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Toward a Transnational History of World War I

Michael S. Neiberg

Michael S. Neiberg delivered the keynote address at the 19th Military History Colloquium, held at the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, 1-3 May 2008. This is the text of his address.

I want to start this talk by drawing your attention to an experiment that asks participants to watch a short video featuring two teams of three. One team is dressed in all white, the other in all black. Players on both teams pass basketballs to one another as quickly as they can. Viewers are asked to count only the passes between members of the team wearing white. After intensely watching the video and reporting the number of passes they counted, the video is rewound and viewers are asked to watch it once again, this time without counting or looking for anything in particular. On the second viewing, they see a man dressed in a gorilla suit walk slowly through the center of the frame, pause to do a dance, then walk slowly off camera. Most participants are amazed that they did not see the gorilla the first time and assume that they have been tricked, but they haven't.

Psychologists call this phenomenon inattention blindness. The main point of the experiment is that we see what we are told to see, not necessarily what is actually before our eyes. Historians have treated nationalism in ways similar to those in which participants in the experiment have treated the basketball players – as the things they are supposed to see first. What I'd like to suggest in my time here tonight is that we have spent so much effort seeing World War I as an expression of nationalism that we have all but ignored the gorilla, which, if you'll permit me to stretch this analogy even further, represents the many other ways men identified themselves.

The national model is the easiest and most natural and I do not mean to discard it entirely or pretend that nationalism was not important.

Nationalism was potent stuff to the men of 1914 and so it has remained to historians ever since. If I needed any more reminders of this fact, I got them in conferences last year in Israel and Australia. The first conference was surprisingly (and, I might add, quite refreshingly) devoid of any discussion of the Somme, Verdun, Douglas Haig, or Kaiser Wilhelm II. Instead, it centered around the actions of Djemal Pasha, Aaron Aaronson, and an intense debate about exactly what percentage of Arabs joined the 1916 revolt against the Ottoman Empire. That debate had little to do with history and everything to do with the political persuasions of the antagonists. To cite another example, a man came up to me in Canberra to tell me that he had enjoyed my book *Fighting the Great War*, but did not understand how I could pretend to write a global history of the war (in just 100,000 words, mind you) without making reference to the accomplishments of the British 62nd Division, raised in his native region. If the old expression that all politics is local is true, then it is equally true that all history (or at least historical memory) is local as well.

The influential state-funded official national histories written shortly after the war, the national museums (like the excellent Canadian War Museum in Ottawa), and the national nature of most war memorials have cemented the national memory of the wartime experience at center stage. The war has become a formative event in the histories and collective memories of nation-states, as I need not remind those of you sitting here tonight. Many, dare I say most, Canadians will easily and naturally point to Vimy Ridge as the place where Canada "became a nation," even if they cannot tell Arthur Currie from Robert



National history is the easiest and most common approach when studying the First World War, but a transnational approach may offer new and different perspectives on the war. Clockwise, from left: A Canadian tank commander applies a maple leaf to the front of his vehicle before the start of the Amiens offensive, August 1918; A German machine gun crew on the Western Front; A studio portrait of a French officer; British troops mass before an attack at Gallipoli.

Library and Archives Canada (LAC) PA 3667; LCMSDS Photo Collection; Canadian War Museum (CWM) 19760582-010#1; CWM 19820382-058

Borden. In the words of one recent popular study, Vimy was the first “awakening of that full sense of [Canadian] nationhood,” and that image might well be the war’s most important legacy for Canadians.¹ In a similar vein, as I was constantly reminded in Canberra, Australians and New Zealanders still point to Gallipoli as the birth pangs of their nation, as the celebrations just last week commemorating Anzac Day continue to show. That Australia lost many more men on the Somme and at Passchendaele is an inconvenient fact of history that runs counter to the national story, and is thus frequently forgotten. Even in places with a presumably more developed sense of national identity, the war serves for many as a watershed between the dominance of local identity and the dominance of national identity, as the arguments of David Kennedy for the United States and Eugen Weber for France demonstrate.² Men went to war wearing national uniforms and marching under national flags, so the national model has somewhat naturally come to dominate discourse on the war.

