

Review: Mobilizing Cultural Identities in the First World War: History, Representations and Memory

By Federica G. Pedriali and Cristina Savettieri, eds.
Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. ISBN: 9783030427900. 236 pp.

Stefano Lissi

Utrecht University, the Netherlands

Published two years after the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, *Mobilizing Cultural Identities in the First World War* looks at the Great War from a different angle. Unlike most contributions published in the last decade, *Mobilizing Cultural Identities* does not take a military or political approach. Instead, it examines this conflict as a laboratory of cultural mobilization and identity formation, highlighting the cultural response of individuals and groups to a global crisis of such significant magnitude as the First World War (Pedriali & Savettieri 2020, 1). The book does so by offering eight different perspectives on the effects of the conflict on the bodies and minds of its contemporaries, as well as on its legacy in present-day culture through means of commemoration and remembering.

The book is thematically divided into four different sections. The first part, titled 'Political Identities,' deals with the formation of political identities among intellectuals during the war and in its aftermath, presenting two case studies from the United Kingdom and Italy, respectively. In the first chapter, Elizabeth Pender takes the reader on a meticulous exploration of the shifting identities of the journalist Henry Brailsford (1873-1958) and his wife Jane Malloch (1874-1937) before, during, and after the war. Pender effectively argues the importance of the Brailsfords' education as classicists in the context of their divergent visions of the war, especially with regard to Malloch, whose influence has largely been ignored by historiography in favor of her husband. In the second chapter of this section, Simona Storchi sheds light on how Italian avant-garde artists Ardengo Soffici (1879-1964) and Carlo Carrà (1881-1966) conceived of their experiences of the war after 1918 and how this fueled their drive as interventionists and artists. As Storchi points out, the war led them to relinquish their avant-garde internationalism in favor of a more pronounced Italianism based on simplicity and beauty, constituting fertile ground for their subsequent embracing of Fascist ideology in the 1920s.

The second section, named ‘Italian Masculinities,’ provides the reader with two inspired contributions by Marco Mondini and Cristina Savettieri on the conceptualization and re-negotiation of individual and collective masculinity among Italian soldiers in the trenches, as well as among Italian prisoners of war. Both contributions make extensive use of ego-documents, thus also offering fascinating micro-historical perspectives on a phenomenon that is not often studied through the experiential lens of individual soldiers. In *The Genuine Family of my Extraordinary Youth*, Mondini sheds new light on the ubiquitous presence of male bonding in the Italian trenches and the shifting status of these bonds in the context of post-war society. In *Gender Trouble in Italian Narratives*, Savettieri effectively highlights the de-virilized representation of prisoners of war by Italian newspapers and by soldiers themselves in their memoirs. Here, the changing conditions of soldiers’ bodies as a consequence of the hardships of captivity are linked to how their masculinity is accordingly re-conceived by society and themselves.

The third section, ‘Conceptual Frameworks,’ represents the more theoretically-oriented part of the book and provides more wide-ranging perspectives on the peculiar relationship between culture as a mobilizer and war as a social and cultural phenomenon. In the first essay, Angela Hobbs deals with the influence of female agency on the notion of heroism during the war, effectively challenging traditional definitions of valor. In the following essay, Federica Pedriali offers a profound problematization of the spatiality of No Man’s Land as a territory symbolically free from the obligations of civilized society, challenging dominant perspectives in biopolitical theory on the grievability of soldiers’ lives in World War I.

The fourth and last section, ‘Remembering,’ provides the reader with two case studies of commemorations in Croatia and the United Kingdom. In the first essay, Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Ismar Dedović shed light on the shifting image and remembrance of the Great War in Croatia. Such a site, they argue, has been overlooked by academic studies until now. Andersen and Dedović fill this lacuna by highlighting the increasing friction between a Serbian-oriented narrative, which was widespread in Yugoslavia until 1991, and the development of a more ‘Croatian’ commemoration in recent years. In the last essay of the book, Ross Wilson takes the reader on an exploration of the new forms of remembrance in the United Kingdom on the 100th anniversary of the war.

The intricate attention that *Mobilizing Cultural Identities* devotes to the Italian front, with three out of eight essays focusing on this scenario, is evident. After all, as stated in the preface, this book should be considered the natural outcome of a workshop of an ERC research project on the interaction between Italian Literature and the Great War. (Pedriali & Savettieri 2020, v) In this

sense, *Mobilizing Cultural Identities* belongs to a new wave of World War I historiography committed to highlighting the importance of ‘forgotten fronts’ such as the Italian one.

This effort towards shedding light on forgotten actors constitutes the true *leitmotif* of the book. All the contributions are in fact united by the common ambition of bringing to the spotlight geographical scenarios, social strata, or narratives usually neglected by traditional World War I historiography. In this sense, such an effort towards the inclusion of new narratives accomplishes the task of enriching our understanding of the First World War as a complex phenomenon. *Mobilizing Cultural Identities* reconstructs a picture of the Great War as a crisis capable of triggering a variety of cultural responses in all strata of society. It also succeeds in the goal of surpassing the traditional and static vision of cultural mobilization during the war as a phenomenon solely conducted ‘from above’ by institutional actors through propaganda. Instead, *Mobilizing Cultural Identities*, provides us with a depiction of cultural mobilization and identity formation during and after the Great War as a phenomenon ‘in motion,’ involving different actors and often intersecting with other sources of cultural, political, or social change (Pedriali & Savettieri 2020, 3).

The only critique that could be given to this book concerns the uneven role that the war itself plays in the various contributions. In some essays, such as in the piece by Andersen and Dedović, the war is displayed as a clear protagonist and as a fundamental factor in the process of cultural mobilization and identity formation. In others, such as in Pender’s essay, it seems to only play a marginal role, completely overshadowed by other phenomena, leaving the reader wondering whether these latter contributions really fit in a book that seeks to demonstrate the magnitude of the Great War as an agent of cultural change.

However, this in no way ruins the overall reading experience of *Mobilizing Cultural Identities*, which establishes itself as a valuable contribution to our understanding of the First World War as a complex cultural phenomenon. Moreover, the book sets a new standard for future research willing to shed further light on the many narratives often left out of traditional World War I historiography.

REFERENCES

Pedriali, Federica G., and Cristina Savettieri. 2020. *Mobilizing Cultural Identities in the First World War: History, Representations and Memory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.