

## Historiography 1918-today (Great Britain)

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# Historiography 1918-Today (Great Britain)

By [Alex Mayhew](#)

**This historiographical piece surveys trends and key interventions in scholarship and writing on Great Britain during the First World War. It begins by looking at the first-hand accounts of those involved in the war effort, as well as the official histories that were published after 1918. Next, it explores the work of historians between the 1950s and late 1980s – focussing, in particular, on revisionism and social history. Lastly, it explains the variety of ways in which the lens through which the Great War is studied has expanded since 1986.**

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## Introduction

Unpicking and synthesising the historiography of the Great War has become a complicated task. If historical research is created at the intersection of the historian, her source material, and the context in which she is writing, then the [historiography](#) of the war is also the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. [William Mulligan's](#) work on the [war's origins has](#), for instance, highlighted the way in which debates surrounding [Great Britain](#) and [Ireland's](#) entry to the First World War echo broader questions about the United Kingdom's relationship with Europe.

For all that is unique about the national historiography of the United Kingdom from 1914 to 1918 (including the bitter historical memory of the conflict, debates surrounding voluntarism and British identity, or studies of shell shock), one nation's scholarship does not exist in a vacuum. Each successive generation of historians is beholden to the disciplinary *Zeitgeist*. As such, histories written in the empirical tradition have given way to work influenced by the historiographical developments of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. [Jay Winter](#) argues that there have been four "generations" of scholarship.<sup>[1]</sup> They began with contemporaries who had fought in or orchestrated the war, and focussed on military and political events. This was followed, in the 1960s, by a second generation which explored the history of combatant societies. The third wave concentrated on the conflict's cultural features. Arguably, this shift only truly began to bear fruit in Britain during the 1990s.<sup>[2]</sup> Lastly, contemporary works have expanded their perspective and delved deeper into the war's transnational patterns.<sup>[3]</sup> While these generations can also be found in the broader historiography of Britain during the war, this piece focusses on three "periods" rather than on Winter's categorisation.

In the United Kingdom, as [Adrian Gregory](#) has explained, "a slow and hesitant process" led to a moment when the "British came to renounce the war."<sup>[4]</sup> In many ways, this process was mirrored in early histories of the war. Unlike popular perception,

however, this has been followed by historical revision that has led to a degree of scholarly consensus on issues such as generalship. What is more, the availability of sources has played an important role in informing the tone and focus of later historiography. Given the limitations of time and space, this piece focusses exclusively on the historiography of Great Britain, since the stories of Ireland and the [Empire](#) (while both of great significance) have myriad unique cultural, social, and political complexities that mean they deserve their own articles. To trace the patterns and trends in histories of Great Britain, the focus is on three periods: inter-war memoirs and official histories; works published after the Second World War (especially those that emerged in the 1960s) up until the late 1980s; and the “modern” histories that have been published since Trevor Wilson’s *Myriad Faces of War* in 1986.

## Pointing the Finger: 1918 - 1948

The flood of first-hand accounts that were published in the decades immediately after 1918 have informed many of the debates that emerged in later First World War historiography.<sup>[5]</sup> The collected memoirs and histories of both [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) and [Winston Churchill \(1874-1965\)](#) have played a central role. Lloyd George’s mammoth six-volume *War Memoirs* were written from the perspective of a participant and offer interesting insights into the war’s early years, his work at the Ministry of Munitions, and a broader perspective on the conflict while he was Prime Minister. Since he only began to write these in 1933, one might question how much time had distorted his perspective, not to mention the influence of criticism that had been directed at him in the intervening period by political foes and military figures, including [Douglas Haig \(1861-1928\)](#). Unsurprisingly, David Egerton has noted these were, at least in part, “the recording and vindication of his wartime leadership.”<sup>[6]</sup> As a record of his premiership, they have left historians with a useful (albeit highly redacted and biased) record. However, among the most lasting legacies of *War Memoirs* is Lloyd George’s characterisation of Haig. Sometimes subtly, at other times explicitly, he was portrayed as blind to the reality of the war, single-minded, wasteful, and “unequal to the command of an army of millions fighting battles on fields which were invisible to any Commander.” As an “Easterner,” Lloyd George continued to argue that rather than fighting on a congested front in [Belgium](#) and [France](#), the Allies would have been better targeting [Germany’s](#) allies in other theatres. Churchill’s *The World Crisis* was also uncomplimentary about Haig. At once an expansive history and memoir, Churchill was at the core of this narrative. Unsurprisingly, given his involvement in [Gallipoli](#) while Chief Lord of the Admiralty, he also highlighted the need for British strategy to have looked beyond the [Western Front](#).

