

Historiography 1918-Today

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Summary

There have been four generations of historical writing about the 1914-1918 war. The first was composed of contemporaries who either fought in the war or helped run it, and spanned the period 1914-1939. Their focus was political and military. The second emerged in the 1960s, and focused on the history of societies. The third emerged in the later 1970s. Its emphasis was on cultural history, and turned to study the victims of war. The fourth generation is transnational; it studies war from a global, rather than a European perspective, reflecting the end of the bipolar standoff of the Cold War.

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The “Big Bang”: A Cosmological Metaphor

Let us take the outbreak of the war in August 1914 as the point of departure of historical writing on the war. If we visualize this point as analogous to the “big bang” in cosmology, then we can see the growth of historical writing about the war as an exponential curve describing an expanding universe of publications. Starting from a very small base near to the “big bang”, the rate of increase in publications initially increased slowly, and then took off in sequential cohorts or generations, reaching its dizzying amplitude today. No single person today can master all of the writing available about the First World War, and no one in the future will be able to read at the same speed as new materials appear in print, and in televisual, video, movie or digital form. “The sky’s the limit” is a mild way of saying that the full volume of historical writing about the war cannot even be estimated. This universe of

publications is expanding rapidly, with no end in sight.

The Sociology of Historical Writing about the Great War

The sociology of this phenomenon is clear enough. Initially, the number of those in a position to write about the war as history while it was going on was very limited. The historical profession at university level throughout the world was relatively small – perhaps on the order of a few hundred people who earned their living by writing and teaching history at universities and colleges of higher education. We need to add to this professional group those who taught in *lycées*, *gymnasias*, and high schools, many of whom wrote history. Perhaps we can double the number of people who wrote history in textbooks, journals, newspapers, and books.

But the writing of history was also done by those who made history. Administrators, politicians, generals, and ordinary soldiers offered multiple points of view to a wide readership between the wars. There was a substantial viewership, too, of films about the war, which drew on war literature, both fiction and non-fiction.

From the 1960s, the volume of writing about the war increased. This was in part an effect of the fiftieth anniversary, about which I shall have something to say in a moment. But it was also part of the beginnings of a revolution in higher education. Both in Europe and in North America, the population going to college or university after high school of whatever form, trebled in the three decades following 1960. The market for the consumption of historical writing increased, in part accounting for the outward shape of the curve in [Figure 1](#), following 1964. But there other technological developments, which helped shift the demand curve to the right for history in general and for Great War history in particular. Television became a nearly universal form of popular entertainment, and historical programming was part of that phenomenon. Audio and video recorders appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, and made it possible for the voices and faces of old soldiers and prominent political leaders to be captured for posterity. Then, in the 1980s and after, the internet opened up virtually unlimited space, and possibilities for publications and images of the Great War. This online encyclopedia is a product of these changes. There is another sociological dimension at work in recent years to change the nature of Great War historiography. With a few exceptions, the first two cohorts, the Great War generation and the “fifty years on” generation were masculine. From the 1960s on, oral history made major contributions to Great War historiography, and oral history was largely a product of the women’s movement, in that it attempted to capture women’s voices, so evidently absent in national and military archives. Oral history has made a huge difference in the way historians have expanded the range of

evidence they have at their disposal. The work of Lyn MacDonald¹ in Britain and Alistair Thomson² in Australia are examples of this trend. Now, women write the history of the Great War, and not only the history of women in the Great War. The gender balance is not complete, but that is true for virtually every part of the historical profession today (2013).

Four Generations of Historiography

The Great War Generation

Given these structural phenomenon, it is time to offer a chronology of different phases of writing about the Great War. In sum, the best way to approach the historiography of the Great War from 1914-2013 is to separate four generations of historical writing about it.³ It makes sense to start with what I term “the Great War generation”, contemporaries who wrote about the war from the outset of hostilities. Since the earliest days of the 1914-1918 conflict, historians amateur and professional, have attempted to write the history of the war. Given that the major powers had avoided a general war for a century, and that from the first days, everyone was aware of its epic proportions, it was inevitable that there would be an avalanche of publications which took on the form of a narrative history of the war, its causes, conduct, and consequences, from the point of view of one or the other combatants. In the two decades following the Armistice of 1918, and with some exceptions, national justification or pride came before a judicious exploration of how the war happened, how it was waged, and what were its costs and repercussions.

