This book of essays, the second in a series of five, continues to compare and contrast the paths that the United States and Germany took through what might be termed the century of total war, 1861-1945. This work specifically covers the period from the end of the German wars of unification to the beginning of World War I. The essays are loosely organized into four sections. The first, consisting of two essays, takes a methodological and historiographical approach to the concept of total war to plumb the concept’s strengths and weaknesses. The second, eight essays, looks at “War and Society.” The third, six essays, covers “Memory and Anticipation: War and Culture.” Finally, the fourth, four essays, looks at the “Experience of War.”

The purpose of the book is explained and examined in the leading essay. Roger Chickering’s “Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept” leaps feet-first into an analysis of how the concept of total war has been historiographically deployed. He finds there to be fundamental problems with its use. Chickering argues that the rise of total war has become a “master narrative” that locks military historians into a interpretive straitjacket and forces them to ignore nuances in the development of war in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

His argument is strong and well-founded, most particularly when he calls for a concerted attempt to reach a fundamental definition of total war. Chickering makes a number of curative suggestions which are usefully provocative while also remaining admirably restrained. There are, nonetheless, some flaws. His analysis of the previous historiography presents perhaps too much of a black-and-white portrait. I would argue that previous historians have been more aware of the subtleties than Chickering allows. [1]

Chickering could also widen his view a trifle by looking at the reasons why historians had such an attraction to the master narrative of total war. Did larger political and social concerns affect them? How did the Cold War influence the reception and dissemination of a unified framework of total war? Did Soviet historians have a markedly different take on the evolution of war? Given that we are concerning ourselves with the metahistory of a master narrative, should we not then examine the historians themselves? A follow-up essay to Chickering, examining the works of the dominant military historians of the post-war world (Howard, Keegan, Kennedy, et al) would do much to reinforce Chickering’s main points. In the end, however, these are minor caveats. Chickering’s essay is a call to arms that we should heed.

I have the space to examine only a few of the essays that follow. They range widely among topics and methods. We are treated to a sterling example of traditional history by Stig Forster, “Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871-1914,” which deftly rewrites the traditional conception of what kind of war the German generals thought they were getting in 1914. At the other end of the methodological spectrum, Thomas Rohkramer paints an insightful picture of how generational tensions within German veterans’ and reservists’ associations led the younger generation, lacking experience in war, to feel the need to prove itself. Nor is the United States neglected. David Trask offers a well-reasoned analysis of how American leaders viewed future wars in “Military Imagination in the United States, 1815-1917,” though his acceptance of 1914 as a fundamental dividing line may

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[1]
be a bit uncritical. John Whiteclay Chambers III covers a similar topic when he examines “The American Debate on Modern War, 1871-1914,” if through the lens of more popular sources.

But though the variation is large, there remain some general criticisms that apply across the board. First, the conjunction of Germany and America does not always seem concretely justified. As Chickering and Stig Forster point out in the introduction, there were some “difficulties in comparison” between the two countries (p.1). Especially in the era dealt with in this volume, America simply does not seem as central to the total war equation as it does in World War II. Derek S. Linton’s essay “Preparing German Youth for War,” cries out for a comparative look at British youth or, even more critically, French youth. The essays that deal with the results and the memory-construction that followed the Franco-German war of 1870-1 positively beg for a concurrent analysis of French myth-making.[2] It is perhaps an unfair point to criticize the book for something it is avowedly not attempting. Nonetheless, by the end of the book, I found myself thinking of the French and British as the ghosts at the banquet, uninvited but unavoidable.

My second criticism also concerns an omission. Absent throughout many of the essays, and this time culpably so, are the words of the people of Germany and the U.S.A., most critically the working classes. They did, after all, make up the great majority of people of the two countries. They did, later on, make up the great majority of soldiers in both World Wars. It is not an overstatement to see the near-universal popular support of the World Wars as one of the central factors making them “total.” Without such implicit and explicit support, both military and economic mobilization would have been impossible. Until we fully explore its roots, we understand rather less about the wars of the twentieth century than we think. This has not been an uncommon neglect in the military historiography. In my particular subfield of British military history, for example, the working classes have frequently been assigned ideas, thoughts, and viewpoints – whether patriotic or Marxist – by overly-solicitous historians. As a result, we still do not really understand what underlay the popular support in Britain for World War I, a support that translated most noticeably into millions of volunteers.

Some of the same problems exist here. The emphasis for the most part is on propagation, rather than reception. Essays such as Alfred Kelly’s “Whose War? Whose Nation? Tensions in the Memory of the Franco-German War of 1870-1871,” Derek Linton’s "Preparing German Youth for War," and Jean Quartaert’s “Mobilizing Philanthropy in the Service of War: Female Rituals of Care in the New Germany” examine the creation and dissemination of a particular set of values without looking at how those values were received.[3] Instead, they assume that the values were accepted uncritically. This may be a reasonable assumption, but until we examine the words of the workers themselves, we cannot and should not jump to it. There are exceptions to this. David MacLeod’s “Socializing American Youth to Be Citizen-Soldiers” nicely interweaves the beliefs of both the young men and the elders inculcating them. This insightful needs to be the rule, rather than the exception.

But this is too gloomy a note on which to end the review. Both the project, the conferences, and the volumes produced are immensely valuable. The authors and organizers have undertaken the immense task of deepening our understanding of modern war. In that, they deserve our support and, indeed, our participation.

Notes

[1]. Russell Weigley, for example, acknowledges and explores some of the issues that concern Chickering in his The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.


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