

Back from the Trenches

Pierre PURSEIGLE

In his recent book devoted to the historiographical debate over the Great War, Christophe Prochasson explores the ongoing renegotiation of the forms of patriotic consent, as well as the blurring of boundaries between true and false and the manner in which the Republic was put to the test by the conflict.

Reviewed: Christophe Prochasson, *14-18. Retours d'expériences*, Paris, Tallandier, 2008.

Ninety years after the 1918 armistice, the present state of the publishing world testifies to the public's fascination with the history of the First World War. Faced with the mass of scholarly works, art books and testimonies of all sorts on offer from bookstores and publishing houses, even the attentive reader might easily overlook this little volume published by Tallandier. Historians and well-informed amateurs would nevertheless be well-advised to extract it from the mountain of publications dealing with the Great War. In *14-18. Retours d'expériences*, Christophe Prochasson, a Professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) and specialist of intellectual history, offers a collection of essays and articles that constitutes an excellent contribution to the historiographical debate.

The work brings together ten studies that have previously appeared in scholarly journals or edited volumes, supplemented by a new chapter (Chapter IV: "Sur les atrocités allemandes"), an introduction and an epilogue. The book is divided into three parts. The first is devoted to the progress made by the cultural history of the Great War as well as well as difficulties to which it

has given rise. Unsurprisingly, recent debates and historiographical controversies take up the lion's share of attention here. This is followed by a second part devoted to the question of war testimony. In the third and final part of the book, the author returns to the scene of his first battles: the intellectual history of the First World War.

Consent

How did the French hold out? This simple and haunting question remains at the origin and heart of a debate that is no longer exclusively a matter for historians. The consent/constraint relationship nevertheless remains central to a controversy that has over the past ten years embroiled the small world of First World War historians. Eager to force a breach in what they see as the unjustified dominance of the cultural history promoted by the research center of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre*, a team of scholars have come together in the CRID 14-18 to steadfastly reject any interpretation that emphasizes the patriotic consent of French society to the First World War. Their criticism has particularly targeted the notion of a "culture of war" as it has been elaborated by Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker. According to the latter, French consent to the war was particularly expressed by an over-investment in the nation and supported by a unified system of representations inseparable from the violence sustained – and inflicted – on the battlefield.

This controversy, which in December broke out afresh in *La Vie des Idées*, has ruffled more than a few academic feathers without advancing in any historiographically tangible way. Although it has already been the object of several articles, the controversy is still awaiting the historian who will clarify the institutional, political and media issues that are at stake in it¹.

Three brief remarks nevertheless seem to be called for. The opposing parties would be well-advised to look beyond national frontiers where – let's be honest about it – the spectacle of yet another *franco-français* quarrel leaves onlookers perplexed and somewhat amused. No one can seriously deny that Europeans consented to the War. Indeed, it is there that all the tragedy of

¹ J.M. Winter, "P vs C: The Still Burning Anger when the French Talk of the First World War", *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 June 2006; L.V. Smith, "The 'Culture de guerre' and French Historiography of the Great War of 1914-1918", *History Compass*, 5: (6), 2007, pp. 1967-1979; P. Purseigle, "A Very French Debate: The 1914-1918 'War Culture'", *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 1: (1), 2008, pp. 9-14.

the Great War is to be found. The analysis of the mechanisms of national mobilization is certainly not exhausted by invoking a “culture of war”, the critical uses of which are not the privilege of the CRID alone. What’s more, references to an unlikely “consent paradigm” or a just as unlikely “Péronne school” obviously fail to recognize the diversity of approaches that are pursued within the research center of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre*, to say nothing of the disagreements that are cordially accepted as a matter of course among the scholars associated with it.

The undeserved and ill-founded reproaches that have oddly been made against Jean-Yves Le Naour of course betray the properly existential nature of the controversy that gave birth to the CRID. This collective would perhaps be deprived of its reason for existence should the controversy subside. The CRID has deployed its media and institutional strategies with remarkable talent and success. The stance adopted by François Buton, André Loez, Nicolas Mariot and Philippe Olivera is nevertheless surprising. It would seem that historians of the Great War owe them nothing less than the discovery of social sciences and sociological categories!

There is nevertheless a great deal to be said concerning the limits of an approach that denounces the notion of consent in veiled terms as nothing more than a fig leaf behind which quivers a timid neoliberalism. Yet in the English-speaking world, a whole section of historic sociology has established that it is useless to oppose contractual deliberation and social conflict in this way. Charles Tilly, in particular, has shown that the emergence of modern citizenship is on the contrary inseparable from statist constructions born of and for war and that conflictuality is not just one of its forms but, indeed, a necessary condition of democratic deliberation².