The readership for these histories was enormous, a fact of which all publishers were aware. Thus, there was a publishing boom during the war itself, which has continued, with various dips and recoveries, until now, when the centenary of the war is upon us (2014). In the early years, virtually all of this output of historical studies was written by people who were not trained as historians. This is hardly surprising, since, as we have already noted, the historical profession in 1914 was divided into different parts: a small university-based contingent, a group of teachers in secondary education, and a much larger group of what today we would call professional writers who deal with history for the educated public. In surveying the historiography of the Great War, we must be careful not to identify general trends solely from what was going on in the academy and what was written by academics. Those far more numerous individuals who wrote history neither as, nor for academics, but for the general public, mattered more at the time (as they do now).

In addition, we have to account for the progressive [visualization](#) of the history of the Great War. From [photography](#) to [film](#) to television to the internet, we can follow the historiography of images of war, and thereby recognize that what readers saw mattered as much in forming

their notion of the history of the 1914-1918 conflict as what they read. But the carriers of the visual memory of the war during and after the conflict, were primarily photos and secondarily feature films. As we shall see, when television came of age, the message of the images escaped from the message of the text historians wrote as scripts to accompany the images in war documentaries. The visual has increasingly trumped the literal, a fact which any survey of the historiography of war in general and the Great War in particular must take account. In the early years, that meant that illustrated histories mattered. Some were outstanding: the Michelin Company's guides to the battlefields vary in quality, but the very best are still astonishingly accurate and incisive. Every one of them was heavily illustrated.

"The Great War generation" comprised scholars, former soldiers, politicians and public officials who had direct knowledge of the war either through their own military service or through alternative service to their country's war effort, or both. They wrote history from the top down, by and large through direct experience of the events they described. The central actor portrayed in these books was the state, sometimes imbedded in an imperial alliance, sometimes defined outside of [empire](#), but in either case, running the war at home and/or at the front. Almost all the military and political leaders of the major combatants cashed in on their celebrity by writing about their war, and publishers fought for the right to disseminate the insights, the distortions and the lies that politicians, civil servants, and soldiers presented to the public.

The most voluminous of these efforts was the 133-book effort to write the economic and social history of the war, sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Most of these tomes were penned by men who helped run the war or who had to deal with its aftershocks.

This first generation was also composed of men whose memoirs went over the ground again for evident purposes of self-justification. This took many forms, from books by generals and cabinet ministers about their contributions to victory, to exculpatory reminiscences about those trying to evade responsibility for defeat. There were also official histories, many of which were written by former soldiers for the benefit of the various national staff colleges, trying one at a time to frame "lessons" for the future. These works were frequently highly technical and so detailed that they took decades to appear. The delay diminished their significance for planning the next war in more efficient ways.

One central focus of this first of four generations of historical writing on the Great War was war origins. This is hardly surprising, given the explosive nature of the Allied claim in article 231 of the [Peace Treaty](#) of 1919 that [Germany](#) bore sole responsibility for the outbreak of the war. Many historians saw it as their patriotic duty to justify the peaceful intentions of their

nation in the war crisis of 1914. If we believe all of them, no one wanted war in 1914, and no one was responsible for its outbreak. From the earliest blue, yellow, or pink books of documents edited by professors of history to the more substantial collections of documents, there were *parti-pris* publications, which tended to turn history into special pleading. It is not that all nations were equally responsible for the war; exculpation was easier for historians in [Britain](#) and [France](#) than in Germany and in [Austria-Hungary](#), since the war was planned in Vienna and Berlin and not in Paris or London. But the overall tendency of early publications was to say “we didn’t do it; the smoking gun lies on the other side of the lines”.

The very first critical historical works that have lasted to this day began by taking apart this immense literature of self-justification. If anyone had a right to justify his nation’s record on the question of war guilt, it was the French scholar [Pierre Renouvin \(1893-1874\)](#), who lost his left arm serving on the [Western front](#). He never referred to his own war experience in his writings. Instead he offered a model of political, diplomatic and military history in *La crise européenne et la grande guerre (1914-1918)*, published by Félix Alcan in Paris in 1934. This book developed interpretations Renouvin had advanced in his earlier *Les origines immédiates de la guerre (28 juin – 4 août)*, published by A. Costès in Paris in 1925. What is striking is that the social and economic background to the war is virtually non-existent. There is a very brief mention of the strikes of 1917 and two brief pages on the mutinies of the same year in the French army. This is not an omission; it is a choice as to what matters in recounting the history of the war. The first generation defined history as the story of power and violence – and of those who wielded these [weapons](#) in wartime.

