division, a unit celebrated for its performance in the field but whose soldiers also played a major role in the 1917 mutinies.³⁷ Based on a thorough engagement with both military history and social theories, Smith mobilizes the work of [Michel Foucault \(1926-1984\)](#) in particular to make sense of the acts of collective indiscipline that threatened to undermine the French war effort. Informed by a Foucauldian approach to “the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom”, Smith carefully examined the exercise of command authority and explored the conditionality of consent. Highlighting the importance of the political identity of the French “citizen soldiers”, he ultimately demonstrated that the legitimising principles, which underpinned the political communities that fought each other in the trenches of the First World War, were at stake in combat. He places the experience of the division in its larger political and social context. In contrast to conventional historiography, he insisted on the political nature of the mutiny, arguing that the internalisation of the principles of popular and national sovereignty, essential tenets of French republican culture, accounted for both the mutinies and the return of these citizen-soldiers to the line of duty. His work is therefore equally concerned with consent and coercion, as he places a constant process of contested negotiation at the heart of frontline politics. Smith’s argument never neatly fitted the terms of the controversy. This is perhaps why it has unfortunately been more often cited than genuinely discussed by French historians.

Recent research however has drawn more extensively on Smith’s work. André Loez, a CRID stalwart produced a very impressive monograph on the French mutiny in which he discussed Smith’s at length.³⁸ Significantly however, his reluctance to move out of the parameters defined by the controversy in which he played a leading role dramatically undermined his potential analytical contribution. Loez offers a comprehensive list and map of every recorded incident of collective indiscipline. In this respect, he undeniably enriched our understanding of the mutinies and of indiscipline throughout the conflict. He also offers a very interesting sociology of mutineers and sets out to analyse the logic of collective action of mutineers. Where Smith argues that the mutinies were directly aimed at the way the war was being fought, Loez insists that they indicated an outright rejection of the war. Where the historiography conventionally insists on the High Command’s, and [Philippe Pétain’s \(1856-1951\)](#) relative leniency towards the mutineers, he reasserts the critical importance of the suppression of dissent. Coercion, Loez contends by opposition to Smith, brought the mutineers back to the frontline. Loez rightly insists on the difficulty to bring about and lead a social movement under the conditions of industrial warfare. Echoing in some way, Mariot’s “alienation”, he also insists on what he calls “the inertia of war”. For Loez, the war happened in 1914 to French soldiers unable to do anything about it or to conceive any alternative. His analysis flounders at this point. The war did indeed happen to French soldiers and civilians

who, by and large, did not want or call for it. The invasion of 1914, so brilliantly analysed by John Horne and [Alan Kramer](#), did however convince the majority of soldiers and civilians that this war was a war worth fighting for. The alternative – German occupation and domination – was seen as simply unacceptable across the political and social spectrum. This is what accounts for the success of military mobilisation in 1914. One did not have to embrace the war to be committed to its victorious end. The absence of a speedy conclusion to military operations did not fundamentally alter this strategic imperative. Up until 1918, the military map always showed the presence of German armies deep into French territory. Invoking, as Loez, the “inertia of war” does not merely and rather awkwardly sidestep this basic fact; it also belies the strategic intelligence and agency of French soldiers and civilians. One did not need an exceptional degree of education to understand that the enemy was camping deep into the national territory; that, should the lines of defence be breached, one’s home, village, town, family and friends would be directly under threat. Smith’s work underlined that mutineers never ceased to care for the safety of their own. This commitment to national defence did not equate with nationalism. The terms of the controversy have indeed obscured that the very mundanity of national sentiment and loyalty was key to the resilience of wartime France.

Patriotism and the French state at war

The nature of patriotic mobilisation

The logic and dynamic of the historiographical dispute have encouraged and reinforced the radical formulations of each side’s argument at the expense of their respective nuances.³⁹ This was particularly to the detriment of a necessary debate over wartime patriotism. Paradoxically perhaps, one could argue that both schools of interpretation share a “consensualist” view of social mobilisation: the idea that wartime mobilisation stemmed from the “[Union Sacrée](#)” and from a rather improbable national consensus; an idea that remains surprisingly prevalent across the divide. For Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker and many others, national mobilisation was the effect and product of a patriotic consensus crystallised by war violence into a specific “war culture”. For Cazals, Rousseau, Offenstadt, and Loez, strikes and mutinies demonstrate that national mobilisation was only made possible and maintained by the exercise of state coercion and propaganda. Though they draw opposite conclusions from the French war experience, both interpretations therefore seem to share the same premise; namely that only national consensus could underpin wartime national mobilisation. They also, surprisingly and unwittingly perhaps, collude in neglecting patriotism as a category of political analysis.⁴⁰ On the one hand, proponents of the “war culture” paradigm stress the symbolic and emotional dimensions of “national sentiment”. Drawing on anthropology, literary scholarship, and art history, they rarely mobilize the categories of

political history, which had been central to the works of an earlier generation represented by Jean-Jacques Becker and Antoine Prost. On the other side of the argument, their opponents seem reluctant to give much credence to patriotism, lest it undermine their overall paradigm. In any case, they appear unwilling or unable to reconcile the existence of social or regional tensions with the possibility of commitment to national defence.⁴¹

