

First World War Commemorations in Belgium and the Netherlands

Comparative Perspectives

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BEN WELLINGS

Memory of the First World War is refracted through that of other conflicts. Although these are the first 'global' commemorations, national narratives and politics loom large. Commemoration is still dominated by national framing. If the role of war commemoration is to create an affective link between state and citizen, then on the evidence of contestation derived from Belgium, the Netherlands and beyond, we may conclude that it operates more at an individual, local and national level than a consciously European or global one.

Eerste Wereldoorlog-herdenkingen in België en in Nederland. Vergelijkende perspectieven
De herdenking van de Eerste Wereldoorlog wordt bepaald door die van andere conflicten. Hoewel dit de eerste herdenkingen op wereldschaal zijn, blijven nationale narratieven en nationale politiek een rol spelen. Herdenkingen worden tegenwoordig nog steeds in een nationaal kader *geframed*. Als de oorlogsherdenkingen tot doel hebben staat en burger met elkaar te verbinden, dan kan op basis van de verschillende manieren van herdenken in België, Nederland en daarbuiten geconcludeerd worden dat dit meer op een individueel, lokaal en nationaal niveau gebeurt dan op een Europees of globaal niveau.

Comparing First World War commemorations in Belgium and the Netherlands with those taking place elsewhere gives rise to revealing insights about the politics of Great War commemoration. Nico Wouters and Kees Ribbens have provided illuminating analyses of the commemorative activities in two European states whose experiences of the First World War differed enormously. This review will compare such activities in Belgium and the Netherlands with those taking place in the rest of Europe and around the globe. The commonality that emerges is that regional, European and global



On the 26th of June 2014 the leaders of the European Union gathered in Ypres, Belgium. They stood around the 'Peace Bench' with porcelain flowers marking the Centenary of the outbreak of World War I. From left to right: Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades, Slovenian President Borut Pahon, French President François Hollande, Romanian President Traian Basescu and Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė.

Photographer: Wiktor Dabkowski.

Eyevine/Hollandse Hoogte.

politics structure the commemorative activities in which the state encourages its citizens to participate, but that ultimately state-sponsored memory of the First World War remains dominated by contested national frameworks and individual memories rather than a global consciousness.

Belgium, the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth

The first thing that strikes the outside observer of Belgian state-sponsored history and commemoration is the distinction between state and nation in Belgium. The First World War and its immediate aftermath played a large part in galvanising Flemish nationalism. The annual Flemish pilgrimage to the *Ysertoren* became an alternative focus to the state-sponsored commemoration on 11 November.¹ As the Centenary of the First World War approached, these national divisions began to shape the politics – Belgian and international – of the commemorations. The international controversy that surrounded what has become known as the ‘In Flanders’ Fields Declaration’ in 2010 illustrated the high political and diplomatic stakes that were involved at such an important commemorative moment.²

The fragmented nature of Belgian First World War memory and its associated politics was most similar to the situation in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Britain had gone to war ostensibly to protect Belgian neutrality. However, the outbreak of war in August 1914 had also prevented (or rather deferred) a looming civil war in Ireland. Irish nationalists secured independence (at the cost of partition) in the period 1916–1923. This meant that the memory of the First World War in republican Ireland developed separately from that of the rest of the United Kingdom (Catholic Ulster excepted). Nationalist memory placed value on the Easter Rising of 1916 at the expense of the war service of hundreds of thousands of people in the British armed forces who unwittingly became Irish citizens after independence.³ Whereas Flemish war memory was negotiated *within* and against Belgian-Walloon state-sponsored history, Irish nationalist memory in the newly independent Free State was formed *outside* of the state against which nationalist memory was directed.

1 Laurence Van Ypersele, ‘The Great War in Belgian Memories: From Unanimity to Divergence’, in: Shanti Sumartojo and Ben Wellings (eds.), *Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration: Mobilizing the Past in Europe, Australia and New Zealand* (Bern 2014) 133–147.

2 Laurence Van Ypersele, ‘The Preparations of the 14–18 Commemorations by the Walloon-Brussels

Federation and by Wallonia’, *Journal of Belgian History* 42 (2012) 186–191.

3 Jane Leonard, ‘“Facing the Finger of Scorn”: Veterans’ Memories of Ireland and the Great War’, in: Martin Evans and Kenneth Lunn (eds.), *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford 1997) 59–72.

