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Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal, eds., *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. x + 219 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £19.99. (pb). ISBN 978-1-4411-3039-6.

Review by Heather Jones, The London School of Economics and Political Science.

In recent years, with the rise of transnational history, there has been an increase in the number of academic studies that go beyond national boundaries. Yet, in Britain, a strange lack of public awareness of the history of its closest continental neighbour and erstwhile imperial rival—France—remains widespread. In part, this can be attributed to the ‘fog in channel, continent cut off’ mentality of an island nation. Yet, as this fascinating new edited volume, from Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal, on the different British and French views of the two world wars, makes clear the difficulties of mutual comprehension between the two countries run deeper, greatly influenced by their different wartime historical experiences and collective memories.

This is an interesting and engaging book of thirteen essays, by leading historians of the world wars in the two countries. It is divided into three sections—“the First World War,” “the Second World War,” and “Remembering and Forgetting”—which are actually far more comparative and wide-ranging across the two wars than their slightly pedestrian headings might suggest. While the majority of the essays adopt a political history approach, there is stimulating broad engagement throughout with cultural history questions of remembrance and with popular interpretation of the wars. There is also some solid military history analysis of Anglo-French relations in the 1918 military coalition in the chapter by Elizabeth Greenhalgh.

This book highlights not just that the French and the British remember the two world wars differently but also that, as Robert Tombs points out in a thoughtful introductory discussion, in neither state is there currently enough awareness or understanding of *how* the other remembers these events. The latter is a far more shocking realisation, given the ongoing lack of cultural communication across the channel that it reveals. Yet it should probably come as no surprise in light of the scale of poor communication that has historically dogged the relationship between the two countries that the contributions to this volume reveal. For John Keiger, communication problems between the two states predated 1914: he highlights the contrasting ways the Entente Cordiale was viewed in both countries, and how the French only realised at the very last minute that the British did not view themselves as having any military obligations to aid France in the event of German attack: Paul Cambon, French ambassador to Britain, feared “they are going to ditch us” (p. 42). For Keiger, Britain went to war in 1914, not as France’s loyal ally, but to save Belgium, something the French never fully understood. During the conflict, few in France understood the scale of the role of the Royal Navy in winning allied victory, with one exception, as Elizabeth Greenhalgh points out, Commerce Minister Etienne Clémentel who grasped that “la guerre, c’est le shipping” (p. 73).

William Philpott’s contribution emphasises the different ways in which the French military effort in the First World War has been ignored in Britain, a process dating from the war itself, when British generals, such as Douglas Haig, sought to deliberately downplay the French military’s input into

victory. As a result, “vast dimensions of the French army’s activities remain unknown, notably the autumn 1915 Champagne offensive, the largest of the early trench war, and its defensive and offensive battles in 1918; and until very recently the Somme, a ‘British’ battle which it turns out that Foch directed and in which the French army came to play the predominant role!” (p. 55). For Philpott, the lack of communication runs both ways, however. The ongoing French reluctance to acknowledge the full extent of the British role in fighting as France’s ally in 1914–1918 and 1939–1945 is troubling: “forgetfulness would be too forgiving an explanation, patriotism excusable, politics possible, chauvinism probable” (p. 58).

For Jay Winter, in an outstanding analytical essay on the different ways the First World War is remembered in both countries, the answer is different: “since language frames memory, then it is inevitable that different linguistic forms and conventions provide cultural boundaries separating *to some degree* acts of remembrance concerning the Great War in Britain and France” (p. 169, Winter’s emphasis). Winter highlights the language of glory, “*gloire*,” that is associated with the war in French remembrance, in contrast to the more muted British language of commemoration. Ironically he finds that “Britain with an established Church may have had a somewhat more secularized language of remembrance than Republican France” (p. 164). For Winter, linguistic difference has given rise to “cultural divergences” in patterns of remembrance; he highlights a number of these: utilitarian forms of memorial in Britain have no equivalent in France; nor does the British obsession with shellshock or with their wartime generals, particularly Haig. Public debates in France on the French 1917 mutinies have no British counterpart. The French state took on the care of disabled veterans to a degree unknown in Britain where a veteran had to prove his disability was due to wartime service; in France “as soon as the army recognised a man as fit for service, any and all deterioration of his health, even without a direct link to combat was imputable to his military service” (p. 171). The French proscribed Stanley Kubrick’s film, *Paths of Glory* (1957), not shown in France until 1975; in Britain in contrast the film was embraced, serving to inspire Richard Attenborough’s 1969 *Oh What a Lovely War!* In sum, Winter provocatively concludes: “the Great War is sacred in France in a way that it is not in Britain” (p. 168) but also that even the word “memory” is deployed differently in the two cultures and historians must work with phrases that are “national speech acts” and “untranslatable terms” (p. 177). This essay is a powerful contribution to comparative First World War studies.

