



Introduction: The First World War and its Aftermath: Literary Networks and Cultural Encounters

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Abstract

This introduction offers a survey of some important critical approaches to the ways in which the First World War and its aftermath have been studied, conceptualized, represented and commemorated. In particular, it notes recent scholarly interest in issues of gender, as well as a focus on widening the geographical range of the conflict beyond a dominant European paradigm. A recurrent theme is the emergence of new types of modernity in the post-war era, and the ways in which literature and the arts do not merely reflect that modernity, but actively shape and constitute it.

Keywords

cultural memory, Empire, Europe, First World War, networks, translation

Inspired by the centenary of the First World War, scholars of history, literature and culture have revisited not only the war itself, but the ways in which it has been studied, conceptualized, represented and commemorated. For understandable reasons, a good

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deal of attention has been paid to the origins of the conflict itself (Clark, 2012; MacMillan, 2013; McMeekin, 2011; Mombauer, 2013; Mulligan, 2017). The conduct of the war has been analysed in detail, not least because of the increasing availability of documentary sources (Leonhard, 2014). Likewise, historians have been attentive to the ways in which the end of hostilities radically transformed the societies and politics that emerged from it, focusing in particular on the immediate post-war moment and the impact of the Paris Peace Conference (MacMillan, 2001; Wolff, 2020).

Another strand in recent historical writing has been an emphasis on the unfinished nature of the war. Here, scholars have extended the endpoint of the war itself, suggesting that the armistice on the Western Front masked ongoing and often unresolved conflicts elsewhere (Gerwarth, 2012–).¹ Diplomatic historians have been particularly assiduous in examining both the longer-term fallout of the war, and the emergence of new institutions that were designed to oversee the operation of a new world order (Steiner, 2005, 2013). An important aspect of this temporal extension of the war has been an expansion in its geographical reach, with greater attention paid to continuing violence in colonial territories. It is with developments such as these that the essays in this collection are most obviously and productively aligned. Rather than focusing on the literary and artistic representation of the conflict itself, they map a complex series of stories that reveal how individual writers and creative figures responded to the consequences of the end of the war, sometimes with a considerable delay, and sought to contribute to the creation of new forms of identity and society. Here, the ‘post-war’ is seen not so much as a stable and coherent historical period and set of social structures, but rather as a fluid and mutable configuration of often contradictory impulses. Accordingly, the interwar period emerges less as an interstitial moment between two great conflicts, which together made up what Charles de Gaulle described as a second ‘Thirty Years War’ (Gerwarth, 2007: 1), than as a series of diverse and contingent snapshots from radically different milieux.

Here, Antonio Gramsci’s often-quoted dictum about crisis and change comes readily to mind. Writing from prison in 1930, he suggested that ‘La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi più svariati’ (‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’) (1975: I, 311; 1971: 276). It is precisely this notion of crisis that emerges throughout many of the essays in this collection, whether the crisis is perceived as something destabilizing and destructive, or as something promising regeneration and even revolution. It is, moreover, the simultaneous coexistence of elements of both old and new which means that the interwar period cannot simply be seen as proleptic of the Second World War (Bell, 2007; Taylor, 1961). However, the notion of the interwar period as somehow decadent or ‘morbid’ (to use Gramsci’s term) is something that the essays here would wish to question. To be sure, from the perspective of 1930, Gramsci had reason enough to be anxious about the fragility of the present and society’s inability to withstand the rise of right-wing populism, yet one should not be too quick to write off the optimism and belief in progress that characterized the interwar years, especially in the 1920s. It is, instead, Gramsci’s notion of ‘interregnum’ – something holding both renewal and decay in creative tension – that emerges as a guiding theme in this collection, where notions of contingency, liminality, complexity and uncertainty prevail.