Actors who were of less significance, at least to the strategic conduct of the war, also recorded and published their memories of the war. Brian Bond and [Samuel Hynes \(1924-2019\)](#), among others, have described a “war books boom” that took place in the late 1920s and early 1930s driven, in part, by the tenth anniversary of the armistice.<sup>[7]</sup> This saw a variety of authors put pen to paper and explore their war experience. Many of these memoirs and stories of old soldiers contributed to the narrative of futility and pessimism from the ground up. It is, though, important to note that this was by no means universal. Captain [J.C. Dunn’s \(1871-1955\)](#) *The War the Infantry Knew* offered a more balanced narrative of the collective experiences of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers. Some other nuanced accounts have been forgotten (at least by the general public). For example, [Charles Carrington’s \(1897-1990\)](#) *A Subaltern’s War* countered the view that soldiers were either war mongers or pacifists, while [Sidney Rogerson’s \(1894-1968\)](#) *Twelve Days on the Somme* provided a measured perspective on the pervasive boredom of everyday life at war. Carrington also wrote a unit history of his battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, which hinted at the war’s horrors, but also dwelt on the powerful camaraderie and *esprit de corps* that he had held so close to his heart. A plethora of similar memoirs and studies, including [Rudyard Kipling’s \(1865-1936\)](#) two volumes on the Irish Guards, were released in the years after the war. They offer a vivid – though not always entirely accurate – window on to the stories of individual units. It was, however, the publications of the more disillusioned [authors](#) that proved more resilient in Britain’s historical memory. Accounts such as those of [Robert Graves \(1895-1985\)](#) and [Siegfried Sassoon \(1886-1967\)](#), in his semi-autobiographic *George Sherston* novels, have played an important part in shaping public perceptions of the war. These, alongside the conflict’s most famous [poetry](#), offered a vision of slaughter and traumatised soldiers plagued by pessimism and bitterness, though, in actuality, they are not the only emotions one finds upon a closer reading. These narratives were contested and scholars have suggested that the authors themselves were ambivalent about their wartime experiences.<sup>[8]</sup> Arguably, even in historical accounts, at least up until very recently, memoirs (of every origin) have played far too prominent a role in work attempting to understand the war as it took place. They are, more accurately, windows onto the processes that saw the war reinterpreted in its aftermath. While they provide a vivid insight into the ways that the war was understood in the decades after it finished, they have been over-used in studies trying to reconstruct events and mentalities during the conflict itself.

There were many attempts, aside from unit histories, to draft more analytical pieces about the war. For instance, veteran [Basil Henry Liddell Hart's \(1895-1970\) \*History of the First World War\*](#) re-stated the argument that the war should have been fought away from Belgium and France. Other works of history were also written by officers. [Charles Callwell \(1859-1928\)](#) produced a biography of Field Marshal [Henry Wilson \(1864-1922\)](#), while [Archibald Wavell \(1883-1950\)](#) published an account of the campaign in Palestine and a profile of General [Edmund Allenby \(1861-1936\)](#). Elsewhere, the Division of Economics and History of the Carnegie Foundation produced more objective social and economic histories of the combatant nations, including Britain. There were also the multiple volumes of the *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents*, which were arguably the most complete accounts of the British war effort until archival material was declassified later in the century. They covered military, naval, air, and medical operations across the globe and were produced with a view to learning lessons for future wars. In fact, the British military, who saw the war as an imperial conflict from the very start, might have been surprised that this had to be "rediscovered" by historians many decades later. The research and writing of these was overseen by the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence under the leadership of Brigadier-General Sir [James Edmonds \(1861-1956\)](#), previously a staff officer to Douglas Haig and an experienced intelligence officer. The team around Edmonds collected and analysed over 25 million documents; orders, communications, unit diaries, and personal diaries were studied. It was a daunting task and, unsurprisingly, it took over thirty years for the Official Military Histories to be completed, the final volume first being published in 1948. This was a collaborative project and another "soldier-scholar," [Cyril Falls \(1888-1971\)](#), helped to frame the early military history of the war by writing several key editions including those on [Italy](#), [Egypt](#) and Palestine, and Arras. Yet, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the official histories were criticised for partisanship and for not being critical enough of the war's conduct or of Haig's generalship after 1915. Nevertheless, Andrew Green believes that an admirable degree of diligence, thoroughness, and objective analysis went into the researching and writing of these volumes. Edmonds was willing to criticise the High Command and his study of both [Third Ypres](#) and 21 March 1918 are revealing of this.<sup>[9]</sup> Alongside the *Official History of the Ministry of Munitions* (which focussed on the intricacies and problems related to centralising the production of war materiel), these were important early attempts to "interpret and make available the story of the industrial war effort of the nation."<sup>[10]</sup>

