
H-France Review Vol. 15 (July 2015), No. 93

Bruno Cabanes, *Août 1914: La France entre en guerre*. Paris: Gallimard, 2014. 244 pp. Notes and index. 18.90€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-07-012994-2.

Review by Elizabeth Greenhalgh, University of New South Wales Australia, Canberra.

As the commemorations of the events of the first year of the First World War continue into 2015, there can be few who remain unaware that the world, and not only Europe, changed in August 1914. Much of the recent scholarship has concentrated on the month preceding August, the 'July crisis,' and the causes of and responsibilities for the outbreak of war. Some of this has implicated France much more closely than in earlier work, in which the 'forgotten belligerent' was merely the unfortunate victim of an inflexible German plan. This plan meant that, after declaring war on Russia, the powerful German armies would invade Belgium and then France. According to a recent German doctoral thesis, however, France's support for Russia in protecting Serbia and standing up to Austro-Hungarian demands for action against Belgrade was more important than realised hitherto. The French President, Raymond Poincaré, who was absent from France on a state visit to St Petersburg between 14 and 29 July, was determined to deal with Germany firmly and to reassure Russia that France would stand by her ally, even over an incident in the Balkans, where France had no direct interest. If Stefan Schmidt is correct to conclude that France went to war to maintain its great power status, surely he goes too far in claiming that France sought "hegemonic" power.[1]

The focus of Bruno Cabanes's latest publication does not lie in such grand strategic questions, but in individual reactions to the events of the hot summer days of August, as the whole country experienced the sudden change from peace to war. He begins with the return to France of Poincaré and the premier, René Viviani, after their state visit to St Petersburg. The incongruity of a state visit and the absence from France of both the head of state and the head of government as the July crisis unfolded emphasizes the suddenness of the outbreak of a war, which to some had seemed inevitable but which arrived, nonetheless, like the proverbial bolt from the blue or thunder in a clear blue sky. Although the politicians and their decisions are described briefly, Cabanes's focus is on the French people as they coped with the sudden cataclysm of the announcement of mobilisation on 2 August, followed by Germany's declaration of war the next day. In his *avant-propos*, Cabanes refers to a "catastrophe" that was "collective as much as it was individual," and to the disappearance of "an entire world" with the start of the war (p. 12).

It was the suddenness of the descent into war during the first August weeks of the war that Cabanes emphasizes, insisting that August is the war's true initial turning point, rather than the more usual start of static trench warfare at the end of the year after the so-called war of movement was brought to an end as the opposing armies reached the Channel coast. It is the speed of the transition—from civilian to soldier, from villager to refugee—that Cabanes seeks to convey. This is in contrast to the longer timeframe of his earlier work, based on his doctoral thesis, which deals with the two years 1918-1920 of the soldiers' "sortie de guerre." [2] The themes in that earlier work range more widely too: analysis of reactions to the signing of the armistice is followed by the entry into the recovered provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, the occupation of the German Rhinelands, and the return to France of prisoners of war.

The demobilisation process of the war's end was much more complicated and delicate than the mobilisation that is the subject of the work under review here.

Perhaps the very suddenness of the *entrée en guerre* explains in part why there was so little disorder. In these days of social media and instantaneous street protest, the lack of protest in a nation of reputed *frondeurs* strikes the reader immediately. The lists of troublemakers to be arrested in case of war being declared that were kept up-to-date in the offices of all French prefects were not needed. The disorderly mobilisation of France's last war, against Prussia in 1870, was not repeated. Every male citizen who had completed his two years of compulsory military service (or three, after 1913) had a *livret militaire*. This told him the centre to which he was to report, which train to take to get there, and when he should go. These instructions were valid for the next twenty-five years following his active army service: eleven years in reserve, then seven years in the territorial army, with a further seven in the territorial reserve. Yet the men marched off to war, the women and grandparents brought in the harvest, and holidaymakers returned home, with no real confusion. Even the trains ran on time.

The text divides into three, not only thematically, but spatially and temporally as well. The many *petites patries* that made up France become the countryside (where lived most of the more than eight million men mobilised during the course of the war), the towns, above all Paris, which received a sudden influx of soldiers waiting to catch trains, and the more geographically circumscribed areas of northern and northeastern France which were subjected to invasion, to occupation and sometimes to atrocities, such as taking the village mayor hostage and shooting him. The temporal division marks the transition from civilian to military (chapters one to three), then chapters four and five deal with the military events of August—the offensives into German Lorraine, Luxembourg and Belgium, followed by the bloody repulses and the 'Great Retreat.' Chapters six to eight return to the home front, but areas now affected by spy fever, rumours and the oppressive rules and regulations of the occupying forces.

