

'A Forgotten Front: A Review of *The Home Front: Civilian Life in World War One and The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*

Peter Cooksley, *The Home Front: Civilian Life in World War One*, (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2006), ISBN: 0752436880.

Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ISBN: 9780521728863.

The ninetieth anniversary of the Armistice in November 2008 reinforced the association of the World War One with tragedy, the trenches, poetry and the poppy. However, we should remember as the existence of the last British veterans highlights, this historical period contained a range of narratives documenting the diversity of human experiences. It involved both individuals who joined up to fight for Britain and its empire, and civilians who worked tirelessly for the war effort on the Home Front. The 40 million people in the latter category are examined in these two books by Peter Cooksley and Adrian Gregory.

In his latest book, Peter Cooksley claims to unveil for the first time a history of the Home Front. Thereby he intends to present a new perspective on the history of the First World War to offer a contrast to the evocative and heart-breaking experiences of trench warfare. However, this publishing claim does not take into account the fact that this subject has been examined in both academic and popular works by Arthur Marwick and Richard Van Emden. Whilst the book does contain minor factual errors, it is evident that this work also has great strengths. For example, the afterword on 'civilian soldiers' and the creation of voluntary training corps was a refreshing read on an overlooked aspect of the Home Front. According to Dorset estate agent and commander of one such unit, Col. Frank Hankinson, these units 'consisted of men too old, too young or too unfit for military service'.¹ The creation of these units presents to the reader that Britain was, as in the Second World War, preparing for the possibility of an invasion. In my opinion, this interesting aspect dedicated to these 'grandpa regiments' of World War One could have been significantly expanded into a full chapter rather than a mere afterword of three pages.

¹ Cooksley, Peter, *The Home Front: Civilian Life in World War One*, (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2006) p. 181.

Cooksley has an unmistakable interest in the history of aviation. It is admirable that he should attempt to broaden the popular perceptions of the Home Front as Neil Hanson and Andrew Hyde have done in their accounts of the 'First Blitz'. The Great War was important for the development of aviation with the Zeppelin raids, the creation of the Royal Air Force and the dogfights above the Western Front which gained a place in both the imagination and nightmares of the British population. To this extent, public officials in the North Devon town of Barnstaple seriously contemplated taking out insurance in case of a possible attack from the air. However, it can be said that Cooksley has given too much importance to aviation. His eighth chapter entitled 'The Hour and the Men' examines Britain's anti-air defences which distracts from his intention of writing a history of civilian life. As a result of this exploration, it is hard not to argue that this produces an uneven analysis.

In contrast, Adrian Gregory has received a significant amount of praise for *The Last Great War*. Indeed, Gary Sheffield has hailed this book as the most important piece of literature on the British Home Front since Arthur Marwick's *The Deluge*. This claim is not unwarranted. It is a triumph, an enthralling read as well as a scholarly examination proving that the Home Front is still a growing area in the historiography of the British experience during the First World War. Gregory provides innovative analysis on the importance of religion for the British population, the myths of war enthusiasm in 1914 and of the war as a universal catastrophe. In particular, the section on war enthusiasm was intriguing because Gregory illustrates that even the men who had previously lived in the slums and joined up 'would fight to protect even the worse places from the threat of worse fates'.²

His enthusiasm to participate in and promote the historiography of both the First World War and the Home Front is encouraging. Other historians of the Home Front have overlooked this specific dimension, to their loss, resulting in the memories of civilians during the First World War becoming overshadowed by the scarring experiences of the Second World War. The experience of watching the night sky in Devon turn red from the Luftwaffe bombing Exeter and Plymouth would forever haunt civilian memories of

² Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 280.

the twentieth century. Consequently, the important recollections of living on the Home Front during the Great War were replaced by the narrative of the British population rallying together, not against the Kaiser, but against Nazi aggression. His thesis regarding the languages and economies of sacrifice stimulates academic debate surrounding the Home Front. Despite the fact that Gregory had not intended to write this work as a textbook, it will undoubtedly become the standard text on the British population's experiences during the First World War.

In comparison, these two titles represent two different perspectives on the thinking of the Home Front: one being a popular work of history and the other an academic analysis. The former is attempting to raise awareness of the Home Front to an audience who equates the First World War with the trenches of the Western Front. At the same time, the latter is a testament to great scholarship which is accessible to both academic and popular audiences. The experiences of the British Home Front should be examined from both of these perspectives as one approach complements the other. Against the vast numbers of titles dedicated to the trenches and the Home Front of the First World War, these two books are an indication of popular interest in the broader aspects of the war.

It was apparently H. G. Wells who coined the term 'The People's War' in 1914, but as Gregory argues 'we tend to reserve this perspective to 1939-1945'.³ However, these books make the case that we should consider the personal involvement of civilians in the First World War as important as the Second World War because victory can never be assured without the partnership of the combatant and civilian alike. The acceptance of the popular view of the First World War is far from over, but with these two works it is clear that the Home Front has gained a significant foothold.

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³ Gregory, *The Last Great War*, p.6