

Historiography 1918-Today (France)

By [Stéphane Tison](#)

Summary

The history of the Great War has always been written by an array of actors, including academics who were nonetheless a minority prior to the 1960s. The existing scientific historiography is based on the work of successive generations of historians long influenced by the legacy of Pierre Renouvin, one of the pillars of contemporary history. In France, where history underpins the relationship that citizens have with the state and traces of the war remained visible in the landscape and society throughout the 20th century, the historiography has evolved alongside commemorative jubilees. Three main approaches have succeeded each other over the course of a century.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Military and Diplomatic History Focused on Decision-Makers](#)
- [3 The Emergence of History "From Below": From Soldiers' Accounts to Social Analyses of the War](#)
- [4 Major Changes since the 1990s: Cultural History and Broader of Fields of Study](#)
- [5 New Questions raised by Cultural History](#)
- [6 From Social History to a Multi-Disciplinary Approach](#)
- [7 The Renewal of Military History](#)
- [8 The Return of Political History and International Relations](#)
- [9 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction

The history of the Great War began during the war itself, in an attempt to explain the main events experienced by the French population and also as a not entirely covert way to justify the fighting underway. [Gabriel Hanotaux \(1853-1944\)](#) initiated this endeavour in the autumn of 1914 and directed the *Histoire illustrée de la Grande Guerre*, published over a ten-year period. It was infused with fervent patriotism and was written by witnesses, actors and historians alike, with no distinction made between literature and scientific research.

There were very few faculties of arts at the time and only one chair in contemporary history at the Sorbonne, held by [Charles Seignobos \(1854-1942\)](#). Research into the Great War was initially a product of individual initiatives supported by the government or local municipalities, for example in Lyon, where in 1915 Mayor [Edouard Herriot \(1872-1957\)](#) instructed the municipal library to compile a “War Collection” to be used by future historians.¹ In Paris, industrialist [Henri Leblanc \(1873-1935\)](#) and his wife [Louise Leblanc \(1869-1931\)](#) deposited all of the documents he had collected on the causes of the war and the conflict itself at the Château de Vincennes in 1917. This collection laid the foundation for the Library-Museum of War which opened in 1925 under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Instruction. It assumed its current name in 1934, the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine (BDIC – Library of international contemporary documentation). [Pierre Renouvin \(1893-1974\)](#), a young *agrégé* and disabled ex-servicemen, was appointed head librarian. He was also the editor-in-chief of the *Revue d'histoire de la guerre mondiale* published by the Société d'histoire de la guerre starting in 1923.² Renouvin was also central in compiling and publishing the *Documents diplomatiques français*, an initiative whose legacy dated back to the aftermath of the war of 1870. It was [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#) and [Aristide Briand](#) who decided to publish the *Documents* on the origins of the Great War (1871-1914). This was done between 1928 and 1959 (forty-three volumes in total). The research involved in this work fuelled Renouvin’s critical thinking about the causes of the war which he covered in the courses he taught at the Sorbonne starting in 1922. Renouvin further published two major works, *Les origines immédiates de la guerre (28 juin–4 août 1914)* in 1925, followed by *La Crise européenne et la Grande Guerre (1904-1918)* in 1934.

Military and Diplomatic History Focused on Decision-Makers

Research in the 1930s was still very focused on diplomatic, political and military history. Some of this involved describing military facts and establishing a precise geography of operations – for example, the work of Jean-Marie Bourget (*Petite histoire de la Grande Guerre*, 1932) and [Henry Bidou \(1873-1943\)](#) (*Histoire de la Grande Guerre*, 1936). The focus was on French offensives, with no comparisons to other fronts or armies. Economic and social questions were not of central concern. Numerous publications sought to prove the guilt of [Germany’s](#) leaders³ or even to find French responsibility – notably that of President Poincaré – in the lead-up to the war’s mobilization. On this topic, Renouvin inaugurated the history of international relations and made the discipline something more than diplomatic history based solely on the study of dispatches and the diplomatic sphere. In doing so, he distinguished between the immediate and far-off causes of the war and identified the “profound forces” – both physical and psychological – which affect decision-makers.

