

Book Review: Langhamer, Claire, Lucy Noakes and Claudia Siebrecht (eds.). *Total War. An Emotional History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020

By Simona Tobia

When this book was printed in 2020, we had just published Issue n. 3 of CEIWJ on post-traumatic stress disorder, and at the same time had just decided that the following issue would be about emotions as a form of “close encounter” in war. Adding this book review to Issue n. 4, titled “Close Encounters in War and the Emotions” thus seemed like a natural choice.

Total War. An Emotional History features some of the most renowned scholars in the fields of the history of emotions and war and culture studies, but the value of the book goes well beyond the expertise of its authors. The eight studies in this edited collection place “the emotions of war centre stage” (Langhamer, Noakes & Siebrecht, *Total War*: 1) and investigate the intensity and impact of emotions in the total wars of the 20th century. By proposing to use “emotions” as an analytical tool, they also recognize the transformative power of these emotions and consider their linguistic, cultural and physiological dimensions. The volume’s methodological thrust is to use the “expression of emotion” as an analytical category and to study the “emotional agency of historical actors” to then reach new conclusions on motivation and causation in the context of total war. The ambitious purpose of this collection is threefold: on the one hand, the editors offer a reflection on ways to study how twentieth-century conflicts trigger emotions and their expression, with a specific focus on the concept of “total war” understood as “the erasure of a distinction between military and civilian spheres” and as a context in which the roles of both civilians and combatants are seen as central (3). On the other hand, the book looks at ways in which emotional registers respond to cataclysmic events. The “emotional turn” and the ways it can further understandings of war and conflict through a rich set of frameworks, is also of crucial importance, particularly when considering how the “emotional” can become “political” in these contexts. The third aspect of the volume’s aspiration is one that is particularly important for historians: the methodological question of sources. Historians have studied emotions by looking at cultural outputs, including diaries, letters, fiction, poetry and other art forms. The editors here clearly state that “it is life histories that offer the most obvious way into narrated feeling”

(20), as all chapters use a variety of forms of life-history materials, including memoirs and sources from the Mass Observation Project as well as those mentioned above. One notable omission in the problematization of sources is perhaps a reflection on the role of oral history as a form of life story, as methodologically different from other forms of storytelling, for example for the role of intersubjectivity and memory composure, which set this type of sources apart from written ones.

The relationship between emotion and power emerges as central in the contexts of total war, as emotions are shaped by political power, but they can also challenge the same powers. Emotions are also gendered and classed, as the volume powerfully demonstrates.

In the first chapter, historian Ute Frevert looks at emotional codes about honour and shame in the First World War, concluding that they are deeply gendered and never exclusively individual. As Joanna Bourke has observed (Bourke, *The Emotions in War*; Id., *Fear and Anxiety*), emotions are deeply intertwined between culture, language and body, in a process in which linguistic and social interactions constitute those same sensations. Emotions are featured very strongly in wartime communicative lexicons, including – in Frevert's work – notions of honour and shame, which were given new patriotic and political meanings. Male honour and national honour were seen as synonymous. However, both honour and shame had different meanings for women and men, for example, a shamed woman was a woman who had lost her honour.

Susan R. Grayzel authors the second chapter which looks at the emotions elicited by gas masks in France in the First World War. This object represented on the one hand the intention of the state to protect its citizens, and on the other hand it was the concrete manifestation of fear, anxiety and terror elicited by the possibility of the deployment of chemical weapons. In the interwar years, its symbolic power was exploited both in the contexts of planning and resistance. Grayzel concludes that the emotions linked to this specific object could not be easily controlled and that the gas mask shows the “fundamental interconnectedness” (Langhamer, Noakes & Siebrecht, *Total War*: 58) between objects and the emotions in total war.

Social and cultural historian Michael Roper looks at gender relations in the context of the caring provided to disabled soldiers by their daughters born after the conflict, in the same conflict as the two previous chapters. Roper concludes that accounts of care were gendered because they differed between male and

female accounts: whereas men of the same generation tended to see care as a form of service to the nation, which carried ideas of pride and gratitude, women – daughters – saw this as a constraint on their aspirations. Care was at the centre of cross-generational relationships which triggered deep emotions: “love was synonymous with obligation” (77). At the same time, however, women were also proud of assuming those responsibilities. For Roper, it was the failure of the state in providing care, coupled with the moral expectations thrust upon these daughters, that informed the pressures to conform to traditional gender roles.

Historian Claudia Siebrecht sees the tearful response of German women to the invasion of Poland in 1939 as a legacy of the emotional responses to the First World War. Siebrecht studies accounts of crying and tearful responses in both oral and written sources. This allows her to conclude that the outbreak of the Second World War represented a crucial watershed in women’s biographies, as tears are seen as the manifestation of the emotional response to war, and as a legacy to the emotions linked to the previous conflict.

War historian Martin Francis examines, among other sources, the diary of Britain’s Ambassador to Egypt, Sir Miles Lampson to study the juxtaposition of devastating public events such as total war with what he calls “banal domestic anxieties”, to conclude that public claims about the British war effort could be challenged by private emotions. This research shows how even those who had the highest responsibilities in the conduct of the war struggled to manage their private emotional responses, including “wounded pride and petty jealousies”. Francis insists on the importance of individual subjectivity for a more holistic understanding of the impact of total war.

Historian Lucy Noakes analyses some life writing documents to look at the emotional lives of men in mid-twentieth century Britain, and at the ways in which experiences of combat in the Second World War shape their sense of self. Noakes argues that these sources are “sites where men attempted to fashion a militarized masculinity” which often was communicated in a particularly emotional style. Noakes also explains that through these forms of life writing, these authors construct forms of hybrid masculinity, which is subject to constant renegotiation and expressed in a very emotional style.

Claire Langhamer focuses on the Mass Observation Archive to examine the emotional responses of participants in the project. More specifically, Langhamer looks at citizenship as an emotional practice and at how emotional responses can become forms of political engagement. She argues that ways of expressing

emotions did not change significantly because of total war, however, the value attached to lived experience did. Another argument that emerges from this analysis is that a new form of citizenship – emotional citizenship – emerged from the war years.

The last chapter is also the only one that looks at a conflict other than the two world wars: the Greek Civil War. Here, historian Joy Damousi looks at family materials, including letters, photographs, interviews and even rumours, to create a historical archive of a specific experience: her uncle's death in the Greek Civil War. This event shows that war can have a longer emotional legacy, and grief can affect families long after wartime events, thus arguing how family histories can provide useful sources to study the complex interactions between emotions and war.

The value of this edited collection is therefore manifold. By focusing specifically on the history of emotions in total war, the volume goes beyond the emotions most widely associated with war, such as grief and fear, which nonetheless are not overlooked. More importantly, the book offers a valuable outlook of the methodological implications of the study of emotions in war and conflict. Personal sources such as letters, diaries, interviews, memoirs, and family history can allow the historian to focus on the subjective, and this repositions the role of the personal, the emotional, the subjective in the field of history, to allow for a more overarching understanding of events and “the movement between the emotional intimacy of the small scale and the emotional abstraction of the large scale.”

War and culture studies and the history of war and conflict can certainly benefit from this interest in intimate experiences, emotions and feelings, and existing sources can be studied through the lens of the history of emotions. As Alistair Thomson has shown (Thomson, *Anzac Memories*; Id., *Indexing and Interpreting Emotion*), oral history is one field that has embraced intimacy, subjectivity and emotions for a few decades and it is certainly one that can contribute to the study of emotions in many ways.

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