

INTRODUCTION

France and the Memory of the Great War

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“We thought we knew, we still think we know war. . . . That is an illusion that is as unshakeable as it is dangerous,” Jean Norton Cru lamented at the beginning of his catalogue of combatant memoirs of the Great War (1). He hoped that his work, in furnishing documents “for future historians of the war” (vii), would focus the discussion on the individual combatant. The general’s superior understanding of strategy and the historian’s hindsight notwithstanding, Cru believed that the only testimony that mattered—fractured and partial as it necessarily was—would come from those who had experienced the war on the ground.

In the century since the Great War tore apart Europe and remade the map of the world, the memory of the war in France has evolved. In the first few postwar years, as the initial euphoria of victory was fading, the dominant narrative about the war continued a wartime discourse of unity. According to this version of events, the French had held the line for over four years because they were united in a common purpose, what French President Raymond Poincaré had called the *union sacrée*. In its narrowest sense, this sacred union referred to a political truce between the left and the right. After decades of bitterness that had found expression in *L’Affaire Dreyfus*, the two sides made peace with one another to fight the common enemy. During and immediately after the war, however, the *union sacrée* came to mean more for the French: it expressed the feeling that everyone was engaged in the battle for France—soldiers and civilians, old and young, men and women. Those on the home front did their all to support those on the front lines, who in turn gave their all, sometimes even their lives, to protect their homeland. Victory, when it finally came, belonged to everyone. Historian Jean-Jacques Becker has demonstrated that this version of events was not merely wishful thinking or propaganda; it had a basis in reality. Even so, the *union sacrée* was only part of the story, and in the end, it would not be the dominant story of the so-called Great War.

Over the course of the 1920s and ’30s, French public opinion coalesced around the central tenet that the war was less a glorious undertaking and more a devastating tragedy. While this version of events indeed centered on the experience of the *poilus*, it was not exactly what Cru had had in mind; the individual soldier was not, as Cru had styled him, a witness setting the record straight, but as Leonard Smith puts it, “a victim” (7). Lured to their peril by their elders in the name of the fatherland and with the promise of glory, the youth of France had discovered only suffering and brutality on the battlefield. Possessors of a knowledge they could neither escape nor share, the disillusioned veterans of the Great War were “morally wounded . . . [and,] like those who were gassed and who many years after the war lay dying of the distant effects of the horrible massacre” (Chabannes), would continue to suffer in body and spirit long after the last shot was fired. Victory over the Germans was not enough to compensate for the immensity of this catastrophe. The Germans had attacked, it was true, but the savage, rapist Hun of wartime propaganda would soon be overshadowed in the collective imagination by the enemies within: arrogant leaders who had

beaten the drum for war, inept generals whose greatest victories caused casualties in the hundreds of thousands, and corrupt profiteers who grew rich off the sacrifice of the youth. For the war to have a meaning commensurate with the suffering it had caused, it had to be about more than borders and international alliances; it had to have a purpose greater than redeeming the bankrupt notions of *gloire* and *patrie*. So it became, in the minds of many, “the war to end war.” Until the next war tore the veil from this last illusion.

For the last thirty years or so, historians of the memory of the war have examined the various ways in which the French came to terms with the war: through mourning rituals, collective commemorative practices, political activism, and works of imagination. They have shown how, from this cultural work of the postwar years, the dominant story of the war emerged as, in Daniel Sherman’s words, “a collective memory of the war centering on the combatant experience” (16). At the same time, however, they have challenged this reductive outline, broadening our scope beyond the individual soldier. The Great War was, after all, a total war, experienced by whole populations. The statistics for France are staggering: the French population was about 40 million at the beginning of the war, and 8.6 million men were mobilized. About 3 million were wounded, 1 million permanently, and 1.4 million (or about 16% of those mobilized) were killed. Towns all over the north and east were leveled, and 7.4 million acres of farmland were destroyed. The depth and breadth of societal changes wrought by the war have been the subject of historical debate and controversy, but it is undeniable that the war touched the lives of everyone who lived through it and cast its shadow over the succeeding two decades.

The eight essays in this volume address the memory of the war in France in a variety of ways. The first essay explores the memory of the Battle of Verdun, which raged from February to December of 1916, and which has come to represent the carnage, stalemate, and futility of the war itself. In his examination of the coverage of the battle in the popular magazine *L’Illustration* as it unfolded over the course of 1916, Clark Hultquist seeks to pinpoint when, in the minds of contemporaries, the battle took on the character and dimension of the *Battle of Verdun* as we remember it today. In her contribution, Nancy Sloan Goldberg considers two novels from the 1920s that deal with the veteran experience. In these novels by Dorgelès and Valmy-Baysse, which were among the first literary works to address the plight of the millions of demobilized combatants, we begin to see the *poilu* as victim—of unfeeling civilians, of unscrupulous businesspeople, of heartless bureaucrats. In comparing these works to Pierre Lemaitre’s 2013 Prix Goncourt–winning novel, *Au revoir, là-haut*, Goldberg demonstrates the persistence of the character of the *poilu* as victim and argues that Lemaitre’s novel is both an act of commemoration and a tardy expression of gratitude to those who fought the war.

Several of the essays collected here address aspects of the societal transformation caused by the war or of the preexisting societal rifts laid bare by it. Anita Marie Rasi May explores the war service of clergymen in the context of Third Republic anticlericalism. She argues that the integration of clergy into the military helped to allay anticlerical feeling and improve the relationship between the clergy and lay government in the postwar period. In his essay, Ian Germani addresses the ways in which the massive death toll of the war transformed mourning rituals in combatant nations, especially France. Brigitte Mahuzier’s contribution examines the intersection of attitudes about suicide and notions of patriotism. She explores how and why, in the immediate postwar period, wartime suicides were either refashioned as self-sacrifice or erased from memory. In his essay, Lowry Martin treats the use of dogs in the war, both in terms of their

literal war service and in terms of their symbolic use in propaganda and literature about the war. Authors and illustrators used dogs as shorthand for values such as loyalty and courage in wartime, of course, but Martin also shows how authors like Colette elicit sympathy for the war's innocent victims by imagining the dog's internalized experience of what we think of as the human domains of grief and trauma.

The last two essays in this volume address the memory of the First World War at the dawn of the Second. Frédéric Levéziel analyzes previously unexamined primary sources relating to the development of Jean Renoir's 1937 masterpiece *La Grande Illusion* in an attempt to untangle the various versions of events told by Renoir about the film's origins. In his desire for accuracy or authenticity, Renoir did not rely only on his own (sometimes misremembered) war experience but also borrowed from memoirs of prisoners of war. In the end, he made a film that has become one of the most enduring *lieux de mémoire* of the Great War. In the volume's final essay, Maria Rose Lehmann takes us to the 1938 *Exposition universelle du surréalisme* and examines the anti-war message of the exhibit. She argues that the experience of the First World War was at the heart of the surrealists' desperate attempt to prevent a new war. In turning her attention to the performance piece *Acte manqué*, a representation of hysteria performed at the exposition by dancer Héléne Vanel, Lehmann opens up an examination of the complicated gender dynamics of the surrealists' political stance.

The Great War centennial, which will conclude in November 2018, has occasioned a broad reexamination of the war and its meanings. One hundred years on, we can still see the enormity of the war's destruction, though we remain at a loss to comprehend it. One hundred years on, we can still feel the imperative of commemoration, though we now recognize that no gesture of remembrance is ever neutral or can ever occur without a concomitant act of forgetting or even erasure. This volume represents a modest contribution to these collective efforts of understanding and commemoration, which continue to expand and to challenge how we think we know war.

Works Cited

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