But here tonight I’d like to ask you, just for a moment, to turn your gaze away from the

national narratives that have dominated our understandings of this war and instead see the wider European world as a place where men and women shared much in common. Social class, regional loyalties, generational differences, gender, political affiliation, and religion (to name just a few) were identifications that transcended national borders, even if they impacted different parts of the European world in different ways.

The phrase “European world” is meant to include those parts of the world that still retained significant political, social, economic, and cultural attachments to the Old World. Also sometimes known as the “settler colonies,” these places shared in the general development of European civilization and many of their residents clearly understood themselves as Europeans first and foremost. This world included Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, Algerians, and, of course, Canadians. To take Canada as an example of this process, only 30 percent of Canadians who went to war in 1914 were born in Canada. The vast majority of the rest had been born in Britain. First-generation immigrants made up half of the Canadian Army as late as

1917, even though only 23 percent of Canadians were foreign-born in that year. To cite another example, more than 36,000 of the men who volunteered to serve in Australian units in 1914 were born in the British Isles. This amounts to more than one in five. Such men are the most visible and tangible linkages between the old world and the new and they serve as a reminder of the permeability of the borders between the two.

So much of the discussion of Australia's and Canada's history of the war has centered around the extent to which the war made those places a "nation," however defined. But what would happen if we saw Australia and Canada not as places in some debatable stage of national development, but as parts of a much wider world with a shared culture, a shared economic market, and a shared global outlook?

Let me be clear: I certainly do not mean to suggest that nationalism was not important. Nor do I mean to suggest that all nations fought for the same goals or that all nations were equally on the side of the right. This is not an exercise in moral relativism. Rather, it is an attempt to understand the European world that produced this war in all of its multi-layered complexities. Canadians may or may not have gone off to war identifying themselves as "Canadians" or as "Britons," but they certainly went to war as much more. They went as Ontarians or Québécois, as farmers or wage laborers, as Protestants or Catholics, as parents, as children, as husbands, as brothers. In this, of course, Canadians had much in common not only with the people they fought alongside, but with the people they fought against as well.

Such a vision of the war would require historians to get beyond the traditional comparative method, which juxtaposes two or three subjects in order to discover what is truly unique about one of them. This method has its utility for studying war because the objects of comparison actually do compete with one another in the existential arena of the battlefield, allowing historians to study the result and debate the causes of victory and defeat. But the object of such analyses is still to identify (and in many cases to celebrate) national *differences*. As long as that remains the goal we will come no closer to the development of a truly global understanding of what was, after all, a truly global war.

The need to see a world war in truly global terms has led me away from comparative history and toward a new and potentially fruitful method of historical analysis known as transnationalism. I am certainly not arguing against national or regional history. Rather, I am suggesting that we may benefit from this new methodology by placing national and regional studies into a wider and broader context. The central idea of what some historians call "the transnational turn" in historical analysis is to examine processes and movements that migrate easily across national borders and are generally unaffected by the actions of governments. In the words of one recent article on transnationalism, the method:

examines units that spill over and seep through national borders, units both greater and smaller than the nation-state....Perhaps the core of transnational history is the challenge it poses to the hermeneutic preeminence of nations. Without losing sight of the "potent forces" nations have become...transnational history treats the nation as one among a range of social phenomena to be studied, rather than the frame of the study itself.³

Some of the pioneering work in transnational history came in studying environmental history, intellectual history, and gender history. To date, historians of warfare have been less interested in this methodology, perhaps because war is in itself an inherently governmental activity. I would submit to you, however, that transnationalism might be better suited to the study of war than many of the areas to which it has already been applied. Militarism, pacifism, industrialization, military professionalism, and imperialism are just a few of the transnational phenomena that impacted the entire European world, often without governments getting involved. A transnational view of the road to war would surely correct the image of a continent irreparably divided by national and alliance rivalries. It might also help us see instead the many ways that people identified themselves beyond national rivalry.

