

*Power, Violence and Mass Death in Pre-Modern and Modern Times*. By Joseph Canning, Harmut Lehmann and Jay Winter (eds.). (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004; pp. ix + 220. £47.50).

*Power, Violence and Mass Death in Pre-Modern and Modern Times* is an ambitious and fascinating exposition of the themes so starkly set out in its title. Its central premise is that there are significant similarities between the ‘phases of violence’ in the fourteenth, seventeenth, and twentieth centuries, which, despite extensive work having been done on each individual period, remain unexamined. The authors’ purpose in this collection of essays is to begin to investigate how an understanding of the relationship of power, violence and mass death in the earlier periods could strengthen our understanding of what they describe as ‘the tragic turn of events in the twentieth century’, as well as how a reversed perspective might illuminate the ways in which these factors affected the more distant past.

Each period under consideration featured disasters such as war or famine more extensively than was the norm. The fourteenth century saw widespread disease and extended periods of warfare; the seventeenth a ‘triple onslaught’ of disease, famine and war; both witnessed persecution of particular minorities and experienced demographic decline. This leads neatly on to a comparison with the unprecedented levels of violence and genocide marking the twentieth century. In looking for the similarities and differences between the periods, the authors’ focus is on how such points of comparison might be related in various ways to social, political, intellectual, economic, and religious structures and transformations. They identify four aspects of the ‘special character’ of the fourteenth, seventeenth, and twentieth centuries as being especially significant:

1. the rule of violence;
2. the production of new world-views; in particular
3. the search for new religious answers and practices; and
4. a new level of social instability and large-scale migration.

Each chapter explores an aspect of the collective or individual experience of violence and death in the three centuries. The first section, on the fourteenth century, examines how and why the period has become so strongly associated with disaster. William Chester Jordan’s paper puts forward a convincing argument for a link between the Great Famine and the Black Death; the Famine, he suggests, so weakened the immune systems of those who were children at the time that they had little defence against the Black Death. The Black Death is also the topic of Samuel Cohn’s fascinating essay, which argues against the established identification of the disease with bubonic plague. Cohn tracks the

development of doctors' responses to the disease, using his research to cast doubt on the accuracy of the traditional vision of the period as having a 'more "violent tenor of life"', and demonstrates how historical interpretations have occasionally bent the facts to the argument.

The section dealing with the seventeenth century seeks to break new ground in the treatment of the Thirty Years' War as part of a large-scale outbreak of violent change throughout Europe, rather than as an isolated period of social and political misery primarily affecting Germany. Harmut Lehmann sets out the theory that the extreme character of the seventeenth century was a symptom of its being an 'Iron Age', dominated by violence involving Spain, Sweden, England, and France, as well as Germany and the Holy Roman Empire. The three essays in this section, by Otto Ulbricht, Bernd Roeck and Markus Meumann, seek to show the events of the Thirty Years' War as taking place in a 'European theatre'. These were not exclusively military conflicts but the 'concluding chapter of the story of the complete transformation of the European power system and forms of government'. The focus in this section is on how civilians responded to being caught in military violence, and on how we have interpreted the artistic expression of that reaction.

Unsurprisingly, in the final section on the twentieth century, the emphasis shifts from how we can read and use evidence from the distant past (such as Karel Dujardin's war etchings), to how we have memorialized the two World Wars. Pieter Lagrou's essay on the representation of war in western Europe during the Second World War considers how certain war experiences have come to 'represent the war experience *tout court*'. It relates interestingly to Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius' discussion of the ways in which the use of propaganda and certain cultural differences affected the warfare on the Eastern Front as well as how it is remembered. Jay Winter's essay, the last in the collection, rounds the debate off with an exposition of how the definition of warfare has changed after two World Wars; war is now synonymous with death, rather than fighting. As this change occurred, what Winter identifies as the long-term effect of the Great War developed: an ambivalence in cultural representations of the conflict which affected attitudes to and representations of the Second World War from the outset. (It's particularly gratifying to have Winter set the criminally neglected poet Charles Hamilton Sorley amongst his better known contemporaries, Graves, Sassoon, Owen, and Rosenberg).

Each of the essays in this collection was originally presented in August 2000 during a session at the nineteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences in Oslo (with the exception of A. D. Carr's contribution, which was written for this book). The introduction explains that the authors' express intention was to focus on the specific, rather than the general, despite the comparative nature of the project. Essentially, what

each section offers is a particular viewpoint from which to explore a broader comparative approach to the volume's themes as a whole. While this means that the authors are able to offer more in-depth analysis of their topics, it does leave the book with the feel of being a collection of conference papers, the connections between which are deliberately left open for the reader to explore. This is, paradoxically – and unavoidably – both the book's strength and its failing: while the lack of elaboration is thought-provoking and allows the reader to engage in his or her own comparison, it is also somewhat frustrating, and means that the book reads, for the most part, like sample chapters from a much larger project. It would be unfair, however, not to recognise that this is, in part, a measure of the success of this 'very special kind of intellectual and historiographical experiment in a large scale comparative project'.

*St Hilda's College, Oxford*

NATASHA ALDEN