

Reviews

Christoph Declercq and Julian Walker (ed.). *Languages and the First World War: Representation and Memory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-137-55035-4. Hardback. Price £65.00.

This two-volume collection on the First World War and its linguistic history – from the intercultural encounters of troops crossing seas or oceans to serve on the Western Front, to the spread of vocabulary across battlefields and home fronts as humans attempted to name the new sensations and technologies of total war, into the reverberations that the war would have for ‘national questions’ in societies already divided by struggles over language, such as the ex-Habsburg lands where the *casus belli* had occurred or Belgium where the fighting on the Western Front began – contains almost thirty studies and yet, as its editors Julian Walker and Christophe Declercq readily acknowledge, even then only hints at the astonishing breadth of histories that start to be revealed when scholars of a global conflict such as the First World War start searching for evidence of languages and linguists, at every level of war.

Rather than a synthetic history of languages across the First World War in general – a mammoth, yet tantalising task – *Languages and the First World War* derives from the ‘meetings between languages’ gathered at a transnational conference of the same name, held at the University of Antwerp and the British Library in 2014. Ostensibly, the first volume deals with language changes and contacts during the war itself, and the second volume with the war’s effects on language in the century that followed, though the connections within chapters run as frequently between volumes as within them, especially for the two countries, Britain and Belgium, that recur most in both volumes. It is unsurprising that these two figure most often in a project borne of Anglo-Belgian cooperation, and two chapters by Declercq and Bill Lawrence on Belgian refugees in Britain spotlight a wartime tie between the two countries which had faded from public memory in Britain before community and academic historians (including my own mother Helen Baker, a community historian researching Belgian refugees in Richmond and Twickenham, who has worked with Declercq) were moved to start recovering it before the centenary year. Other chapters cover combatant countries large and small, using the prism of languages to gain insight into Maltese social attitudes to British rule, the dynamics of German occupation in Belgium, the effectiveness of Habsburg military language policy in a war of attrition, and the experiences of Jews in Kosovo during a conflict which for this region of south-east Europe effectively began in 1912, not 1914.

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Despite the chronological principle that divides the volumes, the collection's main contrast is perhaps one of approach: which studies are interested in language *contacts*, including the politics and practices of interpreting and translation (mediations between languages on which everything from military censorship to sexual intimacy could depend), and which studies are interested primarily in the development of a language *of war*. The first approach, like many projects in the 'Palgrave Studies of Languages at War' series to which these volumes belong, looks for the sites deep within the battlefield or far away where languages meet and the ideologies and identities these contacts permeate through. The question of mediation between languages, so often invisible, is one that once posed becomes impossible to neglect: how *did* these millions of troops in adjacent sectors, across enemy lines, or assembled by colonial rulers communicate with each other? Who was going to have learned whose language, and how? The results can be astonishing, and sometimes troubling. Richard Fogarty's finding that French forces deliberately taught their West African troops only a limited, semi-pidgin version of French, with 'simplified' grammar, then took the soldiers' ungrammatical speech as evidence that black Africans had lower intellectual capacity to the civilised white French, shows that racism and colonialism isolated the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* from the French nation even as they fought and died for it.

Juxtaposed with this are chapters which grapple with the impact of war on one language or another: the spread of military terminology into civilian life, as exhaustively recorded by an Essex clergyman; the notion of a 'Mata Hari' as the archetype of the sensual female spy; a revisionist approach to the notion of 'propaganda', seeking to recover it from pacifist readings of propaganda between the World Wars; through to reflections on European memory cultures as the centenary approached. The balance between history of language and history of languages begins to emerge, through this collection, as a question that other studies of language(s) in conflict might take further; while the historical evidence collected across the volumes provides linguistic snapshots of everyday wartime life which, however fleeting and personal, all came about through deeper histories of statehood, identity, education and mobility. The place of the individual speaker, reader, writer and listener in these greater contexts is, in the study of languages and in so many other ways, the very stuff of the social and cultural history of war.

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