## Revisionism and Social History: c. 1950s – 1980s

With the passing of the war's central protagonists, the Great War increasingly became the object of scholarly investigation. The fiftieth anniversary also saw 1914-1918 once again become the focus of writing and popular culture. A new generation's ideas about the First World War formed around cultural outputs such as [Joan Littlewood's \(1914-2002\) production \*Oh! What a Lovely War\*](#) and the BBC's twenty-six episode television series *The Great War*. Contemporary concerns, such the threat of nuclear conflict and the wars of decolonisation (including the Northern Ireland Troubles), influenced the public's perceptions of history. During this time, the memoirs and writings of figures such as Lloyd George and Liddell Hart were particularly influential.<sup>[11]</sup> As such, it should not be surprising, given their bitter criticism of Haig, that the quality of British command became one of the most contested topics amongst writers, particularly in the 1960s. He was, in some analyses, the embodiment of the distant, uncaring general of the post-war memoirs. Among the most bitter criticisms to emerge was that of [Alan Clark \(1928-1999\)](#) in the now notorious *The Donkeys* in which he indicates that Haig was driven by a combination of ambition, inflexibility, and worse besides. Clark was discussing a period before Haig had ascended to the command of British forces in Belgium and France. However, [Leon Wolff's \(1914-1991\) \*In Flanders Fields\*](#) reached similar conclusions in its examination of the campaign of 1917. His assessment of Haig's record at Passchendaele was scathing. [A.J.P. Taylor \(1906-1990\)](#) also weighed into the debate surrounding the orchestration of the war, particular on the Western Front. He accepted that the western theatre was the key to victory but suggested that it was not just Haig that was out of his depth: the "[...] war was beyond the capacity of generals and statesman alike."<sup>[12]</sup>

However, as Haig (and other British generals) took a battering, historians began turning their attention to the assumptions that had developed around the Great War and started to question them. The opening of archives after the fifty-year rule elapsed (see the Public Records Act 1958), allowed them to do so through the study of relevant archival material. At the forefront of this revisionism was John Terraine. While he co-wrote the BBC's *The Great War* (and thus helped to popularise the history of the war), it was his books that had the greatest impact on scholarly debate. A prolific writer, he published nine of them between 1960 and 1981. Though he restated many of the arguments found in previous biographies, his *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier* has become one of the best-known expressions of support for Haig, and this extended to British commanders more generally. Importantly, Terraine was willing to criticise Haig's mistakes and bad decisions, but he concluded that he had been at least as

good as his contemporaries. Terraine's work unpicked the interlocking demands of political and military affairs. Elsewhere, he emphasised technology: the deadlock on the Western Front was, in many ways, determined by the limits of [technological](#) progress. There was no easy way to overcome trench warfare. He also argued that the Western Front was the key to Allied victory and that it was where the war was won as [Germany's economic](#) and manpower resources were drained. He also highlighted the [Hundred Days Offensive](#) as the [British Expeditionary Force](#) (BEF)'s crowning achievement, suggesting that this had been blurred by personality conflicts and a focus on earlier battles. Yet historians such as Norman Dixon – and later, in the 1990s, Denis Winter, Trevor Wilson and Robin Prior – have questioned Terraine's conclusions, especially when it came to Haig. However, his attempts to reassess the performance of the BEF laid the foundations for future debate and inquiry, especially after the archives began to open in 1967.

