

## A Companion to World War I

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**Reviewer:** Matthew Hughes

This edited companion in the multi-volume history survey series published by Wiley-Blackwell will become a set text for students of the Great War, at least when the less expensive paperback version appears in bookshops. (Priced at £120.00, the hardback edition is really only a practicable purchase for libraries.) The volume under review is cohesive, comprehensive and engaging throughout, which is not something that one can always say about edited collections. It also includes an extended thematic bibliography that is akin to a historiography of the war and which will appeal to new and established students of the First World War. At nearly 700 pages and with 38 chapters, John Horne's volume is, arguably, overly long, and this will deter some who will prefer, say, the more concise *Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* edited by Hew Strachan.<sup>(1)</sup> That said, the extra length gives Professor Horne's volume a depth and breadth missing in many of the other survey guides to this topic.

The chapter contributors come in the main from British, Irish and US universities, but Horne, based at Trinity College, Dublin, has included a set of key French scholars – such as Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker and Jean-Jacques Becker – alongside academics from Italy, Germany, Belgium and Australia. 12 of the chapters have been translated into English; certainly, reading the chapters it is obvious that this is not an 'Anglo-Saxon' perspective on the war. The French dimension to the conflict is particularly well served – almost a quarter of the chapters are written by professors based at French universities – and this means that much of the analysis draws upon (for English-language readers, at least) a refreshing range of French (or non-British) source material. At times, this makes for chapters that are rather parochial for readers accustomed to a 'British' understanding of the war, but this is not a bad thing, providing as it does new ways of seeing and understanding the Great War.

The structure of Horne's volume is telling. Two 'origins' chapters cover the issues of how Europe of the late 19th century envisaged a future war and why war broke out in August 1914. Here, John Keiger's chapter on the origins of the war succinctly and skilfully examines a complex and heavily studied subject, setting up a standard for the remaining chapters that is invariably met, even if some of these are more partial in tone. Thereafter, a 'military conflict' section of nine chapters deals with what might be called the 'traditional' combat dimensions to the war. The nine essays in this section, generally dealing with different theatres or fronts, are all very good, written as they are by leading military historians, and cover not just the Western

Front but the Balkan, African, and Russian fronts, as well as the naval and air theatres of combat. Strachan's chapter on 'command, strategy and tactics' is a compact, illuminating summary of the set of complex strategic factors that led to ultimate victory and defeat. Similarly, Robin Prior's and Trevor Wilson's analysis of the last two years of the war on the Western Front neatly sums up the argument about the supposed 'learning curve' of the Allied armies that led to their becoming sufficiently powerful to defeat German forces in France and Belgium after August 1918.

It should be said that the military analysis here covers not so much the battlefield tactics – dealt with elsewhere by, *inter alios*, scholars such as Paddy Griffith in *Battle Tactics of the Western Front, 1916–18* and *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (2) – as the higher-level operations, strategy and command that underpinned the slaughter at the various fighting fronts. Horne does not make a play on the 'total war' arguments surrounding the First World War – again dealt with in books such as Roger Chickering's edited *Great War, Total War* (3) – but, instead, the industrial, mass, technological base to the First World War underpins the text under review. Thus, the management (or strategy) of what will be a highly complex long 'total' war involving the home front as much as the war front forms the central part of what is examined in the 'military conflict' section to Horne's collection, overlapping with later chapters that are more social and cultural in tone.

Horne follows this 'military' analysis of the war – what was for many years the staple fare of many studies of the First World War – with a longer set of 13 thematic 'cultural' chapters that contextualize the war. This 'faces of war' section shows how much First World War 'studies' have advanced beyond battlefield operations. It is here that Horne's contributors engage with what might be called the 'war and society' approach to the First World War. One senses that this is where the volume has the biggest impact. Horne's introduction to the whole book makes this point, giving more weight to the cultural than the military dimensions to the war. Such an approach proves that the writing of military history is no longer the preserve of retired generals or academics at military academies but, instead, has become part of mainstream academia, tying in war to broader social, political, economic and cultural change. Alan Kramer provides an effective chapter on non-combatant atrocities, building on the book he co-authored with Horne on the 'rape' of Belgium in 1914, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial*.(4) Film, women, visual arts, demography, faith, experiences of combat, science and medicine are just some of the other topics discussed over a set of nicely crafted 'faces of war' chapters.

The final parts of the *Companion to World War I* deal with national and state engagement with the war, and with the war's legacy. In 11 chapters, Horne examines pivotal states such as France, Germany and Britain, but he shows the broad reach of his study by including chapters on German-occupied Eastern Europe, Belgium, 'Yugoslavia', Ireland and the British and French empires. These national studies re-engage the reader with military and thematic social issues from the previous two parts of the companion, combining them in case studies that reinforce key arguments. The chapters on Austria-Hungary, Russia and Eastern Europe are especially useful and interesting as the English-language literature on the First World War is typically 'Western-front' centric. The last three chapters under the title of 'legacies' examine the peace treaties, as one would expect, but they also challenge, rightly in this reviewer's opinion, the idea that the war ended on 11 November 1918. Revolutions, civil wars and anarchy across large parts of Eastern Europe and the former Ottoman Empire, including obviously Soviet Russia, extended the war into the 1920s. The Russian and Irish civil wars were visible, bloody conflicts that flowed from the First World War, and were the tip of an iceberg of social and political upheaval across Europe after 1918. Peter Gatrell in his chapter on 'war after the war' can only touch upon the misery and death that was the legacy of the 'peace' of 1918, but he gives a real sense of how for so many people the war never really ended. Ironically, the signing of peace often meant the start of another war. The trouble after 1918 was fed by the men traumatized by the war, unable or unwilling to adjust to life as civilians. Such men would take the fascists to power in Italy in 1922 and the Nazis to power in Germany in 1933. Such an approach dovetails with other volumes in the Wiley-Blackwell series such as the *Companion to International History, 1900–2001* (5), linking in war with diplomatic, global history across the whole of the 20th century. The final chapter of Horne's companion examines mourning and memory, providing a cultural finale to a military history.

