McClure on Fantauzzo, 'The Other Wars: The Experience and Memory of the First World War in the Middle East and Macedonia'

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In 1917, an anonymous soldier called “ALA” of the Queen’s Own Royal West Kent Regiment described in his regimental newspaper his fear of the postwar world. In a fantasy world in Britain, a recreation of the recruiting poster “Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?” (1915), he is asked to tell the story of his war. He explains that he dug trenches and marched long distances, but his son wants to know if he killed any Germans. His wife, on the other hand, wants him to tell the children stories of Holy Land, a place ALA knows too well, as he wrote his piece while campaigning in the Sinai and Palestine. Awakened before he dreams of how he confronts his family, the story of ALA, recounted by Justin Fantauzzo in his new book, hits at the heart of the experiences British and Dominion soldiers fighting in Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and the Balkans. The fear, embarrassment, and anxiety ALA and his fellow soldiers felt over their experience of the First World War represent a group of veterans who desired to do their bit but have been clearly forgotten or ignored by the wider public.

Fantauzzo’s book seeks to examine in two parts the ways the campaigns in the Middle East and in Macedonia were experienced and remembered differently by the soldiers who fought in them. Fantauzzo argues that during and after the war, soldiers were “concerned about and fearful that their sacrifice didn’t measure up” to their comrades who fought on the western front (p. 13). Soldiers fighting in these campaigns were confronted with different physical and mental challenges that were unique to their geographic location. Yet the fact they found themselves outside the primary theater of war left them searching for meaning in the conflict that saw them resonating with imperial ideals and motivations that soldiers in France and Flanders had difficulty connecting with. The desire to be recognized by society as having participated equally in the war was not always satisfied. With the war’s conclusion, these soldiers continued to try and justify their service by creating separate public and private memories by which they were able to reconcile their service to society, and themselves. In the end, though, the veterans and soldiers “were locked into a somewhat hopeless struggle, a struggle to persuade those at home that their campaigns were worthwhile contributions to the war effort” (p. 224). Rather than recount the military history of each of these campaigns, Fantauzzo leaves extensive footnotes for both recent secondary works and primary accounts for readers to pursue the strategies and maneuvers of the British armies. He displays a significant grasp of recent historiography on British experiences of the First World War, clearly placing his work within this
much larger context. Fantauzzo’s analysis and argument use the work of Adrian Gregory’s “economy of sacrifice” to explore why soldiers were anxious about fighting in these distant campaigns.[1]

In his opening chapter, Fantauzzo explores the conditions of the soldiers on the front lines. Here the geographic difficulties of fighting in deserts, with their raging wind and sandstorms, deadly strains of malaria, and lack of connections back home affected the physical and mental well-being of British soldiers. These difficult conditions were “central to the claim made by soldiers that they had contributed equally to the empire’s war effort” (p. 19). Fantauzzo emphasizes the importance of remembering that these were for the most part civilian soldiers who were not prepared for being away from home for such a long period of time or to have limited contact with family. The lack of regular mail due to long travel times and the U-boat threat left many soldiers feeling emotionally strained. When they did have leave, being limited to the cities of Salonika, Alexandria, Cairo, and Basra caused confusion and difficulty as these were viewed as uncivilized and alien places.

Yet these different places allowed civilian soldiers to become tourists at a time when only the wealthy of British imperial society could visit these famous sites. Many took advantage to visit holy sites, particularly after the fall of Jerusalem, while others visited antiquities like the Sphinx. In no other theater of war could these soldiers be tourists. The ability to become a tourist caused problems as they had to justify their actions in relation to the war. Fantauzzo argues that in all three campaigns, soldiers “engaged with the colonial world in remarkably similar ways, suggesting that imperialism was a major way that soldiers understood what they were doing and how they were experiencing the First World War” (p. 53). The wild bazaars, poor infrastructure, and seemingly backward ways people lived, as though it were still biblical times, could only be reconciled by taking a liberal imperial mindset that they were here to fix these undeveloped peoples.

The civilizing mission of empire was used by soldiers to justify their larger participation in the war. Fantauzzo seeks to show that combat motivation and morale was more varied in these campaigns than it was for soldiers on the western front. While the primary group was a motivating factor, Fantauzzo argues that “a legitimate demand was also needed” to sustain the fighting in these campaigns (p. 95). Here the importance of these soldiers as civilians helps explain why many desired to stay fighting on these fronts as they were perceived to be less dangerous and safer than the western front. Others took a bigger-picture understanding of the conflict and believed that fighting against the Ottomans and Bulgarians would help limit the Central Powers’ ability to wage war elsewhere. The imperial mission of civilization was used as well to justify their actions. The words of their generals in the liberation of Baghdad and Jerusalem were not just propaganda, but were felt by soldiers as accurate reflections of why they fought.

