# Soldiers, Bombs and Rifles

# Soldiers, Bombs and Rifles: Military History of the 20th Century

Edited by

Paola Lo Cascio, Alberto Pellegrini and Antoni Segura i Mas

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To the memory of Professor Gabriel Cardona

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# INTRODUCTION

# BEYOND THE UNIFORMS: MILITARY HISTORY AS A NECESSARY TOOL TO INTERPRET THE 20TH CENTURY

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Though twentieth century historians have often considered military historians a variable to be reckoned with, the study of weapons and armies has nevertheless been seen as an "asset" to those who research political, social and cultural phenomena. After all, the scholars who work in this field end up studying, collecting, and most importantly, providing data. However, those who study armed conflicts from a broad perspective (which is, in fact, of a political, social or cultural nature) have often viewed military issues as a somewhat closed or concrete sphere; while the field leads to useful interpretations, these have always been seen as either subordinate in some way, since they are limited to or projected in the framework of a specific context, or decisive, yet isolated factors which disregard underlying, widely-accepted trends.

However, there seem to be more and more convincing reasons for rethinking the position of military history among the methodological approaches used to study, understand and interpret twentieth century history.

The first and probably most important reason for doing so is bitterly brought to mind in the words of Massimo Salvadori:

> "I have argued that the twentieth century was a period of never-before-seen violence and tragedy. Hegel had already dubbed the past a universal bloodbath, yet this label was never so true as during this era. In fact, the

> first thing we should note is that the violent events and tragedies of the 20th century are not strictly the result of cruelty in political, social, religious, ethnic and racial conflicts or of the horror of wars – which are themselves ancient dimensions of life, even though they were conceived of and experienced in a completely different way. Rather, they are the result of the fact that human beings and their States possessed the incredible destructive power provided to them by the instruments of technology and science. Before the twentieth century, this power may have been kept within certain limits, and the aggressiveness of humankind appeared relatively contained. However, later it would develop with a destructive power beyond our wildest dreams. This led to the widespread violence that characterized the century, capped off by the carnage of the two world wars and other major conflicts, the terrorism of totalitarian regimes and their death camps, the Jewish Holocaust and the atomic bombs dropped on Japan."[1]

Therefore, war, or more generally speaking the experience of war, is in one way or another a key component representative of twentieth century history, an element which broke from the past quite dramatically as it spread among society.

Since large armies of conscripted soldiers were key agents in the wars of the twentieth century, these wars led to significant societal change. Large conscripted armies raised awareness of and created problems regarding the relationships between citizens and authority figures, thereby playing an important role in creating and spreading hegemonic discourses centered on the state and nation. Furthermore, they were crucial in the complex process of including the masses in public events. (Indeed, in many cases, especially World War I, this was the general public's first real contact with the State.) Moreover, the length of twentieth-century wars and their "demographic" intensity significantly impacted the balance between men and women in countries involved in the conflicts. In other words, war – which kept millions of men stationed at the front for long periods of time – acted as a portal that helped women access the public sphere, the working world and society in general. Though often viewed as temporary and anomalous – and despite the challenges of traditional value systems – the access and presence women gained during the war were destined to endure and strengthen.

As Salvadori has argued, three other significant aspects of war should be highlighted.

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[1] Massimo L. Salvadori, *Breve historia del siglo XX* (A Brief History of the Twentieth Century), (Madrid: Alianza, 2005): 8-10.

First, science and technology played a key role in these wars. During the 20th century, technology came to fruition and had wide-ranging effects, thereby proving its importance, yet we also lost our innocence about its potential impact. War played a decisive role in bringing about this change. The horrors of the concentration camps and trauma of World War I first underscored the tragic nature of war, while the fear of nuclear attacks during the Cold War definitively proved the importance of technology. Consequently, the experience of war challenged the ideal that technology would bring about unlimited progress – which proved to be the central debate of an entire century. The technologically-aided expansion of warfare (consider, for example, the impact of aerial attacks) ended up reshaping the mental outlook of all of mankind.

Second, since the wars of the twentieth century, to a greater or lesser extent, all needed to create a climate of consent imbued with meaning, propaganda and the mobilization of citizens were crucial. (This was true of warm wars, but even more important for cold wars.) Concretely, these elements were tied up in the building of identity and cosmogonies, alliances and conflicts of importance not only during the war itself but especially in the years that followed. Furthermore, the enormous importance of the media would be impossible to explain without referring to war and its component events. For example, consider Lasswell's first studies on the impact of media on contemporary society,[2] which argue that World War I itself triggered a change destined to transform the relationships between culture, power and society.

In the end, the wars of the twentieth century drew a new de facto world map. Beyond their strictly territorial and political impact, the experiences of war during the two world wars led large segments of the population to gain knowledge of the unity of the world itself. Consider apparently minor conflicts, like the Russo-Japanese war, when the bulk of European public opinion collided with the evidence of numerous, incredibly deep interconnections between places quite far from each other. Not to mention, of course, the Cold War, which provided ideological, strategic, and especially military data which clearly proved the famous metaphor of chaos theory: "A butterfly flapping its wings in Beijing can cause an earthquake in New York."