There was one place within the United Kingdom where this was not true however, and that was within the Catholic-Nationalist community of Northern Ireland. Here competing memories of the First World War became an important marker of difference between the Catholic-Nationalist and Protestant-Loyalist communities. The crucial event in Loyalist First World War memory was the ‘first day of the Somme’ on 1 July 1916. In Loyalist memory this event represented a blood sacrifice binding the Loyalist community to the Crown and – in turn – the British government to the Loyalist community. This memory was always explicitly political, but it became more so when ‘the Troubles’ (the conflict in Northern Ireland) began in 1969. The peace process of 1998–2007 and the subsequent embedding of a power-sharing government forced a reconsideration of First World War memory north and south of the border.⁴ This reorientation was best exemplified by the commemorative diplomacy of Queen Elizabeth II’s visit to the Irish Republic in 2011, the first by a British monarch in over one hundred years, where she laid a wreath to republican war dead.

This thawing of nationalist tensions in Northern Ireland coincided with the escalation of nationalist politics in other parts of the United Kingdom. The commemorative events to mark the start of the First World War in August 2014 were followed one month later by the Scottish referendum on independence. On this political stage England – where state-sponsored and national memories coincided most neatly – played Wallonia to Scotland’s Flanders. Much of the initial debate in England focused on the interpretation of the war as ‘pointless’, a position that the Education Secretary Michael Gove dismissed as a ‘Blackadder’ view of history (a memory of official incompetence and futility epitomised by Rowan Atkinson’s comedic character of the same name in 1989).⁵ However, as opinion polls taken during Scotland’s referendum campaign began to show the possibility of secession, the political campaign to keep the United Kingdom together overlapped with the commemorative narrative. Prime Minister David Cameron presented the First World War as a unifying endeavour above politics, arguing for ‘national’ (i.e. implicitly British) commemorations. In contrast the Scottish government downplayed the British connection to the point of barely mentioning the United Kingdom at all, a situation comparable to the Flemish government’s Centenary planning in Belgium.⁶

4 James W. McAuley, *Ulster’s Last Stand?: Reconstructing Unionism after the Peace Process* (Dublin 2010).

5 Stuart Jeffries, ‘Blackadder: Your Country Needs you’, *The Guardian*, 7 January 2014: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/06/blackadder-michael-gove-historians-first-world-war> (1 October 2014).

6 See David Cameron, ‘Speech at the Imperial War Museum on First World War Centenary Plans’, 11

October 2012: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-at-imperial-war-museum-on-first-world-war-centenary-plans> (1 October 2015) and Alex Salmond ‘Speech at the Royal British Legion Scotland conference 2013’, 23 May 2013: <http://www.gov.scot/News/Releases/2013/05/ww1-commemorations-in-scotland23052013> (1 October 2015).

Beyond such national contestation, the state-sponsored history promoted in the United Kingdom suggested another dimension to the First World War – its imperial and global character. In the United Kingdom the commemorations were less focused on Europe than in the Franco-German case, and more on the Commonwealth. In 2014 the term ‘Commonwealth’ had a double meaning, one of which was related to the post-Second World War migration to Britain from the Indian sub-continent, the West Indies and east Africa, designed to provide a means of incorporating multicultural perspectives into commemorative activities, and the other to foster commemorative diplomacy and collaboration with the former Dominions, notably Australia, Canada and New Zealand.⁷

In Canada controversy surrounding state-sponsored history focused on the allocation of resources between commemorations for the First World War and those of the War of 1812. There was criticism that more money had been spent on 1812, which could be best described as a stalemate between the Anglo-Canadians and the Americans at the expense of the First Nations, than on the First World War with its greater global significance.⁸ No such scarcity of funding was to be found in Australia where, since the 1990s, commemoration of the landings at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 has become the *de facto* national day.⁹ A similar pattern emerged in New Zealand, a country also heavily involved in the fighting in the Dardanelles and on the Western Front, where, as in Australia, Anzac Day goes some way to effacing the moment of colonial dispossession that preceded the ‘founding moment’ at Gallipoli in 1915.¹⁰

This emphasis on the non-European nations commemorating the First World War serves to illustrate a major point of difference between commemorative activities in Belgium and those in France and the United Kingdom. That difference relates to the place of empire in today’s commemorative activities. Belgium differed from Britain and France in not bringing its colonial forces to fight in Europe, although they did fight in central Africa. However, the First World War drew in many millions of soldiers and labourers from the British and French Empires and beyond. Soldiers from the Maghreb, West Africa, northern India, Nepal and present day Pakistan

7 Andrew Mycock, ‘The Politics of the Great War Centenary in the United Kingdom’, in: Sumartojo and Wellings, *Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration*, 99-117.

8 J. Granatstein, ‘Why is Canada botching the Great War Centenary?’, *The Globe and Mail*, 21 April 2014: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/why-is-canada-botching-the-great-war-centenary/article18056398/> (5 November 2014).

9 Mark McKenna, ‘Anzac Day: How did it become Australia’s National Day?’, in: Marilyn Lake et al., *What’s Wrong with Anzac?: The Militarisation of Australian History* (Sydney 2010).

