



Introduction

France's Great War from the Edge

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World War I has been studied extensively by historians of France and for good reason. Waging the first industrial war required mobilizing all of France's resources, whether military, political, economic, cultural, or imperial. Politicians from the left and the right joined forces to govern the country, priests and seminarians were drafted into the army, factories were retooled to produce armaments and other war material, and women and children were enlisted to do their part. So too were colonial subjects. More than 500,000 men from France's empire fought in Europe for the French Army, while another 200,000 colonial subjects labored in France's wartime workplaces. The human losses were staggering and the political, economic, and cultural reverberations long-lasting, both in the metropole and in the colonies. More than 1.3 million French soldiers and an estimated 71,000 colonial soldiers lost their lives, leaving behind approximately 1.1 million war orphans and 600,000 war widows.

Historical analysis of the war and its ramifications has evolved significantly, reflecting broader trends in the historical profession. The war's recent centennial occasioned still more books, articles, and special issues of journals. It also prompted leading scholars of the war to reflect on the historiography of World War I and its effect on France. Surveying the field in 2016, Leonard Smith, Martha Hanna, and John Horne outlined a progression from political and diplomatic concerns during the early post-1919 decades, to the adoption of approaches from social and labor history during the 1970s and 1980s and from cultural history in the 1990s and 2000s. Both articles noted contemporary explorations of experience.¹ The war's impact on women and gender roles and identities began to be tackled in earnest in the 1980s and continues to generate interest today.² A similar historiographical trajectory was identified by George Robb and W. Brian Newsome in their introduction to the *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* special issue on World War I in 2016.³ Three of that issue's six articles explored aspects of Germany's harsh occupation of large swathes of northeastern France.

This forum on World War I, which originated as a session at the Western Society for French History Conference in November 2018, shifts attention



away from the much-studied Western Front and the more recently analyzed zones of occupation to peoples and campaigns long considered to be situated at the war's periphery. Two of the forum's three articles are set in colonial North Africa, reflecting the prominence of imperial history among historians of France, including those who study World War I.⁴ But these articles also intersect with the internationalization of the war that has so marked recent global scholarship on the conflict.⁵ A war that has long been recognized as the crucible of the modern world in the West is now seen as having been transformative in Asia too.⁶

The most ambitious effort to analyze World War I as a global event is Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela's 2014 edited volume, *Empires at War: 1911–1923*. In the book's introduction, Gerwarth and Manela argued for shifting the war's historical frame of analysis from European nation-states to European empires. Previous histories of the war, they maintained, had been too Eurocentric, too focused on the Western Front.⁷ European empires had to be brought from the edge to the center of historical studies of World War I.

But it was not simply the war's geographical parameters that needed expanding. So too, Gerwarth and Manela contended, did its temporal boundaries. Instead of being confined to the slightly more than four years between August 1914 and November 1918, the war should be viewed as "the epicentre of a cycle of armed imperial conflict." The cycle began in 1911, when Italians attacked territories in North Africa and the Mediterranean that had previously been controlled by the Ottoman Empire, and concluded in 1923, with the end of the "massive waves of violence" triggered by the war and its imperial aftereffects.⁸

Viewing the beginnings of World War I from this vantage point draws our attention to Morocco, where the forum opens. As Richard Fogarty noted in his contribution to *Empires at War*, Morocco lay at the heart of Franco-German imperial rivalries and tensions in the years leading up to the formal declaration of war in early August 1914.⁹ German attempts to establish influence in the sultanate clashed repeatedly with French determination to monopolize control. Franco-German tensions reached their peak after Germany dispatched a gun boat to Agadir in June 1911. Europe appeared on the brink of war.¹⁰

By November 1911, tensions had calmed sufficiently so that France and Germany could reach an agreement over Morocco. French control of Morocco was accepted by Germany in return for the transfer to Germany of French territory in the Congo and the protection of German business interests in Morocco.¹¹ Morocco became a protectorate of France in the spring of 1912. French maneuvers in Morocco inspired Italy to attack the Ottoman Empire and send troops into Libya. As so often happened during European empire building, the declaration of control did not translate into actual control of all claimed territory. The French continued their military campaign to defeat armed resistance and conquer Morocco, even after war broke out in Europe in August 1914.