In light of these reasons (and the list could go on for many pages more), it seems clear that contemporary historiography as a whole could benefit significantly by rethinking its relationship with military

[2] Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (Peter Smith: New York, 1927).

historiography. This would create a new dialogue that would involve contemporary historians *tout court*, pressing them to acquire the minimal technical skills needed to analyze conflicts. At the same time, these new connections would invite military historians to leave behind technicalities in order to reinterpret the wars of the twentieth century from a much clearer perspective, one which bears in mind the many issues envisaged in the contemporary art of war. This courageous dialogue could successfully overcome hegemonic temptations and methodological vices while constantly considering conceptual innovations and a multi-disciplinary approach. In fact, the ability to generate complex analyses – which is the fundamental core of a historian's scholarship, regardless of his or her area of specialization – depends on this dialogue. We must reconstruct the complexities of the past in order to gain the greatest possible understanding of its deepest depths.

This kind of dialogue has already begun, and as we shall see, in recent years, such conversations have proven productive. In fact, we can already see the first traces of a historiographic transformation which has impacted both methodological approaches and topics of study (as will be mentioned in the next few pages) in the five major topics included in this book – World War I, military intelligence, World War II, the Spanish Civil War, and the conflicts which took place in the late twentieth century. We have now set off on our path, although many twists and turns lie ahead.

## A 'State of the Question' of recent military historiography

At this point, it is necessary to outline – albeit briefly, given the relatively limited space available for this introduction – the major trends in recent approaches to twentieth-century military history, when the discipline began to explore new fields of study, ask stimulating historiographic questions and fruitfully overcome its traditional limits. These limits had often framed military history as a narrow type of specialized research; consequently, the works produced by military history – though interesting – were limited to general, large-scale syntheses, analyses of the political components of conflicts or research on major wars. In order to draw attention to the significant progress military history has made, we shall begin by examining several major lines of research which have recently predominated in studies of the field and then shall lay out a brief state of the question for each of the five thematic areas touched on in this volume.

Any consideration of the most interesting and stimulating lines of military history research pursued in the last twenty years must begin by citing the huge proliferation of studies related to war memoirs. For many

years, scholars studied memoirs written by generals and great political leaders. Now, however, the field has shifted, focusing especially on the ordinary citizens who were sucked into the tragic conflicts that spilled blood across the last century and the rank and file soldiers whose memories portray horrors historians sometimes fail to grasp and thereby help to understand these events. At the present time, these lines of research are quite in vogue, as are all studies related to "memory" in general.[3] They are based on a wide variety of sources, from direct oral histories to the war journals published by soldiers on every side of the war. This influx of war memoirs has had an additional benefit: after years of relative disinterest, a number of new academic studies have finally have begun to analyze the conflicts of the twentieth century by considering the views and experiences of civilians, women, and other ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. (Gender history has proven particularly important in this field). Similarly, a desire to delve into previously overlooked aspects of major twentieth century conflicts has generated a significant amount of research focused on the "losers," who were too often neglected in the major historiographic overviews of the past. Finally, archival research has been particularly relevant in recent years. Though archival documents have always been crucial in studying military history, the recent opening of archives which scholars had been unable to access (especially the Russian archives, which remain difficult to study to this day, as well as others in countries which were part of the Soviet Bloc until 1989), in combination with newly available sources, has shone light – often for the first time – on numerous questions which have generated significant interest not only in the field of military history but also – indeed, especially – for history in general.

The state of the question with regard to the First World War is in line with the aforementioned general observations. Though an enormous number of academic studies have been written about the Great War since it ended, for many decades these were plagued by a series of problems which somewhat reduced the validity of these historiographic contributions. First, as was the case in many other spheres of military history, a good number of studies limited themselves to bringing up old analyses focused on politics, diplomacy and major battles, especially those which were fought on the decisive Western Front (the Battles of the Marne, Verdun, Somme, etc.), adopting a traditional perspective which the new historiographic

[3] An interesting analysis of the complex relationship between History and Memory can be found in Enzo Traverso, *Le Passé, modes d'emploi : Histoire, mémoire, politique* (The Past: A User's Manual. History, Memory, Politics), (Paris: La Fabrique, 2005).

ideas established after World War II were unable to crack. Second, the vast proliferation of studies on the Second World War inevitably reduced interest about the conflict that preceded it to a certain extent, thereby decreasing its "weight" in historiography. In this vein, World War I has all too often been dismissed as a "useless massacre" in which millions of men died for no apparent reason in the trenches and mud as the result of decisions made by politicians indifferent to their suffering. It has often seemed that such positions have sought to draw a not particularly implicit parallel with the "just war" the Axis and Allies would engage in starting in 1939. Indeed, we find this reductive approach in many of the studies focused on the "European Civil War," in which the Great War was seen as a necessary prelude to World War II, a war which – despite having its own unique characteristics – served as a needed introduction which helped explain the major event of the twentieth century, the war of 1939-45. Luckily, significant progress has been made toward supplanting this view, as research since the 1970s has finally focused on the unique complexities of the Great War. Thanks to the contributions of French, British and Italian historians, especially, research on the conflict has taken on a new and exciting series of topics, moving beyond traditional analyses produced in a political and military mold and comparative simplifications. In particular, the French school in Péronne has authored a series of new studies focused on consent (and dissent) among the population, especially soldiers. These studies help us understand how the front "held firm," both internally and militarily, over long years of conflict. Simultaneously, additional studies examining the violence endured and inflicted, both on the front and in the rear guard have been published. Furthermore – and this cannot have come as a surprise – the memory of World War I itself has become the subject of research, as historians investigate how the event has lingered in the European conscience and the grieving process which followed it. We could perhaps criticize the historiography of the Great War for focusing on regional perspectives and fronts thus far, with few more general analyses that bear in mind the global aspect of the conflict. Nevertheless, in the last thirty years, crucial strides have been taken in researching the social and cultural history of this conflict.[4]