Historians also questioned what had [led Britain to war](#) in 1914. A.J.P. Taylor's seminal – though by no means universally accepted – *War by Timetable* highlighted the chain of events that led to war, as well as its deeper underlying causes. Systemic fault lines, including [arms races](#) through to imperial disputes, were stressed, while Taylor asserted that nobody was actively seeking war in 1914. He did, however, indicate that mobilisation was a diplomatic strategy – namely a deterrent – that got tragically out of hand. Significantly, though, in *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918* he had also absolved the Entente of any blame in events. This was one of Taylor's early works and was written whilst he was still influenced by anti-German impulses and before he became a prominent voice in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. [Arthur Marder \(1910-1980\)](#), who was among the most eminent scholars of the Royal Navy in this era, likely would have agreed with this assessment. He believed that Germany's increasing maritime power had influenced British naval development before 1914. The declassification of archival material also helped to clarify these issues. [Zara Steiner \(1928-2020\)](#) showed that policy had been developed in response to external factors and that it was these that set the scene for Britain's entry into the war. Keith Wilson, however, stressed internal dynamics in Britain even suggesting that the Foreign Office "*deliberately* mistook" [German aims](#) to deflect attention away from the United Kingdom's imperial weaknesses. It was concerns about the Empire, not Europe, that were the focus in Whitehall and [Russia](#), not Germany, that was seen to be the greatest threat to British interests. Earlier, V.H. Rothwell had reached a similar conclusion to Steiner, and suggested that the central focus of Britain's early war policy was to discipline Germany with the remainder of its objectives being open for negotiation. However, these changed (and sometimes expanded) as the war dragged on and pessimism took hold. Inter-allied diplomacy became all the more important, and conceptions of what "victory" looked like were transformed. Such conclusions are for the most part accepted up to this day.<sup>[13]</sup>

Away from the war aims and the battle zone, the powerful influence of social history can be felt in monographs of this period. Many of the histories of the home front published during this era focussed on issues such as demographics and living standards. The most significant of these were Arthur Marwick's *The Deluge* and *Britain in the Century of Total War*. Marwick took a broader perspective than many of his contemporaries, and by focussing on social patterns he was able to show that war was not solely a destructive force. In fact, 1914-1918 had been a vehicle for social change. Marwick highlighted a variety of ways in which this was true. Workers – buoyed by the near-eradication of unemployment – gained power, which forced the state to focus on, and invest in, health provision, education, and housebuilding. Despite the [casualties](#) and despite the pain, it seems [women](#) and the working class made gains during the war; though many writers believe he painted too rosy a picture. According to Marwick, the position of workers in the market had improved as their wages and living standards had risen; their participation in important war-related activities meant that their status had also risen as the [government](#) was forced to acknowledge the importance of their role within the war effort. Among the key indicators of these changes were the real term increase in income of between 10 and 20 percent over the course of the war and evidence of rising expectations among large groups of society. Of course, these figures could and probably should be questioned and Marwick himself acknowledged that post-war legislation failed to deliver the politicians' promises of a "land fit for heroes." The war had tested the United Kingdom's economic and political institutions, increasing efficiency and punishing inefficiency, and ultimately became a nail in the coffin of the Liberal Party. The [wartime economy](#) also changed Britain: massive wartime borrowing and the loss of reserves transformed the United Kingdom from creditor to debtor. The aftershocks of this transformation played an important part in limiting post-war social reforms. Nevertheless, [suffrage](#) was extended and it was for this among other reasons, many of which can be found in Marwick's work, that Noel Blewett asserted that it was only in 1918 that Britain truly became a democracy.<sup>[14]</sup> Marwick's arguments were not universally accepted and have been revised in more recent histories, which have demonstrated that where gains were made – particularly among women and the working class – these were uneven. Nevertheless, Arthur Marwick did set a tone for the social histories that followed.