As the essays on 1939–1945 highlight, divergent national memories also shape how France and Britain remember the Second World War very differently. In part, as Martin Alexander’s contribution shows, this stems from 1940, when communication between the allies was very poor and tensions high. “Just days” before the Dunkirk evacuations began, the British hid from their French ally that withdrawal was being prepared (p. 96). The lack of communication extended to casualties: “regrettably few British knew then or know now, that 92,000 French officers, NCOs and soldiers along with 13 French generals died in 1940” (p. 98), although David Reynolds suggests this figure may be too high. Olivier Wieviorka laments the lack of current French awareness of the heavy British military role in D-Day which is today popularly seen as an American operation, “Americanized at the expense of the British,” with leading British figures, such as General Miles Dempsey, completely forgotten (p. 138). Wieviorka attributes this, in part, to British errors made at the time: the British failure to rapidly take Caen, stemming from a desire to be sparing with British infantry lives, meant Britain ultimately became the junior partner to the Americans as the liberation of France continued, ceding the dominant position it had held on D-Day. Robert Frank points out further examples of Britain’s role being forgotten: despite the fact that the resurrection of France as a major global power owed much to Churchill and the British at the Yalta summit, “Britain’s role at Yalta was almost entirely excised from French national memory” (p. 187), with de Gaulle ignoring the fact that Roosevelt and Stalin were uneasy with France gaining concessions, which included a zone of occupation in Germany, and a place at the Interallied Control Commission in charge of the administration of the German territories.

All the essays in this volume ultimately reveal three common themes that bedevil establishing a shared Anglo-French understanding of these two countries' common past in the world wars. The first is the rivalry that underpinned British-French relations during this period (and arguably to this day). From the First World War when, as Gary Sheffield points out, "a saying at GHQ was that Haig had to fight three foes – 'Boche, Foch and Loygeorges'" (p. 27) to the Second, when, as Frank points out, de Gaulle believed the British sought to seize the French colony of Syria, the lack of trust between the two powers has seeped into the historical record, leading to divergent memories of their shared wartime military coalitions and diplomatic alliances. The fall-out between de Gaulle and Churchill over Syria is particularly well-covered here by Frank; French repression of independence protests in the colony were so extreme in May 1945, including the bombardment of Damascus, that Britain acted unilaterally and sent in troops to calm the situation, incensing de Gaulle.

For the British, there was a lingering sense that France in the Second World War had been a wavering ally and, split between Vichy and de Gaulle, had not helped enough when compared to other countries: "Despite their heroism the *Forces Armées de la France Libre* could offer only 186 pilots; in comparison, the Czechs offered 546 and the Poles more than 1,800" (p. 139). Sébastien Albertelli provides a fascinating account of the rivalry between the Free French in London and the British secret services in vying for the right to control the various French resistance groupings. He also points out that the British underestimated the contribution that resistance sabotage could make during the 1944 liberation phase. Perhaps the most interesting point in this essay is the contention that Jean Moulin was not initially assigned to act as de Gaulle's representative in the Unoccupied Zone but in fact took this role upon himself (p. 124), thus becoming the necessary mediator between the Free French and the resistance. Overall, several essays in this volume highlight the deep suspicion and rivalry that existed between the British and the Free French throughout the war, aggravated by the growing dominance of the Americans in the Western alliance. Albertelli shows the Free French believed the British were starving its resistance groups of arms deliveries and Wieviorka contends that the French feared, incorrectly, that the Americans planned to impose American administrators to manage France at liberation (p. 147).