Much of the most important work on the First World War and its varied legacies has been carried out by social and diplomatic historians interested in examining the wider impact of military conflict on the world which emerged after 1918. But what of literature, culture and the arts? How are scholars to account for their role, both during the war itself and in the ensuing decades? Here, it is tempting to see literature primarily as a means of representation – or, perhaps more powerfully – as a form of witness. Yet as Samuel Hynes evocatively suggests,

the First World War was the great military and political event of its time; but it was also the great *imaginative* event. It altered the ways in which men and women thought not only about the war but about the world, and about culture and its expressions. (1990: ix)

Within English-language scholarship, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) serves as a touchstone of such imaginative approaches to the conflict and its immediate legacy. Fussell's study focuses solely on the British experience of the Western Front and on how it was 'remembered, conventionalized, and memorialized' (Fussell, 2013: xv). Fussell's approach to literature is subtle and complex, and rightly emphasizes the mutual relationship that exists between reality and its artistic representation, focusing on 'the simultaneous and reciprocal process by which life feeds materials to literature while literature returns the favor by conferring forms upon life' (2013: xv). Such an approach to cultural production has certainly been profound and influential, as suggested by the continued emphasis in First World War studies on questions of representation and memorialization (as is the case, for instance, in the canonization of the 'War Poets' in both scholarship and the school curriculum in the United Kingdom). Yet the purview of Fussell's study is – by his own admission – limited. He concentrates on 'the British infantry, largely disregarding events in Mesopotamia, Turkey, Africa, and Ireland, and largely ignoring air and naval warfare' (2013: xvi). And, as Jay Winter notes in his introduction to the re-publication of *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 'it is Anglo-centric', and 'Fussell's writers are almost all officers; they came from London, the home counties, the public schools and Oxbridge colleges serving their social class' (Fussell, 2013: xii).

For some time, scholars of the First World War have been seeking to expand the geographical range of the conflict, as well as to give voice to a wide range of participants and observers. Winter's own work – especially *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural Memory* – has advocated 'a comparative perspective' as a means of counteracting 'the distorting effects of a narrowly national approach' (1995: 11). Much of Winter's work has addressed precisely this comparative approach, although primarily from a Eurocentric point of view (Winter and Robert, 1997). More recently, this European focus has been challenged by scholars keen to assert the importance of empire (Das, 2011, 2018). Within Europe itself, emphasis is often placed on the role played by the war in the collapse of empires (Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian), yet it remains the case that for the victorious powers – not least France and Great Britain – the war represented an opportunity to consolidate their colonial territories and reassert their imperial self-image. This emphasis on the subaltern perspective has been matched by interest in women's experience of the war. Whether it comes to domestic life on the home front, social transformations due to the absence of men, moves towards suffrage or

women's literary responses to the conflict, the First World War and its consequences have increasingly been seen through the prism of gender (Adie, 2013; Brockington, 2010; Fell, 2018; Grayzel, 2002; Higonnet, 1999, 2001; Potter, 2005; Siebrecht, 2013; Tylee, 1990).

The vast – and still growing – body of critical literature on the First World War clearly exceeds this brief survey, which is offered as an outline not just of some of the most important and productive contemporary scholarship on the topic, but also of the approaches taken in the articles included in this special edition of the *Journal of European Studies*. While drawing on much of the most important recent scholarship on history and society, this edition focuses primarily on literature and the arts. It comprises studies of the capital cities of some of the combatant nations (Berlin, London, Paris, Rome), even if their spaces are often viewed through curious and critical eyes. While recognizing the bleak realities of the First World War, including the experience of the trenches, certain essays in this collection also emphasize hopeful, cosmopolitan creativity rather than violent, nationalist bloodshed. Other contributions acknowledge the importance of key historical events (the Paris Peace Conference) and new institutions (the League of Nations), while framing these in the context of very personal biographies and experience. Its geographical ambit is inclusive too, with consideration of Ireland and Alsace, Norway and the Balkans, the Dardanelles and the Caribbean. Its linguistic range is extensive (articles cite texts in the original French, German, Russian and Turkish, for instance), and many contributions emphasize the importance of translation, whether as a vehicle for the facilitation of cross-cultural encounter, as a marker of cultural difference or a mode of comparison which sheds light on patterns of international relations, mobility and cultural exchange. This spatial and linguistic range is mapped by the volume's temporal limits, which reach from the *fin de siècle* right through to the dawn of a new conflict in the late 1930s. Throughout, there is an emphasis on how the First World War gave rise to new forms of cultural modernity (Das and McLoughlin, 2018), yet there is an equally important focus on how, for many writers and artists, their primary task entailed the reconstitution of networks, communities and identities that had been shattered by the conflict. In both cases, however, literature and culture do not merely represent wider social processes, but participate actively in the process of creation and re-creation. Accordingly, the authors employ a wide range of material in their analyses: poetry, prose, plays, journalism, periodicals, memoirs, diaries, journals and letters vividly convey the heterogeneity of responses to the war.