10 Mark McKenna, ‘Keeping in Step: The Anzac “Resurgence” and “Military Heritage” in Australia and New Zealand’, in: Sumartojo and Wellings, *Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration*, 151-167.



Second Battalion Kashmir Rifles – photographed at Satwari Camp, Jammu, on June 16th 1917 after returning from East Africa.

Photo courtesy of Andrew Kerr. Private collection.

fought across the globe in Asia, Africa and Europe. Labourers from China, Egypt, the West Indies, Indochina and Fiji toiled across the world from the African tropics to the cold of northern Europe. Racial ideas dictated whether they could fight, and if so in what parts of the globe.¹¹ Remembering such constraints are difficult today since decolonisation and post-colonialism have challenged the historical legacy of racism and imperialism, notwithstanding a more recent attempt to rehabilitate empire in its former (Anglophone) heartlands.¹² Where colonial troops have been remembered they are contained within a context of multiculturalism, an ideology more accepted (though not uncritically) in Britain than in France with its republican traditions of national unity.

France, the Netherlands, the United States and Europe

It fell to the French state to organise the majority of commemorative events for the 2014-2018 period. The French lead in this regard was not surprising given that most of the fighting on the Western Front took place on French soil and that the French diplomatic corps is one of the largest in the world, well able to absorb the demands generated by such a global commemorative programme. However, the addition of centennial events on top of existing commemorative commitments was not without difficulty. This commemorative crowding was precisely the kind of scenario that the *Kaspi Report* of 2008 sought to avoid. The report recommended reducing the number of official commemorative days in the French calendar from twelve to three to avoid 'commemoration fatigue'.¹³

Despite such concerns, the years 2014 and 2015 created a crowded and at times competing commemorative calendar. In 2014 the French government had the dual task of organising the seventieth anniversary of the D-Day Landings in June, followed by the Centenary of the outbreak of the First World War in August. Although in 2015 attention shifted to Belgium (the first use of poison gas) and Turkey (the Dardanelles invasion), that year provided some illustrative instances of selective and competing commemorations. Whilst the greatest diplomatic efforts of the year for the Anglophone countries were playing out on the Gallipoli Peninsular on 25 April, France was a minor player. Instead the French President took part in a commemorative ceremony in Yerevan on 24 April. Official Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide remains a major point of contention in Franco-Turkish relations and the English-

11 David Olusoga, *The World's War* (London 2014) 53-59.

12 Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain made the Modern World* (London 2003).

13 André Kaspi, *Rapport de la Commission de Réflexion sur la Modernisation des Commémorations Publiques* (Paris 2008).

speaking focus on the Dardanelles was a welcome distraction for the Turkish government.

First World War Commemoration in the Netherlands raises important questions about the lure of commemorative activities and what we might call commemorative bandwagoning. Kees Ribbens provides an analysis of the politics surrounding the *Huis Doorn*, or the ‘Kaiser House’, in which Wilhelm II sought refuge in November 1918. Rebranded in 2002 as a Dutch *lieu de mémoire*, *Huis Doorn* is the formal centrepiece of commemorative activities in the Netherlands. No less intriguing are the ‘spill over’ links with Flanders that Ribbens notes are driving commemorative participation within the Netherlands’ administration. This is partly due to regional connections between the Netherlands and Flemish-speaking parts of Belgium, but it is also partly to do with the ‘Europeanisation’ of Dutch history concomitant to the process of European integration following the Second World War: the event that remains pivotal in twentieth century Dutch and European history.

What stands out most about the Dutch experience of the First World War is its neutrality – a position ignored in Belgium’s case with such drastic geo-political consequences. This raises an automatic point of comparison with the other great power that sought neutrality, the United States of America. When America entered the war in April 1917 this too had enormous geo-political consequences. The American example helps us think about how opinions of the war held by contemporaries influence the way that particular conflicts are commemorated. Unlike Italy, there was no ‘war party’ seeking to push the USA into the European war. American participation was marked by ambivalence (the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915 notwithstanding) and Congress refused to be drawn into European affairs in the post-war era. The notion of ‘state-sponsored history’ in the American example is pertinent, since state support for such commemorations is limited.¹⁴ A new memorial in Washington DC was announced in January 2016. However, official commemorative statuary is minimal and makes a pointed contrast to the Lincoln Memorial, the World War Two Memorial, the Korean War Memorial and the Vietnam Memorial, all of which enjoy prominent positions on the Mall.