In *Retours d'expérience*, Christophe Prochasson, who is associated with the work of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre*, endeavors – not always successfully – to extricate himself from the polemic in order to revive what is an obviously legitimate debate. In particular, he quite rightly underscores the plural character of the culture of war and the “multiple and sometimes contradictory facets” (p. 64) of a system of representations that was forged in response to the

² C. Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990*, Oxford, Cambridge (MA), Basil Blackwell, 1990, p. 269; C. Tilly, “Citizenship, Identity, and Social History”, in C. Tilly (ed.), *Citizenship, Identity, and Social History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp.1-17; C. Tilly, *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650-2000*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

“new conditions imposed by the war” (p. 58). By reexamining the initial analysis of Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker³, Prochasson rediscovers the nuances obscured by the paradigmatic intentions of their *14-18: Retrouver la guerre*. He thus reminds us that consent to the war was in no way synonymous with patriotic enthusiasm – confronted with polemical amalgams, it is today still necessary to insist on this distinction despite the fact that Jean-Jacques Becker had established it as early as 1977⁴.

Taking note of the complexity and ambivalence inherent to consent to the war, Prochasson defines consent as “a negotiated acceptance of war, not [as] enthusiastic and unequivocal support” for it (p. 128)⁵. Here, the analysis draws on excellent work by such young scholars as Charles Ridel and Emmanuel Saint Fuscien, who obviously concern themselves less with academic posturing than with making progress in the field of history⁶. The author could in any case have found ample support for his argument in the history of the workers’ movement. Jean-Louis Robert thus brilliantly showed how Parisian workers (though these are mentioned on p. 126) reconciled militancy, labor union mobilization and consent to national defense⁷. Prochasson ultimately leaves it to Léon Werth to define the program of a history of consent to the war that is attentive to forms of mobilization as well as mechanisms of domination: “One sees no trace of popular will in the war. But one sees the marks of popular obedience everywhere”⁸.

Pursuing the program defined by Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, Prochasson very rightly warns against the risks associated with the emergence of a historical paradigm like that of the “culture of war”:

³ S. Audoin-Rouzeau, “Violence et consentement: la ‘culture de guerre’ du premier conflit mondial”, in J.-P. Rioux and J.-F. Sirinelli, *Pour une histoire culturelle*, Paris, Seuil, 1997, pp. 251-270.

⁴ J.-J. Becker, *1914: Comment les français sont entrés dans la guerre*, Paris, Presses de la FNSP, 1977.

⁵ Prochasson here crosses paths with the comparative history of social mobilizations. See the perspective developed in P. Purseigle, “Warfare and Belligerence. Approaches to the First World War”, in P. Purseigle (ed.), *Warfare and Belligerence: Perspectives in First World War Studies*, Boston, Leiden, Brill, 2005, pp.1-37.

⁶ C. Ridel, *Les Embusqués*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2007; E. Saint Fuscien, *Obéissance et autorité dans l’armée française de 1890 à la fin de la Première guerre mondiale: discours et pratiques*, thèse de doctorat, EHESS, 2008.

⁷ J.-L. Robert, *Ouvriers et mouvement ouvrier parisiens pendant la Grande Guerre et l’immédiat après-guerre*, doctorat d’Etat, Université de Paris I – Sorbonne, 1989 and *Les Ouvriers, la Patrie, et la révolution. Paris, 1914-1919*, Paris, Annales littéraires de Besançon/Les Belles Lettres, 1995.

⁸ *Journal du Peuple*, April 3, 1918.

“One of the greatest risks confronting a movement of intellectual renewal is to get bogged down in repetition, to institutionalize novelty and to make a sort of professional specialty out of it at the risk of transforming it into a dogma – in short, to abandon oneself to the blindness of all the orthodoxies and all the routines that one had precisely wanted to combat” (p. 67).