At the same time, a number of common themes and *topoi* emerge, or – rather – the chapters are arranged to highlight those themes. The collection opens with Sofia Permiakova's account of Hope Mirrlees' *Paris: A Poem*, in which the French capital emerges not so much as the 'Greenwich Meridian of Literature' (to quote Pascale Casanova's memorable description), but as a chaotic assembly of impressions that capture the uncertain atmosphere between the Armistice and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919. Stefano Evangelista examines a passionate exchange of letters which unfolded on the pages of the *Revue de Genève*, in which Daniel Halévy and Vernon Lee debated both the consequences of the peace and the nature of nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the post-war context. The next two articles focus on London, and in particular on the Bloomsbury Group. Claudia Olk traces the fluctuating reactions of

Virginia Woolf and other members of the group both to the end of the war and to the coming of peace, as well as examining the enduring impact of the conflict on Woolf's creativity. Naomi Toth examines Woolf's specific response to the question of how war might be represented and what the balance between subjectivity and objectivity might be in this regard. The gendered perspective which structures these first four chapters, as well as its predominant emphasis on urban experience, is extended in Gesa Stedman's analysis of three British women's perception of post-war Berlin as it emerged from war and revolution and took its first steps into the modernity of the 1920s.

In Christian Luckscheiter's article, Alsace figures as a crucible of European, rather than national, identity; caught between France and Germany, the region – both before and after the war – offers a powerful counter-narrative to the cultural, linguistic and political tensions that many felt had led to the conflict in the first place, while also introducing a crucial regional, rather than national perspective on the pre- and post-war eras. If the Treaty of Versailles was meant to limit the defeated Germany's room for economic and military manoeuvre, German culture still possessed a powerful valance for many, and Tore Rem's consideration of the Norwegian novelist, Knut Hamsun, illustrates the potency of the soil as an alternative and energetic form of modernity in the interwar years. The widening geographical perspective of these two articles is pursued in the three that follow. Richard Hibbit and Berkan Ulu compare English- and Turkish-language poetic responses to the Gallipoli campaign (known in Turkish as the Çanakkale War), examining how various earlier myths and narratives, whether of the Crusades or the Homeric epics, were subjected to very different intertextual revisions and rewritings depending on the vantage point of the author. The longer-term fallout of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire is traced in Catherine Toal's analysis of Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Dating from 1941, West's Yugoslav travelogue teases out crucial parallels between the Great War and the Second World War through the prism of one of the new nations to have emerged from the settlement of 1919 (and which evoked comparisons with West's own native Ireland). Empire figures in a rather different guise in Jana Gohrisch's discussion of the Trinidadian historian, journalist and political activist C. L. R. James. Reminding us of the crucial contribution to the war effort of Afro-Caribbean soldiers (and, by implication, of other subjects of the British Empire), Gohrisch also assesses the impact of the war on the emergence of left-wing, anti-colonial and anti-racist politics.

After the widening temporal and spatial scope as delineated in the arrangement of the articles so far, the final two contributions introduce a non-literary perspective on the war, its representation and its legacy. Ana Parejo Vadillo examines the stage designs of Charles Ricketts, tracing the impact of war on his cosmopolitan, symbolist aesthetics, and focusing in particular on a series of Shakespeare plays staged for soldiers at the front. Vadillo also observes that Ricketts' rejection of realism made him susceptible to the rise of Italian fascism, not so much as an ideology, than as an aesthetic. Italy forms the backdrop to Philip Ross Bullock's chapter, which explores the musical settings that Aleksandr Grechaninov made in 1939 of five of Viacheslav Ivanov's *Roman Sonnets* (1924). Although written by artists who had suffered displacement in the wake of the October Revolution, the words and music of these songs evoke Rome's potential to serve as a symbol of the continuity and resilience of European culture, even at a time of crisis.

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Note

- 1 See also the series *The Greater War* (Gerwarth, 2012–), which seeks to test the fixity of the chronological boundaries of the war and to foreground a greater geographical range than has typically been the case.

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