The historiography of intelligence – especially work examining the role of intelligence agencies in major conflicts of the twentieth century, referred to as "military intelligence" – struggles and has always struggled with two significant conceptual issues: the difficulty of accessing classified

[4] An introduction to the World War I bibliography can be found in Mario Isnenghi and Giorgio Rochat, *La Grande Guerra, 1914-1918* (The Great War: 1914-1918), (Milano: La Nuova Italia, 2000): 509-549.

archives and finding a balance between the mythification of intelligence agents and negative views of intelligence work. First, as most people would imagine, accessing unorganized and often classified sources has proved challenging, especially given that quite a bit of information is often missing in these sources. Second, the myth around intelligence agents, often seen as decisive figures who can single-handedly change the course of history[5] thanks to escapist literature and cinema, proves a stark contrast to the limited esteem enjoyed by intelligence to this day, as people question whether it is useful in solving armed conflicts involving millions of soldiers on different fields of battle. Despite these clear challenges, the historiography of intelligence has nevertheless produced works of unquestionable merit, particularly with regard to the role of Western intelligence agents in major international conflicts (consider, for example, studies of British and American intelligence) as well as some specific topics in the history of World War II. Nevertheless, a systematic, fleshed-out historiographic approach to intelligence must touch on many other topics, which confirms the complexity of this field. Consider just two cases: our knowledge of how Soviet intelligence worked and the missions it carried out between 1939 and 1945, which is still insufficient to this day, and the numerous gaps which those who study the undeclared conflict that was the Cold War still must reckon with.

The historiography of the Spanish Civil War is indubitably more complex. Indeed, an immense quantity of research is still produced about the conflict, which in fact garners as much attention from historians as World War II.[6] Early works on the history of this war predominantly touched on the powerful polarization of ideologies, with hagiographies produced by the official Francoist historiography on the one hand and Republican tales that primarily claimed to justify the government's defeat on the other. However, scientifically sound research about the conflict – written predominantly by eminent English-speaking historians and focused on the political and military aspects of the war – was not published until the late seventies. Two of the best known such studies, by Thomas and Jackson, laid the groundwork for an authentic explosion of work on the war. This research continued to study the complex diplomatic relationships

[5] For example, consider the title given to the film acclaiming the famous deeds of "Garbo" (aka Joan Pujol García) in World War II: *Garbo: The Man Who Saved the World*.

[6] For an excellent synthesis of the historiography of the Spanish Civil War, see Juan Andrés Blanco Rodríguez, "La historiografía de la guerra civil española" (Historiography of the Spanish Civil War), *Hispania Nova* 7 (2007): 741-772, last accessed November 26, 2012, http://hispanianova.rediris.es/7/index.htm.

during the war (see, for example, Viñas' and Coverdale's on the German and Italian interventions), yet also moved beyond traditional syntheses to explore new topics related to the conflict (such as collectivization or the strategies of various political groups). As democracy returned to Madrid in the late seventies and early eighties, Spanish historiography began to make its voice heard, producing studies on the Spanish Civil War. Though English-language scholarship on the conflict still played an important role (mostly thanks to the work of Paul Preston), Spanish historiography came into its own as independent, influential research that produced valuable contributions in previous neglected fields. As a result of this new generation of Spanish historians (including Aróstegui, Casanovas, and Villarroya, among others), research on the Spanish Civil War continues to be an important field of study in contemporary military historiography. In recent years, it has focused primarily on four major issues.[7] The first, relatively traditional topic relates to the origins (or presumed inevitability) of the conflict which broke out in the summer of 1936, while the second, which had been examined beforehand but now benefited from significantly more detailed archival research, touched on the role of foreign powers in the conflict. Though these two fields of study have been around for many years, the other two topics studied by historians are quite novel: research on the role of the Republic during the war, which finally overcame the mythification of the past; and studies about the repressive nature of different forces (especially the Francoist power) in both 1936-1939 and immediately after the war itself. This final, essential topic is seeing an authentic boom as it bears witness to the persistence of the debate about the Spanish Civil War among not only historians but the public in general.

Though it is quite challenging to sum up the state of current research on the Spanish Civil War, it is nearly impossible to keep tabs on the immense quantity of historiography related to World War II and the key players involved therein, both individually and on a collective level. Thus, we shall instead simply note some of the major issues that have sparked academic debate in recent years. The first such area of research (which has been around for quite some time) has to do with the origins of the conflict. Over the years, discussion has continued to focus on Nazi Germany's foreign policy guidelines (whether Germany had crafted well-defined attack plans or Hitler was simply a skilled improviser). Moreover, the study of Hitlerian diplomacy is but one of the questions related to the

[7] The most recent historiographic trends related to the Spanish Civil War are covered in Hugo García, "La historiografía de la Guerra Civil en el nuevo siglo" (The Historiography of the Spanish Civil War in the New Century), *Ayer* 62 (2006)/2: 285-305.

