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Interview met Gerhard Hirschfeld

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Schriftelijk interview met Gerhard Hirschfeld

IJsbrand Buys Ballot



Gerhard Hirschfeld

First, can you tell us something about yourself, your work and your interests in history? What made you become fascinated by the First World War?

I graduated in 1974 from the University of Cologne (having studied history, political science and German language and literature) and then taught for a couple of years at University College Dublin and at the Heinrich Heine-Universität of Düsseldorf (as assistant to Wolfgang J. Mommsen), where I received my doctorate in 1981. For eleven years I worked as a Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute in London before I became director of the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte (Library of Contemporary History) in Stuttgart, an international research library with archival collections specializing in the period from 1914 to the present. I was a NIAS-Fellow at Wassenaar in 1996/1997 and in the same year I was appointed Professor of Modern History at the University of Stuttgart.

There are basically two reasons why I became interested in the history of the First World War. First I began my professional work as a historian of the Second World War – my dissertation dealt with the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and the question of accommodation and collaboration exercised by large parts of the Dutch population – and I kept asking myself if the history of the German occupation would have turned out differently if the Netherlands had not been spared the experience of a previous total war. The second reason derives from the fact that the Library of Contemporary History in Stuttgart as an ‘offspring’ of the ‘Great War’ holds among its vast collections extremely fascinating material (i.e. posters, military maps, photos, soldiers’ front-letters) from this important and formative historical period to which I gradually became attracted in the mid-1990s.

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In most of the literature about the First World War, Emperor Wilhelm II is seen as the instigator of the Great War. Do you agree that the Kaiser has been the person who was responsible for the outbreak of the War?

The German emperor Wilhelm II carries a high political as well as moral responsibility for the outbreak of the war in the summer of 1914, but he does so in a wider, in a more general sense. For more than two decades the Kaiser shaped the essence as well as the style of German foreign policy, rebuking and undermining all sensible approaches (even those by his own Reich Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg) for détente and a lasting peace in Europe. During the so-called July-crisis Wilhelm's position, however, remained largely undecided: while publicly giving Austria-Hungary 'carte blanche' for punishing the 'rabble- and robber-state', as Serbia was called by Wilhelm II, he was obviously not prepared to risk an all-out war which probably would have serious consequences for the monarchy. In the course of the war, the Kaiser's authority gradually diminished and he had only little, almost nothing to say in military matters. He nevertheless remained an important figure within the complicated power structure of the German Reich, due to his constitutional role as head of state and his say in all matters of personnel at the top.

In 1916, Paul von Hindenburg took over the Military High Command from Erich von Falkenhayn, and Erich Ludendorff became second in command. Thereafter, these two men wielded so much power that even the Kaiser lost his influence. Many historians speak of a military dictatorship, which Hindenburg and Ludendorff established until the end of the War. How would you describe the role of Ludendorff during the Great War? In fact, how strong was his position?

The Third Military High Command (OHL), which was formed in the summer of 1916 and lasted until October 1918, consisted of a dual leadership by the generals Paul von Hindenburg and Erich von Ludendorff, the 'saviours of East Prussia' from the Russian invasion in 1914. Unlike their predecessors, the Third OHL massively intervened in all civilian and economic affairs. Despite the fact that the megalomaniacal 'Hindenburg program' with its social coercive measures ('Hilfsdienstgesetz') largely remained a paper exercise, both generals gained an almost dictatorial position, even vis-à-vis the Kaiser and the Reich Chancellor. The German contemporary sociologist Max Weber already described the Third OHL as a

‘political military dictatorship’. The ageing Field Marshall Hindenburg gradually came to occupy a symbolic role, previously held by Bismarck and the Kaiser. It was his ‘First Quarter Master General’ Ludendorff, who became the driving force behind all important military and political decisions. As ‘The silent dictator’ (Martin Kitchen) Ludendorff remained the strategic and political leader while Hindenburg authorized the respective orders and put his name to them. The withdrawal of German troops behind the ‘Hindenburg line’ after the battle of the Somme or the setting-up of far-reaching annexational goals for a victorious ‘Hindenburg peace’ – were all planned and initiated by Ludendorff himself. Only when faced with total defeat, at the end of October 1918, was Ludendorff dismissed and replaced by General Wilhelm Groener (Fourth OHL).

