

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hunt Tooley. *The Western Front: Battle Ground and Home Front in the First World War.* Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. x + 305 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-65062-2; \$33.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-65063-9.



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A Western Front Perspective

Hunt Tooley's work, *The Western Front: Battle Ground and Home Front in the First World War*, has received mixed reviews to date. Tooley himself opens his preface with the words, "I think I have tried to achieve several, perhaps too many, goals in the span of a single volume" (p. vii). If anything, this self-assessment reflects many of the limitations of the book. The work consists of eight chapters. Beginning with a chapter on the origins of the war, which offers a functional introduction (if based on slightly dated sources), it proceeds to give a more or less chronological account of the western-front participants' history in the war, with lots of other interesting information slotted in here and there. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the years 1914 and 1915, while chapters 5 and 6 look at the years 1916 and 1917. The last chapter focuses on the military campaigns of 1918 as well as the armistice, the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, and repairing the damage done by the war in France and Belgium. The two better chapters are the thematic ones—chapter 4 on the political economy and centralization of government controls, and chapter 7 on the cultural impact of the war.

The book is certainly not without merit. While in

parts it reads more like series of undergraduate lectures than an in-depth military, social and cultural analysis, it does offer a useful overview of important war developments, which would be especially useful for first-time students of the topic. It also has some engaging parts—most notably on the impact of the war on popular culture, especially in terms of songs and ditties, language development, and children's literature. I appreciated his analysis of the economic implications of the war, and the connections made between military planning, navalism and Social Darwinism. The sections on the battle of the Marne as well as the Verdun offensives were also compelling. Still, on the whole, the book does not gel well. In many places it is disjointed, for example, the links between home and fighting front are tenuously made throughout and Tooley fails to offer an analytical framework for the "disconnections" between civilians and soldiers that other historians supposedly focus so much of their attention on. In all, there is very little that ties together the complex web of subjects and topics mentioned by Tooley.

So much could have been done with the history of the

western front. I, for one, would have welcomed a cultural analysis of the meanings attached to the western front by civilians and soldiers alike, or even a study of the legacies of the western front for western conceptions of war in the twentieth century. Instead, what Tooley has offered us is an overview history of the war, focusing on the major powers involved in the western military theater. While it is a useful overview of the history of this theater of war, Tooley has ended up retracing the traditional picture of the war as one that mainly concerned Northwest Europe, in the process perpetuating the idea that the war was won and lost “in the west.” Recent historiography, most notably but not exclusively the excellent work by Hew Strachan, has clearly illustrated the inappropriateness of such an interpretation. This is not to say that Tooley does not acknowledge there is more war going on than the western front, but he fails to frame this front in the context of the conflict as a whole. There is no section that explains why the western front was so significant or how it related to the multitude of other theaters. At the same time, there seem to be real disparities between what is and what is not included in the narrative. While the United States receives a considerable amount of attention (perhaps this was purposively done for the U.S.

market), there is very little about the actual experience of the western front for the people in the places where it was situated, namely much of Belgium and Northern France, a particularly obvious and important omission. At the same time, there seems to be an unequal amount of focus on “minor” western front participants: where Ireland, Portugal, Australia and Canada receive due mention, there is very little on New Zealand, Algeria or India.

Other reviewers have rightfully noted a number of errors, mistakes and irksome editing concerns in the content of the book, to which I (as a Dutch-New Zealander) would like to add two small but grating points: the Netherlands is not the same as Holland, and the plural of “Maori” is “Maori.” Furthermore, I found the lauding of Fussell’s mythical interpretations of the cultural legacies of the war as perplexing as Tooley’s failure to analyze recent historiography on the Schlieffen Plan. I also cannot fathom why Tooley did not commission a few good maps.

Overall, *The Western Front* offers an interesting, if skewed, introduction to the history of the Northwest European theater of war. Undergraduate students will find the book especially useful. I, on the other hand, was rather dissatisfied with this version of the Great War.

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