Numerous commentators in 1913 and the first half of 1914, for example, noted how close relations were between the English and the Germans at almost every level *except* the governmental. The very concepts of "British" and "German," were, of course, still being worked out. Harry Steurmer, a German Catholic from Baden, loved the English, but decried the

“Prussian spirit of unbounded exaggeration of self and deprecation of others” that he feared would sooner or later bring the English and the Germans to war unnecessarily.⁴ Indeed there is little evidence to suggest a hatred or even a suspicion between the two peoples sufficient to lead them to war. Shortly after the assassination of archduke Franz Ferdinand, a British fleet made a friendly visit to a German fleet at Kiel and in London Liberal MP Arnold Stephenson Rowntree saw nothing unusual in his hosting 30 German students at his social club even as the July Crisis was reaching its boiling point.⁵ Even in France, men who lived far from the “lost territories” of Alsace and Lorraine or who were born well after their loss in 1871, saw the issue quite differently than did the nationalists in Paris who screamed for *revanche*. One German diplomat noted after a tour of the French countryside in 1913 that “no one is disposed to risk his or his sons” necks for the question of Alsace-Lorraine.”⁶ Similarly, an American who toured Alsace and Lorraine in 1913 concluded that the spirit of *revanche* had “slowly waned as the new generations have come and gone.” He saw “no real hatred” between Frenchmen and Germans and believed that the two sides would eventually reach an entente across the Rhine as naturally as the French and English had done across the English Channel. In this way, all the bitter hatreds of western Europe could be buried.⁷

All of the above would seem to suggest that an over reliance on the national model rides roughshod over much complexity and subtlety. By focusing on nationalism to the exclusion of other factors, we may be seeing only part of the picture in a kind of historiographical version of inattentive blindness. In the second half of my talk here tonight, let me present three brief examples of how a transnational approach to the study of the war might help us to see the years 1914-1918 in a more complex manner. First, a transnational approach would help us understand that men went to war for a wide variety of principles that they believed in deeply. For some men these were nationalist in origin, but other transnational motivations were mixed in as well. Some of these were political and class-based. The classic example of such a transnational movement in the years before the war was the international socialist movement. As early as 1891 socialists across Europe had begun to discuss the possibility of stopping a

continental war by declaring a general strike. Of course, they were aware of the dilemma that the International Socialist Congress considered in 1893 in Zurich, namely that a general strike might “put the country where socialists were most powerful at the mercy of the country where socialism, as a movement, was most backward.” Nevertheless, by 1907 the International Socialist Congress had agreed on the general strike as the best means to prevent a war.⁸

Indeed, the socialist parties across Europe congratulated themselves on having used the mere threat of a general strike to contain and localize the two Balkan Wars. Whether they had, in fact, is another question. The important point is that they believed that they had. They therefore approached the crisis of 1914 believing that they could once again work together to contain a Balkan crisis. The famous meeting of European socialists in Brussels on July 28 now seems to us to have been a last, hopeless gasp to avoid a global catastrophe. But the men and women at that meeting did not see it that way. They believed that they still had time to force their governments to their senses. One of the delegates at that meeting, French socialist leader Jean Jaurès, reminded a Belgian colleague of a crisis in Morocco in 1911 that had blown over, “This is going to be another Agadir. We shall have ups and downs. But this crisis will be resolved like the others.”⁹ Socialists from across Europe left Brussels planning to meet again in Paris on August 9, to be followed by a meeting in Vienna. There would be time, they believed, to use international arbitration to avoid a catastrophe. For their part, the German delegates assured their French comrades that Germany would not be so foolish as to go to war for “a Habsburg whim.”¹⁰

Of course, Jaurès and his colleagues did not know just how far the decisions of the diplomats and the generals had already gone. Jaurès’s warning as late as July 28 that the workers of Europe “must rally the forces for good, the forces of progress” against “the flood of barbarism” went unheeded and within a week he was dead at a French assassin’s hand.¹¹ It was the second shocking assassination in Europe in as many months, and to most working-class people across Europe it was by far the more tragic. War began a few short days later amid a renewed rise of national passions. But we should not assume, as too many historians have facetiously done, that

Europeans immediately forgot their principles as soon as the guns began to fire. On August 4, the German socialist party voted in favor of credits for the war, a step historians have taken as an indication of their willingness to put their nationalism above their ideology. But listen to a few excerpts from the words the German socialists pronounced in casting their votes:

This is a fateful hour....The responsibility for this disaster falls upon those who have inaugurated and supported that policy. We refuse to accept any such responsibility....Up to the very last hours we have worked for the preservation of peace, in especially close cooperation with our French brethren....We condemn all wars of conquest. We demand that, as soon as our safety is assured the war be terminated by a peace which makes friendly relations with our neighbor countries possible. We hope that the cruel lesson of war will arouse in many more millions of people a horror of war and will convert them to the ideals of socialism. Guided by these considerations, we vote for the war appropriations.¹²

