



## Remembering the first world war today: Introduction

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## Remembering the First World War Today

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‘Remembering the First World War’ is an expansive topic, and one that has already produced an extraordinary and diverse array of scholarly inquiry. The centenary of the First World War has naturally been a source of considerable debate and stimulus – at least among academics, politicians, and in cultural institutions – for a long time before its realization in 2014 and beyond. That debate has been premised on the obligations, opportunities and not infrequently the anxieties that are entailed in the determination to mark the centenary of the first of the twentieth century’s two catastrophic global conflicts. The politics of the centenary divide between those who see opportunities to remind their (usually national) communities of the significance of their wartime past, and invoke their obligation to remember in that vein; those concerned to complicate that past, to challenge older conceptions of events, to rework contemporary relationships with the First World War; and those who prefer either to oppose or ignore the event altogether. This volume takes its cue from that contemporary debate, recognizing that we are now beyond living memory of the war, and yet to all appearances still fascinated by it, and by our own links to its events. That persistent fascination with the war has been rendered by key scholars as a form of resistance to the loss of its living links, and an effort to re-imagine and reassert our connections to the conflict.<sup>1</sup> The politics of that effort remain insistent: what meanings do individuals and societies engaged in remembering the war attribute to the events and experiences of a century ago? In responding to this question, *Remembering the First World War* focuses on contemporary practices of remembering the war; it seeks to expose the processes by which the war is being remembered today, by whom, and for what purposes.

The tools for this inquiry are familiar: government agencies are managing key commemorative events surrounding the outbreak of the war, major battles and the armistice; new memorials are being constructed on and away from the battlefields; historians are emerging from a plethora of academic conferences and entering the mainstream media with invocations to join in a debate over the complexity of the war and its legacies; museum curators tread a fine line between the expectations of both in their efforts to engage their various publics without antagonizing any one section of them. Film-makers and novelists seek for truths beyond the historian’s constraints of evidence. For those historians who observe, there will be continuing opportunities to investigate the production and reception of official and unofficial narratives of war, an opportunity that historians in this volume are taking on the very cusp of the centenary.

At the point of the centenary of the First World War, one could easily detect a wide spectrum of attitudes in public forums. The Canadian historian Jack Grantastein, for instance, insisted that not only did Canadians ‘need to remember’ the war but, rather prescriptively, that ‘We really must remember the Great War properly’.<sup>2</sup> Eminent British historian Hew Strachan looked forward to a more open public and academic engagement with the centenary, such that ‘If we do not emerge at the end of the process in 2018 with fresh perspectives, we shall have failed.’<sup>3</sup> Others turned their back on the centenary altogether, fearing that its marking would be nothing more than a parochial and narrowly nationalist celebration. In the *Guardian* in January 2014, journalist and broadcaster Simon Jenkins had already apologized to Germans for an anticipated ‘avalanche of often sickening Great War memorabilia, largely at their expense. ... The horror, the mistakes, the cruelty, the crassness of war will be revived over

and over again, “lest we forget”.’ Finally, he asked, ‘Can we really not do history without war?’<sup>4</sup>

This kind of debate – conducted here within newspaper columns – certainly has its analogue in the broader public, though there remain fundamental questions to be asked about the nature of public engagement with the First World War more generally. Leading into the centenary a number of surveys of popular knowledge of the war suggested that for those engaged in remembering the First World War, there was something to worry about in terms of public receptiveness. In Australia, where war commemoration enjoys a privileged relationship with ideas about national identity, focus group investigation in 2010 revealed that ‘There is almost no awareness or anticipation of the impending 100th World War I anniversaries, including the Gallipoli landings and Anzac Day.’<sup>5</sup> Knowledge of Australia’s war history, the report found, was ‘generally poor’, and declined across age cohorts, though even older Australians ‘often have only sketchy or incorrect knowledge’.<sup>6</sup> Not quite half of the Canadians questioned in 2014 could identify Vimy Ridge as a significant battle of the First World War, and war knowledge very quickly diminished from here.<sup>7</sup>

In Britain too, the research thinktank British Future found that despite politicians’ claims about the centrality of the war to national consciousness, ‘what is in fact evident is how little most people know about a conflict that now seems extremely distant and which is often either supplanted by, or conflated with, the second world war.’<sup>8</sup> The even more expansive polling – in seven countries – commissioned by the UK’s British Council, showed similar levels of ignorance, though with local variations.<sup>9</sup> On the other side of the coin, interestingly, polling in Germany suggested broad interest in the First World War, especially among those aged 14–29.<sup>10</sup> All this should not necessarily incline us to the view that ignorance necessarily means apathy: the more significant finding is that despite lapses in discrete knowledge, individuals across age cohorts tended to express a belief – whether sincerely held or socially expected – that the centenary *ought* to be marked in a significant way.<sup>11</sup> And indeed, in Australia at least, social researchers found that ‘People do not want detailed historical information’, so much as a knowledge of key events and attitudes. There were, however, ‘quite strong opinions about how ... commemorations should (and should not) feel.’<sup>12</sup>

