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GERHARD HIRSCHFELD, Gerd Krumeich, and IRINA RENZ, in conjunction with MARKUS PÖHLMANN (eds.), *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg* (2nd revised edn.; Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2004), 1,002 pp. ISBN 3 506 73913 1. EUR 78.00

In German historiography the First World War has been completely overshadowed by the Second, not least because of the latter’s criminal and destructive dimension: the responsibility so much clearer, the loss of lives, both military and civilian, so much greater. More importantly, however, the period of the two wars is now interpreted as one long historical epoch: the second Thirty Years War, a kind of late nuclear fusion caused by German unification under Prussian leadership on the battlefield (1871). The Fischer controversy some forty years ago about Germany’s irresponsible risk-taking and annexationist ambitions in 1914 has long since been settled. This was the last time the First World War was brought to public attention in Germany. The unleashing of the war, the main issue hitherto, and the continuity of German war aims in the two conflagrations are no longer in dispute. One tends to refer these days to the great seminal catastrophe, a term borrowed from George Kennan, and to think that everything has been said and settled. In his polemical stance against appeasement Churchill called the Second World War ‘the unnecessary war’ in order to give the impression that it could have been avoided had he been at the helm. He would have been reluctant to say the same of the previous war.

In Britain and France, once Germany’s bitter enemies and now its close allies within the European Union, the First World War still figures as the Great War /Grande Guerre, an assessment which appears fully justified in view of the historical fallout. Their casualty figures were so much higher than during the Second World War and the break with the past was more dramatic: the end of the Pax Britannica and the decline of Europe’s leadership on the world stage. Of all the great empires that tumbled in its wake—Tsarist Russia, the Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the German Kaiserreich—the last named had perhaps the least awesome fall.

In many ways a fresh look at this cataclysm encompassing the role of the major powers was overdue. The new *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*, initiated by Gerhard Hirschfeld and edited with the help of close colleagues, is therefore a most welcome arrival on the historio-
graphical scene. No place could be more fitting for the launch of such an enterprise than the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte in Stuttgart, previously known as Weltkriegsbücherei and founded as early as 1921 for the purpose of setting Germany’s record straight.

In retrospect, and judged from this specific location, it is safe to say that no country has moved further from its original point of view. Moreover, it is astonishing that a small institute with only a skeleton staff should have been prepared to tackle such a major undertaking, enlisting the support of no fewer than 146 contributors from fifteen countries. Under these circumstances it was a sensible decision to set a limit of one volume at an affordable price. A few reviewers have taken exception to the fact that not all contributions operate on the same model. However, any editor knows that it is an impossible task to persuade authors from different countries to sing from exactly the same hymn sheet all the time.

How did the editors respond to the challenge of compressing whole libraries of accumulated knowledge into one volume? The contents are divided into two major parts, one-third narrative subdivided into surveys on ‘States’, ‘War and Society’, ‘Strategy’ (and related questions), and ‘Historiography’, each comprising up to half a dozen essays, and two-thirds encyclopaedia listing more than 650 entries followed by a detailed chronology. This part is greatly enhanced by a substantial amount of visual material collected by the third editor, Irina Renz — photographs, cartoons, official documents, and maps — which will recommend the book to the public as well as university libraries. The international character of the work is nowhere more clearly expressed than in the eight articles on the major players (Germany, Belgium, France, Britain, Austria–Hungary, Italy, Russia, and the USA) all written by native historians except for the one on Russia and that on Britain, written by an expatriate American at Cambridge. Smaller powers are adequately dealt with in the lexical part.

The late Wolfgang J. Mommsen presents a most depressing picture of Germany at war: a government taken hostage by rabid nationalism bordering on hysteria, delusions of grandeur on all sides (except for the left) intent on the demand for extensive annexations and, finally, the trauma of unexpected defeat and revolution. Only the soldiers, it seems, had a realistic notion of the horrors of trench warfare, but no voice to stop the madness. No historian of the former enemy states could be more outspoken in his verdict on why and
how that war was fought and lost by his country. The terms dominating the public discourse are revealing: in Germany defence of the fatherland called for Burgfrieden (castle precincts rather than truce); in France, as Jean-Jaques Becker tells us, it was the Union Sacrée of the two ideological camps, republican and laiciste versus conservative and Catholic. As a result a kind of war culture cast its spell over the country, only to give way at a later stage to a deep yearning for peace. As in Germany, army command and government were at loggerheads, though with a different outcome: government and parliament trying to uphold civil liberties emerged victorious from this struggle. In the years to come awareness of the colossal sacrifices overshadowed the final victory.