Continuity and change provide the dominant theme to all of the chapters in Horne's *Companion to World War I*. Did the First World War usher in a new age of modernity or was it the last gasp of the *fin-de-siècle* epoch? So often, we see the Great War in terms of a beginning, in which there emerged a new spirit of modernism, scepticism and irony, expressed in, *inter alia*, T.S. Eliot's poem 'The Wasteland' (1922), James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922), Bertolt Brecht's and Kurt Weill's play 'The Threepenny Opera' (1928), and Absurdist art movements of the 1920s such as Dada. This was the 'age of extremes' (1914–89), the start of the short twentieth century marked by fascism, communism, world and cold wars, ending with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Even in military terms, the Great War saw the birth of the modern battlefield, as evidenced by Jonathan Bailey in *The First World War and the Birth of the Modern Style of Warfare*. (6) Yet, one has only to look at the pre-war paintings of Picasso or Kandinsky to see that life was changing before 1914. If the world was changing before 1914 then the First World War reflected rather than caused the change. The tensions surrounding what the First World War represents ties together Horne's volume, whether his contributors are discussing medicine, guns or art. At times, it seems as if little changed because of the war. As Susan Grayzel shows in her chapter on 'Women and men' in Horne's companion, any changes to women's position in society were (p. 274) 'for the duration' and 'expectations for appropriate gendered behaviour had changed relatively little during the war years'.

What was the place of the First World War in history? Was it the end of one age or the start of another? Even in military terms, the war was, arguably, more the end of a journey that began with the French and Industrial revolutions than the start of a new style of combat, *contra* the arguments of those such as Jonathan Bailey. The First World War, it seems, sits on the cusp of two worlds and this ambiguity is nicely reflected in this volume. The issue of change and continuity was examined many years before by George Dangerfield in his *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, published in 1935, in which Dangerfield argued that Britain was changing before the Great War, measured by the mood of groups such as the working class, women and Irish nationalists. More recently, Modris Eksteins' *Rites of Spring* (7) has given this argument a new twist, showing how shocking new forms of dance and music were introduced into Paris in 1913. Thus, Horne's collection of essays usefully builds on an existing corpus of work.

Ideology, faith and nationalism, broadly understood, provide another theme to the book under review. But was the First World War the grisly end of an era of post French Revolution nation-state nationalism – that

created and fed the mass armies that fought the war – or was it the birth of a new set of more radical ideologies such as communism and fascism? Again, the reader is drawn into arguments about the place of the Great War in history, to which there are no easy answers. Issues of personal faith, memory, mourning and trauma are even harder to understand, not just in terms of archival evidence and literature but also in terms of how we comprehend their places in a longer history. This is, of course, an issue well covered by Paul Fussell in his *The Great War and Modern Memory*.<sup>(8)</sup> (Readers interested in the different ways of looking at the Great War might be interested to read Robin Prior's and Trevor Wilson's 'Paul Fussell at War' <sup>(9)</sup>, an article which sharply shows some of the methodological differences between scholars of the First World War, and an issue largely left to one side in Horne's introduction.)

Horne is to be congratulated for editing such a disparate group of essays into a cohesive whole. His coverage of the non-European aspects to the war – *pace* David Killingray's chapter on the war in Africa – is not complete, but the presentation of the First World War as a conflagration that consumed most of Europe is excellent. This volume presents the war as a phenomenon that extended well beyond the Western Front, a much-needed approach, and one that allows the reader to see the war in all its horror, especially in the 'bloodlands' of the east where atrocities and deaths outweighed other theatres of combat. The First World War created both suffering and energy – 'negative, by its power of destruction, but positive, by the forces it liberated' (p. 238–9) – and the essays in Horne's volume, in their different ways, prove this terrible paradox.

## Notes

1. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford, 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-18* (New Haven, CT, 1994); *British Fighting Methods in the Great War*, ed. Paddy Griffith (London, 1996).  
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Great War, Total War Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918*, ed. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (Cambridge, 2003).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. John Horne and Alex Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT, 2001).  
[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *A Companion to International History, 1900–2001*, ed. Gordon Martel (London, 2007).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Jonathan Bailey, *The First World War and the Birth of the Modern Style of Warfare*, Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, Occasional paper no. 22 (Camberley, 1996).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, MA, 2000).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, 'Paul Fussell at war', *War in History*, 1, 1 (1994).[Back to \(9\)](#)

The editor is happy to accept this review.

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