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Leonard V. Smith, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, and Annette Becker, *France and the Great War 1914-1918. New Approaches to European History*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. vi + 202 pp. Plates, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$58.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0- 521-66176-5; \$21.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-521-66631-7.

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English-speaking students of the First World War have long understood that war primarily through the lens of British experience: the powerful poetry and anguished memoirs of disillusioned British soldiers have, by and large, shaped our collective understanding of the war, its horrors, and its social and cultural significance. These sources, published in the 1920s, created a powerful and enduring “myth of the Great War” (to borrow Samuel Hynes’s phrase) according to which young men, raised in the tradition of English pluck and glorious valor, went to war armed with ideals and enthusiasm that were forever destroyed on the killing fields of the Western Front.[1] Those who witnessed the war firsthand were, the story goes, forever alienated from the old men at home who spouted pious platitudes and from the young women who distributed white feathers to all able-bodied men not in uniform.

Ultimately, the hapless Tommy stayed the course not because he still believed in the cause of king and country, not because he thought of Germany as a threat to world civilization, but because to do otherwise would be to betray the men with whom he fought. Front-line soldiers thus became a community of embittered souls forever set apart from those who knew nothing of combat. One of the great contributions of *France and the Great War 1914-1918* is to demonstrate that, however plausible this retrospective interpretation of the Great War might (or might not) be for Britain, it does not hold for France. The long-suffering *poilus*— subjected to the same miserable conditions of daily life as their British brothers-in-arms, sacrificed in even greater numbers in battles every bit as inconclusive, and strained to the breaking-point in 1917—nonetheless continued to fight because they, like the civilians at home with whom they remained in contact, believed in the national cause. Consent, not coercion, animated France from 1914 through 1918.

Without eschewing the value of a comparative approach to the study of the First World War, the authors contend, rightly enough, that “the comparative study of World War I must rest on a thorough knowledge of just what is being compared” (p. 6). And to date there has been no truly comprehensive survey in English of France during the First World War. Important monographs, such as Jean-Jacques Becker’s *The Great War and the French People* or Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau’s *Men at War* have helped us understand much about civilian and combatant France, respectively, but only *France and the Great War 1914-1918* merges these two narratives.[2] Co-authored by three of the most accomplished scholars of the Great War writing today, Leonard V. Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau, and Annette Becker, the book is enriched by each author’s particular expertise and by their shared desire to understand the French experience of the war in all its complexity. Defined as a work of synthesis rather than as a monograph based on new archival research, it draws upon Smith’s masterful understanding of how French troops shaped the outcome of battles and the war by repeatedly negotiating the limits of command authority;

upon Audoin-Rouzeau's ground-breaking analysis of front-line sentiment as articulated in trench newspapers and, more recently, his interest in mourning and commemoration; and upon Becker's deep knowledge of wartime culture in the nation writ large and of wartime misery in those *départements* that fell under German occupation.

Produced by the Cambridge University Press series "New Approaches to European History," it addresses two quite different audiences simultaneously, usually with considerable success. Intended as a college-level textbook, the book introduces to readers unfamiliar with the subject matter such essential topics as the diplomatic, political, and military circumstances of pre-war Europe; the process by which the war of movement evolved into the stagnation of trench warfare; and the social, economic, and cultural mobilization of the home front. But it also speaks to experts in the field by engaging some of the most controverted scholarly debates about the war. Challenging those who think of combatants of the First World War exclusively as victims who felt a greater empathy for their enemy combatants than for their civilian compatriots, the authors argue that French soldiers, like their civilian associates, believed that their cause was just because in their judgment a German victory would constitute a challenge to civilization itself.^[3] Nonetheless, the sacrifices wrought by this war were so many and so debilitating that genuine victory was, in the final analysis, unattainable. Mourning so deeply marked postwar France that recovery, whether physical, economic, or psychological, was impossible. The First World War was the "Great War" for France because it shaped the political, economic, and social structure of the nation for the rest of the twentieth century.

Written with verve and punctuated by a dry wit, *France and the Great War* is especially successful when it discusses (in the first and third chapters) the politics, diplomacy, and military dimensions of prewar and wartime France. On the much debated question of who was responsible for the outbreak of war in 1914, the authors acknowledge that the Franco-Russian alliance of 1894 contributed to German unease and, consequently, to the formulation of the Schlieffen Plan that would bring damage and destruction to Belgium and northern France in August 1914. In the final analysis, however, they rightly argue that France confronted a war in 1914 that they had not sought, but were determined not to lose. This was not going to be the Franco-Prussian War, part two. But it was a near thing, to be sure.