That emphasis on feeling is important, especially as none of the combatants of that war remain now to speak directly of their experiences or their conception of the event. Yet the past quarter of a century has witnessed an extraordinary increase in popular and academic interest in the Great War as an event, and in the ways it is represented. Since the 1990s, in several victor nations at least, we have seen increases in attendance and participation in the anniversaries of the war, burgeoning output of popular histories, novels and films, and increasing political attention to the war in school curricula and commemorative events. Even in potentially less fertile fields, such as Germany, there are those ready to insist on the state’s obligation to confront the past, though based on a leftist concern to perpetuate the message ‘No more war!’<sup>13</sup> How do we explain this phenomenon? Part of the answer must be, as David Reynolds points out, that the end of the Cold War decoupled the First World War from the Second, and the persistence with which ‘the twentieth century kept reshaping the Great War in its own light’, thus encouraging an effort to again understand the First World War in its own terms. For Reynolds, the passing of the remaining veterans of the First World War has rendered the task at the centenary ‘not so much remembrance as understanding.’<sup>14</sup> And yet people are taking part in forms of remembrance, on a series of levels, to which strong emotions are attached and felt. We must then remain sensitive to the ways in which remembering the war occurs, what meanings are being transmitted, and how understanding of the war is received in the early twenty-first century.

## The production of war memory

Several important scholars have in recent years made significant efforts at theorizing our contemporary relationships with the First World War. In doing this they are building on academic endeavours centred on recovering the experiences of those who, during and after the war, conducted their own forms of commemoration, in their own historically specific conditions. This project has led to a much more nuanced understanding of the dynamism of commemoration of an event that engaged entire populations not only in the passions of war, but the desolation of loss and bereavement. The discourse on ‘memory’ – variously configured – has helped to drive this work, and its key features require some elaboration here, in order to understand the current practices of First World War remembrance being conducted around the world. Jay Winter’s scholarship has been critical. One of the more helpful contributions to memory studies in the last decade and more is his observation that among its practitioners few use the term ‘memory’ in the same way. This is helpful, because one of the more fundamental problems has been a disassociation between individuals who remember events that they experienced, and the social forces that in their turn shape and re-shape private memories over time. The relationship between private memory and the loosely-defined ‘collective memory’ is mutually constitutive: private memories are not perfect recordings of the past, but are shaped by subjective attitudes and social mores that encourage the articulation of some memories, while making others less publicly acceptable. Just as those social contexts can change over time, then, memory itself can change over time. Hiving off the public signs and symbols of ‘collective memory’ from the production of that memory – in the actions of individuals and communities as much as the state – threatens to hollow out the value of memory as a category of analysis.

For this reason Winter has advocated investing the term ‘memory’ with a greater sense of agency, and indeed to prefer ‘remembrance’ as a better descriptor of the processes of memory-making. One can more profitably refer to the acts of ‘remembering’ and ‘forgetting’, rather than to the simple existence of ‘memory’, especially ‘collective memory’, in understanding the dynamism and the politics of memory. This distaste for the passive voice has insisted on a much more responsible examination of how memory is shaped and transmitted in its social and political contexts. As Joanna Bourke has observed, ‘individuals ‘remember’, ‘repress’, ‘forget’ and ‘are traumatized’, not societies ... The collective does not possess a memory, only barren sites upon which individuals inscribe shared narratives, infused with power relations.’<sup>15</sup> Thus does Winter make his preference for ‘remembrance’ over passive terms:

To privilege ‘remembrance’ is to insist on specifying agency, on answering the question who remembers, when, where, and how? And on being aware of the transience of remembrance, so dependent on the frailties and commitments of the men and women who take the time and effort to engage in it.<sup>16</sup>

In this concern, Winter was enriching the work of other scholars who were insisting that what was required was closer attention to the processes of memory-making, especially the relationship between private and public memory, and the reception of the narratives so produced. Alon Confino observed that the study of memory had bifurcated, and concerned itself separately with personal testimonies on one hand, and the representation of the past and shared cultural knowledge by succeeding generations on the other. This ignored the problem of why ‘some pasts triumph while others fail ... Why do people prefer one image of the past over another?’<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Jan Assmann was concerned with the processes of transmitting particular conceptions of the past to subsequent generations when he developed a working definition of ‘cultural memory’. In this conception, cultural memory reflected a process that

sought to fix the meanings and significance of particular events beyond the lifetimes of those who experienced them. Here, wrote Assmann, was ‘a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation.’<sup>18</sup> Where private memory shapes identity, so too does cultural memory, though on much broader scales, through the cultural channels available to mass society, including memorials, ceremonies, museums, film and literature.