Even under the tide of national ardor ran currents that were both counter to the mood of nationalism and consistent with it. Across the Rhine, French socialists believed that their German brethren had made the war possible by refusing to honor the agreement not to go to war. French socialist Léon Werth therefore went to war to fight not just against the German government, but against traitorous German socialists whom he blamed for making the war possible by their refusal to honor the international socialist demand for a general strike. France, led in Werth's mind by its socialists, would have to defeat the German Army in order "to impose [a socialist] peace on the world."¹³ Wirth was fighting not for France – or maybe it's more accurate to say not just for France – but for a vision of a fairer and more just socialist post-war world, a vision that he shared, ironically enough, with thousands of men on the other side of the lines.

Nor was it only socialism that could inspire men across national boundaries. Irish Nationalist Tom Kettle, killed on the Somme in 1916 while serving with the Dublin Fusiliers, serves as another example. Ironically, the British Army (more importantly to Kettle the Irish regiment that was a component of that army) was the chosen vehicle of this Irish Nationalist for the attainment of universal European principles. Although he had little love for Great Britain,



French troops resting in a trench.

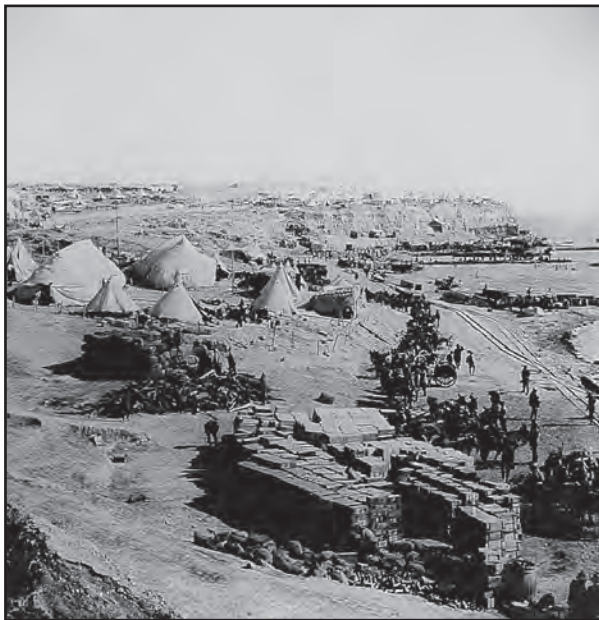
Kettle saw no choice for Ireland but to fight for the cause of justice and for the cause of Europe, which he wrote "carried the fortunes and hopes of all mankind," but was threatened by German barbarity. He saw the contradiction and irony in enlisting in the British Army, but he did so, in his mind, not as a Briton, an identity he rejected even as he enlisted in the British Army, but as a European, a Christian, and an Irishman. In his mind he was going to war as a "international nationalist," an Irishman in the service of Europe and mankind.¹⁴

Together these examples help us to understand that men went to war in 1914 for a wide variety of ideals they believed in. We can therefore reject the persistent image of innocent "lambs being led to slaughter." We can also reject an understanding of the outbreak of the war as the exclusive result of an excess of national passions. Nationalism there surely was, but the passions, the enthusiasms, and the resigned determinations of men in 1914 came from much more. They came from the dizzyingly complex nature of European society, a place where nationalism was but one among many ideologies with calls to the loyalties of men and women across the continent, loyalties for which they were willing to fight and die.

Second, and perhaps more interesting, a transnational approach might help us to understand why men stayed in the trenches and why they endured the horrid conditions of the western front. There was only one major refusal to fight before the war's final weeks, and it occurred in France in the wake of the disastrous 1917 Nivelle Offensive. But even the mutineers on



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Above: Soldiers from the French 157th Infantry Regiment pose for group photograph.