This era also saw scholars begin to mine the attitudes of the actors. John Keegan's *Face of Battle* offered a bottom-up

perspective on the [Battle of the Somme](#). Tony Ashworth's *Trench Warfare* made excellent use of now declassified war documents such as war diaries in his description of the "live-and-let-live" system in the trenches, which also provided new insights into life at war. Martin Middlebrook and Lyn MacDonald both integrated personal testimony into their work. Denis Winter's *Death's Men* also made the individual experience of British servicemen his primary focus, narrating their journey from training to the post-war world. Significantly, whilst he drew heavily on memoirs, he began to integrate personal diaries and letters into his analysis. Furthermore, Paul Fussell's seminal literary history, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, continues to influence historical work to this day. Echoing this trend, towards the end of the 1980s social (as well as labour) and cultural history began to merge. Arguably Jay Winter's *The Great War and the British People* provides the most robust historiographical bridge to the next generation. The influence of economic and social history was evident in his detailed discussion of class structure, statistics, and demographics. His analysis of social and structural features of Britain's wartime experience suggests that the war had a positive impact on the living standards of Britain's poorest, whose bargaining power was increased due to full employment. Not only this, but since many working men were in protected occupations, the elites – the statistics suggest – suffered higher than average death rates, and the working-class incurred lower than average death rates. This has met with some criticism, particularly from scholars who have wondered how such changes took place alongside, say, the increased danger of respiratory disease. Arguably, though, it was Winter's cultural history methodologies that set him apart from much of the scholarship that preceded him. Winter's integration of contemporary "experience" foreshadowed his later work. In particular, his emphasis on the language of [mourning](#) was explored as a framework through which contemporaries understood the conflict. He suggested that this eventually blurred any of its beneficial consequences. These insights and approaches influenced much of the scholarship that was to come.

## Widening the Lens: 1986 – Present

The next generation of scholarship has opened new windows onto the Great War. Renewed interest in the conflict has accompanied the sequence of anniversaries of 1914-1918 leading up to the recent [centenary](#). With a ready audience, there has been an abundance of new research, facilitated at least in part by the wealth of new source material at historians' finger tips. The collection at the Imperial War Museum has become a fundamental part of many – if not most – studies. Elsewhere, the Liddle Collection at the University of Leeds and a wide array of local archives now offer scholars the opportunity to study personal testimony in detail and *en masse*. Accompanying this has been a burgeoning interest in new historical themes and approaches: particularly subjective experience, national identity, historical memory, and commemoration.

It was perhaps Trevor Wilson's *Myriad Faces of War* that truly signalled the beginning of a new generation of historical scholarship. This was not his first book, but when it was published in 1986, his use of sources was a major claim to innovation. Unfortunately, Wilson did not make use of some important documents (such as Cabinet Papers) but he did integrate personal testimony, diaries, and letters into his analysis. Wilson also sought to cover diplomacy, the conflict's origins, politics, society, tactics, and strategy. Importantly, though, this was built upon a foundation of actors' motivations, perceptions, and experience. By focussing on, for instance, an NCO during the 1914 campaign or an Essex village, he was able to knit individual experience into his grand narrative. Deploying this microscope allowed him to reveal the many terrible consequences of the war for ordinary people, something that coexisted with the social gains that can be seen when approaching the war through a macroscopic lens. His use of files at the Imperial War Museum would become the norm, but at the time made this one of his most original contributions to work on the Great War. He also added to our understanding of the blockade (and its consequences) as well as the fall of [Herbert Henry Asquith \(1852-1928\)](#). It is, however, the new light shed on battles such as the Somme or domestic issues such as recruiting by his use of diaries and other personal collections that perhaps make this the catalyst of the history that has followed. Significantly, Wilson highlighted the pervasive feeling that this was a war of defence rather than aggression and that, far from being "empty rhetoric", this was a belief that underpinned the motivations of many Britons.

