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Alan G. V. Simmonds. *Britain and World War One.* London: Routledge, 2012. 336 pp. $115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-45538-1; $35.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-45539-8.

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An Ideal Introduction

For unexplained reasons, the title of this book is a misnomer, since the book does not cover military operations or diplomatic activities. As the author, Alan G. V. Simmonds, himself indicates in the first sentence of his introduction, he undertook the arduous task of writing a history of Britain's home front during the First World War. Why the chosen title was not *Britain and the World War One Home Front*, only the publishers know. Prospective buyers should be aware of this severe restriction in the scope and ambition of the book, which however does not detract from its high intrinsic qualities as a monograph on the home front.

The introduction usefully begins with a survey of the existing literature, with Simmonds duly paying tribute to Arthur Marwick's pioneering work in the field (*The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* [1965]), somewhat questioned by Gerard DeGroot (*Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War*) thirty years later (1996) and radically so by Adrian Gregory in 2008 (*The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*). Thus the author indirectly answers the inevitable doubts–was another book on Britain's home front during the First World War really needed?–by indicating that "*Britain and World War One* endeavors to wriggle between the broad-based approach of DeGroot and the intensive analysis offered by Gregory" (p. 3).

The opening chapter, "Summer's End," provides a state-of-the art synthesis of the many interpretations given to the prewar period (since what used to be called the Boer War and is now referred to as the South African War or the War in South Africa), incorrectly dubbed the "Edwardian" era as Simmonds reminds us (though he uses the expression himself). This provides the pattern for the rest of the book: the events selected by the author (as in all history books) are discussed in the light of what previous authors have had to say about them, with copious references at the end of each chapter, including up-to-date details of articles in journals and chapters in books. As such, this approach provides an ideal introduction to the historical literature on internal politics and the home front, 1902-18. The chapter ends on a question that is not a rhetorical one–it is in fact the central question that continues to dominate the historiography of the war: "Had the outbreak of war concealed rather than cured the political, industrial, and social tensions of Edwardian Britain?" (p. 28).

Chapter 2, "For King and Country," starts with the reminder that "the people's fervor of August 1914 has been exaggerated" while at the same time "the absence of popular resistance to the conflict suggests that many Britons accepted the war as necessary and, by implication, endorsed the politicians' resolution" (p. 36). Simmonds thus neatly points out the difficulty of assessing the real degree of popular support, which in turn dictated the degree of individual willingness to participate in the collective war effort. Exceptionally, the chapter makes a foray into the military field, to discuss the three successive phases in the move to provide the British Army with sufficient men: the rush to enlist in 1914 (here again with an excellent examination of the various explanations offered by previous authors); the propaganda of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee to induce young men to join; and finally the introduction of conscription, with the attendant uneasiness inside the Liberal Party (and practical problems of skilled manpower in the munitions factories), when the first two failed to provide the required numbers.

In "The Industry of Conflict" (chapter 3), the reader will find an excellent panorama of all the technical, industrial, and administrative problems that beset the government. Basically, the objective was simple: to modernize and rationalize production in order to obtain the maximal and optimal output in spite of limitations, like the shortage of manpower and the scarcity of some raw

materials (e.g., saltpeter) or essential semifinished products (e.g., high-quality glass for optical equipment) which used to be imported from the United States or Germany. The main stumbling block was–predictably–the human factor. Modern mass production methods implied deskilling and "dilution," i.e., the replacement of skilled by unskilled labor, sometimes women, *horribile dictu.* Even if one left out the psychological dimension–the fear of losing one's painfully obtained status (through a long apprenticeship) in the pecking order of modern industry–there was the obvious, immediate financial dimension, since "the rate for the job" depended on the perceived degree of skill that it required, a complex scale that had been fixed, like the "demarcations" between the various skilled trades, as a result of an arduous process of collective bargaining in past decades. To reverse all this overnight was to invite trouble. Besides giving all the relevant figures (a hard-going, but inevitable part of the demonstration), Simmonds shows how David Lloyd George, in charge of munitions before he became prime minister in December 1916, probably made a mistake when he bought the support of the top engineering union, guaranteeing that this elite would keep its hard-won privileges, and neglected the feelings and interests of workers lower down in the subtle hierarchy of factory labor–all this leading to what he calls, in what is perhaps an understatement, "Lloyd George's turbulent relationship with Britain's labor movement" (p. 87).

This is logically followed by "The Eclipse of Party Government" (chapter 4), in which Simmonds examines the pros and cons of coalition–as they were seen at the time and as they now appear, almost a century later, both from the point of view of the national interest and from that of the three competing, rather than really cooperating, political parties. Naturally, he also discusses the personalities and their conflicts, foremost among them the split between Herbert Asquith and Lloyd George, which left him "politically homeless" (p. 117). Simmonds concludes his chapter on a positive note, arguing that "the experience of wartime coalition government had taught both politicians and the public the value of tying the parties together to see out a national emergency." This is of course a highly contentious way of looking at things, the more so as he extends this "value" to "the 1931 economic crisis, as well as the new war of 1939" (p. 119): few historians have found any virtues in Ramsay MacDonald's September 1931 National Government, ostensibly formed to save the pound, devalued only a few weeks later; and perhaps fewer still in Neville Chamberlain's "business as usual" September 1939-May 1940 "National" Coalition (which unlike Winston Churchill's War Coalition excluded Labour); and none of their respective supporters would go so far as to maintain that either MacDonald in 1931 or Chamberlain in 1939 saw out the national emergency.