Of all the major powers Britain was least prepared to wage a continental war. In a country with no draft at the beginning of the war, recruitment was a special challenge, according to Jay Winter. By the end of 1914 one million men had volunteered; after the Somme disaster another 700,000 signed up. The upper and middle classes were over-represented with Oxford and Cambridge taking the heaviest toll. It may be due to these statistics, the ‘lost generation’, that the Great War is nowhere more intensely remembered than in Britain. In three major battles of the war, beginning with the Somme (July–November 1916), the British lost a million men, dead, wounded, or missing. However, for the rest of the population life expectancy increased thanks to a more pro-active state and better food supplies for the working class. Other results of the war are well known: the decline of the Liberals, the rise of Labour, and loss of financial supremacy to the USA.

The rest of the surveys by country follow a more conventional approach with an emphasis on politics, economics, and strategy. In the case of Russia it was the autocratic systems which failed to cope with the war situation, with getting the army into shape and feeding a starving urban population. US politics were greatly influenced by big business which favoured those powers whose ports were not blockaded. Eventually the war came to a standstill before the full weight of American intervention could make itself felt and enable President Wilson to secure a lasting peace. One conclusion seems to be inescapable yet difficult to grasp for the Germans in both world wars: in times of war democracies get their act together much more efficiently than autocratic regimes.
The most innovative section which makes most use of new research is that on ‘society at war’, with essays on women, youth, the working classes, soldiers, scholars, literature, religion, propaganda, medicine, and economics. The approach is clearly comparative and leaves its mark on the lexical section in the choice of entries later on. More than any other, this section justifies the editors’ claim that they tackle their subject from an international perspective. Not all of the authors—most of the exceptions are German—are able to fulfil this promise in equal measure.

Ute Daniel’s essay on women, mainly their recruitment into the labour force, and Dick Geary’s on the working classes in Europe are perhaps the most substantial and wide-ranging. The workers and their representatives toed the line at the beginning, only to become the reluctant vanguard of the revolution towards the end of the war. It is depressing to see that there were hardly any independent minds among scholars and theologians. Annette Becker, who analyses the syncretism of religious and patriotic sentiment, would have been well advised to explore the role of the churches. War sermons are any agnostic’s treasure trove for misguided advice to the faithful. It is quite impossible to do equal justice to all of these essays dealing with issues and topics which clearly show that ‘total war’ is more than military action.

The subject of the third section is what one would expect from a book like this in the first place: how the war came about (Jost Dülfier), the extension from European to world war (Stig Förster), the strategy of the opposing alliances (Wilhelm Deist for Berlin/Vienna and Hew Strachan for the Entente), international law and war crimes (Alan Kramer), and the conclusion of hostilities (Klaus Schwabe). These essays generally summarize previous research. The final and shortest chapter is devoted to the extensive historiography on the First World War. Here two of the three editors, Gerhard Hirschfeld and Gerd Krumeich, sketch the development from mere documentation to interpretation, from military to social history, from the national to the international perspective. Whether the research by Fritz Klein, although substantial, merits a separate essay on the GDR is a matter of opinion. On the German side ceaseless attempts to disprove German war guilt as laid down in the Versailles Treaty proved to be a major obstacle to real progress. It was not until Fritz Fischer’s groundbreaking (though not in a methodical sense) work on the Reich’s war
aims that German historiography joined the mainstream of interna-
tional research. By that time, however, French and Anglo-Saxon his-
torians had already advanced into new areas of research: ‘war from
below’, the ‘shaping of collective mentalities’, and ‘war culture’.

This is a review of an encyclopaedia. Whatever has been said so
far, the many entries on a diversity of topics are the bargain offers,
from ‘Aberglauben’, ‘Adria’, ‘Henri Alain-Fournier’ (French war
poet) to ‘Zweifrontenkrieg’, ‘Arnold Zweig’ (German writer), and
‘Zweite Internationale’. Anything the reader might have found miss-
ing in the narrative part is likely to turn up in the encyclopaedia sec-
tion, for instance, the colonial war or statistics about war losses. As
one would expect, names of individuals (generals, politicians,
authors, artists), battlefields, and other locations, and special terms
(‘Dicke Berta’, ‘Franktireur’, ‘Tank’ etc.) dominate this part of the
book. But there are also many entries which reflect a more modern
interest, such as ‘Fronttheater’, ‘Gerücht’, ‘Hunger’, ‘Ikonographie’,
‘Judenzählung’, ‘Kochbuch’, ‘Mohnblume’, ‘Nibelungentreue’ (special
bonding between Germans and Austrians), ‘Soldatenverbrüderung’
(fraternization), ‘Ungeziefer’ etc. In former times such topics would
have been dismissed as irrelevant; not so today, with our increased
interest in everyday life at war. It is mainly for its first-class textbook
quality that this encyclopaedia should be on every librarian’s pur-
cashing list; in Germany it probably already is in view of its nomin-
ation as Book of the Year. After all, it does no harm for the ordinary
schoolboy to delve into the madness of trench warfare.

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