Renouvin was a professor at the Sorbonne from 1931 to 1964 and as such deeply influenced the course of French historiography. Along with his successor, [Jean-Baptiste Duroselle \(1917-1994\)](#), he trained a second generation of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. While some of these researchers continued to work on diplomatic relations and military history, with a shift in focus towards countries other than France (e.g. Pierre Guillen, Pierre Milza, André Kaspi⁴), others began to more directly address financial issues and mentalities based on consular archives and those of banks, companies and the Ministry of foreign affairs' commercial departments, e.g. [Raymond Poidevin \(1928-2000\)](#), [René Girault \(1929-1999\)](#), Jacques Thobie.⁵ This research posited that [financial interests](#) played only a secondary role in the outbreak of the war and did not really alter the importance of political and strategic factors. Military history was enhanced by the theses of [Georges Bonnefous \(1867-1956\)](#), who examined the relationship between [military command and government authorities](#), and [Guy Pedroncini \(1924-2006\)](#) who studied the strategic thinking of [Philippe Pétain \(1856-1951\)](#) and provided keys to understanding the reasons behind the war's stagnation and the general staff's trouble escaping from the strategic impasse of the [war of attrition](#).⁶

This history gradually moved away from analyses of cause and slowly shifted towards the consequences of the war on [public opinion](#) – [Pierre Miquel \(1930-2007\)](#) – international relations from a diplomatic perspective – [Jacques Bariéty \(1930-2014\)](#) – as well as from a financial angle, with an examination of the role that war debts played in Franco-American relations – [Denise Artaud \(1930-2011\)](#).⁷

The Emergence of History “From Below”: From Soldiers' Accounts to Social Analyses of the War

Until the last third of the 20th century, soldiers' accounts were basically kept out of the scientific sphere. And yet veterans' voices had nonetheless been audible since the 1930s via the plethora of [newspapers](#) and memoirs published. Notable among these are the works of [Jean Norton Cru \(1879-1949\)](#) in 1929, [André Ducasse \(1894-1986\)](#) in 1932 and [Jacques Péricard \(1876-1944\)](#) in 1933.⁸ Ducasse compiled an anthology of writers at the front and thematically categorized excerpts from novels and writing by seventy authors. He challenged the patriotic and jingoistic representations of the war. Péricard drew on half of the 6,000 accounts collected following a call-out in the press to give voice to the soldiers who fought in [Verdun](#). The most original analysis, however, was that of Jean Norton Cru, who analysed 304 accounts published by 252 writers; his critical work resembled that of an historian as he sought to check whether the accounts described corresponded with the authors' actual statements of service. He did not hesitate to criticize well-known authors like [Henri Barbusse](#)

(1873-1935) and [Roland Dorgelès \(1885-1973\)](#) and spurred strong reactions. And yet this upsurge of witnesses demanding to be included in the official, scholarly history did not alter the discourse of professional historians: while Renouvin acknowledged the precision and originality of Norton Cru's work, he did not include its contributions in his subsequent publications.⁹

The Second World War reduced the interest in 1914-1918; there were still very few academics working on the topic at the time. There was a decrease in both scientific research and in the publication of first-hand accounts. The fiftieth anniversary of the war provided an opportunity for veterans (who were reaching retirement) to get more involved in the scientific writing of the war's history. Among such authors, André Ducasse, Jacques Meyer and Gabriel Perreux published three works which constituted a new way of envisaging history. This was history "from below" – both from the trenches and behind the lines. Works such as *Vie et mort des Français 1914-1918* (Ducasse/Meyer/Perreux, 1958), *Vie quotidienne des soldats pendant la grande guerre* (Meyer, 1966) and *Vie quotidienne des civils* (Perreux, 1966) shifted the focus away from elites and gave voice to people of limited means. This research managed to liberate from literary anthologies the everyday experiences of war and introduce them to the scientific sphere. By focusing on the history of the people rather than on the nation itself, they began to portray 1914-1918 as a mass war.

Academic researchers in turn became interested in society at war and began to take a cross-disciplinary approach involving history, sociology and political science, at times interpreting their work from a Marxist perspective. It is as such that [Annie Kriegel \(1926-1995\)](#) traced the origins of the French Communist Party to the war (1964). She spurred heated debate when she argued that the very structure of the French socialist movement made it a "minority movement" and that, given this, communism offered a vision that was at once radical, abstract, removed from reality and thus all the more attractive at the end of the war.¹⁰ Guy Pedroncini took a quite different approach when he returned to the still sensitive topic of the 1917 mutinies. He argued that there were fewer than 30,000 mutineers in total, with two thirds of the divisions affected. The movement was less politicized than previously thought and reflected a rejection of the deadly strategies of the general staff. Lastly, the number of executions – fewer than thirty – challenged common assumptions about massive executions¹¹. [Antoine Prost](#) (1977) studied the archives of the National office for veterans and sketched a sociological, cultural and political landscape of the "generation of fire" during the inter-war period. He pointed up its deep ties to a patriotism imbued with anti-nationalistic [pacifism](#). He argued that the [fascist](#) leanings attributed to veterans during the riots of 6 February 1934 were actually quite marginal. Other myths were also toppled: e.g., of soldiers departing with a "flower in the end of their rifle barrel" in 1914, which [Jean-Jacques Becker](#)

(1977) dispelled in a political history thesis on public opinion. This research was original in its incorporation of other sciences such as linguistics and epigraphy.