Surprisingly, French historians of the war have thus far rarely and seriously engaged with historical and social scientific approaches to nationalism and nationhood.⁴² Nicolas Mariot's study of the frontline encounters between intellectuals and working-class soldiers is a welcome exception. Anxious to challenge the notion that the war experience brought classes and social group together, Mariot relies on the testimonies of combatant intellectuals to argue that the resilience of soldiers cannot be taken as evidence of patriotism, which he reduces to the idealistic system embraced by intellectuals and nationalist alike.⁴³ Yet their rhetoric belied the nature of patriotism. Expressed in the most mundane words and habits, patriotism was a sense of belonging and loyalty that ought not to be confused with nationalism and the systematic primacy of the nation-state. Patriotism was and should be understood in both an anthropological and legal-political sense, as a performance of solidarity to kith and kin as well as a performance of loyalty to an imagined community of fellow citizens. Nationalism, both as a political project and as category of analysis, is intimately bound up with the demands that the state may place on the citizenry. By contrast, patriotism underline the capacity to mobilize nationhood to assert distance towards the state and even to resist its authority in contradiction with the prescriptions of nationalist ideologies. Here Smith's analysis of frontline politics chimes in with recent social and in particular urban histories of the war. As the demands of industrial warfare defined the "social relations of sacrifice" in specific ways, patriotism was effectively invoked and mobilised against the policies of the wartime state. The language of patriotism cannot be dismissed as a mere expression of social conformity in a time of censorship and propaganda as Frédéric Rousseau argues in his latest book.⁴⁴ It would not simply overstate the efficiency of the state's police apparatus; it would effectively suppress the voices of subaltern participants in the conflict.

The success of wartime mobilisation did not rest on an improbable national consensus, but on the willingness and capacity of patriots of all hues to reconcile their diverging understandings of the national project to defend the existence of the national community. In a context defined by the invasion and occupation of the national territory, social movements, including strikes and mutinies, allowed social groups to assert the condition of their participation in the war effort. Conscription alone was not sufficient to convince the French that military service would be equally shared within a citizenry already unevenly affected by shortages and

inflation.⁴⁵ The constant recriminations prompted by perceived or real instances of shirking and [profiteering](#), along with strikes over working and pay conditions, demonstrated that the state never successfully claimed a monopoly over the definition of patriotism. Indeed, it was in the name of patriotism that its authority and policies were challenged, albeit within the obvious constraints imposed by wartime legislation.⁴⁶

French politics, civil society, and the Republic at war

The first two years of the conflict saw France suffer half of its total war-related deaths. As John Horne recently pointed out, “France in 1914-1915 was a society in shock.”⁴⁷ In a context defined by unprecedented mass casualties and economic dislocations, where the gap between pre-war expectations and the reality of industrial warfare was underlined daily by the staggering level of human and social sacrifice it required, the overall consent to the war would of course be challenged at an individual and collective levels. Critically however the strategic stalemate meant that the foundational case for a war of national defence remained unquestionable. But wartime mobilisation was not simply the result of a resolute or resigned state of mind. It was a contested process where state authorities and civil society organisations (from [churches](#) to charities through political parties) redirected their resources towards the overarching goal of national defence. The intensity of mobilisation undeniably varied in time and space and in response to the uneven social pressures of war. Stuck in the crude alternative between consent and coercion, the French debate never fully integrated Horne’s critical insights in the different phases and mechanisms of social mobilisation: self-mobilisation, remobilisation, and demobilisation.⁴⁸ His remarkable body of work, ranging from labour to cultural history, illuminates key aspects of the French social, political, and colonial experiences of war and demonstrates the inanity of pre-conceived methodological demarcations. It also underscores and nuances the central role played by the state.

The history of wartime politics is that of the indisputable expansion of the state apparatus and, therefore, of the exercise of state-enforced coercion. Yet the aptly described “exuberance” of the French state belies the nature of its wartime relationship with other economic and social agents.⁴⁹ For the war did emphasise the limitations of the state as much as it stressed its undeniable capacity to steer the economic and social resources of the country towards the war effort. New forms of cooperation between the state, businesses, labour and civil society organisations gave rise to a contingent type of wartime corporatism.⁵⁰ This reflected the pragmatic imperatives that lay at the heart of social mobilisation in France and across the belligerent world. But its success did not solely depend on the legitimacy of the war effort; it hinged on the legitimacy of the state itself. The state’s response to the

tensions born out of the war was therefore critically important. Of course, the geo-strategic position of the Triple Entente allowed France to meet the key material demands arising out of social movements.⁵¹ But its Republican regime and liberal political culture also provided a framework that proved flexible enough to manage the socio-economic strains and outright conflicts arising out of wartime mobilisation.⁵²

