The Great War: from witnesses to historians, from memory to history?

La Grande Guerre : du témoin à l'historien, de la mémoire à l'histoire ?

De Grote Oorlog: van getuigen naar historici, van herinnering naar geschiedenis?

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The opposition between witnesses and historians as figures, narrators and as authors united by their interest in narratives of the past and reflecting in part the canonical opposition between memory and history, is commonly accepted. In the crystallization of these two entities and of their opposition, the Great War plays a role that cannot be neglected, at least for France. With the death in 2008 of Lazare Ponticelli, the “last remaining poilu”, and at a time when there are only a few centenarians still alive in the world who lived the First World War as children, the era of witnesses of the Great War seems definitely to have given room to historians. And the coincidence between the deaths from the 1990s onwards of the last generations having lived the Great War and the historiographic revival, founded mainly on the critical of testimonial voices, seems at first glance to give evidence of this.

We can observe, indeed, since roughly twenty years, a very keen public interest in the Great War and a significant increase in the study of historiography along with debates on consent, the cultural war, soldier testimonies) of which we can wonder if they don’t owe as much to the renewed interest in the memory conflicts of the 1920s and 1930s than to science. We shall nevertheless follow Henry Rousso with the following remark as he compares the links between the memory and the history of both conflicts:

Whereas the controversies surrounding the memories of the Occupation and, more precisely, the involvement of the French state in the genocide of the Jews, steadily increased in the 1990s, the field of historiography was experiencing a form of consensus. The authors favourable to the regime or attempting to defend its results, as it was the case until the 1960s and 1970s, proved to be more and more rare because of the lack of solid arguments. Conversely, the polemic that recently raged among (French) historians to determine whether the soldiers in the trenches had accepted unusual degrees of violence by consent or by force, has merely had a weak echo in the public and political sphere. People, as it seems, are mobilized rather by the commemoration of this war, as of now without any survivors left, and by the meaning that could be conferred to the event a century later.

Now with full attention on the commemorations of the centenary, the interest has never been greater. There is undeniably a very keen social demand and a need for the memory of the Great War. The main figures of this memory are the millions of men that fought the war at the front and who, literary allowing, were both actors and narrators of their experience providing a key contribution to the elaboration of a great memorial narrative. In this perspective, it seems interesting to retrace in broad outline the history of the occasionally tumultuous relation between historians and witnesses, between history and memory, from 1914 to 2014.

As Antoine Prost and Jay Winter wrote, “the war in 1914 does not belong to anyone, not even to historians”. In fact, since it began, we have not ceased telling and re-telling the Great War, exercises in which historians have only played a minor role. In fact, they were early on confronted by other writings of the Great War and, namely, to the voiced testimonies of veterans, as early as 1914-1915, were considered just as legitimate to talk of the war. From then, the relation that historians maintained with this kind of expression was for a long time ambivalent, or of a competitive nature. Still, it cannot be reduced to a simple opposition.

The Emergence of Testimonies as a Source...

If we follow Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, the historiography of the Great War articulates itself chronologically around three main writing periods closely related to their political uses and to the memory preoccupations of their contemporaries. Within these historiographic, as well as memory, configurations, the place of witnesses and of testimonies would have evolved...

The first configuration, starting during the war and confirmed immediately after 1918, would essentially be political and military. Its goal was to study the causes of the Great War, to understand why such or such battle – or even the war – was either lost or won. All that concerned domestic or international politics was added later. The highly controversial (especially in Germany) article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles proposed no more no less than a historical analysis of the causes of the conflict. It stipulated indeed that “Germany and its allies are responsible, since they caused them, for every loss and all the damage suffered by the governments of the allies, associates and their nationals as a consequence of the war that was forced upon them by Germany and its allies’ attack”.

Many historians, whether explicitly...
or not, have since taken a position on this article.\(^7\)

The goal was to study the causes and the development of the conflict in a way to write a very political history that corresponded then to the triumph of the so-called positivist or methodological history. In this configuration, little regard was given to history from the bottom. What’s more, even historians that are former soldiers like Henry Contamine, one of the most renowned specialists of French military history or even Pierre Renouvin,\(^8\) founder of a new approach to international relations, distrusted the voice of former soldiers and witnesses. Even though Renouvin lost an arm, he wrote in 1939: “The testimonies of soldiers, though very useful to read in order to understand the atmosphere of the battle, can seldom give any information on how operations were conducted, the horizon of the witnesses was too limited.”\(^9\) However, the war period and, to a lesser extent, the time that immediately followed, was marked by the plethora of publications of “testimonies” in a broad sense. At the end of the 1920s a lively debate even opposed their most fierce critic, Jean Norton Cru, to a certain number of what was then called “soldier poets.”\(^10\) Historians felt a form of disinterest for these narratives, even though abundant, that were founded on the testimonies of soldiers. As if history had begun with a divorce rather than a wedding.