The author's emphasis on the "suddenness" of the *entrée en guerre*, of the war's "irruption into the lives of millions of French" (p. 9), unifies his tripartite divisions and reveals the underlying theme of the whole work, namely pervasive violence. Following the "irruption" of the war, came "une tuerie sur les champs de bataille," "une vague d'exactions [qui] s'abat sur les ressortissants des pays ennemis," and "un régime d'occupation...[qui] transforme la population en main d'œuvre servile" (pp. 9, 11). The collective memory of the previously unparalleled violence of the first weeks of the war has been eclipsed, claims Cabanes, by later catastrophes such as the 1916 battle of Verdun (p. 12). Certainly, for many French, Verdun symbolises 'la Grande Guerre,' probably in part because the familiar name of Marshal Philippe Pétain is linked to Verdun. The authors of a recent study of one of 1914's battles—Charleroi, 21–23 August—agree: it is as though Charleroi was erased from the public's memory, they write, by the long years of trench warfare that followed it.[3]

The theme of violence is not new, of course. For too long the somewhat artificial divide between *contrainte* and *consentement*—between fear of military discipline forcing men to fight and a sort of blood-lust—has dominated French writing about the First World War. The French historians associated with the Historial of Péronne (Somme) in northern France have written much on the topic of violence.[4] Moreover, Michael Neiberg's *Dance of the Furies* published in 2011 shows how 'the hatreds unleashed by the war as early as the end of its first month' made possible the continuance of the war, over more than four more years, until final victory or defeat.[5] Neiberg's timescale (August-December 1914) and geographical compass (Europe) are much greater than Cabanes's more limited focus, but both recount, for example the assassination of the Socialist leader, Jean Jaurès, and discuss tales of atrocities.

In seeking to "faire revivre des passions, des espérances, des illusions que les historiens oublient souvent" (p. 10), Cabanes has used sources that he claims have been unexploited until now, and he cites prefects' reports, police reports and private correspondence and diaries. This claim is somewhat inflated, given the pioneering work of Jean-Jacques Becker, whom Cabanes acknowledges as one of his first

teachers. Like Becker, Cabanes has used prefects' reports (the F7 series in the Archives nationales) and the archives of the Paris Préfecture de police, but the former's work on how the French entered the war is cited only a handful of times. It must be said, however, that Becker describes his work as a "contribution to the study of public opinion," whereas Cabanes is more interested in private opinion.[6] Much of Cabanes's source material, apart from the police and prefects' reports, is published journals, letters and diaries, some of it contemporaneous. Unfortunately there is no bibliography, which forces readers, who come upon a reference that they may wish to chase up, to scroll back through all the 'op.cit.'s in the endnotes to find the first mention with its bibliographical details, in cases where they are not lucky enough to hit on the first reference.

Despite this distraction, *Août 1914* is elegantly and persuasively written. It provides a short and very readable account of the first month of the war. It ends with an effective image of the Charleroi battlefield, where so many had received their *baptême du feu* in August 1914. The line reached on 11 November 1918, when the armistice putting an end to the fighting was signed, ran a little way south of that battlefield. As the surviving soldiers began marching again to follow the retreating German armies, they reached the valley of the river Sambre with its thousands of wooden crosses marking the provisional tombs of those who had been killed in that battle. The next day, all the little crosses had been decorated "de petites cocardes tricolores" (p. 212).

NOTES

[1] Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2009), p. 10.

[2] Bruno Cabanes, *La Victoire endeuillée: La sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918-1920* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004).

[3] Damien Baldin et Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien, *Charleroi 21-23 août 1914* (Paris: Tallandier, 2012), p. 11.

[4] For example, Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la Grande guerre: humanitaire et culture de guerre, 1914-1918: populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre* (Paris: Noësis, 1998); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *L'enfant de l'ennemi, 1914-1918: viol, avortement, infanticide pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Aubier, 1995) and *Cinq deuils de guerre, 1914-1918* (Paris: Noësis, 2001). Together they have published *14-18, retrouver la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), translated into English as *14-18, Understanding the Great War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

[5] Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the outbreak of World War I* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 8.

[6] Jean-Jacques Becker, *Comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1977), title page; p.10.

Elizabeth Greenhalgh
University of New South Wales Australia, Canberra
e.greenhalgh@adfa.edu.au

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of

publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172