Third Reich currently plaguing scholars: though the historiography of Nazism continues to produce dozens and dozens of volumes of all types every year, in recent years historians have been able to concentrate on aspects of the regime which had generally been overlooked, such as the daily life of Germans under the Third Reich. The Holocaust and the German slaughter of Jews and other ethnic and sexual groups during the war are inseparable from the study of Nazism; indeed, they are so crucial that they represent a de facto question in and of themselves. Although the issue may not always produce a "Goldhagen Case," as took place in the late nineties,[8] the inner workings of extermination, victims and their executioners remains an essential topic for contemporary historiography. Furthermore, as noted when discussing World War I, in recent decades researchers have been able to take a broader view when analyzing violence, thus going into greater depth in new and interesting research on the behavior of soldiers at the front and behind the lines. In fact, they have managed to do so while also studying victims of every gender, origin and social status, including the losers of the war. Finally, with regard to the more strictly "military" aspects of the conflict, numerous studies about specific incidents should also be mentioned (for example, the Battles of Stalingrad, Okinawa, and Normandy, among others). Similarly, we should not forget the fascinating research about the decisive Eastern front, which has benefited from new access to the archives of the former USSR (despite the aforementioned difficulties), filling a gap which had been present in Western historiography for far too long.[9]

Finally, at least a brief mention should be made of the major lines of research historians (as well as political analysts and journalists) have pursued in recent years when examining the complex wars of the late twentieth century. Again, trying to briefly sum up the extensive historiographical work on the conflicts which bloodied (and in many cases continue to bloody) the planet after the Cold War would fill many pages, both because of the considerable number of such studies and because of their complex, diverse nature. In fact, it is these two features that ensure that the classical approach to military historiography must inevitably be overturned. While on the one hand, the last twenty years have seen

[8] See Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and The Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

[9] For a basic bibliography of the large historiographic bibliography on World War II, see Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 921-944, and Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War To Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000): 606-612.

ongoing conflicts that fit a more traditional mold, conflicts which almost always arose during the Cold War itself (the most significant example is Palestine), on the other hand, the number of so-called "asymmetrical conflicts" has increased in parallel to a growing political and institutional fragmentation. Consequently, traditional methodological approaches and analyses prove neither sufficient nor functional, and specialists who study the "military events" of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century must broaden their view. For example, consider the flourishing analyses, produced on both a local and international scale, of the humanitarian crises arising from conflicts, why they were certain and why they continue. A second particularly common field of research relates to both resolving or transforming conflicts that are currently underway as well as unilateral and multilateral peacekeeping and peacebuilding. A list of those conflicts and geographic regions that have most interested scholars must inevitably begin with those of the Middle East, and, as a direct consequence thereof, those which stemmed directly from the attacks of September 11, 2001. Particularly after the attacks on New York and Washington, interest in this problematic region and analyses focused on a variety of topics related to the Middle East (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, terrorism, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, civil wars, etc.) have also increased quite significantly and are by now on the agenda. And we should not forget the ongoing research touching on various conflicts that have emerged in countries of so-called "social realism," from wars in the Caucasus to the tragedy of Yugoslavia to the power struggles in Central Asia. An unfortunate result of this is that there is still relatively little research on the terrible conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, one of the challenges for military historians in the new millennium will be to finally broaden their focus to include the "forgotten continent" and its tragedies.[10]

## A historian, a soldier, a book

The ensuing pages, which comprise the core of this book, are the result of a day of study entitled "Soldiers, Bombs and Rifles: Military History of the 20th Century," held on April 12, 2012 at the University of Barcelona's (UB) Faculty of Geography and History. The event was organized by the

[10] For more information on recent conflicts and research into them, see the websites of the International Conflict Research Institute, http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/services/cds/index.html, last accessed December 2012; Uppsala Universitet (UCDP), http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/search.php, last accessed December 2012, and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, http://www.iwpr.net, last accessed December 2012.

UB's *Centre d'Estudis Històrics Internacionals* (Center for International Historical Studies; CEHI), within the framework of GRANMA (Group of Research and Analysis of the Present World) (SGR 099, 2009-2013), in memory of Professor Gabriel Cardona, who recently and prematurely passed away. Professor Cardona regularly argued that military history must be included in the major historiographic trends of the twentieth century. A soldier by training, teacher in the UB's Department of Contemporary History by profession, and member of the CEHI, this Spanish Civil War expert knew how to break down the barriers of specialization in military history with an approach consistently based on a strong technical underpinning. His impressive publications bear witness to this.

Consequently, Professor Cardona stands as an important example of the integration and dialogue between contemporary history *tout court* and military history, a topic that is more important than ever. The *Centre d'Estudis Històrics Internacionals* honored his memory by organizing an event that encapsulated his intellectual legacy, an event that not only memorialized Gabriel Cardona but also provided a space for reflection and sharing findings. The conference brought together highly prestigious experts to speak about some of the most significant topics in twentieth-century historiography. Chaired by Professor Antoni Segura i Mas, the director of the CEHI, the event included contributions from Fortunato Minniti on World War I, Giuseppe Conti on military intelligence, Allan R. Millett on World War II and Joan Villarroya Font on the Spanish Civil War. When it was decided to publish the proceedings of this initiative, it also seemed opportune to include a piece by Antoni Segura i Mas on the conflicts of the late twentieth century, thus rounding out an overview of the major topics of war and peace which have pockmarked the twentieth century. We invite you to explore the articles that follow, and are convinced that this ambitious work will inspire reflections that break through the traditional barriers of historiography.