The selectivity involved in this process is important; it demands recognition of the politics of memory and, by extension, the agency of those who work to have their particular memories of war recognized in public. Further, acknowledging the existence of agents of remembrance does not presuppose equal power in shaping popular understandings of the meaning of events. T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper in particular, have elaborated on the nature of the contest conducted between the state, communities and individuals in shaping the wartime past. The politics of war memory, they contend, refers to an unequal power struggle, in which memory is installed at the centre of a cultural world, through that variety of cultural channels:

The politics of war memory and commemoration is precisely the struggle of different groups to give public articulation to, and hence gain recognition for, certain memories and the narratives within which they are structured. The history of war memory and commemoration involves tracing the outcomes of particular struggles, as represented both by those memories which are publicly articulated, and by those which have been privatized, fragmented or repressed.<sup>19</sup>

The struggles over war memory remind us that the narratives attached to the First World War are not static, or agreed, but are subject to constant contestation, and change over time. This is in the nature of cultural memory, and in recognizing this, we can see the life histories of remembering, at a series of levels—public, private, institutional—and the cultures of remembrance that those processes have bequeathed to the present. In other words, 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.<sup>20</sup> Thus our relationship with the First World War is not simply a relationship between now and the events of the 1914-18, but one informed by the processes of transmission of familial and cultural memory in the intervening years.

### **How do we understand ‘remembering’ beyond living memory?**

Acknowledging the importance of generational transmission of war memory allows us to look more closely at those who continue to ‘make’ remembrance today, especially as we are now all but entirely disconnected from those with a living memory of the war itself. In one sense, we should expect that as witnesses to the First World War pass away, the cultural memory of the war that remains should become more and more ossified and fixed. The survival of particular narratives of the past is dependent on their engaging with individual memories, which are in turn shaped by those broader narratives.<sup>21</sup> Dan Todman has sensitively charted the rarefying of remembering the war over several generations in Britain, in which the links to direct experience of the war and all its personal complexities have drawn away. In their place, private and detailed understanding of the war has been increasingly populated with national myths developed and redeveloped over the decades following the war. In this, the war becomes ‘more of a symbol—easily shared and commonly understood—than a multi-faceted, personally remembered event.’<sup>22</sup> In a similar way, Harald Wydra refers to the initiation of new generations into cultural memory, in which ‘Societies, like individuals, “learn” habitual

acts of performance by forgetting the exact circumstances' in which such acts are historically and personally located.<sup>23</sup> Such habits of commemoration can be fostered by official ceremonies and memorials, which take on a semblance of concretizing what it is that is not to be forgotten, and so can facilitate a process of disengaging from actual events, while maintaining a sense of dedication to their ostensible meaning.<sup>24</sup> The process here is one of gradual consolidation of complex past realities into a broadly accepted symbolic currency, that yet retains a sensibility that it reflects events worthy of remembrance.

And yet that process – inevitable as it may ultimately be – has not proceeded as relentlessly as we might expect. With the deaths of the last veterans, we are not seeing a transition 'from memory to history', so much as between different forms of remembering. The question that has come to occupy historians, given the persistent interest in the First World War, is this: if there are no participants or witnesses left, how do we explain what we describe as 'remembering'? The short answer is that those who engage in remembrance simply cannot be remembering a war in which they had no part. On the other hand, they are certainly remembering something, and in this they are again remaking the narratives attached to the war. The loss of the last veterans thus becomes a catalyst for the production of new memories of the past, with new modes of production. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker describe the critical moment in which access to witness testimonies suddenly diminished: 'Then the 1970s and 1980s swept away that version of the war for good. Like it or not, the umbilical cord was severed.'<sup>25</sup> In its place is something requiring more precise terminology than 'memory' alone can muster. Rejecting the idea that individual experiences of war can be transmitted to subsequent generations, Dan Todman argued that 'historians need to pay particular attention to *who* is remembering *what*, to traditions in remembrance and the means by which these are communicated and transmitted, rather than how later generations might inherit ancestral experience.'<sup>26</sup> That is, we need to understand the processes by which we reconstruct the past in the present, rather than how participants' memories might somehow be perfectly transmitted and received by succeeding generations. In this sense, Todman insists that we must make key distinctions between the 'experienced and unexperienced past,' and this has led him—and others—to question the utility of the term 'remembering' for those born after the events at hand.<sup>27</sup> These are, indeed, processes of a different order and quality to the acts of remembrance conducted by those who themselves participated in the war.

