

WAR ON ALL FRONTS

LSE has a long tradition of innovative research on the first world war. An international approach can shed new light, according to David Stevenson and Heather Jones. **Joanna Bale** finds out more.

As we near the first world war's centenary, it has been reported that the last veteran has died, so none survive to share their memories of the horrors of a conflict that saw more than nine million military deaths. Yet the events of 1914 to 1918 remain a powerful drama that continues to inspire and perplex historians.

One of the key influences underpinning much of the research on the Great War in the last 40 years is a pioneering inaugural lecture at LSE by James Joll. He argued that if one is to understand the minds of the statesmen whose decisions brought about that war, it is necessary first to understand the basic assumptions on which they based those decisions. His 1968 lecture,

"1914: the unspoken assumptions", which marked Joll's arrival from Oxford as Stevenson Professor of International History at LSE, is still extensively cited.

LSE is widely regarded as the leading centre in Europe for the study of international history and one of the most important for first world war studies. The National Archives in Kew, as well as archives at the Imperial War Museum and King's College, are nearby. The School attracts some of the world's most eminent international history scholars, including Niall Ferguson, visiting professor from Harvard, who published the critically acclaimed *The Pity of War: explaining World War One* in 1998.

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“The research carried out on 1918 tends to be surprisingly nationalistic, focusing mainly on Britain or America”

Continuing the long tradition of innovative work in the field of first world war studies at LSE, Professor David Stevenson has carried out a comprehensive re-examination of the final year of the war, focusing on the complex reasons why Germany and the Central Powers wanted a ceasefire in 1918, and why the Allies and the US granted one. Drawing on seven sets of country archives, the research is more international in its approach than previous studies, and forms the basis of a new book *With our Backs to the Wall: victory and defeat in 1918* (2011).

Professor Stevenson explains: “The research carried out on 1918 tends to be surprisingly nationalistic, focusing mainly on Britain or America. I look at both sides, including all the Allied countries, so have used the country archives of Austria, Germany, Britain, France, Canada, the USA and Italy. I look at all the different fronts, not just the Western Front, so the archival work is more wide-ranging than in previous work on 1918.

“The book does not just examine the reasons why the Germans and Austrians lost and sued for peace, but also perhaps the more interesting question of why the Allies and Americans agreed to it when they were on the up. You have to understand the balance of military advantage, but you also have to get behind it and look at the political and economic factors that were influencing the decision makers in October 1918.”

The book sheds new light on the importance of economics, which has tended to be overshadowed by political and military factors. Professor Stevenson says: “One of the arguments in the book is that Germany was not economically on its last legs in 1918 and could have gone on for several months, so it was a political decision for Germany to end the war.

“On the other side, one of the big puzzles is why the Americans were so keen to end the war, and again, this is new: the Americans were very worried about how much the war was costing. This is clear once you get into the American sources: it was far more expensive than they had previously realised. That’s not the only reason – there were also influential developments in domestic US politics – but it’s one of the important things that comes into play.”

The book argues that it is crucial to look at what was going on behind the scenes on all sides to really understand why the Great War ended in 1918. Professor Stevenson concludes: “The argument is that if you are trying to understand why the war ended, you need to look at the tensions and conflicts between the victors, as well as the factors that influenced the defeated countries.”

The importance of an international approach to understanding events in the first world war is also explored in another new LSE book, published this year by Dr Heather Jones. It is the first comparative study of violence against British, French and German prisoners of war and how this fuelled propaganda and reprisals.

Dr Jones explains: “Instead of being sent to home front camps, increasing numbers of prisoners were used as forced labour on the Western Front, working for the British, French and German armies. This is the first book to show the scale of this and how stories told by repatriated or exchanged prisoners were used to create propaganda to influence enemy governments.

“There’s no book on German prisoners in Britain or France, so I was really working from scratch on these topics. There are a few books and articles on prisoners in Germany, but because they weren’t comparative, there was no way of knowing what motivated the Germans.

“My book shows that in 1916 the French were treating German prisoners really badly on the battlefield at Verdun, using them as forced labour in poor conditions. That was why the decision was made by the Germans to put Allied prisoners behind the lines in 1917 as a reciprocal action. Comparison really shows how and why Germany was ultimately prepared to make much more ruthless decisions to use prisoners as forced labour than Britain and France.”

Professor Stevenson and Dr Jones will be taking part in an International History Department summer programme in July, speaking at the Imperial War Museum, London, on the experiences of ordinary people in the capital. ■



David Stevenson is a professor of international history at LSE. His book, *With our Backs to the Wall: victory and defeat in 1918*, is published by Penguin in the UK and by Harvard University Press in the US (May 2011).



Heather Jones is a lecturer in international history at LSE. Dr Jones’s book, *Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany 1914-1920*, is published by Cambridge University Press (June 2011).



Joanna Bale is a senior press officer at LSE.

Summer lectures and tours

Professor Stevenson and Dr Jones will both be contributing to the Department of International History’s inaugural summer lecture and travel series this year. This event will be a week-long programme of lectures, using the department’s world-class academics, and visits to sites linked to the themes of the lectures. On the day devoted to the world wars, Professor Stevenson will talk about Britain’s role in the conflicts and Dr Jones will discuss the home front, before accompanying the subsequent visit to the Imperial War Museum. Other highlights include Professor Alan Sked speaking on the Anglo-American relationship, ahead of a tour of the Houses of Parliament, and Professor Dominic Lieven detailing the struggle against Napoleon, followed by a boat trip to Greenwich and the National Maritime Museum. This series will run from Monday 11 until Sunday 17 July. For more details on these events and booking information, please visit: lse.ac.uk/internationalHistory/travel/homeTravel.aspx