

## Introduction

The War in the Interwar - La guerre dans l'entre-deux-guerres (1918-1939)

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The articles in this special issue of *Synergies* began life as papers delivered at a conference held in the University of Birmingham between 2 and 4 April 2009, under the auspices of the AHRC-sponsored Culture F-B Research Network. Our intention, as expressed in the initial call for papers, was to “explore the responses to war of artistic, cultural-literary, intellectual and political movements in a specifically Franco-British perspective”. We welcomed papers on themes such as British and French pacifism, cross-Channel avant-gardes and their responses to war, writers’ organisations, as well as analysis of state or official visits, memory and memorials of World War One, *regards croisés*, and studies on the “harbingers” of the coming war in Britain and France. Our expectations were more than fulfilled by the response, and we were delighted that in the end we were able to welcome such a range of scholars - established academics as well as postgraduates - not only from the UK and from France, but also from Canada, the US and Australia.

We began with the conviction that the “War in the Interwar” is a theme for research that remains ripe for exploration, particularly in a comparative perspective. The First World War devastated the combatant nations, and its consequences signalled the end of one order of civilisation, opening a much more uncertain period fraught with doubt, apprehension and fear, which has rightly been characterised as “*The Morbid Age*” (Overy, 2009). It was a period of which “the convention has been to see these fears as a product of the dark 1930s, but they were evident in the 1920s too, and their roots lay before the First World War, an event which threw the whole culture of crisis into sharp relief; they flourished long before the slump and the shadow of Hitler gave them more plausible substance” (Overy, 2009: 2).

The title of the conference, “The War in the Interwar”, reflects two Janus-like concerns. One is the existence within French and British societies in the 1920s and 1930s of the all-pervading memory of the 1914-18 combat itself. Ceremonies for the fallen, battlefield clearance and reconstruction, works of memory and witness, the memorialisation of the “War Experience” (Mosse, 1990) and many other features physically marked every single year of the period. With the arrival of unfamiliar and modern socio-economic pressures - most intensely symbolised by the Wall Street Crash - and the emergence, from the early 1920s, of new ideological regimes that increasingly flaunted their aggressiveness, there was also a marked tendency to look forward, to speculate on, and even to anticipate a new conflict. On both sides of the Channel writers and intellectuals - the “Cassandras and Jeremiahs” referred to by Overy - engaged in reflection and debate on these matters. One of the most important of all such contributions in France, Julien Benda’s *La Trahison des clercs*, published in 1927, has also become one of the most emblematic intellectual

interventions of all because either it is most frequently read as a call to “non-engagement”, or recuperated as a critique of all intellectual commitment. But if one carefully re-reads it in the context of the 1920s one may see clearly that Benda’s work is itself caught between two preoccupations. It looks back at 1914 and lays the responsibility for that catastrophe squarely at Germany’s door; in this, it shares much with the position of some of Benda’s sworn enemies on the extreme right, especially in the Action française. Yet chillingly it also “prognosticates” another apocalyptic crisis of civilisation, assuming the continuance of contemporaneous ideological and intellectual trends:

Si, en effet, on se demande où va une humanité dont chaque groupe s’enfoncé plus âprement que jamais dans la conscience de son intérêt particulier en tant que particulier et se fait dire par ses moralistes qu’il est sublime dans la mesure où il ne connaît pas d’autre loi que cet intérêt, un enfant trouverait la réponse : elle va à la guerre la plus totale et la plus parfaite que le monde aura vue, soit qu’elle ait lieu entre nations, soit entre classes. [...] Et de fait, il suffit de penser, en ce qui concerne la nation, à l’Italie, et, en ce qui touche la classe, à la Russie pour voir à quel point de perfection inconnu jusqu’à ce jour l’esprit de haine contre ce qui n’est pas soi peut être porté, chez un groupe d’hommes, par un réalisme conscient et enfin libéré de toute morale non pratique. Ajoutons [...] que ces deux peuples sont salués comme modèles dans le monde entier par ceux qui veulent soit la grandeur de leur nation, soit le triomphe de leur classe<sup>1</sup>. (Benda, 1927: 151-2)

Once Hitler’s racialist Nazi party had been elected to power in 1933, the constituent elements of the coming *Rassenkrieg* were in place. Observing events in late-1930s France only served to confirm Benda in his established view.

The War in the Interwar was experienced somewhat differently in France and in Britain. Common to both is the observation that “the key intellectual and ideological debates of the interwar years were nourished by the history they confronted”. Yet it is also the case that the British crisis seemed to be “far less dangerous, violent or divisive than the crisis in Europe and beyond”. Be that as it may, involvement in the 1914-18 war, and Britain’s role in attempting to police the post-war order, meant that the British were henceforth open to sharing “Europe’s problems as if they were their own and which gave a wide airing to ideas and ideologies that were not British in origin” (Overy, 2009: 369). In France, “la tourmente des années 1930 [...] a accéléré une crise de la conscience nationale” (Rioux and Sirinelli, 1998: 190). Here, at the time, the year 1930 was consciously identified as a critical turning point by many intellectuals of different persuasions: it constituted, explicitly, “the end of the post-war period”, “*la fin de l’après-guerre*”. Describing this phenomenon, Daniel Halévy was admirably succinct:

1920: aube de l’après-guerre ; 1930, qu’en dirons-nous ? C’est rare que tout près une année livre son secret. Ici, pourtant, nul doute : le tournant est marqué. Juillet 1930 : nous évacuons la Rhénanie ; septembre 1930 : élections révolutionnaires et nationalistes en Allemagne : voilà une fin et un commencement. 1920-1930 : c’est un entr’acte entre deux âges, je ne veux pas dire entre deux actes. (Quoted in Myszyrowicz, 1973: 292)

Beyond these backward- and forward-looking assessments, it is clear too that new intellectual movements, such as Emmanuel Mounier’s *Esprit*, founded in 1932, reflected the social dilemmas underlying and influencing the cultural crisis of the period. French republican culture was predicated on a culture of the individual, and yet modernism increasingly required individuals to be incorporated and located within society. Alongside many other movements, whether lasting or ephemeral, Mounier’s *personnalisme* responded to this dilemma, a trend characterised by Jean Touchard as “*l’esprit des années trente*”.

