

**Jay Winter (ed.)**  
***The Cambridge History of the First World War***

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1 The significance of the comparative investigation is related to the historiographical traditions of an individual nation, to personal preferences for methods and to the current state of the art in historiography. Changes in the understanding of history and in historical writing, the construction of new categories of analysis, major directions of thought in historiography and the social sciences have emerged from great events that have changed the historical conscience of time. The Great War is one of those major events.

2 Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch's formulation of comparative historical scholarship was due to their wish to transcend national-oriented historiography.<sup>1</sup> Bloch – being an historical actor and an historian at the same time – managed to historicise his experience by conceptualising various aspects of the war. The systematisation of comparison in history is linked, therefore, to the experience of the First World War, which provoked a double movement of consolidation and of overcoming national histories. Recent perceptions of the historical event as unexpected and uncontrollable implies the idea that the possible does not exist a priori but comes to life together with it.<sup>2</sup> The potentiality of the past is fundamental for the cultural historian. The notion describes what was, or was thought, to be possible for the agent of the past. Cultural historical research has emphasised the potential and not only the actual, the historical significance of thoughts, emotions and representations.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis is not on the causal-based description of the event but on the historical reality and the historical experience it encompasses, as well as the memory (or memories) constructed and reconstructed (at a later period)<sup>4</sup> by the conceptual articulation of the event.<sup>5</sup> Historical scholarship is generally sceptical of great generalisations, placing high value on the principle of uniqueness; and yet, comparisons drawn from the inclusion of many cases is not a practice familiar to historians, who usually proceed from primary sources, thus isolating special variables of a whole.<sup>6</sup> In comparative history we select aspects, we proceed from parts of a society, or from entire societies, which we seek to compare; the emphasis is on causality. Comparison in history is about relating different-yet-similar historical phenomena while crossnational history puts several national experiences in perspective “without the impulse to make comparative evaluations”.<sup>7</sup> Global historians are reluctant to use comparison in histories of the world: the spectre of teleology and the rhetoric of uniqueness are the problems related to the comparative approach that disclose its limitations.<sup>8</sup>

3 Is transnational history a genre of comparative history on the grounds of their common pursuit of “crossing the boundary lines”? Could we argue that transnational history is defined topically since it arises when the limitations of national histories are evident? To illustrate this point, let me refer to migrant groups, exile communities, colonies, religious practices and mentalities, elites and social movements. Is transnational history, as it had developed by the beginning of this century, a genre of global history and the outcome of the recently emergent last wave of globalisation that has altered the ways of understanding the present and the past? The term “transnational” appeared in the 1990s when the discourse of globalisation seemed to undermine the appeal the nation-state had for historical writing, though national history is still the privileged form of historiography almost universally.<sup>9</sup> Literally speaking, it is an historical approach that is not applicable to the period before the formation of nation-states; methodologically speaking, the transnational approach “frequently only gestures at the global without fully confronting its challenges”.<sup>10</sup>

4 Transnational history, as practiced in the three-volume *Cambridge History of the First World War*,

which is edited by Jay Winter and includes contributions by a distinguished transnational team of scholars, is rather a methodological and an intellectual adventure influenced by a nonhierarchical and democratic view of history and its actors.<sup>11</sup> The comparative dimension is present as a technique, and not as a context, especially in cases such as conditions of engagement and mobilisation, couples and conscription, cities at war, deportations, casualties and atrocities, memorials and military cemeteries with respect to already identified questions. The real interest, though, is in the entangled processes and interrelated levels of historical experience. The transnational commitment incorporates various historical subfields such as military history; financial history; technologies; war economies; logistics and command; international history and peace treaties; the history of mutinies and of battles; gender history, labour history (war work); the history of family (which for Winter is the “most powerful vector” of transnational history) and civilian life; the history of everyday life; the history of remembrance and memorial-commemoration culture; the history of the body and of emotion. By breaking down the boundaries between subdisciplines, the project advocates the common experiences of the agents for the sake of our understanding of the Great War as a multifaceted phenomenon. Transnational methodology and transnational sensibilities move beyond established political, national and ethnic identities. The Great War was a global phenomenon. In this respect, there is a claim to generality concerning the realm of reality and its experiences in the realm of the dead and the living. At the same time, historical research operates at the private level, exploring the space of the experiences and waging of war as well as its “hidden injuries”. A new understanding of this war is not possible without studying the complexity of perplexed identities like the ambiguous figure of the female soldier as her service was associated with gender definitions (Margaret R. Higonnet, vol. 3, chap. 6). Transnational history takes seriously the historical reality of the war and the meanings that include the self-interpretations of agents. In pursuit of this interest in lived experiences, the transnational enterprise has grown beyond the traditions of national history as a discipline and nationally structured interpretative frameworks.