The Great War was not a subject for research for the men who founded the journal *Annales* during the war, though both central figures in its work, [Marc Bloch \(1886-1944\)](#) and [Lucien Febvre \(1878-1956\)](#) fought in the war. They taught together in Strasbourg, once again a French university after forty-four years of German occupation. One of their colleagues, [Maurice Halbwachs \(1877-1945\)](#), invented the category of *mémoire collective*, and yet *la mémoire collective de la grande guerre* was something on which he never wrote. Bloch was fascinated by rumours in wartime, but in his historical writing, it is not for his reflections on war but rather for his classic account of the history of feudalism that he will be remembered.

The only work which matches Renouvin for rigour and thoughtfulness, published in this first generation, is that of the Italian historian [Luigi Albertini \(1871-1941\)](#). Distinguished journalist of the *Corriera della Serra* in Milan, Albertini was sacked for his opposition to [fascism](#) in 1925. He retired to his estate near Rome and wrote his magnum opus, a three-volume study of the origins of the Great War. It was published in Italian in 1941 and translated into English a decade later.⁴ Like Renouvin, Albertini was persuaded that the war was planned in Vienna and Berlin, and not in Paris and London. American revisionists like [Sidney Fay \(1876-1967\)](#)

and [Harry Barnes \(1889-1968\)](#) thought otherwise. In his 1927 book *The Origins of the War*, Barnes argues that [Serbia](#), [Russia](#) and France bear principal responsibility for the outbreak of war, and Germany and Britain bear the least blame for it.

The most original of all the historians of the pre-1964 period was [Elie Halévy \(1870-1937\)](#), the foremost French historian of Britain. In his “World Crisis”, originally delivered as lectures in Oxford in 1929, he bypassed the “blame game” to describe the war as part of a revolutionary upheaval. “Pills to cure an earthquake”, he scoffed: “my subject is the earthquake itself”.⁵ By bracketing together war and [revolution](#), he pointed to a way out of the endless debate over the supposed injustices of the war guilt clause, and anticipated the turn towards social and cultural history which came a generation later.

Fifty Years On

The second generation I term the generation “fifty years on”. While much of the first generation of historians wrote official history, which tends to the history of officials, the second generation wrote peoples’ history, or the history of politics and society at war. Here we can see the clear hallmark of Halévy’s approach, though it is necessary to say that though he pointed out where the historiography of the Great War would go, few people were aware of his contribution at the time. This second generation of historians wrote in the late 1950s and 1960s, and wrote not only the history of politics and decision-making at the top, but also the history of social structures and social movements. In the 1960s, the balance shifted between political history and the history of the people, located mostly outside of Parliaments, General Headquarters, and Cabinet offices. Thus both the first and the second generation of historians looked to the state, but in the second generation, the people were the central actors. Many of the scholars working in the 1960s and after had the benefit of sources unknown or unavailable before the Second World War. The “fifty-year rule” enabling scholars to consult state papers meant that all kinds of documents could be exploited by those writing in the 1960s, which threw new light on the history of the war.

In the 1960s, there was much more use of film and visual evidence than in the first generation, though in the interwar years battlefield guides and collections of photographs of devastation and weaponry were produced in abundance. After the Second World War, the age of television history began, and attracted an audience greater than ever before to historical narratives. This became evident in the size of the audience for new and powerful television documentaries of the war. In 1964, the BBC launched its second channel with the monumental twenty-six-part history of the war, exhaustively researched in film archives and vetted by an impressive group of military historians. Many of the millions of people who saw this series had lived through the war. In 1964, the young men who had fought and survived

were mostly above the age of seventy, but what made the series a major cultural event was that the families of the survivors, and of those who did not come back, integrated these war stories into their own family narratives.

Strikingly, the script written by two respected conservative historians then outside the academy, Corelli Barnett and [John Terraine \(1921-2003\)](#), with sporadic help from Sir [Basil Liddell Hart \(1895-1970\)](#), did not give the series its signature. Image did, and that signature was completely different from the views the authors of the script wanted to convey. They offered a balanced defence of General [Douglas Haig \(1861-1928\)](#) and his strategy of [attrition](#), but that is not what viewers, speaking to the BBC, took from the series. In overwhelming numbers, they viewed the series as showing the war as a ghastly catastrophe orchestrated by military and political leaders who had no idea how to conduct it without a bloodbath or to end it before 10 million men had died. This anti-war sentiment was reinforced by the ongoing publication of [war novels](#), written mostly by young officers, whose views on Haig and command were decidedly critical. However much men like Terraine and Barnett moaned about the lachrymose novelists and poets who misled everyone about what the war really meant to the vast majority of men who believed in the cause, it was not their view which emerged from the BBC series. It was a view of the war as tragic, a waste of countless lives with no redeeming outcome at all.