Following Wilson's intervention, the need to draw on more expansive material, particularly individual testimony, to form a nuanced perspective on the past has become the bedrock of many studies. The interweaving of the macro and micro is now a common feature of histories of Britain during the war. Furthermore, many analyses now draw more heavily on and overlap with ideas emerging in other countries' First World War historiography. The symbolic power of the [navy](#) has, for instance, been highlighted in pre-war Britain (and Germany).<sup>[15]</sup> Nevertheless, many of Wilson's (and Winter's) assertions have been questioned and deconstructed. The assumption of progress, particularly in [women's rights](#), has been justifiably questioned. [Susan Grayzel](#), among many others, has argued that while new jobs might have emerged for women this did not dismantle pre-war gender roles and identities. Elsewhere, the issue of consent and coercion has been reassessed. Recent work has unpicked

the idea that there was widespread war enthusiasm in Britain and elsewhere during 1914. In *The Last Great War*, [Adrian Gregory](#) uses a diverse array of source material, allowing him to show that while there was war enthusiasm among certain groups, particularly the middle classes, this coexisted with anti-war protests and many more parochial concerns as well as compulsion and pressure. [Catriona Pennell](#) drew on a wealth of regional newspapers and other sources in *A Kingdom United*. She has also highlighted the wide variety of reactions to the declaration of war, but has shown that a community of “United Kingdomers” did emerge from the crisis. Gregory extended his analysis into the war itself and concluded that Britons were aware of the war’s horrors but believed in the nation’s cause – this was, however, contingent on an economy of sacrifice that rested on people sharing the burden of suffering. Janet Watson’s *Fighting Different Wars* has also offered important new perspectives. Her distinction between war work and war service (as well as the influence this had on the way people remembered the conflict after 1918) provides a deeper and more complex picture of perceptions of the conflict.

Such work has also problematised our understanding of Britain’s war by highlighting the multiplicity of responses to it. Many studies now look beyond England. [Richard Grayson](#)’s monographs, *Belfast Boys* and *Dublin’s Great Wars*, reveal the complexities of [Ireland](#)’s war. Yet, both Scotland and Wales also have their unique stories to tell. This is evidenced in, for example, Gill Plain’s edited volume on the historical memory of the war in Scotland. Pennell’s *A Kingdom United* is a rare example of a study that incorporates Ireland into a “four nations” analysis of the United Kingdom’s response to a European conflict. *The Last Great War*, shows how Ireland’s political and cultural intricacies meant that Gregory focussed on Welsh and Scottish experiences in *The Last Great War*. Their industrial areas played a central role in the nation’s total war. Furthermore, by considering, say, the South Wales Miners or Glasgow Women’s Housing Associations it also becomes clear that reactions to the war were contingent on a variety of factors from class through to gender and age. The war was not necessarily perceived in the same way by neighbours, let alone by diverse communities across the British Isles. Such groups were frequently driven by local, not national, concerns. The war was often lived and interpreted at the local level.

The cultural (and social) history approaches of such studies have also allowed historians to reveal the ways in which the chasm between the home front and the war zone was much smaller than previously assumed. Joanna Bourke, David Englander, [Jessica Meyer](#), and Michael Roper have highlighted the importance of relationships with home and domesticity in men’s endurance. Tellingly, Roper explained that the particular form that these links took also depended on age and background.<sup>[16]</sup> What, other scholars have asked, allowed the British Tommy to endure when other armies faltered? Insights drawn from studies of the socio-cultural features of Edwardian Britain have also crept into the military sphere where individual mentalities and culture have occupied an increasingly prominent place in studies of morale. [Peter Simkins](#) has asserted that it was the “nature” of British society that “provided a bedrock of social cohesion which prevented the BEF from total collapse.”<sup>[17]</sup> John Bourne has argued that coping mechanisms developed during peace, especially those of impassivity and solidarity, supported working-class men in the trenches.<sup>[18]</sup> Jay Winter has also suggested that Britain’s highly disciplined [labour force](#) contributed to the BEF’s obedience and resilience.<sup>[19]</sup> J.G. Fuller used soldiers’ newspapers to demonstrate the role that popular culture – from sport to music hall – played in the resilience and robustness of the BEF. In *Leadership in the Trenches*, [Gary Sheffield](#) stressed small-group leadership (a common theme in literature on combat motivation) but highlighted the peculiarly British matrix of deference and paternalism that was rooted in the kernel of Edwardian society. Both Helen McCartney’s *Citizen Soldiers* and [Mark Connelly](#)’s *Steady the Buffs!* have highlighted the power of local allegiances in units of the British Army. In this way, the BEF’s endurance was, at least in part, drawn from civil society and its mentalities.