The first sociological study of soldiers was conducted by Jules Maurin (1982) when he undertook a computerized serial analysis of conscription records to compare the traditionally “red”, wine-growing plain of Béziers with the mountainous, “white”, catholic and conservative town of Mende. He showed how regiments became mixed after the large-scale losses of 1914 and the rejection of regional recruitment (already on the decline before the war), and differences in casualty rates according to where wine-growers and mountain men were assigned.¹² The opening of the colonial archives led to a thesis on soldiers of Algerian origin and on the [Senegalese Tirailleurs](#), and research was conducted for the first time on soldiers in the French Far East Expeditionary Force.¹³ New narrative accounts from people of less elite social standing were also edited by scholars rather than by witnesses. The notebooks of [Louis Barthas \(1879-1952\)](#) published in 1976 by [Rémy Cazals](#) were extremely popular for their pacifistic undertones.

A lot of original work was also produced in the field of economic history, in several areas. Patrick Fridenson studied mobilization in Renault factories, before examining France behind the lines in *The French Home Front, 1914-1918* (published in French in 1977)¹⁴. [Georges-Henri Soutou](#) (1989) analysed shifting [war aims](#) at the European scale to present the Great War as an industrial war and counter the thesis of [Fritz Fischer \(1909-1999\)](#).¹⁵ He argued that [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg's \(1856-1921\)](#) conception of [Mitteleuropa](#) was surely based more on a customs union aimed at limiting military appetites. Soutou's research, as well as the 1994 synthesis published by [Jean-Baptiste Duroselle \(1917-1994\)](#),¹⁶ mark a turning point towards another historiographical period more interested in the cultural and international facets of the war.

Major Changes since the 1990s: Cultural History and Broader of Fields of Study

The second generation of historians gradually shifted from the socio-political sphere towards a cultural approach. This cultural history was part of the dual tradition of studying the “profound forces” and opinion based on international relations, and the tradition of “mentalities” and “representations” so dear to French social history. Anthropological approaches also became popular, inspired largely by American and British research into the experience of men at war; works by [John Keegan \(1934-2012\)](#) and [George Mosse \(1918-1999\)](#) were translated into French. It was also at this time that researchers increasingly became affiliated with international research networks which further encouraged

comparative approaches.

New Questions raised by Cultural History

The change in focus was ushered in by the conference organized by Jean-Jacques Becker and [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#) in Nanterre in 1988 on “European societies and the war of 1914-1918”; it further gained ground with the first conference organized in 1992 by the Historial of the Great War in Péronne entitled “War and Cultures”.¹⁷ The Historial and its research centre became an unprecedented initiative aimed at bringing together researchers from across the world around a museum designed to showcase for the general public the contributions of research in a city that is emblematic of the [Battle of the Somme](#).¹⁸

The museum uses the war experience to highlight the history of topics inherent to collective representations and social practices: mourning, the violence of war, the consent of mobilized men to fight and the brutalization of societies. Following several studies that pointed up the involvement of a wide array of social actors in the war, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and [Annette Becker](#)¹⁹ defined the characteristics of a “war culture” in their book *14-18*.

Understanding the Great War (published in French in 2000)²⁰. They claimed that this “culture” materialized during the war around a few major ideas: the spirit of sacrifice and consent to the war, hatred towards the enemy and the eschatological dimension of a war framed as a crusade. This idea fuelled heated debate in [France](#). The authors argued that cultures harnessed the representations generated by the war and subsequently influenced acts. The idea was based on a specific chronology: while the cultural mobilization of such representations varied depending on military acts, cultural demobilization was analysed as a complex process that needed to be viewed through the lens of “exiting the war”.²¹ [Nicolas Beaupré](#) as such analysed French and German soldier-writers and changes to the structure and meaning of [narrative writing](#) during the war and in the post-war period. Christophe Prochasson, [Anne Rasmussen](#), Annette Becker and [Juliette Courmont](#) all studied the patriotic combat of the majority of intellectuals and scientists; they described a gamut of Germanophobia that at times went so far as to animalize the enemy, thus justifying a struggle for “justice” that was based on a dichotomy unique to “war culture” and which distinguished between civilization and barbarism.²² Such representations appear to have been shared by both soldiers and [occupied civilians](#), the latter of which were studied for the first time.²³ They were showcased by cinematographers who forged a new way to look at the war – and this [cinematographic work](#) was studied by Laurent Veray. The overlap between intimate war experiences and [propaganda](#) has been revisited in several ways, including through an examination of how mourning was expressed in artistic production, which

