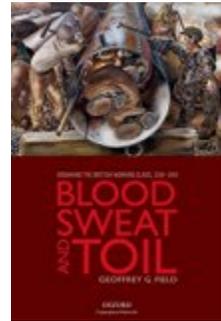


Geoffrey G. Field. *Blood, Sweat, and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class, 1939-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 496 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-960411-1.

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A Working Class at War

One of the many perverse ironies of modern war is that wartime states tend to rally combatant societies through a language of common citizenship and sacrifice, while at the same time there are few endeavors that better highlight social inequality than the trial of protracted industrial conflict. Geoffrey G. Field, in his engaging and deftly written study of Great Britain during the Second World War, explores this juxtaposition through a variety of lenses. The war years, he observes, were “characterized by a constant tension or counterpoint between rhetoric that stressed the nation’s unity and solidarity and perpetual reminders of society’s divisions and inequalities” (p. 183).

Field intends this book to help write class, and particularly the working class, back into the history of Britain during World War Two. “Among the few advantages to working so slowly,” he self-deprecatingly notes, is that other historians have begun to do the same thing (p. 3). While the book intervenes in a number of historiographical debates, it is at heart a synthesis, and a very good one at that.

Readers seeking a dense methodological exploration of class will be disappointed. Instead, Field focuses, on the one hand, on the lived experiences of working-class Britons during the war years and, on the other hand, on the emerging narrative of a “People’s War.” Field argues that the war strengthened class identity among working Britons, both by creating a “national” working class free of the social and regional divisions of the interwar pe-

riod and by fostering a “nationalized” body of workers engaged in the war effort.

By far the strongest parts of this book are Field’s thematic chapters, which examine the experience of working-class Britons of both genders as they experienced evacuations, air raids, factory work, military service, and social life in wartime. The life histories from which Field draws, taken from primary and secondary sources, are engaging and recounted in lively prose. Urban evacuations in 1939 brought together people of different regions and classes, with sometimes disastrous results. “Many of the upper classes have come into contact with workers for the first time,” observed a doctor who worked with evacuees “and have been horrified” (p. 36). By the end of the Blitz in mid-1941, those same urban workers, now captured in Bill Brandt’s photos or Henry Moore’s sketches, became the center of a new “national landscape” in which they and the city of London came to symbolize British defiance and courage (p. 70).

Field points out that the notion of war that leveled class distinctions was a product of wartime rhetoric and thick postwar gloss of patriotic commemoration. In the years that followed 1945, wartime moral panic about female sexuality, youth behavior, or the collapse of the traditional family were obscured by the overwhelming narrative of a people united in the war effort who then created a more egalitarian country in the war’s wake. The war, Field argues, moved a social democratic reform agenda onto the center of the political stage. By

the end of the conflict, British elites had become much more aware of the need for meaningful reform, while the working class and its representatives became considerably more assertive in their collective power.

Field accomplishes this wide-ranging analysis without sacrificing clear and often witty prose. His chapter on the army and military life is a terrific example of the social history of war. He parses the remarkable career of the fictional Colonel Blimp and army efforts to confront the more obnoxious class-ridden thinking that pervaded some sectors of the officer corps. He also presents in vivid detail the strains of separation in a population where most left school early and struggled with letter writing. When describing anxieties among servicemen about their wives and girlfriends at home, who lived in close proximity to American and other Allied troops, Field remarks that “esteem for the Red Army was not unrelated to the fact that they were not on British soil” (p. 257).

I have some minor quibbles with the book, but the complaints I have only highlight how thorough the whole work is. Field could have included more about the role of the empire and imperial participation in the war effort. He might have written more about facets of demobilization other than the drawdown of troops. The writing, which is so engaging for the first two-thirds of the book, flags considerably as the focus turns to formal politics at the end. Perhaps most critically, and presumably through no fault of the author, there is no bibliography. This reviewer mourns the impending passing of the academic bibliography, particularly for works that offer such a broad and useful overview of the state of the field.

This book is probably too long for undergraduates, though there are a number of chapters that could stand reasonably well on their own. For anyone seriously engaged in the study of wartime Britain, Field’s work will likely be read for years to come.

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