As for the conundrums surrounding the likelihood of peace or war, 1930 again represented a pivotal moment. Writing in the *Nouvelle Revue française* in April 1932, Jean Schlumberger mused: “Qui aurait pu prévoir, il y a seulement un an, le fatalisme avec lequel certaines couches du public se laisseraient imposer par leurs journaux la croyance à une guerre imminente?” (quoted in Myszyrowicz, 1973: 305) Apprehension of the threat of a new war was not limited solely to intellectuals; it was felt broadly within society. Many more such examples could be given to illustrate the phenomenon of the War in the Interwar, and indeed it is a question which continues to resonate in histories of the period, especially in works seeking to explore the reasons for the defeat in 1940 (e.g. Quétel, 2010).

In what follows, we have adopted a loosely chronological order, at the same time as attempting to reflect the way papers were clustered together in the conference. Memory and commemoration are at the heart of contributions by Alison Fell and Elizabeth Greenhalgh, who both examine memory in very different contexts: the first analyses French and British nurse memoirs, the second reviews how the often prickly relationship between Marshal Foch and the British was negotiated as the years passed after the war. Next come a group of articles reflecting the diverse ways in which cultural responses to war were articulated. Marie-Emmanuelle Reytier provides a timely reassessment of Louise Weiss’s *L’Europe nouvelle*, in the light, above all, of this weekly’s attitudes towards Germany. Claire Toupin-Guyot focuses on Catholic writers’ responses to the notion of “la paix usée”. This striking phrase was coined by the anguished writer Georges Bernanos. On the eve of the defeat, and already in South-American exile, Bernanos sent Jean Paulhan an article entitled “Nous retournons dans la guerre” for publication in the *NRF* (Bernanos, 1940) where he reflects bitterly on the tragic betrayal of the sacrifices made in the Great War. The articles by Françoise Bort and David Uhrig offer analyses on how British and French writers - the former represented by John Lehmann, the latter by Maurice Blanchot - reflected on the cultural crisis. There follows a group of articles drawn from papers constituting a panel devoted to questions surrounding pacifism. Norman Ingram examines the tensions inherent in the pacifist legacy of 1914, specifically in regard to the development of the *Ligue des droits de l’homme*. Carl Bouchard examines contrasting French and British views on sovereignty after the First World War, whilst Peter Farrugia focuses attention on the Entente partners’ respective approaches and roles in that important international peace movement, the *Rassemblement universel pour la Paix*.

The articles by Jacques Puyaubert and Thibault Tellier, on Georges Bonnet and Paul Reynaud respectively, contextualise how these politicians’ attitudes towards Britain and towards appeasement were formed and articulated. Indeed, by the time of the Munich crisis in September 1938, it was no longer a question of whether war was going to break out, but when. Once this realisation began to percolate through French and British social strata, measures began finally to be put in place in anticipation of a new (and as yet unfathomable) conflict; here, the article drawing on research carried out by Lindsey Dodd and Marc Wiggam into civil defence preparation on both sides of the Channel opens new territory. My own article on the morale-boosting Royal Visit to France in July 1938 aims to throw light on why it was considered important to recast the Entente once again, even if the statue of Britannia, inaugurated during this visit, would have a significantly (and symbolically) shorter existence than had been envisaged for it. Finally, Jean-Claude Lescure, using a hitherto unexploited source, sheds new light on how the new conflict impacted on commerce and business during the Phoney War.

There is certainly scope for further research (and further conferences) on this fascinating topic. In future one might conceive of a broader conspectus, to revisit not only France

and Britain, but also to extend the parameters to include Germany, Italy and Spain... We hope that this special issue will whet the appetite, and that there will be more to come. This special issue is rounded off by an article by Estelle Epinoux, on the question of sexual identity as portrayed in Neil Jordan's film, *The Crying Game*. The article analyses gender identities beyond the binary, in terms of hybrid criteria.

### Acknowledgements

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Furthermore, I should like to record here my own personal vote of thanks to Jennie Turner, administrator in the Department of French Studies, for her patience and efficient organisation in preparing the conference held in the University of Birmingham on 2-4 April 2009. Thanks too to Professor Jennifer Birkett, Dr Angela Kershaw and Victoria Harrison for their help during the conference, and to Professor Frank Lough, then acting head of the nascent School of Languages, Cultures, History of Art and Music in the College of Arts and Law, for his support.

Above all, I should like to express my profound gratitude to all those who attended the conference, some of whom came from very far away, and for making it such a memorably friendly and inspiring event.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Indeed, if we ask ourselves what will happen to a humanity where every group is striving more eagerly than ever to feel conscious of its own particular interests, and makes its moralists tell it that it is sublime to the extent that it knows no law but this interest - a child can give the answer. This humanity is heading for the greatest and most perfect war ever seen in the world, whether it is a war of nations, or a war of classes. [...] As regards the nation, think of Italy; as regards class, think of Russia; and you will see the hitherto unknown point of perfection attained by the spirit of hatred against what is 'different' among a group of men, consciously realist and at last liberated from all non-practical morality. And my predictions are not rendered less probable by the fact that these two nations are hailed as models throughout the world by those who desire either the grandeur of their nation or the triumph of their class" (Benda, 1928: 183-4).