This was the period when the Great War entered fully into the lucrative and populous field of public history, represented by museums, special exhibitions, films, and now television. By the 1960s, the Imperial War Museum in London had surpassed many other sites as the premier destination of visitors to London. It remains to this day a major attraction in the capital, just as does the Australian War Memorial, an equally impressive museum and site of remembrance in the Australian capital, Canberra. The creator of the [Australian War Memorial](#), [Charles Bean \(1879-1968\)](#), was also official historian of the [ANZAC forces](#), Australian and New Zealanders who fought in Gallipoli, in Palestine, and on the Western front. His writings on the war were essential parts of what has become the ANZAC legend, of noble soldiers establishing their right to nationhood through their courage and their sacrifice. Nobility was mixed with sadness in his writing and in his museum, which is a sacred site to this day in Australia.

There was more than a little nostalgia in the celebration by survivors of “fifty years on”, in many combatant countries. By 1964, the European world that went to war in 1914 no longer existed. All the major imperial powers that joined the struggle had been radically transformed. The British Empire was a thing of the past; so was *Algérie française*, and the French *mission civilisatrice* in Africa and South Asia. The German Empire was gone, and so were most of its eastern territories, ceded to [Poland](#) and Russia after 1945. Austria, Hungary,

and [Yugoslavia](#) were small independent states. And while the Soviet Union resembled Czarist Russia in some respects, these continuities were dwarfed by the massive transformation of Soviet society since 1917.

The nostalgia of 1964 was, therefore, for a world which had fallen apart in the Great War. For many people, the blemishes and ugliness of much of that world were hidden by a kind of sepia-toned reverence for the days before the conflict. “Never such innocence, / Never before or since”, wrote [Philip Larkin \(1922-1985\)](#) in a poem whose title referred not to 1914, but to the more archaic “MCMXIV”. This poem was published in 1964, just after the BBC Great War series, and in line with its populist elegiac tone.

In much historical writing, as much as in historical documentaries, the dramatic tension derived from juxtaposing this set of pre-lapsarian images with the devastation and horror of the Western front, and with the sense of decline, a loss of greatness, which marked the post-1945 decades in Britain and beyond. Whatever was wrong with the world seemed to be linked to 1914, to the time when a multitude of decent men went off to fight one war and wound up fighting a much more terrible one.

Decencies were betrayed, some argued, by a blind elite prepared to sacrifice the lives of the masses for vapid generalizations like “glory” or “honour”. This populist strain may be detected in much writing about the war in the 1960s, and in the study of social movements which arose out of it. The fiftieth anniversary of the [Gallipoli](#) landing provoked a surge of interest in the Great War in [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#), where the loss of the battle was eclipsed by the birth of these two nations. Similarly heroic were narratives of the [Bolshevik Revolution](#), celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 1967. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many scholars told us much more about the history of [labour](#), of [women](#) and of ordinary people during the conflict than had scholars working in the interwar years.

As I have already noted, one of the major historiographical innovations of the 1960s was oral history, in part the product of feminist historians who needed to find a way to counter the male bias in the archives of the Great War. The history of women was written from official sources, but they usually filtered women’s voices through documents written by and for men. In [Italy](#), in Germany, and in Britain, women’s voices were sought out and recorded, leading to an entire industry of preservation of “everywoman” and thereafter “everyman”, as the unsung heroes and victims of war.

In Germany, there were continuities between the first and second generations of writing on the war. This was the outcome of the storm of criticism unleashed by the publication of two volumes by the German historian [Fritz Fischer \(1909-1999\)](#).⁶ Fischer used extensive citations

from archives to highlight the aggressive character of German foreign policy in the period prior to the war, and went so far as to suggest that there were similarities between the nature of [German war aims](#) in 1914-1918 and those of [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) and the Nazis a generation later. This was not so much a charged analysis as a radioactive one. The controversy Fischer's work unleashed produced a substantial literature itself in Germany and abroad, though only in Germany did Fischer's moral outrage at what he saw in the German archives yield an equally powerful moral outrage on the part of his opponents, who saw him as deceitful and disloyal. Here is the parallel between the 1960s and 1970s in Germany and the "war guilt" controversy of the interwar years.