Two constitutive elements of this paradigm would nevertheless have merited a more extensive critical development. First, the repeated insistence on the fundamental character of the culture of war leads to under-estimation of the extent of long-term evolutions such as the nationalization of the European masses and the consolidation of state domination. Next, the systematic use of the notion of “brutalization”, borrowed from George Mosse, takes little account of the criticisms that have been made of the comparative enterprise pursued by this historian of fascism⁹. Of course, the nature of the present work hardly lends itself to this type of discussion, which, in any case, is peripheral to the author’s work. Yet the chapter devoted to German atrocities, which draws on John Horne and Alan Kramer’s exemplary study¹⁰, is in my view a reminder of just how necessary it is to maintain an analytical distinction between the levels of violence attained as early as August 1914 and the social and cultural construction of this wartime violence. Indeed, this distinction protects us from the risk of historiographical prolepsis to which a rather mechanical transposition of Mosse’s analysis otherwise leads¹¹.

In many respects, Prochasson’s discussion suffers from the weaknesses of a French historiography that has despite recent progress somewhat neglected conventional but nevertheless essential questions. The structural and intellectual weaknesses of French military history, in particular, appear flagrant when contrasted with the dynamism of British, American and German scholars. The tactical, operational and logistic aspects of the French military’s experience of the Great War remain poorly understood in comparison. Similarly, the social history of the First World War has also been relatively neglected at a time when the analysis of social conflicts and industrial relations appears more relevant than ever. As Prochasson reminds us, finally, political history lags behind in France. The work of Fabienne Bock and Thierry Bonzon is truly

⁹ G. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990. See Antoine Prost’s review, “The Impact of War on French and German Political Cultures”, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1994, pp. 209-217.

¹⁰ J. Horne, A. Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2001.

¹¹ P. Purseigle, *Warfare and Belligerence*, *op. cit.*

exceptional in this regard¹². The history of the state and of French public services in wartime still largely remains to be written.

Testimony

The second part of the work pursues and deepens the debate provoked by the question of consent. Organized around the question of testimony and its uses, it allows the non-specialist reader to address the experience of war from the truly innovative perspective first developed by Prochasson and Anne Rasmussen in a co-authored work that appeared in 2004¹³. Indeed, for the author, “the state of war can be analyzed as a regime of uncertainty that affects everyone” (p. 69). Extending the pioneering analyses of Marc Bloch, Prochasson emphasizes that “the state of belligerence [...] imposes another regime on reason and perception” (p. 94). He thereby invites historians to treat the wartime lie as a historical object in its own right. Indeed, in his view, all uses, distortions and manipulations of information in wartime reveal an essential dimension of the experience of the conflict. One thus fully grasps the virtues of a form of historical criticism that the notions of propaganda and “eyewash” (“*bourrage de crane*”) are far from exhausting. The methodological and epistemological stakes of this cultural history of the Great War here appear clearly: what’s at stake here in the question of testimony is how to manage historical proof.

Yet these remarks are not only of interest to cultural historians. The analysis of the epistolary system established during the conflict demonstrates the importance of managing correspondence, an indispensable sociopolitical concern of belligerent societies. The attention brought to correspondence and the relations between the front lines and the home front provides the outlines of a topography of consent during the war, with negotiated consent found not only on the front lines but also within the family home conceived as an intimate space redefined and preserved in spite of the state of war¹⁴. Finally, the study of war testimony, correspondence and literature allow the traditional opposition between the frontlines and the home front to be

¹² F. Bock, “L’exubérance de l’Etat en France de 1914 à 1918” in *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’Histoire*, no. 3, 1984, pp.41-51, and *Un parlementarisme de guerre, 1914-1919*, Paris, Belin, 2002 ; T. Bonzon, *Les Assemblées locales parisiennes et leur politique sociale pendant la Grande Guerre (1912-1919)*, University of Paris I, 1999.

¹³ C. Prochasson and A. Rasmussen (eds.), *Vrai et faux dans la Grande Guerre*, Paris, La Découverte, 2004.

¹⁴ Emmanuelle Cronier’s examination of soldiers on leave represents a remarkable study of the relations between the frontlines and the home front. See E. Cronier, *L’Echappé belle: les permissionnaires du front à Paris pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Paris, Belin, 2009.

rethought and the importance of women's words to be reevaluated as a result. Here, too, these remarks underscore the lateness of French historiography which, despite the pioneering work of Michelle Perrot and Françoise Thébaud, has yet to grasp the progress that has been made thanks to the history of gender and sexuality¹⁵.

Wartime discourse – the cement of belligerent communities weakened by distance – is delicate material for the historian. While questions of method are inseparable from interpretive debates, the historiographical controversy has too often mistaken critique for mobilization of testimony. Refusing the “dictatorship of testimony that one sometimes tries to impose” on historians (p. 110), Prochasson seeks to resituate the critical work of Jean-Norton Cru within the very testimonial literature that the veteran had wished to evaluate (chapters VI and VIII). The work of Norton Cru is thus judged in the light of the reflections of another veteran of the Great War, Marc Bloch. Indeed, for Prochasson, “the conflict slowed the movement towards openness and modernization in historical scholarship” (p. 208).