The intrigues of high politics are followed by the status of women in the state, as producers and as citizens (chapter 5, "Workplace Women"). Once again, one can start from deceptively simple remarks: this status as citizens was almost nonexistent in 1914–and by 1918 it was almost equal to that of male Britons. Needless to say, the difficulty resides in the "almost": no one can deny the progress–but this is very much a case of the "half-empty or half-full" conundrum. Incredibly, Simmonds tells us, nobody knows "how many women entered the national wartime workforce" and if one wants to include those who were in domestic service, the problem is compounded because we do not have reliable statistics there, either (p. 129). Still, he tries to unravel the complex reality of female employment from the figures that we do have, destroying two myths: the total rise was less than is generally imagined, since there were a lot of transfers from declining industries to growing and/or better-paid ones (2,178,600 working in industrial trades in 1914; 2,970,000 in July 1918); and if one considers specific trades, "the ordnance industry was not the largest employer of women" (with 247,000 employees in July 1918)–it was "banking, finance and commerce" (955,000). An excellent table of "women employed in non-industrial sectors" tells us that in July 1914 those in "banking, finance and commerce" were only 505,500–in other words the total almost doubled during the war (table 5.1, p. 136). The rise in "banking & finance" alone was even more spectacular, at least in relative terms: from 9,500 to 75,000. The reason is not hard to see. These two fields of relatively well-paid "black-coated" employment had largely remained a male preserve until the war. Simmonds however concentrates on factory work and workers: the pay, lower than that of men, but higher than that of domestic servants; the lack of Trade Union organization; working conditions, sometimes appalling; the "sisterly" (or otherwise) atmosphere; the continued mistrust of women, despite undeniable demonstrations of their skills and abilities, even in unexpected areas like oxyacetylene welding; and above all the general patronizing attitude that continued to prevail, notably, in the press. Interestingly, Simmonds reminds us, after the war the press accused women of "selfishly keeping jobs meant for returning soldiers." Such attitudes allow him to conclude the chapter on an ambivalent note: "So much had changed; but so much remained the same" (p. 153).

Much the same conclusions hold good for "Society,

Family and Welfare," the theme of chapter 6. On the one hand, one can point to the rise in wages, but on the other, one can point to the rise in prices and rents. The chapter is full of contradictory figures, or at least figures that can lead to contradictory interpretations: an excellent example is to be found in table 6.1 (p. 175), "Retail prices and wages in the United Kingdom, 1914-1918." From an index of 100 in 1914 for all three fields, the indications give us in 1918, 203 for "Retail prices," 180 for "Average weekly wage rates," and 212 for "Average weekly wage earnings." The pessimist's interpretation is that prices rose faster than wages; the optimist's one just the reverse, and both would be correct. Simply, the demand for labor ensured that most workers had a longer week, possibly with plenty of overtime opportunities. So even if the rate per hour was lower than in 1914 in terms of purchasing power, the gap was more than compensated for by the fatter pay packet due to working longer hours. Conversely, freezing the rents, as the government did in 1915, may appear as a prima facie favorable measure for the laboring classes, but in the long run it turns against them because this is a disincentive to invest in new construction, thus making the law of supply and demand work further against them. Government authorities were aware that "they were in a tight corner," and they avoided confrontation with the populace by accelerating state intervention in the field through subsidized housing, which as we know was to become a permanent feature of postwar Britain thanks to the Housing Act of 1919 (p. 183).

State intervention is again in prominence in chapter 7, "Food, Farming and Rural Society." Food supplies were a crucial problem, since, as the author reminds us, "British agriculture had long lost its capacity to feed the nation," with the stark fact that "over 70 per cent of the wheat and 60 per cent of meat consumed came from overseas" (p. 193). The chapter tells us how the government was slowly and reluctantly converted to the obvious solution: subsidizing farmers to induce them to plow up fields with a low fertility. But more farmhands would be needed at a time when there was a severe labor shortage. The obvious answer was again resorting to female labor. It is a pity here that Simmonds does not make comparisons with continental Europe, showing British cultural particularism. In Germany or France, the farms were run by women whose husbands and sons were on the front, but British farmers would hire no women unless forced by the government, as indicated in a remarkable official document from 1918 which warned that Hampshire farmers were ready "'to take on anything that comes along, boys, old men, cripples, mentally deficient, criminals, or anything else … they will not have women"' (p. 200). For their part, British women considered farm work as "demeaning and unfeminine" (p. 200)–again in total contrast to continental European farm wives, who considered milking the cows as their preserve, for instance. Anyway, urban employment offered better wages. The fact that Britain was an island, an asset for defense, was a liability for its imports of food, vulnerable to the new weapon and the U-boats, and competing for limited shipping space with the munitions and essential raw materials bought from the United States and the empire. Britain was never starved into surrender (as the admiralty feared at some stage), but, as Simmonds puts it, "by 1918, [food] queues were threatening public order and civilian morale" (p. 202). His description of the muddled and reluctant planning of state intervention, with its combination of "government controls, price guarantees, subsidized wages, controlled rents and soaring profits" on the supply side (the farmers) and price controls and finally rationing on the demand side (the public), shows that it must in fact have been a close shave (p. 211).