As Caroline Campbell demonstrates in her multilayered analysis of a key November 1914 battle in the war in Morocco, General Lyautey, Morocco's conqueror and first resident-general, inextricably linked French colonial warfare in Morocco to the war being waged on the Western Front. The article's first half reconstructs the Battle of El Herri, rescuing it from the neglect of historians of France. Hostilities commenced at dawn on 13 November, when the French shelled the Amazigh, or Berber, encampment at El Herri. The shelling terrorized residents and warned Amazigh fighters of the attack, prompting them to slip out of the encampment. Upon entering the encampment, French soldiers trained heavy machine-gun fire on civilian inhabitants, hunted down those in hiding, and massacred 400 Amazigh, mostly civilians. This massacre, Campbell notes, was only one instance of the French military's repeated refusal to honor the Hague conventions of 1899 and 1907 during its colonial military campaigns.

Campbell pays careful attention to the battle's gender and sexual dimensions, foregrounding issues that have, until recently, been overlooked by historians. Pointing to the vague, possessive, and inhumane language used in French accounts of the battle, Campbell points out that French soldiers almost certainly committed acts of sexual violence against Amazigh women. What else to make of Lieutenant Pichon's description of women's reactions to French soldiers entering their tents, "They waited motionless for the conquerors to do as they wished"? Campbell connects this instance of sexual violence to recent scholarly re-evaluations of the use of sexual violence in colonial warfare, reminding us that earlier generations of military historians tended to gloss over the thinly veiled language used by Pichon and others.

Campbell also details how French soldiers deliberately undermined the honor—and, therefore, manhood—of the Amazigh leader Moha ou Hammou by invading his tent and kidnapping two of his wives. This "dishonourable" French conduct so enraged Zaian fighters that, along with a 5,000-strong contingent of soldiers drawn from diverse tribes, they furiously set upon the retreating French soldiers. Half of the detachment and 90 percent of the men's officers, including the commanding officer, Colonel Laverdure, were killed. Nonetheless, the Amazigh did not pursue their assault to the city of Knenifra, allowing the French to maintain control of the crucial commercial and transportation hub. The French thus escaped military disaster.

The second part of Campbell article's explicitly connects the Battle of El Herri to the war being waged in Europe through an examination of Lyautey's attempts to manage and politicize the battle's memory. In the battle's aftermath, Lyautey and his supporters constructed an official narrative that departed from realities on the ground. The battle was cast as an unmitigated military disaster and transformed into a weapon to be deployed in the debates over military strategy then raging in Paris. At fault in El Herri, Lyautey insisted, was not only Laverdure, but the entire school of military strategy that he represented. In Lyautey's telling, the Battle of El Herri became a cautionary tale of what could happen if his approach to military

strategy were not followed. Not only would French control in Morocco be imperiled, so too would French success on the Western Front.

Chris Rominger's article shifts the forum's focus east to Tunisia, a French protectorate after 1881, and to the "Jewish question" that emerged in Tunisia late in the war and became more urgent in the immediate post-1918 period. Tunisian Jews, a diverse group constituting around 60,000 of Tunisia's roughly two million people, were exempted from military conscription, unlike their better-studied Algerian counterparts.¹² This exemption was a holdover from precolonial policy in Tunisia. Still, between 500 and 2,000 Tunisian Jews volunteered for service in the French Army, a fact highlighted by many Tunisian Jews during debates over the "Jewish question."

As Richard Fogarty and others have demonstrated, participation in the French war effort had a series of far-reaching consequences for colonial societies, peoples, and spaces.¹³ In Tunisia, the final years of the war and the immediate postwar period saw numerous attacks on Jews and confrontations between Jewish and Muslim Tunisians, Algerians, and Europeans. Soldiers on leave from the Western Front figured prominently among those involved in the disturbances. Rominger probes the rhetoric of the diverse North African participants, as well as of the French officials investigating and recording their stories. Puncturing French tropes of Muslim-Jewish antagonism and sectarianism, Rominger reveals how the position of Jews in Tunisia eroded under French control. It was anti-Semitic French policies and attitudes, not any "traditional" Muslim antagonism toward Jews, that created the "Jewish question" in Tunisia.