Experimentation

It thus stands to reason that the analysis of the experience of the war should lead to a study of the mechanisms by which knowledge is created about, and during, the conflict. Wartime experimentation here fully takes its place at the heart of the experience of the conflict. Appropriating the English expression “home front”, which he defines in an excessively narrow, domestic manner, Prochasson mentions the emergence of a third front – “that of the mind” – also situated behind the lines. Evoking intellectual mobilizations and scholarly practices, the author is obviously on familiar ground. Little surprise, then, that the argument taken as a whole is particularly solid. The reader nevertheless wonders about the analytical relevance of this “third front”. Indeed, was the involvement of intellectuals and scholars at the “front behind the lines”¹⁶ really so different from other mobilizations based on professional *habitus*?

¹⁵ One cannot help but be astonished by the lack of attention that has been given in France to Susan Grayzel's excellent comparative study: S.R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War*, Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

¹⁶ On the “front behind the lines”, see P. Purseigle, “1914-1918: Les combats de l'arrière. Etude compare des mobilisations sociales en France et en Grande-Bretagne” in A. Duménil, N. Beaupré, C. Ingrao (eds.), *Expériences de guerre. 1914-1945*, Paris, A.Viénot, 2004, pp.131-151.

“In all belligerent nations, the war was made by one and all. Everyone did what they could to put their resources and abilities at the disposal of the nation. Intellectuals were no different. Only a handful resisted” (p. 304).

Far from neglecting this “handful” of men and women, Prochasson insists on the importance that the First World War assumes in this regard due to the unprecedented mobilization of intellectuals as well as the emergence of a “new figure in the history of intellectual engagement: the dissident” (p. 287). The author thus offers in this work a coherent collection of diverse studies in which he surveys familiar terrain and opens up a series of leads that are obviously worth pursuing. Nevertheless, one cannot help but be astonished that a co-author of the monumental *Dictionnaire critique de la République*¹⁷ should give such little attention to the Republic.

Of course, the Republic is not completely absent from the author’s reflections. Prochasson poses the question of the relationship between belligerence and the nature of the political regime in these terms: “How can a liberal regime deprived of the weapon of police terror obtain a contribution from its citizens when the latter do not in exchange benefit from its immediate effects?” (p. 153). By approaching the question of consent to the “blood tax” in this way, Prochasson sketches the contours of a history of wartime citizenship. These questions, which are familiar to historians of Great Britain – once again inspired by gender history¹⁸ – serve to outline a research program capable of reconciling the artificially opposed social and cultural histories of the conflict. Indeed, forms of acceptance, like forms of resistance to the state, are both sides of the same coin.

“By saying that patriotism is for each of us ultimately an expression of one’s desire for justice, I do not believe that I am diminishing it”. Written in 1914, this remark by Georges Siméon (quoted p. 132) echoes the feeling of those who, in 1917 and 1918, reaffirmed the conditions and limits of their involvement in the war through strike and mutiny¹⁹. Too often

¹⁷ V. Duclert and C. Prochasson (eds.), *Dictionnaire critique de la République*, Paris, Flammarion, 2002.

¹⁸ N.F. Gullace, “The Blood of Our Sons”, *Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War*, New York, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002.

¹⁹ J. Horne, “‘L’impôt du sang’: Republican Rhetoric and Industrial Warfare in France, 1914-1918”, *Social History*, 14, 2, 1989, pp. 201-223; L.V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Division During World War I*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994.

ignored in the clash of academic arms, the ethical and political dimensions of belligerence only fully divulge themselves to those who situate social conflicts at the heart of processes of mobilization. When all is said and done, victory belonged to the regimes where the political culture and institutional architecture allowed the moral and material resources of the nation to be put to the service of the war effort while absorbing the social tensions born of national defense²⁰.

Having read this book, historians of the Great War will be grateful to Christophe Prochasson for having brought together these important but till now scattered studies. The resulting volume represents a valuable contribution to the historiographical debate and an invitation to move beyond what have become excessively familiar positions.

Translated from the French by Ethan Rundell

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²⁰ J.M. Winter and J.-L. Robert (eds.), *Capital Cities at War: London, Paris, Berlin, 1914-1919*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997; J.M. Winter and J.-L. Robert (eds.), *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.