Here, recourse to Winter's distinction between memory and remembrance becomes more useful again, in that where memory is the preserve of those with direct experience of the war, remembrance allows for the act of remembering—the construction and reconstruction of the past—to be conducted both by those with and those without that experience. To meet the current situation, in which we are actively making meaning of the wartime past without any direct connection to it, Winter has proposed the term 'historical remembrance'. 'Historical remembrance', he explains,

is a way of interpreting the past which draws on both history and memory, on documented narratives about the past and on the statements of those who lived through them. Many people are active in this field. Historians are by no means in the majority.<sup>28</sup>

The agents of historical remembrance, as Winter says, can be historians, though they share the field with numerous others, including filmmakers, novelists, architects, curators and others involved in cultural production. These latter do not necessarily share historians' obligations to evidence, and this may be one factor that gives historical remembrance such vitality and persistence. As Graeme Davison has observed, the myths of the war 'might flourish even more luxuriantly when ... freed from the limitations of historical fact and the human frailties

of its surviving representatives. Feeling connected to the past, after all, is not at all the same as being connected with history.<sup>29</sup>

As Davison shows, having defined the issue, the task is to explain it. Why has remembrance persisted so powerfully? To this end Winter has labeled the popular fascination with the past and its actors the ‘memory boom’. He tracks two such ‘booms’, the latest of which emerged in the 1970s, and has been intense and enduring. Taking its cue from the Second World War and the Holocaust, its preoccupations are with remembering the victims of the violent twentieth century. An increasing recognition and acceptance of the traumatizing effects of war on individuals, and of their traumatic memories, has brought these people – witnesses – to the centre of how remembering the past has been conducted in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Their testimonies are valued for their access to traumas that must be acknowledged and, as Winter observes, ‘their stories and their telling of them in public are historical events in their own right.’<sup>30</sup> In terms of the First World War, we remain obsessed with ‘the soldier’s story’, though as a witness the soldier has increasingly taken on the persona of the victim – of the generals, of the guns, of societies that failed to appreciate them. Understood this way, Winter has characterized the current memory boom as an act of defiance, a resistance to that drawing away of direct experience of the past that is all too apparent to those who remain. Morbid count-downs to the last veterans of the First World War were only one, if very obvious, sign of that awareness.<sup>31</sup> While Winter too could predict the ultimate if gradual emptying of meaning from sites of memory created after the war, he suggested that the memory boom of the late twentieth century ‘may be understood as an act of defiance, an attempt to keep alive at least the names and the images of the millions whose lives have been truncated or disfigured by war.’<sup>32</sup> Thus would sites of memory created in the urgent need to find meaning and comfort immediately after the war ‘inevitably become sites of second-order memory, that is, they are places where people remember the memories of others, those who survived the events marked there.’<sup>33</sup>

That effort at prolongation is not simply a mimicry of the memories of others; it is an effort at remaking the past in ways that preserve the affective power of participants’ memories. Marian Hirsch’s theory of postmemory speaks to those who resist the homogenization of cultural memory, especially the children of witnesses to the past, who ‘remember’ those same events only through the stories and images with which they grew up, and their own observations of the continuing effects of past events on parents. Hirsch willingly concedes that postmemory is not the same as memory – it is constituted not by recall, but by ‘imaginative investment’ – but insists that it shares the emotional force of participants’ memories, and so needs to be taken seriously as a form of remembering the past.<sup>34</sup> The widespread practice of family history might also be understood as a mode of ‘imaginative investment’ in the past, with the potential for such emotive connections. Its extraordinary escalation has prompted Dan Todman to suggest that remembering the war as a significant event will be prolonged through those processes of family history: family memory, and the preservation apparatus that supports it – in the form of state archives, personal papers, photographs, and memorabilia – helps facilitate a sense of individual engagement with the war, even beyond the capacity of families to do so from their own resources. It is those supports to family history research, he suggests, which may well become of the ultimate markers of First World War remembrance in Britain, as they attempt to compensate for the loss of living links to the conflict.<sup>35</sup>

Conceiving of continuing popular interest in the First World War as defiance of the ossification of memory helps us to begin to understand the activities of the agents of remembrance today. There is no sense of condescension here, nor doubting that genuine feelings of connection to the past exist, though as the children of the war generation—the generation so critical in shaping the myths of the war that continue to resonate today—are

themselves passing away, we are now obliged to grapple with the ways in which generations without direct connection to those who fought is reconstructing their relationship with the war. This is the concern of *Remembering the First World War*. The book is organized around three key themes, each providing scope to interrogate contemporary production and reception of narratives about the war, at a series of levels and in different international contexts. Part one reduces the focus immediately to individuals and their endeavours to engage the wartime past through the practices of family history. Part two is concerned with a series of cultural media through which individuals and the agents of cultural production – including the state, novelists, artists, curators and musicians – come into contact and negotiate their efforts at meaning-making in the twenty-first century. Part three takes a broader perspective still as it investigates the formulation and reformulation of national narratives relating to the war, especially where those narratives have been in contest or repressed. Taking long perspectives on the histories of remembrance in several different contexts, this section of the book exposes keenly how very much alive are the politics of memory surrounding the global conflict of a century ago.