The second half of the first chapter provides a vivid account of the military near-catastrophe that France courted between August 2 and September 9, 1914. Without doubt, France could have lost the war in this critical six week period, because the French General Staff, and Joffre in particular, made critical strategic errors. But France did not lose in 1914, as it had in 1870, in part because the Germans made mistakes, too (the Schlieffen Plan left German troops exhausted and ill-prepared to offset a French counter-attack) and in part because French national resolve was much more potent in 1914 than it had been in 1870 or would be in 1940. Bloodied and battle-weary though they were, French troops stood their ground on the Marne, much to the amazement of the German High Command.

The French were stronger in 1914 than their enemies had predicted and than many subsequent historians have appreciated. As chapter three, "The Front and the Soldiers' War," makes clear, however, this strength was sorely taxed in the ensuing years of fruitless battle and front-line misery. Given that the soldiers' experience on the Western Front was physically and psychologically wretched at best and horrific at worst, and that the strategies of the day were, until the summer of 1918, singularly ineffective at bringing victory to France, why did the men-in-arms endure? Challenging those who explain combatants' willingness to stay the course in terms of loyalty to their primary unit alone, *France and the Great War* insists upon a more multifaceted interpretation. Without doubt, loyalty to comrades mattered, but the authors contend that "it would be a mistake to explain the tenacity of the French army in the Great War solely by primary groups" (p. 100). In their judgment, French troops stayed in the line because they were intent on seeing the invaded territories of their homeland liberated from enemy control, because they remained connected to their families whom they were fighting to protect, and

because they perceived in Germany a despised and barbaric enemy whose victory would constitute a threat to civilization itself.

The French decision to persevere, whatever the costs, was reinforced by a “war culture” that defined what was at stake and thereby gave meaning to the war and the sacrifices that it exacted. Chapter two turns its attention to the home front and analyzes four different facets of how civilian France experienced the war, with an eye to understanding the character of this war culture. While the four separate parts of this chapter—the experience of occupied France, intellectual and cultural mobilization, economic and social mobilization, and grief and mourning—present four sharply focused snapshots of wartime France, they do not come together in an entirely satisfying panoramic explanation of why France held out. In part, this is because the authors seem to be addressing different audiences and different scholarly agendas at one and the same time. Thus, in the section devoted to the bleak existence of prisoners-of-war and civilians in the occupied provinces, the authors make the entirely legitimate argument that in the aftermath of the war, when the plight of the front-line soldier enjoyed exclusive recognition, the suffering of those who fell outside this community of the trenches faded from national consciousness. To correct this act of collective amnesia and to prove that the Great War was indeed a “total war,” the authors demonstrate that civilians in occupied France, who labored under harsh, punitive conditions, were deprived of basic necessities and the psychological solace that would have come from contact with the interior and their men in uniform. However important it is to remember the suffering of these unfortunate civilians, this evidence does not really help us understand why the rest of France fought, for it looks not so much at how the occupied provinces figured in the collective imagination of non-occupied France, as it does at how the occupation was experienced from within. It is unclear how the suffering of the occupied civilian population—real though it was—contributed to the national resolve to stay the course.

To be sure, atrocity stories, both real and invented, emerging from the early weeks of the war figured prominently in the writings and speeches of eminent intellectuals (as John Horne and Alan Kramer have demonstrated so persuasively) and thus contributed to the nation’s desire to reclaim the invaded territories, restore the territorial integrity of France, and resist what they took to be the onslaught of barbarism.[4] But it is not clear that the subsequent suffering of those who had the misfortune to live under German rule mattered very much to the war culture of unoccupied France. Nor, indeed, is it entirely clear that the efforts of intellectuals who did so much to shape this war culture penetrated as deeply into the national domain as the authors suggest. I have no doubt that the efforts of scholars and writers were important to the ways in which educated French citizens (in uniform and out of it) conceived of the war, but I wonder if the villages of rural France were touched at all by the efforts of France’s intellectual elite. The prefect of the Dordogne, for example, observed, based on reports compiled by his sub-prefects, that the peasantry in his department hardly ever read newspapers, and were thus little influenced by discussions in the national press.[5] Nor did they watch newsreels. So, if they supported the war because they believed in the righteousness of the national war effort and not just because they stood to gain from the economic boon of higher prices for agricultural produce, then their “war culture” presumably came from other sources.