The Liberals, always suspicious of state intervention, were also ill at ease with the alien (even worse, Roman Catholic) notion of "propaganda," the theme of chapter 8. Yet Asquith and his friends came to consider it as a necessary evil, for the recruitment drive; for the manipulation of information; and for the morale-boosting insistence on the "atrocities" of the "Huns," even when their action was legitimate, as in the case of the "martyr" Edith Cavell. From December 1916, Lloyd George gave a new impetus to British propaganda, with the creation of a Department of Information and, for the home front, a National War Aims Committee, enlisting the support of his good friends, the press lords. The chapter includes an interesting discussion of the government's exploration of the possibilities of film as a propaganda weapon, in which Lord Beaverbrook believed–and perhaps an even more fascinating one on the way the National War Aims Committee infiltrated pacifist movements and used the information thus gathered to disseminate black propaganda to discredit them. Yet Simmonds concludes on the effectiveness of all this with an undertone of doubt: "more as a case made than a case proven" since the public tended to take this government "information" with a pinch of salt (p. 248).

"War Culture" (chapter 9) is in a way a prolongation of this discussion of the representation of the war. Readers familiar with the Imperial War Museum and its numerous paintings of the First World War will at first be surprised by Simmonds's mention of names that one never sees there. This is because he reminds us of the

"popular" success–encouraged by many of the elites–of idealized and romantic scenes like imagined cavalry attacks in the old style, which never took place in the British Army in the Great War. The paintings were reproduced on postcards and magazine covers–in other words, they were the archetype of low-brow culture. But Simmonds unexpectedly and audaciously turns the tables on high-brow critics who continue to dismiss them as genuine forms of art: "they shared some common ground with the modernists, for they also relied on art as a concept, as intellectual interpretation rather than optical clarity" (p. 256). Still, he concludes in his section on painting, "perhaps it was … the modernists [those whose works now hang in the Imperial War Museum] who had the final say. Our view of the First World War, as pointless death, mass slaughter and trench warfare, is their view" (p. 260). The sections devoted to classical music, popular and intellectual literature (especially the poetry of the war), and the theater and popular music show the same attempt at being fair to all, avoiding the patronizing approach that would preclude a holistic view of all forms of cultural expression reflecting the preoccupations of the participants. Indeed he introduces an immensely useful caveat when he warns his more intellectual readers of today against forgetting that "the voices of the *avante garde* [sic] were only dimly heard" at the time (p. 277).

The final chapter, "After Rejoicing," classically deals with the aftermath of the war: its political consequences (i.e., the prorogation of the Lloyd George coalition); the intractable problems of demobilization if the soldiers, clamoring for immediate repatriation, were not to return only to join the dole queue; the "Red" agitation, especially in Glasgow; and the important new legislation on health, housing, unemployment insurance, and education followed by the economy measures of the Geddes "Axe," largely dictated by the weight of the debt. It ends on a discussion of the problems of memory and remembrance among the bereaved. These survivors–chief among them the former members of the home front–Simmonds argues as a final conclusion, never benefited from the same attention and admiration as their counterparts during the Second World War, hence the appeal in his last sentence: "Perhaps it is time that *this* wartime generation was brought in from the cold" (p. 305).

On top of the text proper, the book features very informative "boxes" on a grey background devoted to a number of subjects which run across the themes treated in the various chapters: "Manpower," "Budgets," "[Women's] Land Army," "Sex and Morality," and "Drink." The choice of illustrations is also excellent, as the photographs (most of them uncommon ones) are closely related to the text. The only regret is that the quality of the reproductions on ordinary paper cannot match that of separate plates on glossy paper in the existing state of printing techniques. Another regret, in a different area, is the absence of a general bibliography at the end of the book. Inevitably, many publications are quoted several times, and the notes have an abundance of "*op. cit.*," which often means a lot of inconvenient searching before one finds the first occurrence and full reference. A recapitulation of the works quoted would have made the book far more user-friendly and enhanced its undeniable value as a tool for further research into the First World War.

Still, the claim on the back cover, "*Britain and World War One* is essential reading for all students and interested lay readers of the First World War," is fully substantiated. The book, written in jargon-free language easily accessible to undergraduates (and with meticulous proofreading) is unreservedly recommended for purchase in all university libraries and it should henceforth figure on all reading lists on British society and the First World War.

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