Another defining feature of the "fifty years on" generation was the focus on European societies at war. The 1960s and 1970s were the high point of the discipline of social history, defined as the study of social classes, social movements, and [social conflict](#). There was a Marxist – or more precisely Marxisant – flavour to such writing, in which the essential premise was that political and social change follows changes in the pattern of work and industrial practices. If you will, as machines change, so does the outlook and politics of workers.

The Great War was a time of massive reorganization of industrial labour, and many historians looked to the war as a dialectical moment, first suppressing industrial conflict and then accelerating it everywhere in Europe. The focus of much research was on industrial militancy, [strikes](#), [pacifism](#), and finally, the new world of labour defined by the Russian revolutions of 1917.⁷

In 1969, Marc Ferro, a distinguished French historian of the Russian Revolutions, produced the first synthetic social history of the Great War.⁸ Here was a path-breaking work, offering a panorama of the war on both the [Eastern](#) and Western fronts, and providing important insights on the social history of all phases of the war. Ferro was one of the first to bring historical scholarship into television, producing a series on the Great War in France which paralleled the BBC's important series in 1964.

The Vietnam Generation

The third generation may be termed the "Vietnam generation". Its practitioners started writing in the 1970s and 1980s, when a general reaction against military adventures like the war in Vietnam took place in Britain and Europe as well as in the [United States](#). This was also the period in Europe when public opinion turned against the nuclear deterrent, and when the 1973 Middle Eastern war had posed dangerous effects on the economies of the developed world. The glow of the "just war" of 1939-1945 had faded, and a new generation was more open to a view that war was a catastrophe to both winners and losers alike.

This was the environment in which darker histories of the Great War emerged. There were still scholars who insisted that the Great War was a noble cause, won by those who had right on their side. But there were others who came to portray the Great War as a futile exercise: a tragedy, a stupid, horrendous waste of lives, producing nothing of great value. The real story to this group of writers was to be found in the way blind and arrogant leaders threw away the ordinary decencies and dignity of millions of men and women.

The most influential works were written by three very different scholars. [Paul Fussell \(1924-2012\)](#), a veteran of the Second World War wounded in combat, produced a classic literary study, *The Great War and Modern Memory* in 1975.⁹ He was a professor of literature, who fashioned an interpretation of how soldiers came to understand the war they found in 1914-1918 as an ironic event, one in which anticipation and outcome were wildly different. It was a time when the old romantic language of battle seemed to lose its meaning. Writers twisted older forms to suit the new world of trench warfare, one in which mass death was dominant and where, under [artillery](#) and [gas](#) bombardment, soldiers lost any sense that war was a glorious thing. Fussell termed this style the “ironic” style and challenged us to see war writing throughout the 20th century as built upon the foundations laid by the British soldier writers of the Great War.

Sir [John Keegan \(1934-2012\)](#) produced a book a year later, which paralleled Fussell’s. An instructor in the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, but a man whose childhood infirmities ensured he would never go to war, Keegan asked the disarmingly simple question: “Is battle possible?” The answer, published in *The Face of Battle* in 1976,¹⁰ was perhaps yes, long ago, but now in the 20th century, battle presented men with terrifying challenges. The men who fought at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 could run to the next hill to save their lives. Foot soldiers converging on Waterloo four centuries later could arrive a day late. But in 1916, at the [Battle of the Somme](#), there was no escape. Given the [industrialization of warfare](#), the air above the trenches on the Somme was filled with lethal projectiles from which there was no escape. Mass [deaths](#) in that battle and in the other great conflict of 1916 at [Verdun](#), pushed soldiers beyond the limits of human endurance. Nothing like the set battles of the First World War followed in the 1939-1945 war, though Stalingrad came close to replicating the horror of the Somme and Verdun. Here was a military historian’s book, but one whose starting point was humane and to a degree psychological. The soldiers’ breaking point was Keegan’s subject, and with power, subtlety, and technical authority, he opened a new chapter in the study of military history as a humane discipline.

In 1979, Eric Leed, a historian steeped in the literature of anthropology, wrote a similarly

path-breaking book. *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*¹¹ borrowed subtly from the work of the anthropologist [Victor Turner \(1920-1983\)](#). He had examined people in a liminal condition, no longer part of an older world from which they had come, and unable to escape from the midpoint, the no man's land, in which they found themselves. Here is the emotional landscape of the trench soldiers of the Great War. They were men who could never come home again, for whom war was their home, and who recreated it in the years following the Armistice. Here was the world of shell-shocked men, but also that of the [Freikorps](#), militarized freebooters of the immediate post-war period, who prepared the ground for the Nazis.