What were the motives of the German political and military leaders for waging War and how do you see these motives in connection with the ‘Septemberprogramm’ of 1914 (a ‘list’ of territorial demands, set up by government officials and some industrialists and signed by the Reich Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg to be introduced after Germany had won the war)?

Long before the outbreak of hostilities, German conservative elites were convinced that a European war would cut the Gordian knot of German ‘Weltpolitik’ and thus help to fulfil their often declared ambitions for colonies and for military as well as political prestige in the world. Some politicians and military men clearly hoped that a war involving all classes of society would also help to undermine or perhaps even halt the apparently unstoppable rise of the social-democratic workers movement. The actual decision to go to war over a relatively minor international crisis like the Sarajevo murder, however, resulted from a fatal mixture of political misjudgement, fear of loss of prestige and stubborn commitments on all sides of a very complicated system of military and political alliances of European states.

In contrast to the German historian Fritz Fischer who saw German war aims, and in particular the ‘Septemberprogramm’ of 1914, with its far reaching economic and territorial demands, as the core of the German government’s decision to go to war, most historians nowadays dismiss this interpretation as being too narrow. These historians and I happen to agree with them, tend to place German war aims, or incidentally all other belligerent nations’ war aims, in the contexts of military events and political

developments during the war.

Do you agree with Hans-Ulrich Wehler that in fact there has been a second Thirty Year War which lasted from 1914 to 1945?

The thesis of a second Thirty Years War between 1914 and 1945 was first expressed by General Charles de Gaulle during his exile years in London and popularized by Raymond Aron in the 1950s. It rests on the assumption that the First World War formed the seedbed for the Second. Of course, there has not been an uncontested continuity from one war to the other – politicians but also the people during the *interbellum* certainly had political options – but neither the Bolshevik revolution nor the rise of Fascism respectively National Socialism would have been possible without the experience and outcome of the First World War. Thus the two wars belong together and they explain each other.

Besides, both world wars are inextricably linked by a number of historical phenomena: Both were mass industrialized wars, characterized by a common and lasting experience of uncontrolled and excessive violence, death and destruction. Both wars saw an expansion of the means and methods of warfare including new and powerful military technology and weapons, but also a general extension (*Entgrenzung*) of the war into all areas of human life. Regarding the First World War I just refer to Germany's unrestricted U-boat warfare, the British sea blockade of German ports causing mass starvation inside Germany, the bombardment of enemy towns by heavy artillery and airplanes, the systematic destruction of a country's infrastructure and landscape (as with the German retreat from the Somme) or the deployment of gas, first on the Western front but later also in the East, in the Balkans and even in the Alps. And there are the deportations and mass killings of the Armenian population in 1915, the first genocide ordered by a state in the twentieth century. I do not think it is necessary to give similar examples from the Second World War.

In your article 'Erster Weltkrieg – Zweiter Weltkrieg: Kriegserfahrungen in Deutschland. Neuere Ansätze und Überlegungen zu einem diachronen Vergleich', you write that for countries like Germany, Russia and The Netherlands, the Second World War is more important than the First World War. This is contrary to the experience of countries like France and England. How do you explain this difference?

The two World Wars are remembered differently – even until today. While for the French, Belgians, British and Australians (to name just four of the former allied countries) the First World War still remains 'La Grande Guerre', 'The Great War' or 'De Grote Oorlog', the Germans, Russians and also the Dutch (though for different reasons) look to the Second World War as the most decisive historical event and watershed in the history of the twentieth century. Russians view the war against Nazi Germany (1941-1945), which caused incredible loss of life, as their 'Great Patriotic War'. The Dutch still see the oppressive German occupation (1940-1945) but particularly their country's liberation in 1945 as historical beacons, while the First World War still lies 'beyond our national sphere of remembrance' (Maarten Brands). As far as Germany is concerned, the Second World War (unlike the previous one with the exception of the short-lived Russian invasion of East Prussia in 1914) was also fought on German soil, involving the civilian population and resulting in a colossal number of deaths and wounded exceeding that of the First World War by far. For Germans today this war is forever linked with the establishment and rule of the Nazi dictatorship, which, along with other barbarous crimes against humanity, caused the Shoah, the murder of six million European Jews.