# CHAPTER ONE

# MODERN REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL HISTORY IN THE GREAT WAR

FORTUNATO MINNITI
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA TRE

> The war of 1914-1918 belongs to no one, not even to historians.
> —Jay Winter and Antoine Prost
> *"Urkatastrophe": A "special" war*

**1.** "Why are we so obsessed by the Great War of 1914-1918?"[1] The question has been asked before, and bears asking again. Perhaps because of the war's scope? But the war was neither longer nor bloodier than World War II, nor was it more harmful or more painful for the civilian population. Several other pertinent answers should be considered: perhaps we are obsessed by the Great War because it shattered our expectations about the future by revealing the dark side of progress; because in killing or maiming millions of promising young men, it permanently disproved Darwinian arguments that war supported selection of the fittest; or because it led part of Europe toward totalitarianism and a new war.[2] However, though all of these answers are compelling, on their own they are insufficient.

Therefore, we should reformulate the question and ask: "What made the First World War so special in its impact on attitudes towards war?"[3] Was the Great War unique because it was more destructive than major conflicts of the past, because it put an end to a long period of peace, or because it demonstrated that instruments of war could annihilate the world we knew? According to John Mueller, none of these explanations are

[1] Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, "Review article: The First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35 (2000): 319-328.
[2] Prior and Wilson, "Review article," 319.
[3] John Mueller, "Changing Attitudes towards War: The Impact of the First World War," *British Journal of Political Science* 21 (1991): 1-28.

correct. Rather, our surprise and disappointment about the Great War can be ascribed to the gap between perception and expectations before and after the war.[4] John Horne has made the same point, arguing that the war's ability to set free forces that were both destructive and constructive consolidated and perpetuated this gap, as the war gave rise to new social and political structures that would place the balance of power in Europe – which had been profoundly changed – in an even larger, previously unknown context, a context that was, for the first time, global.[5]

This inconsistency between expectations and results is precisely why the origins, decisions, features and outcomes of the Great War are still studied with such passion today. Nevertheless, this has not managed to make a dent in the Great War's wholly negative image. Indeed, over time the wide cultural arena of publicness[6] has seen a proliferation of twisted perceptions about indisputable events like the British victory – which is still overshadowed by the memory of methodical massacres at the Somme – or the Italian view of the Battle of Caporetto, which is known for the breaching of the front, disbanding and withdrawal of troops, and flight of thousands of civilians. In the long run, however, this would end up centering the action on the Piave, where two defensive battles and one offensive battle were fought, paving the path to subsequent victory.[7]

The aforementioned explanations present several justified interpretations of the ongoing interest and unease that still characterize the Great War. In fact, when describing this war, John Mueller wrote: "It was not the first horrible war in history, but it was the first in which people were widely capable of recognizing and being thoroughly repulsed by those horrors and in which they were substantially aware that viable alternatives existed."[8] It is reasonable to doubt that they were aware of legitimate alternatives, but their feelings of repulsion cannot be questioned, since they were commensurate with the long-lasting moral and social – not to mention

[4] Mueller, "Changing Attitudes," 9, 24-25.
[5] John Horne, "Introduction" to *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012): xvi, xix-xxvi
[6] According to Geoff Eley, publicness is "the public sphere where ideas and images about the past are produced, mediated, reworked, fought over, fashioned into ideology, and put into collective circulation." Geoff Eley, "The Past under Erasure? History, Memory and the Contemporary," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46: 555.
[7] Mario Isnenghi, *La tragedia necessaria. Da Caporetto all'Otto settembre* (The necessary tragedy: from Caporetto to September 8th) (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999); Fortunato Minniti, *Il Piave* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002).
[8] Mueller, "Changing Attitudes," 12.

military – beliefs of almost all of the participants. Certainly, in terms of public opinion, feelings and outbursts of intolerance mostly came to a head *after* the war ended, when literature and painting in Europe and the United States found the strength to voice their feelings, ingraining a negative view of the war into the consciences of future generations, who were the first to label it an *Urkatastrophe*.[9] This concept, which is still historiographically compelling, would later be formalized in the political sphere by George F. Kennan, who defined an *Urkatastrophe* as an original event able to stand the test of time and historical research, with the latter held back by the outbreak of another, larger conflict.[10]

Indeed, World War II inevitably sapped energy from its predecessor, achieving scientifically significant results in the field of political history when the archives began to open in the seventies. Research focused especially on the "origins" of the war. Meanwhile, military history, defined narrowly as the history of military operations, was evidently incapable of providing information on the "totality"[11] of the war, which involved not only institutions but also societies and economies, whose cultures and political structures it transformed.[12]

**2.** In France and Italy, the moment to tackle the complicated dimensions of the war once and for all arrived in the early seventies. As this unfolded, the wounded and disabled, defectors, prisoners and veterans gradually came to replace politicians and generals, strategies and battles, who had been the first leading characters of this monumental event. Meanwhile, a second, internal front was opened. It looked beyond battles to peasants and workers, parents, widows and orphans, poets, writers and artists. Large and small military units were no longer seen as pawns in strategic or tactical maneuvers. Rather, they came to be viewed as instruments which

[9] Belinda Davis, "Experience, Identity and Memory: The Legacy of World War I," *The Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003): 112

[10] Kennan is famous for writing of a "seminal catastrophe." See George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[11] Hew Strachan, "Les histoires militaires officielles de la première guerre mondiale" (The Official Military Histories of World War I), in *Histoire culturelle de la grande guerre* (Cultural History of the Great War), ed. Jean-Jacques Becker and Centre de Recherche de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre (Péronne-Somme), (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005): 46-47.