### **Part 1. Family history, genealogy and the First World War**

The great problem for historians today, as I have suggested above, is to understand the persistence of interest and the genuine sense of connection individuals still feel to the wartime past. Perhaps in no other way is the intensity of that interest in the First World War more evident than in the boom in family history, and the emphasis on individual stories of war that pervades the war's public representations. While the reasons for the explosion in genealogy are of course much broader than an interest in the war itself, the First World War is a critical node around which family history comes into contact with national and international narratives of the past. In Britain, surveys in 2013 found that, despite patchy knowledge of the war, significant numbers of people (almost half) were aware of a family connection to the First World War, while the greater part of the remainder simply did not know if such a connection existed.<sup>36</sup> What this suggests is not just the potential but the reality that families remain key sites at which the past and present converge, and reshape each other. As Jay Winter has observed:

the richest texture of remembrance was always within family life. This intersection of the public and the private, the macro-historical and the micro-historical, is what has given commemoration in the twentieth century its power and its rich repertoire of forms.<sup>37</sup>

It is also the case that personal memories – even simply an awareness – of family members who encountered the war give affective power to remembering in the present, as the resonances of the war that were visible in ancestors' lives become the substance of remembrance. Winter is rightly insistent on the importance of family transmission of stories about the past to the sustenance of broader narratives. Without such engagement with the past on these levels, public ceremonies can do little to prevent the atrophy of remembrance.<sup>38</sup>

There are two key themes to observe in this section, both revolving around the relationship between family historians and broader public narratives of the war. The first is the impact of a broad recognition in government and cultural institutions of the public appetite for family history as a means of engaging the past, and the subsequent provision of family history resources in ever greater quantities, and with ever greater ease of access. This is a truly international phenomenon that one might trace through the series of local and national archives that have been busily digitizing individual service records, to the efforts to collect and present private records of the war for a mass audience, a theme that has so marked the



extraordinary efforts of the 'Europeana 14-18' European database project.<sup>39</sup> This feeds into the second theme, which is the collaboration between family historians and more powerful cultural agents in making meaning of the past, a process that is becoming clearer in the forums established by cultural institutions that allow users to articulate their responses to family history in concert and comparison with others. The rehearsing of family narratives of the First World War thus proceeds much more openly, though not without a level of guidance from the institutions that facilitate it.

In pursuing this analysis, chapters in this section pick up not only Winter's point above, but Ashplant, Dawson and Roper's observation that it is the interaction between different agencies of remembering, rather than individual remembering per se, that will become the matter for analysis beyond living memory of the war.<sup>40</sup> James Wallis thus considers the ways in which amateur family history can reshape the contours of modern First World War remembrance, through a study that combines an emphasis on the post-living memory generation and its capacities to 'know' the wartime past, with the work of those who frame First World War history through making particular resources available in particular ways. This includes the Imperial War Museum's 'Lives of the First World War' project, which has substantial aims in seeking 'to engage everyone in remembering' through family history.<sup>41</sup> Carolyn Holbrook and Bart Ziino's concerns are similar, in seeing a mutually constitutive relationship between the conduct of family history in Australia, and the powerful public narratives of the war that offer broader contexts for that research. They nevertheless argue for a recognition of the significant agency of family historians, even those without direct knowledge of ancestors, in shaping war knowledge in the present.

## **Part 2. Practices of Remembering**

If family history is one key process of remembrance, then more public forms of representation and negotiation also require investigation. In part two, the focus is much more squarely on those involved in cultural production in public: not the faceless 'state', but a whole series of professionals and artists who engage in transmitting and, often, questioning versions of the past, including teachers, politicians, historians, curators, artists, architects and musicians. Such people are centrally placed in the struggle over war memory, by choice or otherwise. Indeed they are central to Winter's conception of 'historical remembrance', as they provide some key shared opportunities for conceptions of the past to be reflected, contrasted, and reshaped as part of communal, national and transnational groups.

Authors in this section take a broad approach to understanding the war's more recent cultural products, and the national and transnational histories from which they have emerged. In what ways are public representations of the First World War serving national and international audiences? New memorials, new exhibitions, amended education curricula, as well as new books, films, music and television documentaries and dramatizations are some of the hallmarks of centenary activity around the world, as these people mobilize their resources to engage in what they expect will be a potent and focused period of opportunities for remembrance of the war and its participants. Already some of the themes of that mobilization can be seen in particular quarters, especially in Europe, where the centenary has provoked a rhetoric of fraternity and unity, while some of the tensions of the war, its origins and outcomes, remain difficult to paper over. This is particularly evident in the plethora of exhibitions opened in readiness for August 2014. An exhibition in Brussels entitled *14-18, It's Our History!* focused on both the Belgian and European dimensions of the struggle, claiming that 'The entirety of Europe's history emerged from the First World War'.<sup>42</sup> In Germany and Austria, exhibitions have promoted a sense of common experience across borders. An exhibition at the Austrian National Library speaks to the 'common past' of the countries of

the former empire; a joint French/German exhibition seeks to examine not only the differences between the combatants that sustained the conflict, but ‘also how similar the experiences of the soldiers and the artists who served actually were’.<sup>43</sup> Even the Archive of Serbia’s exhibition of key documents, including the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum, drew similar sentiments, as the failure of dialogue and negotiations in 1914, and the ensuing hostilities between neighbours, framed a contemporary ‘obligation to foster trust and understanding’.<sup>44</sup>