The need to establish meaning was necessary for soldiers as back home they were often ignored or discredited as shirkers. Here, Fantauzzo leans on Gregory’s “economy of sacrifice” to explain the anxiety soldiers felt as, “all soldiers had to be seen as suffering. And to many at home, those outside the Western Front had not suffered enough” (p. 142). Fantauzzo argues that soldiers from these other fronts, no matter what meaning they attached to their experiences, agreed that they were being forgotten or misrepresented by the home front. The misunderstanding extended from the press to the families of the soldiers themselves, as seen in the letters of Frank Doughty Day, who fought to convince his father of the worth of his soldiering. At the heart was the fact that they did not fight Germans, who were the real enemy. To help convince the public, and themselves, soldiers sought to
prove they helped win the war by highlighting the surrender of Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, the first pieces to fall out of the Central Powers.

On the return home, soldiers and some historians began a fight to defend their war from a public that was questioning why the war had been fought. The difficulty the veterans faced stemmed from both the attention the western front continued to receive from society at large as well as from the political establishment that was retroactively condemning the campaigns in the Middle East and Greece. The attack on the veterans became very public when “Bonar Law, during the Conservative Party’s campaign in the general election in 1922 ... condemned the campaign in Mesopotamia, telling the press ‘I wish we had never gone there,’” spurring veterans to speak up (p. 168). Here, Fantauzzo examines memoirs about the campaigns by authors who struggled to ensure they would not be forgotten or misrepresented. Compared to memoirs and other writings coming from veterans during the interwar period, veterans of these campaigns clung to explanations they developed during the war to explain themselves, rejecting a growing disillusionment with the war. Fantauzzo argues that the experience of campaigning, and seeking to confront the anxiety of proving they had done their bit, created a different outlook on the war for these veterans. Their work, though, was often ignored or discredited, ensuring the western front remained the focus of any war remembrance.

While they were ignored publicly, veterans continued to maintain a private memory of their war that was quite different from their public activities. Moving from published memoirs, Fantauzzo presents the creation of private memory in scrapbooks, arguing that these are “almost entirely about the lighter side of their wartime experience, namely travel, tourism, and camaraderie” (p. 207). Here the memory of the war reveals the absence of anxiety over their war experience, as there was no need to justify their war privately. Instead, the veterans only needed and wanted to remember their experiences that were positive. This created a more positive memory of their wartime experience, as the scrapbooks are full of photographs that soldiers had greater freedom to take while campaigning and on leave as compared to soldiers on the western front. These scrapbooks displayed a private memory that was joyful and showed happy days, a memory that was being denied by the collective memory that pushed suffering and communal mourning.

The success of Fantauzzo’s book rests on its grounding in soldier’s letters, diaries, newspapers, and personal mementos. The strong voice of these veterans is displayed throughout the book and reveals the large amount of research done. Fantauzzo remarks that this book came out of his PhD dissertation and underwent a significant amount of editing before publication, which is evident from the book’s readability. One element that the book could have explored further is the interaction of these British and Dominion soldiers with fellow imperial soldiers, particularly considering that most of the soldiers in the Mesopotamian campaign came from India. Fantauzzo’s discussion of civilian populations shows how these citizen-soldiers viewed the world they were fighting in, but he does not explore how they viewed fellow soldiers from within the empire, a significant question given the importance placed on liberal imperialism.

Fantauzzo’s book illustrates the varied responses and experiences soldiers had of the First World War, pushing back against the established narrative that dominates public memory. His book does a great job revealing how the western front dominates the First World War like an overbearing shadow. In a way, Fantauzzo’s argument that soldiers were obsessed with justifying their war in relation to the western front also applies to historians trying to examine other aspects of the conflict. The
shadow of Flanders and France hangs over every issue confronted by historians, as the public is seemingly only able to understand the war through the tropes of the western front. Fantauzzo shows how empire and the First World War were intrinsically linked by the very soldiers fighting the war, and not just by the political and military elite. The hold of the western front on the memory of the war has removed the link between the war and empire from the public’s perception of the conflict, and for some historians as well. Fantauzzo does an excellent job of not ignoring the western front, but also not allowing it to overshadow the experiences he explores in the book. His work permits us to see the importance of the western front in a much larger context, especially how it worked in one regard to obscure other memories of the imperial nature of the First World War.

Note


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