[12] Antonio Gibelli, "La storiografia militare italiana negli ultimi venti anni: la Grande Guerra" (Italian Military Historiography in the Last Twenty Years: the Great War), in Società Italiana di Storia Militare, *Quaderno 2000*, (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2003): 188.

could inflict suffering and death on their own members before even taking a shot at the enemy.

Studies – which were often conducted on a small scale – were entrusted with identifying a new mass subject[13] that experienced the war from a point of view quite distant from its politics. This led to consequences some viewed as excessive, such as concentrating on military victims of the war and their disagreement with it and thus decreasing the focus on soldiers, who were seen as complicit, motivated and active.

Upon close consideration, all of the actors in the war – both victims and combatants – were being pushed toward new positions forged for them by historians thanks to an innovative approach which is still valid today, more than a quarter century later. In my opinion, it was the most fitting way to begin to understand our obsession with the Great War, a conflict we deem "great" due to the repercussions it had on the history of the twentieth century. As Christophe Prochasson wrote in 2005 (although the idea dates back to three years earlier), studies focused on World War I in the last 15 years have predominantly revolved around cultural history.[14] Ten years later, the trend remains unchanged.

Prochasson's argument is certainly true. Therefore, we too shall dive into this arena, even if this means omitting from our historiography of the Great War the history of political and military relationships, armaments, military operations and the economy of war, which are part of the "'hard' military history of armies, tactics, strategy and warfare."[15]

Therefore, this chapter will focus exclusively on cultural history, in fact narrowing its scope to only some of the topics and publications in this field, which commenced in the seventies. In addition to critical works and sources about the war, we also must invariably consider a goodly number of pieces tied to the double anniversary of the beginning and end of the Great War. We have celebrated the triumph of memory embodied in these two moments

[13] Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 203-205.

[14] Christophe Prochasson, "La guerre en ses cultures" (The War in its Cultures), in *Histoire culturelle de la grande guerre* (Cultural History of the Great War), ed. Jean-Jacques Becker and Centre de Recherche de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre (Péronne-Somme), (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005): 46-47; and Davis, "Experience, Identity and Memory," 112-113.

[15] As per the definition published in the *Cambridge Military Histories* series.

every decade since the mid-seventies. In the eighties, this concept[16] began to take hold, and in the nineties, it came to dominate studies.

This "memory boom" has led to an enormous number of studies on places, rituals and languages[17] with one limit: the so-called "collective memory" has become an obsession that threatens to confuse individual and social experiences, memory and history. However, as Bourke wrote, society has no memory[18]; I would add that instead of rituals surrounded by celebratory ceremonies, it needs philologically correct analyses and broad general interpretations which look beyond the pressure – either imposed by publishers or by our own selves – of an unmissable opportunity to reach a wider audience. However, the search for memory has a plus: it gathers testimonials from the generations touched by the war. In fact, by thoughtfully processing individual or local memories, historians play an indispensable part in analyzing contemporaneous portrayals and passing them down to future generations.[19]

## "*Modern Memory*": A changing world

**3.** In Italy, the focus on these expressions of culture through which we can "consider" – or even reconsider – the Great War dates back to a 1970 work by Mario Isnenghi. Italian writers and intellectuals have focused on expectations around the war, its "beneficial" aspects, and the social and political role of officials and soldiers.[20] Yet this model was limited to Italy, where it was accompanied by studies which aimed to foreground new subjects including the soldiers, farmers, and workers, propaganda in the country and among the troops, and popular culture.[21]

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[16] This is a translation of the "nostalgia for the present" stemming from current needs to forge our identities. Cf. Eley, "The Past under Erasure? History, Memory and the Contemporary," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46.3 (2011): 556

[17] Stefan Goebel, "Beyond Discourse? Bodies and Memories of Two World Wars," Review Article, *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (2007): 377

[18] Joanna Bourke, "Introduction: 'Remembering' War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39 (2004): 473-474

[19] Bourke, "Introduction," 484-485.

[20] Mario Isnenghi, *Il mito della grande Guerra* (The Myth of the Great War), (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1970), which was preceded by Mario Isnenghi, *I vinti di Caporetto* (The Defeated of Caporetto), (Padova: Marsilio, 1969).

[21] Mario Isnenghi, *Giornali di trincea. 1915-1918* (Trench Diaries: 1915-1918), (Torino: Einaudi, 1977) as well as the pieces dating to 1978 published in Mario Isnenghi, ed., *Operai e contadini nella Grande Guerra* (Workers and Farmers During the Great War), (Bologna: Cappelli, 1982) and in Giovanna Procacci, ed., *Stato e classe operaia in Italia durante la prima guerra mondiale* (The State and

The opposite happened in Great Britain, where Paul Fussell's important volume, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, was published in 1975.[22] Fussell is credited with proposing a universal interpretation of the Great War, although it was actually founded on portrayals offered up by British writers. In his preface to the 1984 Italian translation, Ernesto Galli della Loggia wrote that the war had been seen "as an isolated event of significance in and of itself, as a crucial, paradigmatic event,"[23] without considering it in its real framework, namely the conditions faced by combatants, the risk of death, the deep wounds and changes in humanity caused by an incurable tragedy. Consequently, "beyond its political, strategic or military impact, the Great War was at its core an enormous cultural event: herein lies... its *significance*",[24] which is, therefore, why appropriate methods and sources should be deployed to study it. For example, the "aesthetic" dimension of the war experience was generated from an almost completely allegorical and metaphorical perception of reality, focusing on how the senselessness of events forced combatants to seek to indirectly construe meaning. As this methodology deprived it of any connection to time and space,[25] the experience of war became the uninterrupted experience of humankind in the twentieth century, by which "all wars, in a certain sense, are the Great War."[26] This type of discourse served to explain how a "terribly 'British'" book helped Europe and the United States to understand "the intensity, duration, and sometimes dramatic responses of fleeing from or rewriting" this experience beyond the self-evident specific national contexts.[27] According to Leonard V. Smith, this classic has become a *lieu de mémoire* for everyone, especially those involved in the conflict. [28]

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the Working Class in Italy During the First World War), (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1983).