Still, tensions were never far below the surface. In 2013 the Serbian Prime Minister expressed fears that centenary commemorations would ‘lead again to Serbian people being accused of triggering the biggest armed conflict in the history of humanity’, and the European Commission itself abstained from organizing any commemorative events itself, as a way of avoiding immersion in potential dispute over the past.<sup>45</sup> French officials were sensitive to the difficulties of engaging with Germany to mark what was ultimately a German defeat and French victory, while engagement with Turkey was made even more problematic by severe diplomatic strain over recognition of the Armenian genocide. Criticisms of a low-key German approach to the centenary prompted officials at the German embassy in London to reassert that questions of guilt ‘should be left more or less to historians and shouldn’t feature dominantly in politicians’ speeches’, and that the focus of commemoration should be those who died, and on the unity of Europe fostered by the European Union.<sup>46</sup> And again in Serbia, a statue to Gavrilo Princip, assassin of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was erected on the centenary of the event as a tribute to a patriot and ‘freedom fighter’.

Ross Wilson’s provocative chapter opens this section, turning on its head the common criticism that British remembrance of the war is too much defined by cultural products emphasizing mud and futility. He argues that such representations of war are actively selected and redeployed in contemporary British society for a series of ends, not only as a well-accepted shorthand form, but as a way of rejuvenating and reasserting a genuine sense of the trauma that accompanied the First World War as a significant event in British history and identity. Thus does Wilson assert that reference to various cultural media should be understood as framing memory, rather than reflecting the very act of remembering. Ann-Marie Einhaus and Catriona Pennell usefully broaden the scope of mediation of the war, by insisting that more people will come into contact with the First World War through school than they will through family, therefore necessitating an understanding of how knowledge of the war is transmitted through education systems. Their chapter shows the surprising complexity in English school teaching about the war, and asks how the classroom affects the transmission of ‘memory’ and in what ways, noting the variety of responses among teachers, and the tensions that can emerge between disciplinary approaches. As elsewhere, the First World War in the classroom is subject to the same tensions between feeling connected to the past, and being connected to history that are seen elsewhere in the volume.

Annette Becker’s contemplation of new museums and installations on the former Western Front elaborates her ongoing concerns with the representation and obscuring of violence in public art and exhibition, and the dangers of feeling and empathy overwhelming the obligations of historians.<sup>47</sup> Reading the Western Front as a site for the international assertion and negotiation of remembrance narratives, she is encouraged by efforts at representing the war’s totality, the breadth of its impacts and the persistence of its legacies. Finally, in this section, Peter Grant and Emma Hanna interrogate the efforts to shape the aural dimensions of remembrance over time, arguing that at times music has been central to debate over war commemoration, and that it remains a potent vehicle for discussing the nature of remembrance today, through its engagement with, and occasional subversion of, changing mythologies of war in Britain. The chapter’s long historical sweep allows us to see the

installation of a canon of musical remembrance, as much as we might detect the same in literature and film, and its reproduction in the present through performance in private and public. Yet music promises, as much as any other medium, continued contestation and reflection on the war and contemporary relationships with it. Together these chapters offer ways of understanding not only how debate over the war is carried on, but how the experiential and emotive force of the past – even in the history classroom – is integral to popular engagement with the wartime past today.

### **Part 3. The return of the war**

Today the war is emerging again even in political climates in which remembrance of 1914-18 previously struggled to thrive. In this final section of the book, the lens opens wider again, to examine the reconfiguration of national narratives relating to the war, in the context of long histories of contestation, dominance and repression of the narratives of war nurtured in families, communities, and alternative political formulations of the nation. It aims particularly to expose how the processes of remembrance discussed in previous sections of the book have their place in defining national – and in some cases international – relationships to the war over time. The politics of memory surrounding the war in these places, as we will see, are very much alive.

In its material outcomes, the war destroyed empires and created new nations, demanding a search and a contest for new narratives of nationhood. It intervened in and aggravated domestic political divides in ways that remain palpable today; authors in this section all acknowledge this presence of the war in contemporary politics in a series of case studies that allow them to tease out the roles that efforts to acknowledge the First World War can play. Current practices must be seen in the context of long histories of remembrance, state sanctioned and not. The case studies included here are hardly exhaustive, so much as they showcase the ways in which participation in commemoration of the First World War remains a political act, as much as it also tends to private sentiment. In doing so, they speak not only to the presence of the war a generation beyond those who fought it, but its likely uses beyond its own centenary.