The second configuration would seemingly have emerged at the end of the 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s. The focus was then redirected toward the social actors of the war, firstly to the soldiers. Qualified as “social,” this period was indeed marked by the emergence of social history and of Marxist interpretations shifting the attention toward actors other than diplomats, politicians and generals. Yet, according to Winter and to Prost, this social focus on society, at the front line of the conflict. This was a way to return to a criticism of testimonies from a historical perspective, whilst being precociously aware of the circulation of information during the war. It is true that the death of witnesses is paradoxically not caracterized by a diminishing of their voice nor of their influence. Until today, there is an increase in all sorts of testimonies and this undoubtedly will not cease with the Centenary. Their publication encourages certain historians to proceed to a critical analysis of this source, but rather to more critical attention in the face of this editorial surge.

\(\text{or the return of witnesses}\)

This is how we could retrace in brief the story of what could be a proactive integration of testimonies within historiographic discourse. According to Prost, the transition from the period of witnesses to the period of historians, from memory to history, is neither progressive nor linear. Both these writings, one testimonial, the other historiographic, are developed in parallel, coexist and cross over at times. This is the case for Ducasse, Perreux and Meyer or even for Jean Norton Cru who, however, proposed a supposedly uncompromising criticism of the testimonies that he considered “scientific.”\(^11\)

Thus, it is necessary to nuance Winter and Prost’s affirmation that the beginning of the Great War marked the beginning of a change in social and military era within the field of historiography and, thereby, a distancing of the voice of witnesses by historians. Yet, it new insertions that the public voice of the soldiers has become a highly legitimate narrative of the war and represents a strong voice that the public immediately listens to. An interest has developed at least as much, if not more, for the daily lives of the soldiers, for the shape modern war takes. Now, the voice of the soldiers, responding to a social demand, is considered legitimate. We would be mistaken to believe that it is a marginal phenomenon. A few hundred testimonies, at the very least, have been published during the war in France. A comparable phenomenon took place in the other engaged countries. To such an extent that certain historians who took part in the war also judged it useful to write their own war narrative as Marc Bloch did. However, he decided not to publish it and following the war he became interested, in an article published in 1921, in the circulation of tales woven during the war. This was a way to return to a criticism of testimonies from a historian perspective, whilst being precociously aware of the circulation of information during...
In any case, if historical and testimonial voices seem perfectly distinct, historians, on the contrary, have not lost interest in the work of soldiers writers. Thus, Ernest Lavisse – believing that historians ought to be engaged in their day – accepted to preface at least three books written by soldiers during the war. Along with the sociologist Émile Durkheim, he created at the publishing house Armand Colin the “Etudes et documents sur la guerre” [Studies and documents on the war] collection, in which his own subjectivity also emerged. As more than one historian had correctly suggested from the very beginning, Jean Norton Cru’s reception in the scientific community was very little on how war literature and testimonies were received in academic journals and by historians. In 1970, when a certain testi mony was published in the second edition of Témoins in 2006, we note that some historians, and including famous ones (Pierre Renouvin, Jules Isaac), participated in it, as did former soldiers who passed the agrégation in history (André Ducasse, Charles Delvery). In a certain way, beyond Prost and Winter’s reviews on the meekness and the absence of the war experience in the academic histori cal discourse at the time, we led, Jean Norton Cru’s work was very little on how war literature and testimonies were received in academic journals and by historians.

The memory of the Second World War, its presence today and the debates that surround the event, surely contribute to a certain fading of the “moral witness” of the Great War. Authors intervened more in the field as historians and as popularizers than as former soldiers. Whereas they had, before 1919, published their testimonies, Meyer and Perreux published in the 1960s a daily life at the front and another at home, and these were presented as one of the first testimonies. Even Maurice Genevoix who wrote the preface, involved himself personally in the foundation and the discourse of the Museum of the Battle of Verdun. Benefiting from his fame, he comes back to his war experience with a short narrative, La Mort de près [Death at first hand]. The memory of the Second World War, its presence today and the debates that surround the event, surely contribute to a certain fading of the “moral witness” of the Great War.
Surfing the wave of renewed interest for soldier testimonies, other projects less scrupulous on a historical level have exploited the interest for testimonies that also corresponded to the transformation of the poilu from hero to victim. The climax was reached with the anthology Paroles de poilus which was first published in 1998 and which to this day, with more than three million copies sold, remains by far the most widely sold book in France on the Great War, despite the questionable quality of the collection of letters and of shortened testimonies, at times without even mentioning the cuts that were made. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker warn against this excessive use in year 2000. Leonard V. Smith amongst others, agreed with their warning and criticized more precisely the use of testimonies as a form of proof in argumentation, showing that it is possible to twist a corpus of testimonies to say both one thing and its opposite. Part of a larger debate opposing historians of the Great War then focused on the place of witnesses and on the work by Jean Norton Cru. Some historians, like Rémy Canals and Frédéric Rousseau have defended Jean Norton Cru’s position and his method that intended to approve the good and the bad witnesses, even pursuing his work with a dictionary of witnesses published on the internet and continually supplemented with new notices “like a continuation of the pioneering work by Jean Norton Cru.”

We are now at a time when the voice of the poilus is sought after and heard as never before, when testimonies, and particularly soldier testimonies, are central. Its social and historiographic uses continue to cause a stir. But as we can observe, we did not pass in a linear manner from a writing of history by witnesses to a writing of history by historians. To this day, works written by witnesses and other soldier writers, posthumously, remain privileged ways of accessing the Great War and their books often sell much better than those by historians. Mnemosyne has not yet definitely handed over to Clio.

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