



4-3-2015

“Two Wars and the Long Twentieth Century:” A Response

Bryan G. Caswell
Gettysburg College

S. Marianne Johnson
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Caswell, Bryan G. and Johnson, S. Marianne, "“Two Wars and the Long Twentieth Century:” A Response" (2015). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 92.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/92>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/92>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

“Two Wars and the Long Twentieth Century:” A Response

Abstract

Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University and renowned historian of the American Civil War, authored an article in the *New Yorker* recently entitled “Two Wars and the Long Twentieth Century.” Taken primarily from her remarks in the Rede Lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge earlier in 2015, Faust’s article takes advantage of the proximity of the anniversaries of the First World War and the American Civil War to advocate for a dialogue of greater continuity between the two conflicts. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, WWI, World War I

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“Two Wars and the Long Twentieth Century:” A Response

April 3, 2015

by Bryan Caswell '15 and Sarah Johnson '15

Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University and renowned historian of the American Civil War, authored an article in the *New Yorker* recently entitled [“Two Wars and the Long Twentieth Century.”](#) Taken primarily from her remarks in the Rede Lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge earlier in 2015, Faust’s article takes advantage of the proximity of the anniversaries of the First World War and the American Civil War to advocate for a dialogue of greater continuity between the two conflicts. Faust cites the apparently similar roles of industry, suffering, national mobilization, and memory in both wars as evidence for a ‘long twentieth century’ similar to the ‘long nineteenth century’ so often used by historians to denote the period between the French Revolution and the end of the First World War. Faust argues that “A case can be made that the American Civil War anticipated, in important ways, the transformations that have so often been attributed to the years between 1914 and 1918.” This statement is highly problematic, and requires viewing the two conflicts as if in self-contained historical vacuums. As Dr. Faust’s expressed wish was to place the American Civil War in historical context, however, we have resolved to do just that.

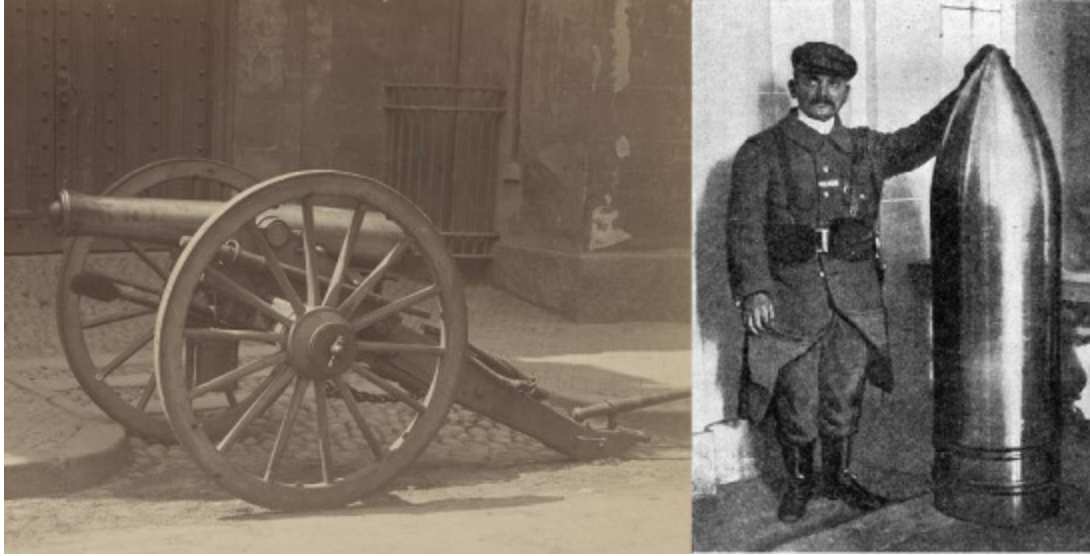
Perhaps the most emphasized point of Faust’s article is the untold carnage of the American Civil War and the First World War. Among other things, Faust points to the unexpected nature of that carnage in both wars and the role of industry in their harvests of death. Claims of similarity based on these factors are rather disingenuous. The industrial slaughter of the First World War had never been approached by any previous conflict and truly heralded a new age in warfare. The mortal cost of the American Civil War, although high for a budding nation only seventy-six years old at the time, should not be understood as anything out of the ordinary. The last major wars in Europe, those involving Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, inflicted massive numbers of casualties. Napoleon’s invasion of Russia alone incurred more casualties than the entire Civil War solely among French forces. The high number of American casualties in the Civil War is also a misleading figure, as it is reflective of the nature of *civil* war in which both armies were made up of Americans. Such widespread devastation has largely been attributed to another of Faust’s points for the importance of the American Civil War, namely the mass mobilization of people along nationalist lines and the participation of all citizens, civilian and soldier, in the waging of war. The French Revolution, not the American Civil War, is the origin of this phenomenon in the modern period, and indeed