Karen Petrone's study of Russian efforts to reintegrate the First World War with Russian history is perhaps the most extreme example of the recuperation of a 'lost history', though she notes well that the process of recuperation is necessarily contested. Petrone's analysis of centenary projects is sensitive to the efforts of Russian elites to rehabilitate the war as a time – outside the Soviet era – when Russia was a major international power, and to the level of purchase these conceptions might gain in Russian society generally. Attention to current memorial-building projects helps to define the kind of memory the Russian state is seeking to construct, and Petrone warns that the new history of the First World War projected in public in Russia may turn out to be as partial as it was under the Soviets.

In Turkey, Vedica Kant investigates a struggle between two narratives of the Çanakkale/Gallipoli campaign, that reflects a contemporary contest over the nature of the Turkish republic itself. Kant catalogues the long dominance of a secular narrative that sees Çanakkale as the point to which the origins of the republic, and its key figure, Mustafa Kemal can be traced. The challenge to that narrative emerges through the soft Islamism of a long-entrenched government, which is intent on highlighting the republic's religious foundations, as a way of reconciling it with a much longer Ottoman history. The public rhetoric and new memorial-making that underpins that narrative, Kant argues, has not gone uncontested, and indeed, the stakes in debate over the past remain high in Turkey.

In Ireland too, the stakes are high, and here too the war was integral to the processes of founding the Irish republic and Northern Ireland, though in the republic the war did not feature in its founding narratives. Keith Jeffery traces the several factors that made remembrance of the First World War so difficult in Ireland, while arguing that there was never total amnesia or total commitment to forgetting the war and those who participated in it. Here, the links between local agents and national myths are teased out to show the circumstances in which Irish service in the First World War can eventually find a place in the civic culture of the Irish republic. The centenaries of the war and 1916 might provide opportunities, but they are loaded too with challenges.

The politics of divided communities also inform Karen Shelby's examination of the war in Belgian politics, in which she examines Flemish commemoration of the war as an expression of dissent from incorporation in the broader Belgian state. In particular, her chapter analyses the political symbolism of a tombstone, writ large in the memorial tower erected as a symbol of Flemish sacrifice, and harnessed to demands for Flemish independence. In a Belgian state without a dominant culture of remembrance, that symbol remains today a point around which the politics of division can coalesce.

Finally, Sabine A. Haring's examination of several generations of Austrian reconstruction of the First World War returns us to the difficulties of understanding the war beyond the events that succeeded it. The National Socialist era necessarily made difficult not only reference to the Second World War, but to the First, and the 1950s saw reversion to a nostalgic vision of the Habsburg Empire. Though historians led an increasing awareness of the First World War from the 1980s, the war remained, Haring argues, confined to the margins of national narratives. Even in the midst of the centenary, the war that gave shape to modern Austria continues to be formulated anew.

## **Conclusion**

The centenary of the First World War has several potentialities, and indeed its only certainty – as this volume attests – is that the purposes to which remembrance is put will vary widely in relation to historical and current political contexts. Where remembrance of the war has historically been persistent, we should certainly expect to see the perpetuation of existing narratives of the war, and the performance of a 'habit of commemoration', in which participants are not necessarily encouraged to look beyond what they already 'know' about the significance of the First World War. That process will be assisted, no doubt, by the emotional connections people are still making to the war, through its personalization in their own family histories, or the cultural products of the war that emphasize individual experiences as they key avenue to the wartime past. Historians might be genuinely suspicious of the capacity of emotional responses to the past to provide the foundation for an enduring and intelligent connection to the past that appreciates its complexities. On the other hand, the persistence of powerful emotional responses to the war and those who fought it does not immediately shut down the possibilities for the fresh perspectives that so many historians are now demanding. Rather can they provide the impetus to seek broader, more complex comprehension of the war, where it is made publicly available. In Winter's schema of historical remembrance, historians are only one group among numerous active agents; our unease about the limited space we occupy should push us to embrace our own role as makers of the past in an attempt to rework popular narratives of the war, in ways responsible to the evidence and to the people of the past. One does not want to forego the potential for directing the affective connections people are insistently making with the past, awaiting a time when the last flourishing of popular remembrance of the First World War has exhausted itself, and the field is abandoned to us. Perhaps that time might is not too far away: the experiential

factor may, indeed, be most telling in a remembrance event set to last more than four years. Still, those who emerge in 2018 may yet be more inclined to seek a more complex understanding of what had propelled their forebears through that original trial, and what produced the perspectives on the world that would shape the century that followed.

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006); Dan Todman has produced an excellent synthesis of the literature. See Dan Todman, 'The Ninetieth Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme' in *War Memory and Popular Culture: Essays on Modes of Remembrance and Commemoration*, eds M. Keren and H. Herwig (North Carolina & London: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2009), 23-40.