The lack of importance accorded to the First World War in the United States also suggests another crucial element that shapes commemorative activity: the significance and magnitude of other conflicts. In the United States it is very easy to present the Second World War and the Civil War of 1861-1865 as moral crusades, mobilising human and economic resources in the cause of freedom. The First World War, by contrast, has left little trace on the collective American memory. President Wilson’s idealism was not translated into a

14 Douglas Craig, ‘Commemoration in the United States: “The Reason for Fighting I never got

Straight”’, *Australian Journal of Political Science* 50:3 (2015) 568-575 DOI 10.1080/10361146.2015.1079944.

great popular cause and commemorative activity (or lack thereof) reflects this ambivalence of the time.¹⁵

In the Netherlands the events of 1940 – the occupation, the famine of 1944-1945 and the conflict in the East Indies, 1945-1949 – are of far greater importance than the First World War, even if the contribution of individuals such as Anthony Fokker to the German war effort were notable. Thus although Belgian and Dutch experiences of the First World War differed greatly, their experiences of the Second World War were very similar. Both Belgium and the Netherlands shared in the experience of Blitzkrieg, occupation, collaboration and resistance. In Belgium the memory of the First World War was subsequently shaped by the politics of the Second, particularly over allegations of collaboration levelled at the Flemish community by the Walloons after the Liberation. The subsequent division of Belgium into a federal polity allowed the sub-state sponsored histories to diverge in the two main linguistic communities, a position they occupy to this day. This is a legacy with which the Netherlands has not had to contend.

Lastly, this comparative analysis allows us to note that much state sponsored history is victors' history. Commemorations in Germany, Austria, Hungary and Russia have not been as marked as in Western European states and former British Dominions. Turkish commemoration remains distinct in that the conflict that engulfed the Ottoman Empire and its successor states from 1914-1923 is also seen as a foundational moment: the successful repulse of the Allied invasion in 1915 is seen as the crucible of modern Turkey. In Germany, even more than in Italy, the memory of the First World War has been tarnished by the subsequent rise of fascism and Nazism. Despite an absence of official enthusiasm for First World War commemoration on behalf of German authorities, memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust has shaped much historical thinking in public life through the process of 'coming to terms with the past' (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) and the 'historians dispute' (*Historikerstreit*) of the 1980s and after, and this has carried over into other interpretations of the legacy of the First World War.¹⁶

German history – with 1945 as the *Stunde Null* (Year Zero) – aligns German commemoration with a wider 'European' (or EU) memory of the First World War. The First World War is not natural terrain for EU mythologising, since European integration was most immediately a response to the Second, rather than the First, World War.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the European Commission

15 John Milton Cooper Jr., 'The World War and American Memory', *Diplomatic History* 38 (2014) 727-736.

16 Matthew Stibbe, 'Remembering, Commemorating and (Re)Fighting the Great War in Germany', in: Sumartojo and Wellings, *Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration*, 205-222.

17 Christine Cadot, 'Wars Afterwards: The Repression of the Great War in European Collective Memory', in: Sumartojo and Wellings, *Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration*, 259-271 and Christine Cadot, 'Can Museums help build a European Memory?: The Example of the Musée de l'Europe in Brussels in the

moved cautiously into the commemorative terrain – even if such matters are the preserve of member states – and the emphasis on Europeans as common victims of war accords with a German sense that the First World War was not a conflict in which a particular aggressor can easily be pinpointed, the Fischer controversy of the 1960s notwithstanding.

Along with European integration, globalisation forms another major framework for the First World War Centenary commemorations. Changing modes of warfare give an air of clarity between friend and foe in 1914 that appears to have been lost in an age of terrorism and undeclared (and perhaps unwinnable) wars.¹⁸ Changes in the means and modes of communication appear to have altered levels of empathy and perceptions of trauma. In an age of mass migration – as in the period preceding 1914 – some populations appear to be seeking ‘kinship’ through commemorative practices, with family history providing a fertile source of linkage with the past.¹⁹

Conclusion

Comparing the politics of war commemoration in Belgium and the Netherlands with that taking place in other parts of the world reveals important points of commonality and difference. Memory of the First World War is refracted through that of other conflicts, principally the Second World War, but also the American Civil War and the War of 1812. Commemoration of the First World War also weakens memory of other conflicts such as colonial conflicts within European settler societies as in Australia and New Zealand. Although these are the first ‘global’ commemorations, national narratives and politics loom large. Within an EU beset by crises, commemoration is still dominated by national framing. State-sponsored history exists in a relationship with the vernacular and the national. However, if the role of war commemorations is to create an affective link between state and citizen, then on the evidence of contestation presented above from Belgium, the Netherlands and beyond, we may conclude that it operates more at an individual, local and national level than a consciously European or global one.

Light of “New World” Museums’ Experience’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 23 (2010) 127-136.

18 John Hutchinson, ‘Warfare and the Sacralisation of Nations: The Meanings, Rituals and Politics of National Remembrance’, *Millennium*:

Journal of International Studies 38 (2009) 401-417.

19 Shanti Sumartojo, ‘Anzac Kinship and National Identity on the Australian Remembrance Trail’, in: Sumartojo and Wellings, *Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration*, 291-305.

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