To argue that the French consented to the war is not, the authors insist, to say that they happily accepted defeat in battle, the deaths of comrades and loved ones, the deluded, misguided confidence of the High Command, or the economic inequities that characterized civilian France by the end of 1916. Consent should not be confused with complacency, as 1917 proved. The great originality of Smith’s previous work, and of the argument presented here, is that the mutinies of 1917 (like the strikes of that year, too) do not undermine the thesis of national consent but reinforce it. Arguing that “the French army mutinies of 1917 became one of the Great War’s most extraordinary exercises in patriotism” (p. 126), the authors insist that the front-line soldiers who defied military authority in the aftermath of the failed Nivelle Offensive rejected the strategy of the High Command, but they did not reject the war as such. They did not call for an immediate peace at any cost, even though peace was, understandably

enough, a goal they all shared. When push came to shove, they would accept peace only if it restored the territorial integrity of the homeland. And that could not happen without victory. In 1917, front-line French troops, who had the power to lose the war, chose not to exercise that option.

At the same time that 1917 tested—but did not dissolve—the will of the front-line soldiers to stay the course, it strained civilian resolve, too. In the nation's towns and cities high prices, inadequate supplies, and war weariness gave rise to strikes and public discontent. I would take issue, however, with the authors when they suggest that the crisis of the homefront barely touched rural France: "Peasants did well, providing they could keep the farms going with so many men in uniform" (p. 133). The records of the postal control office show that rural France, and especially those departments most hard hit by the severe winter of 1916-17, was strained to the breaking point, too. Fields were left fallow; military requisitioning of cattle when combined with inadequate fodder crops undermined the peasantry's ability to work the land; the quality of basic food commodities deteriorated significantly, and medical care was almost non-existent. Without doubt, peasants could sell their surplus crops at high prices, but by 1917 there was precious little surplus to sell. And, indeed, there was little desire to sell to city-dwellers, disparaged somewhat but not entirely unfairly as shirkers and profiteers who lived the high life while the men of rural France died at the front. Why rural France held out remains an under-developed facet of this otherwise rich and perceptive analysis.

The final chapter, "The Ambiguous Victory and its Aftermath," carries the narrative through the end of the military campaign, with a well-paced summary of the German offensive of the spring and the Allied counter-offensive that brought the war to an end. But if Germany's defeat was incomplete (as it surely was), so, too, was France's victory. When the authors address the immediate aftermath of the war they concentrate their attention on how pervasive mourning, caused by the deaths of 1.3 million men, informed the ways in which the nation ascribed meaning to the war. To this end, they argue that "the Armistice, commemorative practice, and the French influence over the Versailles treaty reflect different aspects of the same cultural process—the gradual evolution of French war culture into a culture of mass mourning" (p. 176). This argument challenges us to reconceptualize such familiar components of political and diplomatic history as the Treaty of Versailles within the framework of the new cultural history. Original and insightful though it is, it works more successfully as a volley in the historiographical debates about the nature and meaning of the Great War than as a component of a textbook survey of the war.

What is curiously missing from this analytical approach is anything more than a passing reference to the economic devastation caused by the war—whether calculated in terms of accumulated national debt, a seriously depreciated currency, or destruction of the national infrastructure. Is it too old-fashioned to suggest that the hard economic realities that confronted France in 1919 were as important to the peace-making process as the psychological trauma that afflicted a nation devastated by the loss of more than a million men? Or to suggest that the reparations clauses were as concerned with forcing Germany to pay real money for real physical damages, as they were with articulating France's unsatiated animosity to its enemy? Scholars of twentieth-century French history know well enough the economic damage left by the war, but students coming to the subject for the first time need to know this, too, and yet *France and the Great War* does not provide this essential information. In this regard and on this topic, it speaks more effectively to other scholars than to students new to the subject matter.

In the final analysis, *France and the Great War* makes the case that the Great War shaped the subsequent history of France as surely as France shaped the Great War. Mourning marked every family; bitter political animosities that came to the surface in 1917 contributed ultimately to the decline of the Third Republic; and the totalization of war, that made civilians as well as soldiers the targets of military aggression, became a tragic hallmark of twentieth-century European life. Equally importantly, *France and the Great War* makes evident how French resolve in the face of unparalleled adversity shaped the history of the Great War. Given that any analysis of the First World War that leaves France on the

side-lines is fundamentally inadequate, one of the great merits of *France and the Great War 1914-1918* is that it puts France back, front and center, into the picture.

NOTES

[1] Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1991), 439.

[2] Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (New York and Oxford: Berg Publishers Ltd., 1985); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, trans. Helen McPhail (Providence and Oxford: Berg Publishers Ltd., 1992).

[3] For a recent articulation of the argument that French troops were more likely to feel sympathy for the enemy soldier on the other side of No Man's Land than with their own compatriots behind the lines, see Frédéric Rousseau, *La Guerre censurée: Une histoire des combattants européens de 14-18* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999).

[4] John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

[5] Archives Départementales de la Dordogne 1M82. Monthly report of the Prefect of the Dordogne, 27 December 1917.

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