The second reason for the highly divergent historical understandings of the two world wars in each country that these essays emphasise is the fact that the geopolitical experience of each conflict was very different. For Britain, as Philpott points out, the First World War came to be seen as futile in a way that was impossible for France, an invaded country fighting to liberate its own territory. In contrast, the Dunkirk moment in 1940, which both Alexander and Frank discuss in detail, was mythologised as a victory snatched from the jaws of defeat for Britain; in France, no such redemptive narrative was possible. It was a humiliation that marked the start of four years of occupation. As P.M.H. Bell points out in his contribution, Churchill called the second volume of his memoirs dealing with the events of 1940 "Their Finest Hour"; the French translation tactfully rendered this as "*L'Heure tragique*." Given such disparities in Britain and France's actual war experiences and understandings of their national cause in each conflict, there was already little common ground to build any shared history or historiographical interpretation in their aftermath. Yet, as Bell and Reynolds both rightly point out, myths of betrayal by their ally in 1940, in both Britain and France, have overshadowed the reality that an array of major initiatives had brought the two countries closer at this point than at any time in their history. The 1939-1940 initiatives included joint planning for food supplies, a financial agreement fixing currency rates, a shared Supreme War Council and educational initiatives, including BBC radio talks to promote greater understanding of France in the UK. Sir Orme Sargent, a senior official in the Foreign Office, even proposed a system of intergovernmental cooperation that would "for all international purposes make of the two countries a single unit in post-war Europe" (p. 199).

The final key theme that emerges here as foundational to the very different ongoing understandings of the two world wars is the geopolitical restructuring that took place in their aftermath. The British sense that the French had betrayed them in 1940 left them wary of any future continental entanglements and to look to the USA for a more reliable alliance to secure the UK. Of course, the roots of the 'special

relationship' predated the Second World War, stemming from the economic weakness of Britain after 1918, reflected in the ditty: "In Washington Lord Halifax, Once whispered to Lord Keynes, 'It's true they have the money bags, But we have all the brains.'" (p. 200). But it was only after 1945 that Britain's allegiance shifted completely to the transatlantic alliance. Even then, the 1947 Dunkirk Treaty offered an opportunity to revive the Anglo-French link that ultimately never really developed. In contrast, the French, in the wake of the Second World War, sought security in a new European integration process that would intermesh the interests of West Germany so closely with those of France as to neutralise any future German threat. They also clung to the prestige that the French Empire offered them as France struggled to regain its status as a major world power in the wake of the 1940 defeat. This, Akhila Yechury and Emile Chabal suggest, explains the slow French disengagement in Algeria and Indochina: as one socialist put it, during the Second World War, the empire was the only thing that stopped France from "falling to the level of Portugal" (p. 89).

Overall this is a very welcome volume which presents an English-language readership with important insights into the contrasting British and French views of the two world wars. There are some minor criticisms. A full essay on the interwar period would have benefitted the book, by providing a comparative discussion of how the two countries saw the road from one war to its successor. The book also revealed the absence of any popular shared history of Britain and France in the two world wars but did not really develop suggestions as to how this situation of mutual lack of awareness might be overcome. Myth histories and national insularity clearly remain major issues for historians of France and Britain: this challenges the idea that transnational comparative history has won much public ground, something with both academic and political implications that needed further discussion here. At a more practical level there was a need for a better index to the book. Yet these points should not detract from the fact that this volume is an immensely engaging and wide-ranging work of scholarship, with valuable and original insights into the Anglo-French experience and memory of *both* world wars—no mean feat. It is still all too rare for the two world wars to be compared transnationally in this way. The editors and contributors deserve much praise for taking this scholarly initiative and producing an excellent volume.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Robert Tombs, "General Introduction"

Part I: The First World War

Gary Sheffield, "Introduction"

John Keiger, "Why Allies: Necessity or Folly?"

William Philpott, "Sacrifice and Slaughter: Two Armies, Two Wars?"

Elizabeth Greenhalgh, "The Push to Victory, 1918: The Allied Contributions"

Part II: The Second World War

Emile Chabal and Akila Yechury, "Introduction"

Martin Alexander, "1940: The French Army and the BEF"

Sebastien Albertelli, "The British, the Free French, and Resistance"

Olivier Wieviorka, "Liberation: The British Contribution"

Part III: Remembering and Forgetting

Philip Bell, "Introduction"

Jay Winter, "The First World War"

Robert Frank, "The Second World War"

David Reynolds, "An Overview"

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