The conflict had suspended the electoral process and censorship, propaganda, as well as conscription and material hardship further curtailed the operations of the liberal public sphere. Wartime politics however was not wholly subsumed or suppressed by the operations of the coercive state apparatus. This is one of the key conclusions of those historians whose work could not be reduced to the terms of the “war culture” controversy.⁵³ Local, urban, and institutional perspectives do indeed reveal how the conflict reinforced the terms of the social contract to which citizenship refers. They also underline the importance of institutionalised as well as informal processes of negotiation and bargaining.⁵⁴ As a result, social conflicts cannot simply be understood as evidence of the unravelling of social mobilisation. It was indeed a more dynamic process in which social conflicts allowed social groups to claim and extract economic compensations or policy changes. Mutinies and strikes partook of the same process in this regard. The state’s reluctant willingness to accommodate such claims stemmed from its dependence on civil society. Despite its dominance, the state alone could not extract the resources for industrial warfare. When their policies were contested at home and on the frontlines in the language of rights and equality of sacrifice, the leaders of the Third Republic could not and did not rely on coercion alone. The republican political culture did not simply colour wartime social movements. It buttressed their claims and compelled the state to accommodate them. Neither consent nor coercion alone fully account for the social or political history of WWI France.

Conclusion

The controversy over the 1914-1918 “war culture” was shaped, in no small part, by the politics of French intellectual and academic life in the 1990s. To be sure, the centenary commemorations did not quite bring it to an end. However, the most recent efforts to revive it appears likely to fail even if the scholarly issues it raised remain of critical importance. The alternative between consent and coercion has indeed long ceased to reflect the nature of the historiographical debate that now rightly focuses on a continuum of attitudes ranging from [acceptance and endurance to refusal](#).⁵⁵ The artificial and strict demarcations between cultural and social history also do not do justice to the very best studies of the French experience of the conflict.⁵⁶

Comparative history too has offered a welcome corrective to this polarised debate.⁵⁷ Yet the controversy arguably reinforced the solipsistic tendencies of national history in France and certainly hampered a systematic engagement with [foreign historiographies](#). Transnational studies of the Great War remain few and far between in France and it is fair to say that the global history of the conflict remains a minority concern there.⁵⁸ The persistence of the controversy also highlights other gaps in the French historiography of the conflict. Operational histories as well as studies of strategy, command, and generalship remain relatively scarce.⁵⁹ The economic history of the war is also rather neglected at the expense of a wider reflection on the political economy of this global conflict.⁶⁰ Likewise, in spite of the pioneering works of Michelle Perrot and Fabienne Thébaud or the outstanding contribution of [Susan Grayzel](#), the controversy never fully engaged and built on the studies of [gender relations](#) and sexual identities which did so much to renew our understanding of the war.⁶¹

A truly European history of the conflict remains a daunting and distant goal but French scholarship would certainly benefit from greater engagement with foreign historiographies and transnational frameworks of analysis. The impact of French historians on the international scholarly debate is, after all, clear. Interestingly however, international scholarship on the conflict rarely adopted the terms of the French debate on “war culture”. In this regard, the [British historiography](#) of the First World War offers an interesting counterpoint. Another liberal democratic regime, [Britain](#) entered the war as the French army’s junior partner on land. This was, in no small part, due to the strategic choices made to protect British colonial possessions and the maritime trade routes upon which depended the economy of the British Isles. Britain’s land forces were never intended to match the might of the Royal Navy. In 1914, Britain also relied on voluntary recruitment and on a localized regimental system whereas France mobilized a national conscript army.⁶² In other words, these parent liberal democracies had adopted two very different systems of recruitment and military organization. These stemmed of course from distinct political trajectories and strategic challenges since the late eighteenth century. In Britain however, both the scholarly and public debates have also long been concerned with discipline and the wartime growth of a coercive state apparatus, even though these were rarely pitted against the population’s overall consent to the war.⁶³ More recently, scholars illuminated the complex socio-economic and cultural dynamics that underpinned the mobilization of British society for war and volunteerism in particular.⁶⁴ Like in France, and indeed other countries such as [Italy](#), a public controversy over military discipline marked the 1990s and underlined the problematic articulation of historical scholarship and collective memory. In some quarters, this debate was framed as an opposition between military history and cultural memory; the occasionally

willful confusion between history and memory serving as a gossamer screen between nationalist and pacifist readings of the war experience.⁶⁵ However vehement at times, the British historiographical discussion never suffered from the type of polarization that affected debates across the Channel. A thorough comparative discussion falls beyond the remit of this paper, but a number of factors certainly account for this: the centrality of the languages of class in contemporary Britain, the strength and sophistication of British operational history, the influence of [E. P. Thomson \(1924-1993\)](#) and the New Left on the practice of social history, the greater internationalization of British universities. For all its robustness, the British discussion over coercion, consent, and wartime social mobilization never descended into controversy and scholars have by and large eschewed facile and misleading oppositions between historical genres and methodologies.⁶⁶

Considerable work is still to be done to understand the complexity of the French experience of this global war. Whatever the controversy over the “war culture” ever achieved, one cannot but rejoice that it never fully closed down the academic debate or discouraged the many brilliant early-career scholars who continue to plough this fascinating field of studies.

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Key Person(s)

[Barthas, Louis](#); [Mosse, George L.](#); [Furet, François](#); [Kuhn, Thomas](#); [Bourdieu, Pierre](#);
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