Unsurprisingly, the Western Front and long-standing debates surrounding the BEF’s performance have continued to occupy the attention of scholars. While Haig has continued to receive some very bitter criticism – particularly from Gerard de Groot and Denis Winter – most historians would now agree that, flawed as he was, he was probably the best man for the job.<sup>[20]</sup> Gary Sheffield’s biography of the Field Marshal certainly updated our perspective on the commander of the BEF after 1915. He suggests that critics have failed to recognise that [attrition](#) was the only strategy open to him and that this was a war that needed to be fought in the face of German aggression. Willing to adapt to new technologies, Haig also became a great supporter of ex-servicemen in the years following the war. Consensus has similarly been reached on a few other matters: the war was necessary; the Western Front was the only place it could be won; and a costly learning curve was evident in the British Army’s conduct, accompanied by peaks and tragic troughs. In fact, the works of Tim Travers, Robin Prior, and Trevor Wilson have made it clear that the army and its generals were slow to adapt. Nonetheless, the BEF was, at least by the end of the war, better equipped to meet the challenges it faced. Paddy Griffith, for example, highlighted tactical developments in the British Army. In *Forgotten Victory*, Gary Sheffield argued that the successful repulse of the [German spring offensives](#) and the subsequent

victories won in the final months of the war are evidence of both steep learning curves and generals who were certainly not acting like “donkeys”. Elsewhere, scholars – such as John Bourne and David French – have added greater colour to this picture by exploring the higher conduct of the war, [civil-military relations](#), and the performance of more junior generals. In more recent work, historians have begun to explore more specific features of the BEF’s war on the Western Front: Jim Beach has looked at intelligence, [Jonathan Boff](#) at the Third Army in 1918, [Ian Brown](#) at [logistics](#), and Brian Hall at military communications. As the focus has pivoted away from debates about generalship, a more complete picture of the British Army at war has been formed.

Studies have also expanded beyond the Western Front and the BEF. This mirrors a wider consensus amongst historians that the history of the British nation is, fundamentally, an imperial (and by extension a global) one.<sup>[21]</sup> Douglas Delaney’s *The Imperial Army Project* is an example of how such an approach has been applied to the Great War (and beyond). Scholars have highlighted the essential role that the Empire played in Britain’s war effort. For example, [George Morton Jack](#) has produced a welcome book on the [Indian Army](#), while [James Kitchen](#) has explored the morale and identity of British and Imperial forces in the Middle East. In other cases, a broader perspective has shone new light on seemingly familiar issues. For example, Aimee Fox’s excellent work on military innovation and change draws on a wealth of theory on organisational learning from the social sciences. In doing so, Fox highlights the significance of inter-theatre as well as military-civilian networks and presents a more subtle perspective on the learning curve debate. This is but one of many examples of the introduction of rigorous interdisciplinary work in recent years. A similar “multiple theatre” approach allowed Mark Harrison to investigate medical advances in the British forces.

It is important that, over thirty years after Wilson’s *Myriad Faces*, British histories are attempting to deflect a broader criticism of studies of Britain during the Great War: their parochialism. Despite the obvious centrality of Britain in its national historiography, the comparative and transnational approaches of Jay Winter’s fourth generation of First World War scholars have helped to nuance conclusions about Britain’s war. These have, among other things, allowed cultural historians to build and refine the picture of urban life in London during the conflict.<sup>[22]</sup> Yet, perhaps most significantly, it has placed the British contribution to the eventual defeat of Germany in the context of an Allied war effort. Both [William Philpott](#) and [Elizabeth Greenhalgh](#), for instance, have reintegrated the French into their work on the Western Front. All too often, British historians focus exclusively on the BEF. However, Philpott – who argues that the Somme was a key turning point in this war of attrition – has underlined the important role France’s army played in the Battle of the Somme where it incurred 200,000 casualties. It is difficult to produce a convincing history of the British Army without considering its relationship with its allies. Greenhalgh’s monograph clearly demonstrates this. It was the increased co-ordination of national forces in Belgium and France that paved the way for the successes of 1918. [David Stevenson’s](#) international history of the last year of the war has shown that it was the logistical capacity of the Allied armies, of which the BEF was just one part, that ultimately paved the way for victory. Similar approaches, which seek to compare national experiences, have been used by [Heather Jones](#) to investigate violence against [prisoners of war](#) and by [Stefan Goebel](#) to study the influence of medievalism. [Alexander Watson’s](#) comparative history of British and German morale has shown that many of the mechanisms that maintained morale were common to soldiers on both side of the trenches. Watson also takes an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on sociology and psychology. Pointing to endurance as the norm, Watson confirms the importance of leadership among junior officers and fear of the enemy but also highlights cultural factors such as over-optimism, patriotism, religion, and supplies. While they might have drawn on different ideas, the mechanisms by which morale was maintained and nurtured seem to have been the product of human (rather than national) adaptability.