continued to influence the battlefield throughout the war.²⁴

Research surrounding how wars are [remembered](#) was greatly influenced by the work of Antoine Prost and Pierre Nora. Annette Becker examined the aesthetic and architectural forms tied to mass mourning. Ceremonial rites such as [Remembrance Day](#) and political investment in the symbolic figure of the Unknown Soldier have inspired both national and international research.²⁵ Following the afflux of departmental monographs on war memorials, a period of comparison began – of spaces affected differently by the war and of different rites and rituals. [Stéphane Tison](#) examined the individualization and personalization of funeral rituals over the long term starting in 1914, whereas [Elise Julien](#) studied Paris and Berlin to analyse how rites and rituals were created – in a fragmented manner in defeated countries and at the national scale in victorious countries.

From Social History to a Multi-Disciplinary Approach

Following in the footsteps of Rémy Cazals and Frédéric Rousseau, a social history of the war first developed to nuance the cultural approach. Criticism of the notion of a “war culture” led in 2005 to the creation of a research group – the CRID 14-18 (International collective for research and debate on the First World War) – whose activities are primarily organized in Craonne, along the Chemin des Dames. This group emphasizes the importance of social determination in people’s behaviour and acts. Its research reignited debate over the critical approach taken by Jean Norton Cru, which it endorses,²⁶ and it has accused the historians of the Historial of basing their arguments on accounts written mainly by elites who professed a much clearer sense of patriotism.²⁷ Researchers affiliated with the CRID 14-18 have posited that the logic of constraint imposed by [military justice](#) on soldiers who were not politicized was stronger than patriotic consent. The research of [Nicolas Offenstadt](#) into the role of executed soldiers in collective memory and of [André Loez](#) on the spread of dissent in 1917 further fuelled this debate.²⁸ Research into General André Bach redefined the chronology of the repression and showed that three quarters of the executions occurred between the summer of 1914 and the spring of 1915. Since its publication, the questions raised and answers proposed by this research have themselves been nuanced. Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien underscored the diversity of offenses and the evolution of mechanisms in place to try them; [Galit Haddad](#) studied postal checks to argue that the discourse of protest at the front and of pacifism behind the lines remained quite distinct, although intersected at times. She has also focused on the voice of “non-mutineers”.

The controversy over constraint versus consent has gradually been tempered via an approach to history that combines social relations and culture. The relationship between

officers and soldiers has as such been studied, with Nicolas Mariot pointing up the divide between the two, whereas Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien showed the processes involved in defining obedience and authority, and for dialogue within an army wrought by the democratic pact. The mythological images constructed by a society at war have also been revised: in studying troops holed up behind the lines, [Charles Ridel](#) pointed up how the social divide was transposed onto the battlefield, undermining the [Union sacrée](#), and thus forcing the government to deploy a legislative arsenal to defend soldiers not at the front. Using archives related to the tax on [war profits](#) established in 1916, [François Bouloc](#) assessed the actual economic impact of the sums involved as well as the fantasies inspired by this tax during the war.²⁹ Soldiers' experiences have also been studied to assess the continuity and breaks in pre-war and wartime social and cultural practices. [Alexandre Lafon](#) examined the drivers of [comradery](#), often limited to people of similar social and cultural status, and thus deconstructed the myth of fraternity at the front. Benjamin Gilles analysed what soldiers read and in turn nuanced the influence of media balderdash as well as the impact of [censorship](#).³⁰ Research into men on [temporary leave from the war](#), to rest or on furlough ([Emmanuelle Cronier](#), [Joëlle Beurier](#)), via leisure activities (Jean-François Jagielski, Thierry Hardier), or those on a more sustainable retreat due to injury ([Sophie Delaporte](#)) or [mental illness](#) (Hervé Guillemain, Stéphane Tison) has provided insight into the unique effects of a long, industrial war on the bodies and minds of soldiers and on how health facilities adapted.³¹