In all three cases, and by reference to very different sources, the subject at hand was the tragedy of the millions of men who went into the trenches and who came out, if at all, permanently marked by the experience. They bore what some observers of the survivors of Hiroshima termed the "death imprint"; the knowledge that their survival was a purely arbitrary accident. Here we may see some traces of the anti-nuclear movement, putting alongside one another Japanese civilians and Great War soldiers. The moral and political differences between the two cases are evident, but the wreckage of war, so these writers seemed to say, is at the heart of the civilization in which we live. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that these three books, alongside others of the time, helped create a tragic interpretation of the Great War, one in which victimhood and violence were braided together in such a way as to tell a fully European story of the war, one to which the founders of the European Union clearly reacted. From the 1970s on, European integration was an attempt to move away from the notion of the nation state as that institution which had the right to go to war, as [Raymond Aron \(1905-1983\)](#) put it. The result has been a progressive diminution of the role of the military in the political and social life of most European countries. James Sheehan asked the question in a recent book *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?*¹² The answer is, they and most (though not all) of their leaders have fled from the landscape of war so devastatingly presented in the works of Fussell, Keegan, Leed, and others.

The German-born American historian [George Mosse \(1918-1999\)](#) made a different contribution to this third generation of writing on the Great War. His concept of the "nationalization of the masses",¹³ a process which antedated the 1914-1918 conflict but which accelerated radically thereafter, inspired much work in France on what [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#) and [Annette Becker](#) termed *la culture de guerre*. By that term they meant the set of representations which framed popular sentiment about seeing the war through to victory, whatever the cost, between 1914 and 1918. The demonization of the enemy and the spiritualization of the cause, are themes with clear links to Mosse's work, and which have

constituted a kind of anthropological approach to the history of violence in the two world wars.¹⁴ Becker and Audoin-Rouzeau have attracted a chorus of denunciations, especially from historians identifying with the socialist and pacifist tradition in France, who see constraint trumping consent during the war. They have formed their own society, located on the Chemin des Dames, where the great mutinies of 1917 took place.¹⁵ And like the Fischer debate, the argument over consent or constraint is still going on.

Mosse's work was influential in another respect. In 1990, he published a study of war cemeteries and commemorative practices surrounding the First World War.¹⁶ Although the first pioneering work had been done by the Australian historian Ken Inglis,¹⁷ the French historian [Antoine Prost](#),¹⁸ and the German historian [Reinhart Koselleck \(1923-2005\)](#),¹⁹ it was Mosse's publication which stimulated a group of younger scholars to explore the history of war memorials all over the world. Alongside such research on monuments, the history of mourning practices grew apace.²⁰ It is still a growth industry today (2013).

The Transnational Generation

Now we are in a fourth generation of writing on the Great War. I term it the "transnational generation". This generation has a global outlook. The term "global" describes both the tendency to write about the war in more than European terms and to see the conflict as trans-European, trans-Atlantic, and beyond. Here was the first war among industrialized countries, reaching the [Middle East](#) and Africa, the Falkland Islands and [China](#), drawing soldiers into the epicenter in Europe from Vancouver to Capetown, to Bombay and to Adelaide. Here was a war that gave birth to the Turkey of [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk \(1881-1938\)](#) and to the Soviet Union of [Vladimir Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) and [Joseph Stalin \(1878-1953\)](#). Demands for decolonization arose from a war that had promised self-determination and had produced very little of the kind. Economic troubles arose directly out of the war, and these were sufficiently serious to undermine the capacity of the older imperial powers to pay for their imperial and quasi-imperial footholds around the world.

The potential imbedded in this transnational approach is also reflected in one institution explicitly committed to going beyond the strictly national confines of the history of the war: the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* at Péronne, France. The Historial is a museum of the war, designed by historians and presented in three languages – English, French and German, located at the site of German headquarters during the Battle of the Somme, that vast bloodletting in 1916, which the German writer [Ernst Jünger \(1895-1998\)](#) termed the birthplace of the 20th century. Together with four historians of the Great War from France and

Germany – [Jean-Jacques Becker](#), [Gerd Krumeich](#), Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker – I joined a collective which reached out across national frontiers to create a new kind of museum, one which treated the Great War as a transnational catastrophe.²¹ This blending of different national viewpoints and emphases suited the new Europe of the 1990s, when it became apparent that to understand the integration of Europe at the end of the 20th century, you had to understand the disintegration of Europe at its beginning.