Rominger deftly inserts Tunisian Jews into the "Wilsonian moment" identified and analyzed by Erez Manela in his book on the subject.¹⁴ As Manela demonstrated, US President Wilson's end-of-war rhetoric of self-determination inspired a sense of hope and possibility among colonized, marginalized, and stateless people around the globe.¹⁵ When the victorious powers gathered in Paris to make peace and remake the world order, anti-colonial leaders did what they could to put their case to world leaders, especially President Wilson. They drafted petitions and declarations, sent representatives to Paris, and launched public campaigns. Ho Chi Minh rented a morning suit in anticipation of a meeting with Wilson. The moment, it seemed, had created fresh opportunities for the self-determination and advancement of colonial peoples.

While Manela tracked the Wilsonian moment primarily in Egypt, India, China, and Korea, Rominger illustrates how Tunisian Jews were inspired by the possibilities created by both Wilson's rhetoric and the peacemaking process. Tunisian Jews were also moved to action by the violence and anti-Semitism directed toward them at home. Rominger illustrates how they sought to marshal Wilson's rhetoric to their own ends, sometimes appealing directly to Wilson himself. After widespread violence on 12 November 1918, a group of Jewish merchants, who had shuttered their shops out of fear of further attacks, dispatched a telegram to President Wilson's office in Paris

to demand his protection. They vowed not to reopen their shops until he responded. Wilson, whose wartime self-determination rhetoric was directed toward Europe and whose racism has come under renewed public scrutiny in 2020, did not respond. Other Tunisian Jews sought to use Wilson's ideals to hold the French to the egalitarian and universal impulses of Republican rhetoric. In these interventions, Tunisian Jews' military service in World War I was frequently held out as the most compelling rationale for improved treatment and expanded rights.

There was no one response or strategy adopted by Tunisian Jews during debates over the "Jewish question," which is precisely Rominger's point. Many Tunisian Jews invoked Zionism, rendered newly appealing by the war, and marshaled it in combination with Wilsonian ideals. One August 1920 article in the Tunisian Jewish press called on France to respond to Jews' calls for "Wilsonian principles" in support of "a Palestinian state in good understanding with all its neighbours." By articulating a range of nuanced positions in this moment of upheaval and debate, Rominger insists, Tunisian Jews challenged the flat, stereotypical views of them held by French officials.

Our final article, by Bethany Keenan, returns to France, and to some of the youngest civilian victims of the war, "war orphans," children whose fathers died while serving France. Long viewed as peripheral to the history of the war, French children have been the subject of growing attention since Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau's pioneering, book-length "essay in cultural history," *La Guerre des enfants 1914–1918*, was published in 1993. Building on Audoin-Rouzeau's analysis of the cultural mobilization of French children for war, Manon Pignot, Audoin-Rouzeau's former doctoral student, has charted new ways of capturing children's wartime experiences.¹⁶ "War orphans," who lost their fathers during the war and whose special status as *pupilles de la nation* was enshrined in French law in 1917, have also been studied by Olivier Faron, while debates about the application of these laws in the empire have been probed by Dónal Hassett.¹⁷

One of the biggest challenges facing historians of children is to find accounts of their experiences and emotions produced by them at the time they were children. This is all the more difficult when children came from modest means, as is the case for Keenan's war orphans. The paucity of sources explains the value of the cache of 607 letters from 481 French "war orphans" to their US sponsors Keenan uncovered and that are scrutinized here. Organized in 1915 by the US organization Fatherless Children of France (FCOF), the initiative paid orphans and their mothers \$36.50 a year, an amount designed to double the meager allowance received from the French government. In return, war orphans were required to write to their US sponsors. The letters that Keenan analyzes, most of which were written either at the end of the war or in the war's immediate aftermath, were translated and published in newspapers across the United States. They were held out by the FCOF as evidence of a strengthening Franco-American bond.

Although some of the orphans' letters were brief and formulaic, many provide heart-breaking glimpses into the emotional and material struggles faced by these children and their mothers. Orphans wrote of destroyed homes and of going without shoes, underwear, and coats. They wrote of the pain of not being able to properly mourn fathers whose bodies had never been recovered and of their mixed emotions on Armistice Day and after demobilization. How painful it was, they confided, to see "little friends" walk happily with their fathers. The children frequently described their sobbing, disconsolate mothers and expressed determination to lighten their load. One boy noted, "I am only an apprentice shoemaker, but I am in haste to grow up to lessen my mother's work."