the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 was largely an effort to stuff the genie of nationalism, with all its dire implications, back into its bottle.

Faust also argues that the nature of these two wars' suffering was similar, in that the industrialized warfare of the Civil War foreshadowed that of the First World War. While the Civil War was undoubtedly a conflict in which industry played a key role, comparing the industry of the Civil War to that of the First World War is like comparing a tabby cat to a lion; although certain technical similarities exist, they are two completely different animals. Industry also did not automatically lessen the decisive nature of war, as can be seen in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, arguably one of the most decisive wars in history and one that relied heavily upon the industrial capacity of Prussia.

This argument also belies a misunderstanding of the nature of combat in the American Civil War. More men died of disease during the Civil War than died as a result of violence, a condition that was reversed in the First World War. The deadliness of the Civil War has in fact confused historians for decades. The proverbial cause of the war's great bloodshed was the inability of commanders to modernize tactics in the face of more advanced military technology like the rifled-musket, conical bullet, and rifled artillery. The end of the Civil War did see some tactical innovation, however, such as the digging of earthworks. While Faust does acknowledge that these earthworks served to protect men from small-arms fire rather than artillery fire as did the trenches of the First World War, she goes on to state in an utterly predictable manner that "It is difficult now not to shake one's head at the way that Britain, and indeed all of Europe, failed to learn the lessons of Gettysburg, Cold Harbor, and Fredericksburg, at how European officers and writers dismissed the Civil War as irrelevant—in the wonderful though perhaps apocryphal words attributed to the German commander Helmuth von Moltke, as little more than 'two armed mobs chasing each other around the country, from which nothing could be learned.'" Contrary to Faust's statement, Moltke's sentiments are thoroughly understandable. In light of European military history, the American Civil War was prosecuted incompetently and fought by amateur soldiers with the most minimal of training at all levels and on both sides. The American Civil War held no lessons for the professional, highly trained armies of Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. The implications of new martial technology had been observed, evaluated, and planned for before the outbreak of the Civil War and while such 'outmoded' conventions as bayonet and cavalry charges were thought to have been made obsolete, the continued success of these tactics in the North Italian War of 1859 convinced European armies to continue to apply them on the battlefield.

In regard to memory and legacy, Faust's comparisons are only applicable because she is not analyzing the First World War, but merely the British experience of the Western Front. Contrary to the wishes of many American Civil War historians, the Civil War had little global impact other than the preservation of the United States. During the course of the Great War, over 100 countries would declare belligerency as members of the Allies or the Central Powers. Eight million combat deaths, four empires obliterated, new nations created, three major revolutions, the global map redrawn: this is the legacy of the Great War. The twentieth century was not born out of obscure comparisons drawn between vaguely similar aspects of two wars. Rather, the twentieth century was born out of the radical global, social, political, and military changes wrought by the Great War.



The 12-pounder Napoleon (left) used at Gettysburg served as an instrument of death in the Civil War, but had serious constraints as to range and line of sight firing. The industrial age of the Great War, however, produced heavy artillery such as the French 400mm shell (right) that was capable of miles of indirect fire and caused massive casualties. The Civil War may have barely anticipated some level of industrial warfare, but the comparison ends there. Library of Congress. Wikimedia Commons

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2015/04/03/two-wars-and-the-long-twentieth-century-a-response/>