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**Joseph Canning, Hartmut Lehmann and Jay Winters, (Eds.), *Power, Violence And Mass Death In Pre-modern and Modern Times***

Aldershot/Burlington, Ashgate, 230 p., 2004, ISBN 0 7546 3042 0

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- 1 This collection of essays is based on papers from the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Oslo in the year 2000. The leading principle of the contributions is the assumption that the fourteenth, seventeenth and twentieth centuries show some important similarities, especially in the areas mentioned in the book's title. The editors identify these three centuries as periods of intensified social unrest, social instability and migration due to the occurrence of extreme and uncommon violence – more so than in the intervening periods. They rightly emphasize the possibilities for a comparative study which can result in new ways of understanding European history. The subjects and their treatment in this volume, however, are too variegated to substantiate that claim. It is, furthermore, debatable whether these three centuries really are so unique, viewed from the aspect of violence and death. Nevertheless, reputable scholars have contributed some valuable articles with in some cases very interesting material and/or theories. William Jordan describes the impact of the Great Famine (1315-1322) in Northern Europe. He sees an intensification of crime and emigration as a reaction of the lower classes to the harsh circumstances, but he is

rather vague about the question whether this should be viewed as an absolute discontinuity with what already happened in the thirteenth century. Nevertheless he thinks that the later crises of the Black Death and destructive wars cannot be understood without the preceding famine. On the Black Death itself, Samuel Cohn contributes precise and valuable material. He maintains that this disease was not the same as the bubonic plague of later centuries, which was caused by the fleas on rats. He argues convincingly that its symptoms and progress were quite different and that only for a short period it caused a state of anomaly, in which extra-worldly considerations predominated. The different pathogen of this plague brought out just opposite things like secularism and state building. Violent epidemics in past time do not always have the same cultural consequences. I fully agree with him on this point. The social reactions are often described in accordance with the stylistic model of Thucydides' classical account of the Athenian plague. But in that case too, the at first prevailing resignation and silent despondency were quickly replaced by a restored confidence in the old gods of the state.

- 2 The contributions about the seventeenth century concentrate mainly on the Thirty Years War as the most explicit exponent of a regime of war, terror, plague and death. After a promising but short introduction of Lehmann three somewhat unsatisfactory articles deal with reactions on the miseries of warfare: by the victims, in the visual arts and in the form of eschatological outbursts. Markus Meumann, for instance, proposes to use the rise and decline of chiliastic excitement as a clue to decode the ego-documents of that age which are difficult to interpret. According to him there is a boom in apocalyptic thinking in the three periods covered by the book, which could be an indication for an intensification of collective experiences. Such easy parallels seem a bit far-fetched to me. Apocalyptic beliefs, for instance, were much less pronounced in the twentieth century.
- 3 The four interesting articles about that age make that clear. Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius and Jay Winter, true enough, also refer to apocalyptic images to describe the representations of the Great War in the Baltic countries and elsewhere, but in a different sense than religious millenarianism. Liulevicius contrasts the outlook of the Germans with that of the Baltic peoples. The former saw the war in the East as a struggle between *Kultur* and Barbarism, while the latter focused on the appalling aspect of the great deportations. Winter deals with the evolution in all sorts of representations after 1918. He describes this evolution in terms of a lost generation who started with mourning, then became ironic, and finished as traumatized. The other two articles are about World War II. Tobias Jersak notes the changes in the German representation of the war on the eastern front in relation to the changes in the war itself. Not surprisingly he concludes that the idea in the first period of a crusade against a Judeo-Bolshevist spearhead and later the returning idea of the last stand against barbarism were responsible for the cruel management of the war. Somewhat paradoxically, reprisals were a feature of the 'gentlemen's war' in the west, whereas in the east the indiscriminate killing of 'subhumans' was the common behaviour. Pieter Lagrou, too, points at the much stricter adherence to the conventions of warfare in the west, in some aspects even more than during the Great War (The use of poison-gas, for instance). Very interesting is his discussion of the different experiences with mourning after the two World Wars. Although representations of World War II initially were cast inevitably in the framework of the First, the great differences between the victims of

both wars necessitated the invention of new ways of memorization. The discrepancy between private and collective memories caused much more tension in the achievement of a much-needed national memory. On the whole this book contains some very interesting contributions that easily might inspire more suitable comparisons.

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## AUTHORS

**PAUL SCHULTEN**

(Erasmus University, Rotterdam), [schulten@fhk.eur.nl](mailto:schulten@fhk.eur.nl)