A word or two may be useful to distinguish the international approach from what I have termed the transnational approach to the history of the Great War. For nearly a century, the Great War was framed in terms of a system of international relations in which the national and imperial levels of conflict and cooperation were taken as given. Transnational history does not start with one state and move on to others, but takes multiple levels of historical experience as given, levels which are both below and above the national level.²² Thus, the history of mutiny is transnational, in that it happened in different armies for different reasons, some of which are strikingly similar to the sources of protest and refusal in other armies. So is the history of [finance](#), [technology](#), [war economies](#), [logistics](#), and command. The history of commemoration also happened on many levels, and the national is not necessarily the most significant, nor the most enduring. The peace treaties following the Great War show the meaning of the transnational in other ways. Now we can see that the war was both the apogee and the beginning of the end of imperial power, spanning and eroding national and imperial boundaries. [Erez Manela's](#) work on “the [Wilsonian moment](#)” is a case in point. He reconfigures the meaning of the Versailles settlement by exploring its unintended consequences in stimulating movements of national liberation in [Egypt](#), [India](#), [Korea](#), and China. Instead of telling us about the interplay of Great Power politics, he shows how non-Europeans invented their own version of Wilson in their search for a kind of self-determination that he, alongside [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#), [Georges Clémenceau \(1841-1929\)](#), and [Vittorio Orlando \(1860-1952\)](#), was unprepared to offer to them. Who could have imagined that the decision these men took to award rights to Shandong Province, formerly held by Germany, not to China but to [Japan](#) would lead to major rioting and the formation of the Chinese Communist Party?²³

Historians of the revolutionary moment in Europe itself between 1917 and 1921 have approached their subject more and more as a transnational phenomenon. After all, both revolutionaries and the forces of order who worked to destroy them were well aware of what may be termed the cultural transfer of revolutionary (and counter-revolutionary) strategy, tactics, and violence. In recent years, these exchanges have been analyzed at the urban and regional levels, helping us to see the complexity of a story somewhat obscured by treating it solely in national terms. Comparative urban history has established the striking parallels

between the challenges [urban populations](#) faced in different warring states. Now we can answer in the affirmative the question as to whether there is a metropolitan history of [warfare](#). In important respects, the residents of Paris, London, and Berlin shared more with one another than they did with their respective rural compatriots. These experienced communities had a visceral reality somewhat lacking even in the imagined communities of the nation.²⁴

Here we must be sensitive to the way contemporaries used the language of nation and empire to describe loyalties and affiliations of a much smaller level of aggregation. A journalist asking British troops on the Western front whether they were fighting for the Empire, got a “yes” from one soldier. His mates asked him what he meant. The answer was that he was fighting for the Empire Music Hall in Hackney, a working-class district of London. This attachment to the local and the familiar was utterly transnational.²⁵

Another subject now understood more in transnational than in international terms is the history of women in wartime. Patriarchy, family formation, and the persistence of gender inequality were transnational realities in the period of the Great War. Furthermore, the war’s massive effects on civilian life precipitated a movement of populations of staggering proportions. [Refugees](#) in [France](#), [the Netherlands](#), and Britain from the area occupied by the Western front numbered in the millions. So did those fleeing the fighting in the borderlands spanning the old German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian Empires. One scholar has estimated that perhaps 20 percent of the population of Russia was on the move, heading for safety wherever it could be found during the Great War. And that population current turned into a torrent throughout Eastern Europe during the period of chaos surrounding the Armistice. What made it worse was that the United States closed its gates to such immigrants, ending one of the most extraordinary periods of transcontinental migration in history. Thus population transfer, forced or precipitated by war, transformed the ethnic character of many parts of Greece, Turkey, the Balkans, and the vast tract of land from the Baltic states to the Caucasus. Such movements antedated the war, but they grew exponentially after 1914. This is why it makes sense to see the Great War as having occasioned the emergence of that icon of transnational history in the 20th century, the refugee, with his or her pitiful belongings slung over shoulders or carts. The photographic evidence of this phenomenon is immense.

