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Comments

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14-18: Understanding the Great War. By Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker. (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002. Pp. 280. Notes, index. \$24.00.)

In *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker meditate on the current state of historiography on the First World War and propose an original synthesis for understanding how the war transformed the private and public lives of Europeans. The authors, having pioneered a new direction in the French cultural history of the war through previous studies that focused on trench journalism, children, religion, and spirituality, are well positioned to ponder the possible ways that anthropology and psychology suggest

new avenues of inquiry for students of the war. This book was originally published in 2000 under the title *14-18, retrouver la Guerre*. Written primarily for a French-speaking audience, the authors focus their critique on French studies of the war and freely acknowledge that some of the directions for research they suggest are drawn from groundbreaking monographs on the British and German armies, many of which are well known to English-speaking readers. All students of the war will nonetheless benefit from the thought-provoking analysis and synthesis that Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker offer.

The authors begin with the premise that the unprecedented violence, both along the Western Front and against civilian populations, remains the defining characteristic of the war. Secondly, they argue that the immediate postwar revulsion against the war and the subsequent elevation to near-heroic stature of the few mutineers and anti-war activists has diminished appreciation for the widespread popular support that greeted the war. Intense hatred of the enemy, universally perceived as a lesser and barbaric race, kept support for the war strong, even after the mass slaughter became common knowledge. Finally, the war turned European society into a community of mourning. With nearly every family touched in some way by a soldier's death, grief, sorrow, and remembrance inevitably shaped the private lives of millions of individuals during this period.

This book challenges our traditional definition of the war's victims by including civilians who lived in occupied territories under often-brutal German rule. Ironically, the authors note, the Versailles Treaty made specific reference to these civilians by using their lost property as the justification for demanding reparation payments from Germany. Once the treaty was signed, however, the frenzy of monument-building and commemoration recognized only soldiers' suffering as legitimate, obscuring the heavy cost that civilians had paid during the war.

Telling the story of the war without actually discussing warfare, the authors argue, is equally misguided. While the strategic and political aspects of pivotal battles clearly matter, the authors assert that it is as important to appreciate the unprecedented violence that the war unleashed on the battlefield. "Surprising as it may seem," the authors write, "when we compare the average number of daily casualties in 1914-18 to the average number" in the Second World War, "the mortality rate is almost always higher for the First" (p. 22).

Reflecting the authors' specific research interests, some topics, such as the rise of spirituality and religious fervor during the war, get more attention than necessary in such a short, comprehensive over-

view of societal changes engendered by the war. In addition, those looking for full inclusion of the American war experience will be disappointed. Overall, however, *14-18* provides a fresh and provocative look at the cultural history of the war. By suggesting new avenues for future research and an original paradigm for understanding the cultural significance of the war, this book breaks important new ground. The authors succeed in their goal of inspiring readers to reflect anew on how total war shaped the twentieth century.

Jennifer D. Keene

Keene is associate professor of history at the University of Redlands in southern California. She is the author of Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America (2002) and is currently completing a book on African American and West African soldiers' experiences during the First World War.