



Remembering the First World War ed. Bart Ziino.

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The centenary of the First World War has elicited an outpouring of works reassessing not only the conflict itself, but the ways it has been remembered, understood, and used over time. This volume is a diverse, engaging, and salutary contribution to that conversation.

Editor Bart Ziino (Deakin Univ.) has gathered essays by an impressive group of First World War scholars to explore the war's remembrance in family histories, museums and monuments, music, education, popular culture, and national narratives. Another major concern of the writers is how the war has been "spun" for various political purposes.

In his introduction, Ziino states that the book "seeks to expose the process by which the war is being remembered today, by whom, and for what purposes" (1). It also considers the relation between public and private memories, and asks why certain images of the past persist, while others fade: "remembering and giving meaning to the past has a history of its own, which can be tracked over time, both for individuals, and for broader social formations. Thus, our relationship with the First World War is not simply a relationship between now and the events of 1914-18, but one informed by the processes of transmission of familial and cultural memory in the intervening years" (5).

The first two essays concern family history and genealogy. James Wallis (Univ. of Exeter), in "Great-grandfather, What Did *You* Do in the Great War?" describes the changes brought to amateur family histories by internet resources, including digitized military records. Online companies, websites, and databases help families learn the fate of ancestors who fought in the Great War.¹ This in turn makes the war relevant to non-historians in ways that standard histories do not. But will people simply fit what they glean about their family members from these resources into existing narratives of the war or will they use it to create a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the war?

In essay 2, "Family History and the Great War in Australia," historian Ziino and sociologist Carolyn Holbrook (Monash Univ.) assess how family histories may "complicate" the standard Australian memory of World War I, which stresses the terrible sacrifices that forged an enduring sense of national identity. Family histories can provide an emotional link to the war and widen the focus beyond soldiers to noncombatants as well. This risks, however, "displacing historical and critical understanding with an emphasis on fellow feeling and victimhood" (52). Thus, the book's first two essays identify both the advantages and the drawbacks of including non-historians in the study of the past, raising the question who "owns" history.

The next four essays look at the representation of the war in public institutions and popular culture. In essay 3, "Framing the Great War in Britain," historian Ross Wilson (Univ. of Chichester) considers the popular memory of the First World War in films, television, and literature to discover how and why Britons remember what they do. He notes that revisionist historians in Britain lament that the remembrance of the war has been so strongly shaped by the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and

1. See, e.g., the Lives of the First World War digital commemorative project – www.miwsr.com/rd/1602.htm.

Wilfred Owen, films like *Oh! What a Lovely War*,² and television programs like *Blackadder Goes Forth*.³ He finds that the dominant image of “soldiers suffering the maelstrom of industrialized war at the behest of their indifferent or incompetent commanding officers [feeds] ... a public memory of ... disillusionment, trauma and suffering” (60). The revisionists seek to remove what they believe to be a left-wing bias in the popular understanding of the past. For them, the memory of the war reveals not only what happened but also how our views of the past can be manipulated for political purposes. For example, allusions to *Blackadder Goes Forth* have featured in contemporary political debates, showing that “The process of framing present issues within past contexts suggests that popular memory of the Great War concerns the representation and use of power within contemporary society at least as much as it refers to the events of 1914–18” (63).

In essay 4, literature professor Ann-Marie Einhaus (Northumbria Univ.) and historian Cationa Pennell (Univ. of Exeter) examine “Teaching and Remembrance in English Secondary Schools.” They find that, though students are assumed to be learning the “standard” content of the war poets and events on the Western Front, in fact teachers show much more diversity and innovation in their approaches to the war; World War I “has to be reinvented for each new generation—the further away we move from the original event, the more teachers have to work to make it matter. Like war memory itself, teaching of war changes constantly and never remains static for long” (85).

In essay 5, “Museums, Architects and Artists on the Western Front,” military historian Annette Becker (Univ. of Paris–Ouest Nanterre la Défense) argues that in the 1990s the French were divided between those who saw only heroes in the war and those who saw only victims. But at that time a shift began to blur the lines so that all became both victims and heroes—all were killed, but none were killers. This reflected the larger contemporary movement toward European unity: “What dominates the efforts of museums and politicians on the brink of the centenary is that all the combatants were the same men, dead together, for a cause that no one now wants to identify historiographically” (97). Yet again, we see remembrance of the war serving contemporary political purposes.

Peter Grant (Cass Business School, City Univ. London) and historian Emma Hanna (Univ. of Greenwich) devote essay 6 to “Music and Remembrance” at commemorative events in Britain. The music played at Remembrance Day observances over time reflects changes of attitudes from mourning to celebration, survival, nostalgia, and comfort. In 1962, Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*, though composed to commemorate the Second World War, became the “cenotaph of sound” for Britain’s remembrance of World War I as a “senseless slaughter.” But both popular and classical musicians have since broken free of this conception of the war to demonstrate that the memory of the war is neither solid nor static.