As Winter, Charles J. Still Professor of History at Yale University, puts it, “a global war needs global history to bring out in high relief its conduct, its character and its manifold repercussions” (introduction, vol. 1, 11). The three-volume history (the books are titled *Global War*, *The State* and *Civil Society*), with an impressive range of contributors (26 in vol. 1, 25 in vol. 2 and 26 in vol. 3), was supported by the staff of the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne.<sup>12</sup> The international museum at the Somme opened in 1992, its ideological premises being the equal treatment to both sides and the respect for the global character of the war. The Great War is considered as the first total war not only because of its global dimension (the involvement of colonial empires) but on the grounds of the mobilisation of industrialised societies,<sup>13</sup> drawing soldiers “into the epicentre in Europe from Vancouver to Cape Town to Bombay and to Adelaide” and involving huge movements of populations, technologies, armaments and ideas, as Winter notes (general introduction and introduction to part 4, vol. 3). The violent experiences of civilians in the Great War, and under long-term occupation, were “fundamental to the process of totalisation of warfare that marked the twentieth century” (Heather Jones and Laurence Van Ypersele in the introduction to part 2, vol. 3). The transnational account shares the “global” concept as a category of denominating the last level of analysis starting with another, very significant, one – the local. The focus is on the war itself and not on nations at war.<sup>14</sup>

For the purpose of this comment, let me note that the Greek case shows how the “local” homogenises the experience of being at war and, at the same time, differentiates it. The Greeks faced the war experiences in various spaces – in combat, in cities, in active and nonactive military zones – and in various ways: privation, occupation, militarisation of the domestic sphere (the notion is used by Susan R. Grayzel, vol. 3, chap. 5) and purges. Thessaloniki and Athens were two wartime cities that represented the contrasting loyalties of the divided nation. In Athens, as in other major cities of southeastern Europe, the home front became the war front.

A global war needs a global perspective. However, it also needs historians whose personal experiences, intellectual interests and professional trajectories have influenced their historical witting. They are those that go further in the exploration of crucial objects and new methods that constitute historical analysis. Winter discloses the “evidence of the experience”<sup>15</sup> in the influential works of Paul Fussell (a critic and veteran), John Keegan and Eric Leed, who represented the third political and historiographic generation, the “Vietnam generation” of historians, as Winter likes to term it. Those works helped create “a tragic interpretation of the war” (General Introduction). In his acknowledgements (vol. 1), Winter identifies himself as a member of a collective of historians that worked together for more than two decades and were united by a shared vision of the war; a

“transnational generation” that has a global outlook and sees the conflict as trans-European, transatlantic and beyond. He also expresses his thanks to these people and numerous other historians in the field of Great War studies working alongside them. This project draws on 25 years of historical scholarship and so the history of the Great War that has been produced recently is “additive, cumulative and multi-faceted”, as he points out in the general introduction.

It is important to stress though that this project directs our thinking in new ways and has revolutionised historiographical practice. The main metaphor is no longer the foreign country but the experience of being at war as a trench soldier, civilian, woman, widow, child, refugee, deportee or veteran. There is no “central actor” for the transnational historian; any individual, community, fellowship, attitude and account that constitutes itself in communication with other agents, institutions, practices; any individual, community or memory that is in relation to the war, its changing circumstances, its manifold repercussions, is worthy of the term. In this sense, no less significant is the collapse of the traditional dichotomies between soldiers and civilians (John Horne), civil and military (Stig Förster), frontline and home front spheres (Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Heather Jones), civilians and combatants (Bruno Cabanes), civilian and military targets (Gary Sheffield and Stephen Badsey), victims of war and actors (Margaret R. Higonnet) as well as the gendered identities (Joanna Bourke), brutalisation (Robert Gerwarth) and the relationship between the living and the dead (Antoine Prost). Fictive kinship and the sacrality of death, as represented in military cemeteries (Prost, vol. 3, chap. 22), are the analytical notions that serve as indicators for the accumulation of temporalities. The first notion is related to a brotherhood, lives during the war and after; the second to the dead soldiers lined up as they were in life, mourned as individuals and, at the same time, as members of a sacred community.