[22] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[23] Ernesto Galli della Loggia, "Introduzione all'edizione italiana" (Preface to the Italian Edition) of Paul Fussell, *La grande guerra e la memoria moderna* (The Great War and Modern Memory), (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984): viii.

[24] Galli della Loggia, "Introduzione". Original italics.

[25] Galli della Loggia, "Introduzione".

[26] Galli della Loggia, "Introduzione".

[27] Antonio Gibelli, "Introduzione all'edizione italiana" (Preface to the Italian Edition) of Paul Fussell, *La grande guerra e la memoria moderna* (The Great War and Modern Memory), (Bologna: il Mulino, 2000): xvi – xviii.

[28] Leonard V. Smith, "Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*: Twenty-five years later," *History and Theory* 40 (2001): 241, 248.

It should, however, be noted that Fussell's book was not showered with universal acclaim: in addition to the critiques that came out upon its publication and in the years following it, which noted the book's limited scope as well as some inaccuracies, we should also bear in mind Brian Bond's 1997 review, which called the work "unreliable."[29] A year later, Roger Chickering would challenge this observation, hoping to craft a work of similar merit about the German experience.[30] Fussell's scholarship helped lead to a continuous series of studies which brought the field to the excellent levels it currently enjoys, even if it didn't do so alone.[31]

Robert Wohl also aimed to pursue Fussell's goal in his 1979 work *The Generation of 1914*, although he did so less successfully. The work described how groups of young intellectuals contributed to creating an atmosphere of war during this tragic period in France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Spain.[32]

**4.** In those years, the Great War was still – or even had just become – a fertile terrain for both historiography and groundswells of public opinion in the western world. After Fussell, Eric Leed would prove this with nearly as powerful an impact in his 1979 work, *No Man's Land*.[33] Leed saw the modernity that Fussell called to mind in the changing physical and mental conditions, expectations, and personalities of leading figures, thanks to whom it was possible to "provide a cultural history of the First World War *through* men who participated in it" and were transformed[34] by it after

[29] Brian Bond, "A Victory Worse than a Defeat? British Interpretations of the First World War," Annual Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives Lecture given at King's College London on November 20, 1997.

[30] Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 95.

[31] Adam R. Seipp, "Review Article: Beyond the 'Seminal Catastrophe': Re-imagining the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41: 764.

[32] Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[33] Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). The beginning might sweep us away when we read that the book "is not a military history." Yet we must simply hold out for half a page more to discover that military history "gains an overwhelming fascination when one looks at it in order to see how it mobilized, articulated, and modified the resources of signification available" to those involved with it (in other words, what contemporaries do to understand what they are doing).

[34] Citations based on the Italian edition of Eric Leed, *Terra di nessuno. Esperienza bellica e identità personale nella prima guerra mondiale* (No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War 1), (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985): 5-7.

becoming bewildered by the sensorial labyrinth symbolized by the trench system.[35] Leed especially laid a path to include within the "historical discourse of this great biological and mental catastrophe...that was the Great War" the traces and murmurs of those who had not written about, recalled or given voice to it because they were incapable of doing so or because they were at a loss for words after locking eyes with the Medusa referred to by Keegan as the "face of battle."[36]

We might also consider whether Leed's work, like Fussell's, has itself become a place of memory, a model, and an obligatory point of reference. I believe it has. First of all, *No Man's Land* preceded George Mosse in noting that the experience of war reoccurred in the imaginations and actions of politicians after a military conflict.[37] Furthermore, he and Fussell helped to launch a new era of studies in Italy, one phase of which included the convention that took place in Rovereto (Trento) in 1985 and focused on social history and mental outlooks.[38] A second phase can be seen in Gibelli's 1991 work, *L'officina della guerra. La grande Guerra e le trasformazioni del mondo mentale*,[39] as well as in the works of Giovanna Procacci[40] and Bruna Bianchi.[41]

Ten years after Fussell, Modris Eksteins' *Rites of Spring* also saw war, death and destruction as elements that helped form the modern conscience and which could not be stopped by the armistice, instead continuing inexorably onwards. The key to understanding this is the "movement"

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[35] Leed, *Terra di nessuno*, 103-155, 217-255.

[36] Gibelli, "Introduzione," xxi, xxix; John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976).

[37] Leed, *No Man's Land*, 7.

[38] Diego Leoni and Camillo Zadra, ed., *La Grande Guerra. Esperienza, memoria, immagini* (The Great War: Experience, Memory and Images), (Bologna: il Mulino, 1986).