Five essays concern the remembrance of the war from specific national perspectives. Historian Karen Petrone (Univ. of Kentucky), in essay 7, “Now Russia Returns Its History to Itself,” explores Russia’s complex response to the war’s centenary: “state authorities are using the official celebration ... as an opportunity to bring interpretations of the war into alignment with nationalist Russian narratives that seek to build a positive national identity, reassert Russian national pride, and affirm Russia’s status as a European power” (129). This process is complicated by the inconvenient fact of Russia’s surrender to Germany in 1917 and the later history of the USSR. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviets downplayed the war while touting the Russian Revolution. Since the fall of the USSR, however, Russian governments have sought to reclaim World War I “as a heroic moment that helps them to neu-

2. Dir. Richard Attenborough (1969).

3. BBC One (1989).

tralize and displace the history of the Russian Revolution and Soviet rule from their current national narratives” (130)—a view as one-sided as the Soviet version it replaced.

In essay 8, “Çanakkale’s Children,” independent scholar Vedica Kant, a specialist in Middle Eastern studies, examines Turkey’s remembrance of the Çanakkale (Gallipoli) Campaign of 1915. As the only theater where the Ottomans were successful, it bulks large in the national myth of the new Turkish state established after the war. It became entwined with the mythologizing of Mustapha Kemal (later Atatürk) as the hero of that campaign. After his death in 1938 and the discrediting of his political party, commemorations of the campaign lapsed until the 1990s, when the Turkish government stressed the sacrifices of the many Turkish soldiers who fought and died at Çanakkale, rather than lionizing Kemal as singlehandedly winning the battle. This was part of a larger effort to separate Turkey from its Ottoman past and cultivate the image of a strong, modern nation-state.

In essay 9, “Commemoration and the Hazards of Irish Politics,” historian Keith Jeffery (Queen’s Univ. Belfast) looks at the experience of Ireland, where the memory of the Easter Uprising of 1916, the “War of Independence” of 1919–21, and the establishment of the Irish Free State and later of the Independent Irish State in 1948 have overshadowed its role in the First World War. But far more Irish participated in the war than in the struggle for independence. As the war’s centenary approached, many Irish sought to link those who died for independence with those who died for the United Kingdom in the Great War. One solution was to cast Ireland’s role in the war as a fight for the rights of small nations (e.g., Belgium and Serbia) rather than for the British Empire. Thus, many recent memorials are dedicated to “those who fought and died” or “fought for freedom” with no further particulars. However, keeping historical scholarship free of political motives remains a difficult challenge.

In essay 10, “Little Flemish Heroes’ Tombstones,” art historian Karen Shelby (Baruch College, CCNY) explores how the commemoration of World War I in Belgium over the years has reignited the Flemish nationalist movement. The Dutch-speaking Flemish wanted special gravestones for their dead to distinguish them from the Francophone Walloons and the few German speakers in eastern Belgium. This has proven controversial. During the First World War, King Albert tried to quash the idea of distinctive gravestones, fearing they would promote divisiveness. During World War II, some Flemish nationalists advocated collaboration with the Germans as a way to achieve independence from Belgium; others reacted by destroying some Flemish World War I monuments. Since then, Flemish nationalists have tried to erase their collaborationist reputation.

In Austria, too, the remembrance of World War I has changed over time and served political purposes. In essay 11, “Between the Topos of a ‘Forgotten War,’ and the Current Memory Boom,” sociologist Sabine Haring (Karl-Franzens-Univ., Graz) argues that defeat in the war was coupled in the minds of Austrians with the fall of the Habsburg Empire. The upper classes thus saw it as the defeat of the nation by the Allied countries and the loss of their special status within a monarchy. By contrast, lower classes may have seen the outcome of the war as a victory for them in the creation of a less stratified society.

During the 1920s and 1930s, regimental histories recorded the war for veterans and their families, celebrating the soldiers who fought so valiantly in a difficult and bitter struggle. This version of the war suited the purposes of right-wing political groups and private armies. Later, personal war memoirs suggested that the armies had not in fact been as cohesive as previously portrayed and that class differences plagued the fighting forces. By the 1970s and 1980s, a more positive and sanitized image of the Habsburg Empire emerged in popular culture, with little mention of the war. At this same time, however, there was a resurgence of interest in the war among academic historians. Austria made plans only for a low-key celebration of the war’s centenary and its remembrance there remains complicated by its connection to the Habsburg Monarchy.

In his “Afterword,” historian David Reynolds (Christ’s College, Cambridge) describes the reinvigoration of the memory of the First World War in the context of the Second and the end of the Cold War. He observes that France, Germany, Russia, the United States, Britain, and Australia have remembered World War I in ways calculated

to create distinctive national narratives, not only in terms of their domestic contexts, but in light of new patterns of international relations.... The global story of remembering the First World War is rooted in the international search for meaning that attended the war in its own time. But our ways of seeing it also reflect multifarious responses to the major events of the twentieth century through which the war has been refracted. (223, 236)

These sentences neatly summarize the goal of a fine collection of essays that advance current discussions of the meaning of the First World War for later generations.