

Canning, Joseph; Lehmann, Hartmut; Winter, Jay (Hrsg.): *Power, Violence and Mass Death in Pre-Modern and Modern Times*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2004. ISBN: 0-7546-3042-0; 220 Seiten

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This ambitious attempt to compare cataclysmic transformations in three different centuries is, Hartmut Lehmann argues, a rallying cry for historians „to engage with this very kind of intellectual and historiographical experiment in a large-scale comparative project as the one we propose here.“ (p. 4) As the historical profession becomes ever more fragmented, such ecumenism is entirely laudable. The most exciting history of the past generation or so has been done by those who have borrowed from other disciplines and work in an interdisciplinary spirit. But this is not the spirit in which this collection was conceived. Its organising principle owes little to Marc Bloch, let alone Foucault or Elias. Instead, what we are offered is do-it-yourself comparative history: in the absence of an overarching conceptual and methodological framework it is up to the reader himself to make the connections and spot the divergences.

While the collection is no more than the sum of its parts, that does not mean that it is without merits - far from it. In our age of information overload, one task of the edited collection is to provide a précis of recent research for the non-specialist. From this point of view, the fourteenth century is probably the weakest of the three centuries covered. William Jordan argues that the great famine of 1315-22, caused by a drop in the annual average temperature, left Northern Europe transformed, though I was left unclear in what ways. Samuel Cohn's important de-bunking of The Black Death, refuting its origin in rat-based bubonic plague, has already appeared elsewhere. A. D. Carr's essay on warfare is a makeweight. Recent scholarship which stresses the Hundred Years War as a French civil war and talks of the Dual Monarchy is ignored in favour of the discredited notion that it was 'the first true national struggle' (p. 88). The papers are so diffuse that we need more than the two and a half pages Joseph Canning

devotes in his introduction to make a sense of what this all meant for fourteenth-century people.

We are on firmer ground in section two because the object of enquiry is more discrete: The Thirty Years' War in Germany. Summaries of recent German-language scholarship in translation will be welcomed by Anglophone scholars. The highlight is the longest: Otto Ulbricht's piece on the civilian experience of violence is reminiscent of Natalie Davis's work on France. It will be of great benefit in teaching, to set beside the experience of civil war in France, Britain and the Dutch Republic. The research is firmly rooted in the sources, which are interpreted with jargon-free language that paints a lively picture of seventeenth-century life. Bernd Roeck makes a convincing claim that the Thirty Years' War marked a shift to more realistic depictions of war and atrocity. Markus Meumann explores the methodological problems in interpreting the experience of violence, linking the boom in eschatology with war and social and economic dislocation. Lehmann agrees that the 'Little Ice Age' is the crucial link. But 'The Little Ice' can be a substitute for serious thought, a catch-all phrase that explains anything from Calvinism to Cromwell: the links between demographic and climatic factors and intellectual and political developments are unproven. Famine was at its worse in France during the first decade of the eighteenth century, a period of social and political stability. Pestilence is a companion of war, but tells us nothing about its ideological dimensions. Theology is of more help than economics and demography in understanding the extreme seventeenth century. But although Lutheran eschatological works reached a peak in the decades before 1618, what this tells us about the outbreak of war, or even Protestantism, is unclear. Fear of the imminent end of the world may be central to understanding Lutherans, but not so Calvinists, whose certainty of their own Election gave them nothing to fear. Calvinists' sober righteousness was more of threat to traditional order, to the horror of Lutherans or Anglicans, than belief in the Second Coming. The 'Little Ice Age' is a red-herring: the Thirty Years War was another round in the European Wars

of Religion. A truly comparative history will need to consider states where militant Protestantism met resurgent Catholicism as part of the same process, a project long hampered by narrow national considerations of English exceptionalism, the German *Sonderweg*, or the unity of the patrie.

The experience of the twentieth century rendered such parochial historiography redundant, and it is no surprise that the historians of that century in part III make a much better fist of comparative analysis. Only Tobias Jersak is concerned with a single case study, namely German representation of war on the Eastern Front in World War Two. While there may be little left to say on the subject it makes a good comparison with Pieter Lagrou's piece on the West, a coda to his important work on the collective memory of occupation in the Post-War period, which takes soundings in the Low Countries, Norway and Denmark, as well as in the more familiar territory of France. Likewise, in the less well-known case (at least to an English speaking audience) of the Eastern Front in the Great War, Vejas Liulevicius presents us with multi-valent experiences, Lithuanian as well as German. While Jay Winter reprises themes he has worked on extensively, his portrayal of the ambivalent British response to slaughter on the Western Front discusses the very different British experience in relation to France and Germany.

The strength of this final section is due not just to its more discrete theme but also commitment to a common endeavour, namely the new cultural history of modern war in which the themes of social memory, representation and ideology figure prominently. Of course, it is easier to get a fix on societies which are closer to us. In our post-Christian society the seventeenth and fourteenth centuries are ever more alien. Winter reminds us of the multiple forms of representations of mass death and the fragmentation of many of the meanings ascribed by contemporaries to the Great War. Medievalists and early modernists would do well to learn from this. Did despair uniformly result in fear and Angst? Or could it lead to fashionable decadence, as in Weimar Berlin, or ennui as in 1930s Paris. For every Hobbes and Montaigne who confronted the

consequences of religious violence, there were many more who saw it as path to salvation, or who, like Henri IV, exorcised the horrors of the past with a spot of debauchery. As Cohn points out 'collective mentalities' are a clumsy tool of historical analysis. The supposed mass hysteria that characterised the era of the Black Death has blinded us to the rational responses to the plague and the success in reducing the infection rate (p. 29). Peasants had no time for existential reflection. Angst is a bourgeois sentiment. For the lower classes in particular, inured to death and want, resignation and fortitude are just as much a part of the human response to catastrophe. Apathy does not have its history, but humour does: popular culture taught one to laugh in the face of death. In this sense, the 'power' in the volume's title is ambiguous. It refers to the power wielded by kings or ideologies, but this volume is also a testament to the power of the human spirit: the immense capacity for adaptation in the face of war and economic catastrophe, the ability to accommodate to changed circumstances, to somehow muddle through, come what may to survive.

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