Widows added messages, their words testaments to emotional and financial difficulties in the absence of husbands and male breadwinners. The women wrote of doing what they could to carry on. Some tried to take over their husbands' jobs or moved in with parents or in-laws in order to pool resources. Others strove to piece together an income by combining different types of poorly paid work. The difficulties were multiple and the grief in these families profound and enduring. As one orphan stated simply, "I have never seen a battle nor even heard the cannon but in spite of that we have suffered very much from the war."

By foregrounding the words and experiences of peoples who, in an earlier time, would have been considered incidental to the war, our authors remind us that World War I's reverberations reached far beyond the Europeans traditionally associated with Western Front. Children who knew nothing of battle had their lives forever altered. An hours-long battle in the lengthy campaign to conquer Morocco became enmeshed in debates over military strategy on the Western Front. Tunisian Jews' exemption from wartime military service contributed to the rise of anti-Semitism in the protectorate.

The war and the peace conference that followed in its wake fueled new imaginings of the postwar international order. For the most part, the hopes of national self-determination—or simply of enhanced rights—were quickly dashed, at least in the short term. Western leaders rebuffed or ignored demands by nationalist leaders, creating strategic opportunities for Lenin and the Soviet Communists. Ho Chi Minh never got his meeting with Wilson, but he was welcomed in the new French Communist Party. The transformative powers of World War I were global.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sean Kennedy for inviting me to participate in the Western Society for French History panel on which this forum is based. Brian Newsome, co-editor of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques*, was a delight to work with during the forum's preparation. Norman Hillmer and Rebecca Rogers were perfect sounding boards.

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Notes

1. Leonard V. Smith, "France, the Great War, and the 'Return to Experience,'" *Journal of Modern History* 88, no. 2 (June 2016): 380–415, doi: 10.1086/686203; Martha Hanna and John Horne, "France and the Great War on Its Centenary," *French Historical Studies* 39, no. 2 (April 2016): 233–259, doi: 10.1215/00161071-3438007.
2. The scholarship on these topics is now extensive. For pioneering essays on gender and the two world wars, see Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al., eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). For the pioneering analysis of World War I's impact on gender relations in France, see Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For an important recent comparative analysis of gender and World War I, see Susan R. Grayzel and Tammy M. Proctor, *Gender and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
3. George Robb and W. Brian Newsome, "Introduction: Rethinking World War I," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 42, no. 3 (Winter 2016): 1–8, doi: 10.3167/hrh.2016.420301.
4. See, for example, Richard S. Fogarty, *Race & War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).
5. In 2014, Frederick R. Dickinson identified the internationalization and transnationalization of the war as the recent developments in World War I scholarship with the most potential to transform our understanding of the war. Frederick R. Dickinson, "Toward a Global Perspective of the Great War: Japan and the Foundations of the Twentieth-Century World," *American Historical Review* 119, no. 4 (October 2014): 1154–1183, here 1156, doi: 10.1093/ahr/119.4.1154.
6. See, for example, Xu Guoqi, *Asia and the Great War: A Shared History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
7. Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds., *Empires at War: 1911–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
8. *Ibid.*, 2.
9. Richard S. Fogarty, "The French Empire," in *Empires at War: 1911–1923*, ed. Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 109–129.
10. For a good account of Franco-German tensions and maneuvers over Morocco, see Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), chapters 3–4.
11. *Ibid.*, 208.

12. The prominence of Algerian Jews in recent scholarship in French Jewish history is evident in the forum on French Jewish history in the February 2020 issue of *French Historical Studies*. Three of the forum's four articles deal centrally with Algeria.
13. See, especially, Richard S. Fogarty, "The French Empire," 110.
14. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007).
15. *Ibid.*, 5.
16. See, especially, Manon Pignot, *Allons enfants de la patrie: Génération Grande Guerre* [Let's go, children of the fatherland: Great War generation] (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012).
17. Olivier Faron, *Les Enfants du deuil: Orphelins et pupilles de la nation de la première guerre mondiale (1914–1941)* [Bereaved children: World War I orphans and wards of the nation] (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2001); Dónal Hassett, "Pupilles de l'Empire: Debating the Provision for Child Victims of the Great War in the French Empire," *French Historical Studies*, 39, no. 2 (April 2016): 315–345, doi: 10.1215/00161071-3438043.