The fourth generation of Great War historians is transnational in yet another, demographic, respect. We live in a world where historians born in one country have been able to migrate to follow their historical studies and either to stay in their adopted homes or to migrate again, when necessary, to obtain a university post. Many of the historians who write about the Great

War in the first and second decades of the 21st century are transnational scholars, practicing history far from their place of birth, and enriching the world of scholarship thereby. Seeing the world in which we live at a tangent, in the words of the Greek poet [Konstantin Kavafis \(1863-1933\)](#), opens up insights harder to identify from within a settled world. The world of scholarship today may be described in many ways, but the term “settled” is not one of them. It fragmented when the Soviet Empire collapsed and with it the polarities of the Cold War. The transnational history of the Great War can now be written precisely because the Cold War is over.²⁶

Conclusion

This multi-polarity and acceptance of unsettledness as a social condition are major changes, with positive achievements already registered. These will enable more transnational histories to emerge alongside national histories, and for each to enrich the other. One of the most important immediate effects of the transnational turn in Great War history is to help open up whole continents to the significance of the 1914-1918 conflict in their region or area. There is now a flourishing historical community in China, Hong Kong, and Japan, as well as a growing group of Latin American historians at work today (2013) on the war period. Much more is available today on Africa and the Middle East in the period of the Great War, and there is more to come.

It is important to repeat that these new initiatives in transnational history have built on the work of the three generations of scholars that preceded them. The history of the Great War that has emerged in recent years is additive, cumulative, and multifaceted. National histories have a symbiotic relationship with transnational histories; the richer the one, the deeper the other. No cultural historian of any standing ignores the history of the state, nor the social movements which at times have overthrown them; to do so would be absurd. No military historian ignores the language in which commands turn into movements on the field of battle. Anyone surveying the rich field of First World War studies today (2014) must acknowledge both the continuities with earlier generations and the departures which have enriched the field too.

Not all museums adopt the approach of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre*, but once again, we must emphasize the complementarity of transnational and strictly national approaches to the representation of war in museums, local, regional, or national alike. In this, the age of trans-continental tourism, the needs of visitors of different languages and nationalities must be respected. This has made the demand for museums of the Great War grow exponentially in the last twenty years, a demand which will increase in the four years of the centenary itself. What will happen after 2018 is anybody's guess.

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Notes

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22. For some discussions of the emergence of transnational history, see: Iriye, Akira: *Transnational History*, *Contemporary European History* xiii (2004), pp. 211-222; Heilbron, John et al.: *Towards a transnational history of the social sciences*, in: *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* xlv, 2 (2008), pp. 146-160; Bayly, C. A. / Beckert, Sven / Connelly, Matthew / Hofmeyr, Isabel / Kozol, Wendy / Seed, Patricia: *AHR Conversation: On Transnational history*, in: *American Historical Review* cxi, 5 (December 2006), pp. 1441-1464. ↑
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26. On the transnational turn and the globalization of historical writing it has spawned, see Winter, Jay (ed.): *The Cambridge History of the First World War*. Cambridge 2014, volume 1: *Global War*; volume 2: *The State*; volume 3: *Civil Society*. ↑

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Citation

Jay Winter: Historiography 1918-Today, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-11-11. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10498](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10498)

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Author Keywords

Historiography; Transnational history; Cultural history; Military history; Commemoration

GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Geschichtsschreibung](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918--Historiography](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Historiographie](#)

Key Person(s)

[Jünger, Ernst](#); [Fischer, Fritz](#); [Mosse, George L.](#); [Fussell, Paul](#); [Koselleck, Reinhart](#); [Renouvin, Pierre](#); [Aron, Raymond](#); [Fay, Sidney Bradshaw](#); [Bloch, Marc](#); [Febvre, Lucien](#); [Barnes, Harry](#); [Halévy, Elie](#); [Terraine, John](#); [Larkin, Philip](#); [Keegan, John](#); [Turner, Victor](#); [Kavafis, Konstantin](#); [Clemenceau, Georges](#); [Lenin, Vladimir Il'ich](#); [Lloyd George, David](#); [Bean, Charles](#); [Hitler, Adolf](#); [Kemal, Mustafa \(Atatürk\)](#); [Haig, Douglas](#); [Orlando, Vittorio Emanuele](#); [Liddell Hart, Basil Henry, Sir](#); [Stalin, Joseph](#); [Halbwachs, Maurice](#); [Albertini, Luigi](#)

Key Location(s)

Title

Historiography 1918-Today

Author(s)

[Jay Winter](#)

Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

Survey Article (Thematic)

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