With the generational change of our cultural and historical memory in the years to come, Europeans will have to face a further historisation of the first half of the Twentieth Century that will draw both World Wars and the *interbellum* stronger together than ever before. The inevitable process of historisation will also affect – I think it has already begun – and influence the work of historians. This is not just the case with historians using a generational approach to history (like Ulrich Herbert in his fascinating study on Werner Best or Michael Wildt in his recent collective biography of the functionaries of the Reich Security Office). Also historians who are seeking, for example, to explain the barbarisation of warfare or the excessive use of violence against civilians during the Second World War have no choice but to look back to the events and the repercussions of the previous 'total war'.

*The Netherlands were neutral during the First World War. This was deliberately maintained in the German war plan by Von Moltke. According to Moltke, the Netherlands would be a *Luftröhre* that would give Germany the necessary air to breathe during the war. How important do you think Dutch neutrality was for German warfare?*

While the first Schlieffen-plan of 1905 still considered the possibility of German troops invading the neutral Netherlands, Schlieffen's successor as chief of the general staff, Helmuth von Moltke the younger, saw more advantages than disadvantages in respecting Dutch neutrality: the Netherlands should become a steady supplier for Germany's much needed foodstuffs and, by keeping open import and export lines for German industry, help to bypass the expected British naval control and sea blockade. Moltke was proved right: the Netherlands became an asset for the German war economy. By 1915 Dutch export of pork alone to Germany was five times higher than before the war. The German economy also gained from the setting-up (in late 1914) of the Netherlands Overseas Trust (NOT), technically a private company, which expanded into an extremely powerful institution that soon took control of all foreign trade of the Netherlands. The NOT struck a deal with the Entente powers, particularly with Britain, which allowed the Netherlands to maintain their overseas trade, while at the same time the company's existence helped to facilitate illegal (mostly agrarian) exports to Germany on an enormous scale. As a countermove Dutch industry received the urgently needed coal from the mining areas of the Ruhr. Increasing German military pressure after 1917 – most obvious from the Third OHL under Ludendorff – forced the Dutch government under the cautiously pro-German premier Cort van der Linden (nicknamed: Caught unter den Linden) to make even further concessions (for instance, parts of the German military supply for the Flanders front ran on Dutch railway tracks).

Are there any important differences in the way German and non-German historians look at the First World War? Can you identify a national historiography or do you see now a general consensus existing among historians around the world?

Historiography about the 'Great War' has surely become an international trade. There is hardly any other period in modern history that has, in recent years, benefited likewise from scholarly exchange or joint ventures such as conferences and publications. This is not least due to the existence of

international research groups and centers like the one attached to the 'Historial de la Grande Guerre' in Péronne or of scientific networks like the Society for World War One Studies which especially caters for university graduates doing a Ph.D. in this field.

The number of publications, notably on a cultural history of the war, has multiplied since the mid-1980s. Initially, German historians were a little reluctant to engage in writing a history of war mentalities or of war culture like their French and Anglo-Saxon colleagues did. These scholars took up the tradition of the Annales School or followed in the footsteps of cultural historians like George L. Mosse or literary scholars like Paul Fussell. This, however, has changed and 'Kulturgeschichte des Kriegs' like the French concept of 'guerre et culture' have become modern trademarks of the First World War historiography – in Germany as elsewhere. There are, thankfully, still scholarly controversies and debates among historians engaged in writing about the First World War (recently on the concept of 'total war', on the contradictions of the international system since 1911 and the responsibilities of the general staffs in preparing the 'Great War', or on the collective experiences and representations of violence in the *interbellum* generated by the war) but these disputes do not any longer develop along national lines or issues.