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Granatstein, 'Why is Canada botching the Great War centenary?', *The Globe and Mail*, 21 April 2014. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/why-is-canada-botching-the-great-war-centenary/article18056398>> (accessed 23 June 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Hew Strachan, 'First World War anniversary: we must do more than remember', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 January 2013. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/9795881/First-World-War-anniversary-we-must-do-more-than-remember.html>> (accessed 23 June 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Simon Jenkins, 'Germany, I apologise for this sickening avalanche of first world war worship', *Guardian*, 31 January 2014. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/30/first-world-war-worship-sickening-avalanche?commentpage=1>> (accessed 23 June 2014).

<sup>5</sup> National Commission on the Commemoration of the Anzac Centenary, *How Australia may Commemorate the Anzac Centenary*, May 2011, 67. Online. Available HTTP: <[http://www.anzaccentenary.gov.au/documents/anzac\\_centenary\\_report.pdf](http://www.anzaccentenary.gov.au/documents/anzac_centenary_report.pdf)> (accessed 23 June 2014).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>7</sup> 'Vimy Ridge: "The birth of a nation" - but how much do Canadians know about the battle?', *Centenary News*, 8 April 2014. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.centenarynews.com/article?id=1578>> (accessed 23 June 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Dan Todman, 'Did they really die for us', in *Do mention the war: will 1914 matter in 2014?*, ed Jo Tanner (London: British Future, 2013), 16. Online. Available HTTP: <[www.britishfuture.org/publication/do-mention-the-war](http://www.britishfuture.org/publication/do-mention-the-war)> (accessed 23 June 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Anne Bostanci and John Dubber, *Remember the world as well as the war* (Manchester: British Council, 2014). Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/publications/remember-the-world>> (accessed 23 June 2014).

<sup>10</sup> 'Young Germans are eager to learn more about WWI', *Deutsche Welle*, 20 January 2014. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.dw.de/young-germans-are-eager-to-learn-more-about-wwi/a-17373053>> (accessed 23 June 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Hew Strachan, 'First World War anniversary'.

<sup>12</sup> *How Australia may Commemorate the Anzac Centenary*, 70, 67.

<sup>13</sup> 'German MP calls lack of plans to mark the First World War Centenary a "scandal"', *Centenary News*, 3 March 2014. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.centenarynews.com/article?id=1502>> (accessed 23 June 2014).

<sup>14</sup> David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 420.

<sup>15</sup> Joanna Bourke, 'Introduction. "Remembering" War', *Journal of Contemporary History* 39:4 (2004), 473-4.

<sup>16</sup> Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Alon Confino, 'Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,' *American Historical Review* 102:5 (December 1997), 1390.

<sup>18</sup> Jan Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 126.

<sup>19</sup> T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, 'The politics of war memory and commemoration: contexts, structures and dynamic,' in *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, eds T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper (London: Routledge, 2000), 16.

<sup>20</sup> See especially Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Ashplant, Dawson and Roper, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambleton and London, 2005), 186.

<sup>23</sup> Harald Wydra, 'Dynamics of Generational Memory: Understanding the East and West Divide', in *Dynamics of Memory and Identity in Contemporary Europe*, eds Eric Langenbacker, Bill Niven and Ruth Wittlinger (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 15.

<sup>24</sup> See Ashplant Dawson and Roper, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Todman, 'The Ninetieth Anniversary', 23.

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- <sup>27</sup> Ibid, 24.
- <sup>28</sup> Winter, *Remembering War*, 9.
- <sup>29</sup> Graeme Davison, 'The habit of commemoration and the revival of Anzac Day', *ACH: Australian Cultural History* 23 (2003): 81.
- <sup>30</sup> Winter, *Remembering War*, 6.
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- <sup>32</sup> Winter, *Remembering War*, 12.
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- <sup>34</sup> Marianne Hirsch, 'The generation of postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29:1 (2008), 106-7, 109.
- <sup>35</sup> Todman, *Great War*, 229.
- <sup>36</sup> 'Polling data', in *Do mention the war*, 33; Bostanci and Dubber, 7.
- <sup>37</sup> Winter, 'Sites of memory and the shadow of war', 65.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 72.
- <sup>39</sup> See, for example 'Library and Archives Canada to digitise 640,000 First World War service files', *Centenary News*, 6 February 2014. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.centenarynews.com/article?id=1430>>; 'Commemorations in 2014 of Two World Wars', *French News Online*, 25 November 2013. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.french-news-online.com/wordpress/?p=32051#axzz31THcR4bR>> (accessed 23 June 2014); Europeana 1914-1918. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en>> (accessed 23 June 2014).
- <sup>40</sup> Ashplant, Dawson and Roper, 12.
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- <sup>47</sup> See Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, especially part 1. Also Christina Twomey, 'Trauma and the reinvigoration of Anzac: an argument', *History Australia* 10:3 (December 2013), 85-108.