## Conclusion

Over the last century, the availability of new documentary evidence has offered different windows on to the past. Successive generations of historians have also brought novel lenses through which they approach history, not to mention less confidence in “historical truth,” and have deployed “new questions, approaches and concepts.”<sup>[23]</sup> Arthur Marwick and Jay Winter were right to suggest that writing a history of Britain during a [total war](#) requires a sort of “total history” in which all participants, great and small, are woven into one narrative. This is, of course, a difficult task requiring skill, knowledge, and methodological flexibility. Furthermore, the need to embed Britain’s story in broader narratives is now self-evident. In some cases, it has been integrated into European histories of the conflict. Elsewhere, global (and imperial) patterns have been foregrounded. In a way, these choices mirror strategic debates during the war itself (and which have occupied policy makers since the 18<sup>th</sup> century). Other historians, though, have also begun to scrutinise the war’s local dimensions. Moving forward, is Britain during 1914-1918 best understood by marrying these approaches and (to borrow the name of one University of Oxford research network) “globalising



and localising” Britain’s war? Whether such an integrated methodology can be tackled by a single historian, or if a “total” history of Great Britain in 1914-1918 can only be achieved through collaborative projects, is unclear.

Collaboration certainly seems possible. Strikingly, one of the defining features of the historiography of Great Britain in 1914-1918 is that it is, generally speaking, characterised by consensus. While controversy remains over features of military discipline, especially executions, there is generally remarkably little dispute within historical circles writing about Britain during this period; at least in comparison to scholars of other nations.<sup>[24]</sup> Of course, there remains a deep and lasting discord between public and academic perceptions of the Great War. Perhaps this dissonance has nurtured the harmony within the academy. However, it may also be a symptom of the increasingly successful integration of different historical schools – social, military, and cultural – over the last thirty years. Yet, since debate is the engine of history, is this peculiar historiographical accord a good thing for the writing of Britain’s Great War? Is it because of this that the centenary did not see a major new general work on Britain? This is not to say that important work has not been done. For instance, recent scholarship has deepened our understanding of the disconnect between scholarly and popular understandings of the First World War.<sup>[25]</sup> To be sure, historical approaches, insights and debates will continue to ebb and flow. Not only this, there are still areas of Britain’s war that demand more thorough historical engagement, namely the war’s economic history. As such, where a degree of harmony exists now, it is possible that it will not in the coming decades.

Alex Mayhew, London School of Economics and Political Science

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## Notes

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6. ↑ Egerton, George W.: *The Lloyd George “War Memoirs”: A Study in the Politics of Memory*, in: *The Journal of Modern History*, 60/1 (1988), p. 83.
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11. ↑ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front* 2001, pp. 51-74.
12. ↑ Taylor, Alan John Percivale: *The First World War: An Illustrated History*, London 1963, p. 220.
13. ↑ David French explored the interplay of economic and diplomatic interests with the military situation, arguing that the divisions in British strategic thinking were focussed less on “Easterners” and “Westerners” and more on those who wanted to conduct the war on “limited liability principles” and others who advocated for mass mobilisation. See French, David: *British Strategy and War Aims, 1914-1916*, Boston 1986. More recently, [Brock Millman](#) has shown how a shift in Britain’s war policy took place in 1917. It moved from one directed towards victory to another focussed on putting Britain in the best position to weather an inconclusive war (or even a defeat). See Millman, Brock: *A Counsel of Despair: British Strategy and War Aims, 1917-18*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 36/2 (2001), pp. 241-270.
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20. ↑ For the most balanced critique, see Harris, J.P: *Douglas Haig and the First World War*, Cambridge 2008.
21. ↑ See, especially, Darwin, John: *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 305-358.
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