Which book(s) about the First World War do you see as the leading work(s) at the moment?

This is a particularly hard one but I will not disappoint your readers. Therefore I have chosen ten books which, in the last 50 years, have sparked important historical debates or contributed in a fine scholarly way to our modern interpretation of the 'Great War' (and my apologies to all my colleagues not included in this list):

Jean-Jacques Becker, *1914, comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre. Contribution à l'étude de l'opinion publique, printemps – été 1914* (Paris 1977).

Gerald D. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor in Germany 1914-1918* (Princeton, NJ 1966).

Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18* (Düsseldorf 1961).

Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York 1975).

Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, Irina Renz eds, *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg* (second edition; Paderborn et al. 2004).

Jürgen Kocka, *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg. Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1914-1918* (Göttingen 1973).

George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York et al. 1990).

George H. Soutou, *L'or et le sang. Les buts de guerre économique de la Première Guerre mondiale* (Paris 1989).

Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. 1: *To Arms* (Oxford 2001) (2 vols to follow).

Jay M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (London 1986).

If I were to choose just one book I would not hesitate to recommend our own *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg* (first published in 2003), to which 146 historians from 15 countries have contributed, and where your readers should find answers to most of their questions concerning the history as well as the historiography of the First World War.

Are there any subjects within the historiography of the First World War which still need a lot of research?

What we really need are comparative studies of the political, social, economic, cultural and mental processes taking place before, during and also after the First World War involving a number of the belligerent but also the neutral countries. There are already some interim results presented by Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert with the help of international research groups in their impressive comparative study on *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919* (Cambridge 1997). Besides, the Eastern front and also the fronts in the Balkans have so far not received the scholarly attention these areas of the war deserve to find. We know very little of the war experiences of the Russian, the Serbian, the Austrian-Hungarian or any

other nations' soldiers fighting in the East or the South East, and we know even less of the plight of the civilian population in those parts of Europe. The same goes for the First World War history of the Ottoman Empire which so far has only been dealt with by a handful of experts on Turkish history. There is, however, a steadily growing interest (particularly by scholars of Genocide Studies) in the deportations and mass murder of the Armenians, but the current preoccupation with this first full-blown genocide in the history of the twentieth century (after many years of regretful neglect) should not become an obstacle to working on other important historical questions and themes related to the Ottoman Empire at war. And finally, if we really want to know why the First World War was a truly global affair, we should do more research into the war history of the European colonies in Africa and Asia, but also into the fate of those coloured non-European soldiers fighting in the colonies as well as on many European battlefields.

What research are you involved in at the moment? Can you give us a little preview of what it is about?

I am currently working on two projects. Together with my colleagues Gerd Krumeich and Irina Renz (and with support from some very renowned international historians) I am preparing a general reader about the *Germans at the Somme 1914-1918*. Besides a number of introductory essays, this book will contain mostly unpublished German documents (i.e. extracts from soldiers diaries and letters, poems, personal memories) and other archival material (also private photos and sketches) which should throw more light on some, up to now rather neglected, aspects of the history of the Somme, one of the bloodiest battlegrounds of the First World War. It deals with the German occupation leading up to the famous Somme battle of 1916, the German retreat behind the Hindenburg line in early 1917, practising a policy of scorched earth, and the so-called second battle at the Somme in 1918, where tanks played a decisive role.

The other book I am writing at the moment and which will surely keep me busy for some time to come, is a comprehensive history of the Netherlands in the 20th century, meant for an educated German audience. It will cover the period 1890 to 2000 and is part of a new series called 'Europäische Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert' by Beck Publishers in Munich. Rather than adopting the current dominant paradigm of a 'short 20th

century' (1914 - 1989/1990), where the outbreak (or rather the outcome) of the First World War is regarded as the beginning of wide-ranging political and territorial changes in Europe, our 'European History' will take into account the manifold processes of modernity which were already well underway before the 'great seminal catastrophe' of the First World War took place. It should be interesting to see how the characteristics and peculiarities of modern Dutch history will fit into such a general European framework.

Thank you very much for answering our questions!