

Neiberg, Michael S.: *World War I*. London: Ashgate 2005. ISBN: 0754624773; 604 Seiten

Rezensiert von: Stuart Hallifax, National Army Museum, London

„After the publication of so many accounts of the battle... it may fairly be asked on what grounds I expect to awaken fresh interest in a subject so long before the public.“ These words were written by Sergeant-Major Edward Cotton in his ‘A Voice from Waterloo’, published 34 years after the battle in question¹, but the question might equally be asked of the large numbers of authors producing books on the First World War over 80 years after its end. Michael Neiberg’s edited volume, part of the International Library of Essays on Military History series, certainly has the potential to awaken fresh interest in the war. The essays are not new in themselves, being drawn from such diverse journals as the *Slavic Review* and *Asian Affairs*, as well as more obvious sources like the *Journal of British Studies*. However, they are well chosen to bring to light new (or overlooked) sources of information or to challenge simplified views of the conflict often taken for granted by other writers.

The volume does not attempt to be a definitive history of or an introduction to the war, though Neiberg helps to put the articles into a wider context. Its emphasis is largely on social, economic and political elements of the conflict, such as nationalism in Nigeria and Russia, the British war effort and domestic political issues surrounding Turkey’s entry. The sections on extra-European countries in particular focus on the impact of the war on the area, rather than the experience of the war fought in the area. The major exception to this non-military emphasis is the section on the Western Front, with its discussions of poison gas, the logistics of defending Verdun and the nature of attrition warfare for the French and British armies.

Many of the articles attempt to counter simplifications of the war experience. For example in previous accounts of Russian mobilisation, much has been made of the observations of two British diplomats on Russian unity and nationalism in 1914 (p. 46). Josh Sanborn uses

this as a starting point for taking a closer look at the prevalence (or even existence) of these two phenomena across that vast country and finds in fact a great divergence of responses both between and among different classes of the population. Likewise, P.E. Dewey uses official documents to redress the assumption that British volunteers in 1914-15 constituted „a cross section of society“² showing instead that the picture was much more diverse in terms of geographical area and type of employment.

William Philpott gives a vehement response to Elizabeth Greenhalgh and her Anglo-centric and rather ill-advised view on ‘Why the British were really on the Somme’³. Similarly, Dennis Showalter dismisses post-1945 writing on the subject of the occupying German forces in the East that seeks to find in 1914-18 a precursor for the blood-letting of the Second World War. Robert B Bruce shows the importance of Petain’s good logistical work in the survival of the French army at Verdun, notably the role of the Service Automobile. Moreover the use of heavy (and super-heavy) artillery to inflict massive damage on the enemy while keeping one’s own army safe (p. 287) shows Petain’s thought coinciding with the idea of attrition held by British War Secretary Lord Kitchener in 1915 (p. 386). David French’s article on the ‘meaning of attrition’ attempts to show how this was moulded and indeed seemingly reversed after Kitchener’s death, until attrition appeared to mean wilful wasting of human lives.

The other major theme in this book is authors addressing questions and areas that are (or were) otherwise under-researched. The ‘Other Fronts’ section (the last of four in the book, preceded by ‘Eastern’, ‘Home’ and ‘Western’ fronts) contains a number of these articles, for instance Richard Rathbone’s ‘World War I in Africa: An Introduction’,

¹ Cotton, Edward, *A Voice from Waterloo*, London 1849 quoted in Roberts, Andrew, *Waterloo: Napoleon’s Last Gamble*, London 2004

² The quote comes from Barnett, Corelli, *Britain and Her Army 1509-1970*; a military, political and social survey, London, 1970, p. 379, quoted in this volume p. 150.

³ Greenhalgh’s original article, *Why Were the British Really On the Somme in 1916*, appeared in *War in History* 6 (1999), pp. 147-73; Philpott’s article appeared in the same journal three years later.

which forms part of an edition of the *Journal of African History* dedicated to the subject⁴. This and other articles (notably James Matthews on Nigeria) focus on the social, economic and political experience of extra-European belligerents and individual combatants. Where European states are tackled, it is largely economic, social and cultural angles on the conflict that Neiberg has chosen to include – for example the impact of war on the ‘urban economy’ in Berlin, Paris and London in 1914, bread rationing in Berlin and the cultural memory of the conflict in France.

If there is an overarching theme for the articles it is the multi-faceted and diverse nature of the war on all fronts. Happily, they go against the tendency in English-language study of the war to concentrate on the British experience and couch the whole history of the war in Anglo-centric terms, ignoring allies, enemies and non-belligerents alike – shown in American historian William Manchester’s claim that ‘Douglas Haig slaughtered the flower of Britain’s youth... without winning a single battle’⁵. Clearly, some academic military historians are expanding the study of the First World War away from simplistic viewpoints like this; the first volume of Hew Strachan’s ‘First World War’ trilogy⁶ is an excellent if weighty example of a global approach, and also of attention to detail and evidence. Sadly, though, many other authors, both popular and academic, still produce work light on evidence in an attempt to be ‘provocative’, in the vein of Alan Clark’s influential book ‘The Donkeys’⁷.

This large book is very useful for its role in bringing to light under-developed themes and issues in the history of the First World War. Even with many of the articles available on the internet⁸, this collection is useful as it brings together works by both familiar and unusual authors from commonly used journals for students of the period and others that are much less well known. Neiberg has collated a useful volume for what advertisers like to call the ‘serious student’ of the war. It does not give a complete history of the war, nor even an introduction to one, but then it does not set out to. Instead it counters certain assumptions and simplifications about the war and hints at the huge range of experi-

ences of the war and the controversy that still surrounds it eight decades on.

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⁴ *Journal of African History*, 19 (1978), No. 1, of which C.M. Andrew and A.S. Kanya-Forstner’s article on France and Africa is also reproduced in this book.

⁵ Manchester, William, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964*, London 1979, p. 345, quoted in: Terraine, John, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-Myths of War 1861-1945*, London 1981, p. 36.

⁶ Strachan, Hew, *The First World War: Volume One, To Arms*, Oxford 2001

⁷ Clark, Alan, *The Donkeys*, London 1961; for an academic example of this see Mosier, John, *The Myth of the Great War*, London 2001.

⁸ For example 17 of the 28 articles can be found on Jstor – The Scholarly Journal Archive (<http://www.jstor.org>).