[39] Antonio Gibelli, *L'officina della guerra. La grande Guerra e le trasformazioni del mondo* mentale (The Laboratory of War: The Great War and Transformations in the Mental World), (Milano: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991). Another important work is Antonio Gibelli, "Nefaste meraviglie. Grande Guerra e apoteosi della modernità" (Fateful Wonders: The Great War and the Apotheosis of Modernity), in *Storia d'Italia. Annali XVIII. Guerra e pace* (The History of Italy: Annals XVIII: War and Peace), ed. Walter Barberis (Torino: Einaudi, 2002).

[40] Giovanna Procacci, *Dalla rassegnazione alla rivolta. Mentalità e comportamenti popolari nella grande guerra (From Resignation to Revolt: Popular Outlook and Behavior During the Great War)*, (Roma: Bulzoni, 1999).

[41] Bruna Bianchi, *La follia e la fuga. Nevrosi di guerra, diserzione e disobbedienza nell'esercito italiano (1915-1918)* (Folly and Flight: War Neurosis, Desertions and Disobedience in the Italian Army, 1915-1918), (Roma: Bulzoni, 2001).

from the acceleration of the Great War to the world's decline,[42] which was manifested metaphorically through art and occasioned by the wounds Alfredo Bonadeo saw and described in a study of literature (and other sources) in the same year as Eksteins. The title of Bonadeo's book –*Mark of the Beast* – is itself indicative of its contents and thesis.[43]

At this point, two different views of the war coexisted. One was expressed by Samuel Hynes in *A War Imagined*, which used literary sources to paint a portrait of not only the mood of elites but also that of the population as a whole. The work condemned political representatives and all of the citizens who let the soldiers go to their fate.[44]

John Fuller's *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*[45] truly toppled consensus about the war when it noted the absence of a plausible reason for it. The work shifted our focus back to the soldiers of the Empire and noted that leaders did not manage the experience of war. Instead, poets and artists became the core of future research and interpretations.[46]

After at least a decade of reflection, in 1989 Mosse followed with *Fallen Soldiers*,[47] a fundamental contribution to the study of the way in which the myth of the war experience emerged to short-circuit the challenges posed by mass killings and help society to survive politically. This myth perfectly met its goals, although it did so at quite a high cost to the European political and social equilibrium of the twenties and thirties. Marked by a sense of meaningfulness and pride about the actions and suffering of the war, the myth denied its unjustifiable absurdity. At its core, it focused on the sacredness of the nation, which was reconfirmed through the sacrifices of so many living and dead, the latter of whom were transformed into cult figures following a liturgy that had been created and celebrated much earlier in France and Germany. Moreover, Mosse

[42] Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2000, first ed. 1989), xii-xiv.
[43] Alfredo Bonadeo, *Mark of the Beast: Death and Degradation in the Literature of the Great War* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989).
[44] Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990).
[45] John Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
[46] Jay M. Winter, "La grande guerra negli studi anglo-americani" (The Great War in Anglo-American Studies), *Ricerche storiche* 3 (1991): 569-575.
[47] George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

inspired fruitful areas of study in Italian historiography, particularly with regard to war narratives and the cult of the fallen.[48]

We therefore find ourselves facing positions that are at times antithetical by conscientiously accepting the impossible linearity of this momentous transition in twentieth-century history. This is suggested in another (lesser) work that helps to discover the cultural dimensions of the Great War (understood in the reductive sense of literary works that would anticipate the characteristics of the war and later build on this). The work is Daniel Pick's 1993 book, *War Machine*, which provides a useful formula for the *modus operandi* of wartime culture and society, arguing that they mirror a machine which freely switches between two antithetical and invertible tasks, those of cohesion and fragmentation.[49]

In the works of Fussell, Leed and Mosse, the image of the Great War is one of a tragedy that modernizes culture and society, which have shifted from their pre-war status, opening the door to the irrational at various levels, especially the political.

## "Penser la Grande Guerre": On consensus

**5.** Scholars from the school of French historiography would follow in the footsteps of Fussell, Leed and Mosse. As long ago as 1992, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker had grasped that a triple approach to cultural history existed, a product of different national schools – in French,

[48] See also Donatello Aramini, *George L. Mosse, l'Italia e gli storici.* (George L. Mosse: Italy and Historians), (Milano: Angeli, 2010). This list is not meant to be exhaustive and also includes Sandra Staderini, *Combattenti senza divisa. Roma nella Grande Guerra* (Soldiers Without Uniforms: Rome in the Great War), (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1995); Fabio Caffarena, *Lettere dalla grande guerra: scritture del quotidiano, monumenti della memoria, fonti per la storia: il caso italiano* (Letters from the Great War: Writing of Daily Life, Monuments of Memory, Sources for History: The Italian Case), (Milano: UNICOPLI, 2005); on the second topic, see Bruno Tobia, *L'Altare della Patria* (The Altar of the Homeland), (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1998); Bruno Tobia, "Monumenti ai caduti. Dall'Italia liberale all'Italia fascista" (Monuments to the Fallen: From Liberal Italy to Fascist Italy), in *La morte per la patria. Le celebrazione dei caduti dal Risorgimento alla Repubblica* (Dying for your Country: Celebrating the Fallen from the Risorgimento to the Republic), ed. by Oliver Janz and Lutz Klinkhammer (Roma: Donzelli, 2008): 45-62; Oliver Janz, "Lutto, famiglia e nazione nel culto dei caduti della prima Guerra mondiale in Italia" (Mourning, Family and Nation in the Cult of the Fallen: The First World War in Italy), in *La morte per la patria*, 65-79.

[49] Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993).