The cultural, social and gender history of the war have intersected to varying degrees and forged new inroads for exploring the intimate experience of individuals confronted with war. [Jean-Yves Le Naour](#) examined the [sexuality](#) of soldiers and described how it was part of the public sphere and under [government](#) control.³² Families, the degree to which [children](#) were involved in the war³³ and the reconstruction of family ties, notably at the end of the war, have also been studied. Using [war correspondence](#), [Clémentine Vidal-Naquet](#) pointed up the intimate strategies embraced by lovers during the war, while Dominique Fouchard and [Peggy Bette](#) provided a nuanced assessment of the effects of increasingly brutalized behaviour given that gender relations resumed their traditional form after the war.³⁴

The Renewal of Military History

Military history has also moved in two very novel directions: the analysis of military thinking from a cultural perspective and the anthropology of war. Dimitry Quelloz studied the construction of pre-war military doctrine inspired by Napoleonic strategy; [Olivier Cosson](#) examined the first modern wars, like the [Russo-Japanese war](#), and officers' anticipation of the pending war.³⁵ Michel Goya assessed how people adapted to actual war and the evolution of

combat methods during the war.³⁶

The anthropology of war emerged with research into the violence of war and was enhanced by a lot of research by Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau on the body-at-war, the violence of war and objects of death. For scholars in this field, the Great War is seen as a matrix of contemporary representations and behaviour, the dividing line between wars fought by men directly facing off against their adversaries and those fought hidden and lying down. [Odile Roynette](#) studied soldiers' language to identify their concerns and measured the leaching of military argot into society since the French revolution. François Cochet sought to define the relationship between soldiers and their [weapons](#), and examined their totemic nature from the perspective of the history of techniques and gender.³⁷

More broadly, the focus of such analyses is no longer to distinguish only between the life at the front and life behind the lines, but also to examine the relationships forged between the two. In one of the rare studies of economic, military and social history, Rémy Porte examined the period of economic control that gradually formed in 1915-1916 and then dissipated after the war.³⁸ The contribution of the colonial [empire](#) and of [colonial troops](#) has also been studied.³⁹

The Return of Political History and International Relations

Political history was the target of criticism from the Annales School and little research was conducted in this area following Pierre Renouvin's work, aside from the thesis by Jean-Claude Allain on Joseph Caillaux⁴⁰ which was at the crossroads of politics and international relations. There have been numerous biographies written about [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#),⁴¹ but more is now also known about other political figures such as Raymond Poincaré (François Roth) and Paul Painlevé ([Anne-Laure Anizan](#)).⁴² Democratic continuity has remained of central concern: in addition to research into the role of Clemenceau and the type of governance he initiated,⁴³ the action of parliamentarians has been studied ([Fabienne Bock](#)), as well as the complex ways in which the socialists contributed to the Union sacrée⁴⁴ and political censorship (Olivier Forcade). This scholarship has pointed up the characteristics of democratic practices in an exceptional context and how parliamentary practices and freedom of speech adapted to the situation without resorting to antidemocratic manoeuvres. The return of parliament's rights in 1915 (after its suspension during the invasion) and the fact that the reinforced executive branch did not stifle parliamentary debate helped lay the

foundations for a politically successful post-war experience. More recently, regional identities have been examined: in a society transformed by the republic, small nations were often engulfed by the events of the war, but the mixing of mobilized men did not dispel regional [stereotypes](#).⁴⁵ Regional identities were occasionally reignited, for example by rumours about the cowardice of soldiers from the south (Jean-Yves Le Naour), a sense of disproportionate sacrifice in the case of Bretons (Yann Lagadec), or due to conflicting experiences and memories in [Alsace-Moselle](#) (Jean-Noël Grandhomme).⁴⁶

The history of international relations has largely ignored the Great War era since the synthesis by Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, but several new initiatives are announcing its return. Researchers are beginning to examine peace in the midst of war: Jean-Michel Guieu identified the roots of movements supporting the [League of Nations](#) and has insisted on the role of legal experts in the first part of the 20th century in drafting the rules of collective security first conceived the century before. Carl Bouchard pointed up how these ideals spread through society via peace initiatives published by regular French, English and American citizens.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Most recently, the centennial of the First World War underscored the vitality of research in this field: the publication of at least 500 books, new major syntheses⁴⁸ and several dozen conferences are proof of its flourishing. In this vein, it is worth underscoring the contribution of numerous French researchers to the Cambridge History of the First World War⁴⁹ which, for the first time, embraced a transnational approach. This includes several topics never before addressed, such as Olivier Compagnon's research on [Latin America](#). Others are renewing with fundamental data: Antoine Prost re-examined how statistics regarding [soldiers killed](#) in the war were calculated and his new findings have become a reference. The collection of documents initiated by the Ministry of Culture for the centennial in 2014 under the banner of the "Europeana 1914-1918" project will surely further encourage new discoveries and continue to fuel great future debate.

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