Still, it reflects a methodological orientation that extends the traditional boundaries of history as a discipline. Mapping out new semantic fields plays a part in supporting the methodology and in relation to the corpus of accumulated evidence: populations at risk is one of these semantic fields and comprises populations under occupation, captive civilians, displaced persons and minorities; other ones are bodies in pain, societies in mourning and commemoration, societies at war, political systems under the pressures of war, fictive kinship (Winter coined the phrase to assert the strong bonds of people with shared experiences formed in wartime that lasted long after armistice). Issues such as imperialism, nationalism and curtailed freedoms, revolution, genocide and the laws of war are formulated as emotions, ideologies and movements before, during and after the war, recognising the intersection of temporalities. At the same time, the war is treated as a major event that takes on a powerful life of its own (the “*événement-monstre*” of François Dosse), which restructures historical time, changes the political landscape of the world order and shapes postwar societies regionally and across the world.

Consequently, it could be argued that transnational and global history share common sensitivities in taking nation-states or political entities not as givens but as the product of global processes, in considering the transcending of borders and boundaries, the entanglements and interconnections in history. In this vein, the Great War is situated in a global context. Based on an extensive and plural documentation and on a wide range of research, the *Cambridge History of the First World War* has a declared global and transnational objective. Transnational history analyses “the spatial impact of war and the effects that occurred both regionally and across the world” – as Winter puts it – in conjunction with “the changing character” of the war; global historians privilege the connections and synchronic contexts in space.<sup>16</sup> Unlike, though, global historians who are radically critical of “past” paradigms, current transnational generation of historians do not challenge the major insights generated by the scholarship of the latest generation on the First World War. They don’t question the significance of national histories, which still have to be produced.

## NOTES

- 1 Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka, “Comparative history: methods, aims, problems,” in *Comparison and history: Europe in cross-national perspective*, ed. Deborah Cohen and Maura O’Connor (New York: Routledge, 2004), 23–39.
- 2 François Dosse, “Événement,” in *Historiographies: concepts et débats*, vol. 2, ed. Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, Patrick Garcia and Nicolas Offenstadt (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 744–56, esp. 746.
- 3 Hannu Salmi, “Cultural history, the possible, and the principle of plenitude,” *History and Theory* 50/2 (2011): 171–87.
- 4 On the reinterpretation of past events through new ones, see Dosse, “Événement,” 746.
- 5 On past and present conceptualisations, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures past: on the semantics of historical time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT, 1985), 90–91.

- 6 Haupt and Kocka, "Comparative history," 24–25.
- 7 Michael Miller, "Comparative and cross-national history: approaches, differences, problems," in *Comparison and history: Europe in cross-national perspective*, ed. Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor (New York: Routledge, 2004), 115–32.
- 8 Sebastian Conrad, *What is global history?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 40–41.
- 9 Ibid., 45.
- 10 Ibid., 47.
- 11 French-speaking readers may consult the translation: *La Première Guerre mondiale*, vol. 1, *Combats* (Paris: Fayard, 2013) and vols 2, *Etats*, and 3, *Sociétés* (Paris: Fayard, 2014).
- 12 The members of the editorial team of the International Research Centre of the Historial de la Grande Guerre and editors of the three-volume *History* are the following: Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Nicolas Beaupré, Annette Becker, Jean-Jacques Becker, Annie Deperchin, Caroline Fontaine, John Horne, Heather Jones, Gerd Krumeich, Philippe Nivet, Anne Rasmussen, Laurence Van Ypersele, Arndt Weinrich and Jay Winter.
- 13 Jay Winter, "The Armenian genocide in the context of total war," in *The spectre of genocide: mass murder in historical perspective*, ed. Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 189–213.
- 14 Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in history: debates and controversies, 1914 to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 15 Leonard V. Smith, "Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*: twenty-five years later," *History and Theory* 40/2 (2001): 241–60.
- 16 Sebastian Conrad, "Enlightenment in global history: a historiographical critique," in *The American Historical Review* 117/4 (2012): 1005.