Left: The scene of the British landing at West Beach, Gallipoli.

the Chemin des Dames were careful not to allow the Germans to take advantage of what French headquarters called their “acts of collective indiscipline.” French soldiers were aware that an ensuing German victory would destroy the chance at seeing their war goals fulfilled, whatever those goals might have been. Notably, the demands of the men were varied and diverse. Some wanted political change, some wanted economic reform, and some sought fundamental changes to the very nature of French society. Some patriotically sang *La Marseillaise*, others the *Internationale*, and

some sang both. Other soldiers in other armies, most notably men from underrepresented minority groups or oppositional political groups, had similar concerns, although they rarely expressed them in quite the same way. Seen in a new light, these mutinies are therefore not an exclusively French phenomenon, which the comparative method might suggest, but only the most extreme manifestation of a series of soldier grievances whose origins can be traced back to the pre-war years.

This transnational turn might also help us to understand the many complexities and contradictions the war brought to the surface. For example, Irish Republicans and Ulster Unionists, both of whom were ready to take up arms against Britain during the Home Rule controversy, nevertheless volunteered to serve Britain, albeit in distinct local units with clear confessional identities. Similarly, socialists in all nations, who had railed against the power of capitalists, nevertheless joined the colors and paradoxically protected the very system they had decried. If we understand this seemingly contradictory military service not as a function

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of coercion or naïveté or the release of a pent up subconscious nationalism, but as a function of their desire to fight for their own goals, then their experiences come into sharper focus. So, too, does their commitment to seeing the war to a successful conclusion and the widespread post-war disillusionment, even among the ostensible victors. Indeed this shared disillusionment seems all the more sensible when seen in a transnational light: France and England may have won the war as nation-states, but the rights of national minorities like the Irish and the dream of a socialist Europe clearly had not.

Which brings me to my final point: the shared sense of disappointment with the post-war peace agreements might become more clear if seen as a transnational phenomenon. It was not just that Frenchmen, Germans, and Canadians did not get from the war what they thought they deserved. It was also that socialists, Irish separatists, and industrial workers felt that the war had left them worse off than before, despite their massive sacrifices. Accordingly, they responded in transnational ways, putting their faith in international bodies like the League of Nations, or by joining transnational political movements like communism and fascism. To be sure, French fascism was not quite the same as German fascism, but a transnational turn might help us to see similarity where we have to date mostly looked for difference. Maybe then we can develop a fuller understanding of a war that was, in the end, a shared, transnational experience.

“This,” F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote about the multi-national Battle of the Somme, “took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes....You had to remember Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in Valence and beer gardens in Unter den Linden and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather’s whiskers.”¹⁵ One couldn’t ask for a better transnational explanation of the shared experiences of Europeans from 1914 to 1918, and it came from a member of that eccentric and secessionist part of the European world, the United States.

I would like to thank Mike Bechthold, Terry Copp, Geoff Hayes, Whitney Lackenbauer, and the members of the Laurier organizing committee for the opportunity to present this paper. I would also like to thank the members of the audience for excellent and provocative questions, some of which I hope I answered.

1. Ted Barris, *Victory at Vimy: Canada Comes of Age* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2007), p.260.
2. See David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) and Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).
3. Micol Seigel, “Beyond Compare,” *Radical History Review* 91 (Winter 2005), p.63. See also Robert Gross, “The Transnational Turn: Rediscovering American Studies in a Wider World,” *Journal of American Studies* 34 (2000), pp.373-93.
4. Harry Stuermer, *Two War Years in Constantinople* (New York: Doran, 1917), p.32
5. Ian Packer, ed., *The Letters of Arnold Stephenson Rountree to Mary Katherine Rountree, 1910-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.149.
6. Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *Triple Alliance and Triple Entente* (New York: Henry Holt, 1934), p.102.
7. David Starr Jordan, *Alsace-Lorraine: A Study in Conquest, 1913* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1916), pp.6 and 11.
8. Carl Landauer, *European Socialism: A History of Ideas and Movements from the Industrial Revolution to Hitler’s Seizure of Power* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1959), p.338.
9. Georges Haupt, *Socialism and the Great War: The Collapse of the Second International* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), p.204.
10. Haupt, *Socialism*, p.207.
11. Harvey Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaurès* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), p.465.
12. Landauer, *European Socialism*, p.508.
13. Léon Werth’s novel *Clavel Soldat* cited in Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers’ Testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p.29.
14. Tom Kettle, *The Ways of War* (London: Constable and Co., 1917), p.4.
15. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* (New York: Scribners, 1995), p.49.

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