

Goodbye to all that?

Memory and meaning in the commemoration of the first world war

Historian **Heather Jones** argues for commemorations of the Great War to advance beyond left-right politics and simple nationalistic triumphalism, to take a broad international perspective of the social, cultural and political changes brought by the war and its lessons for modern diplomacy and institutions.

No sooner had fireworks announced the arrival of the New Year 2014 than explosions of another kind erupted in the British press: a heated debate about the centenary of the Great War, the outbreak of which will be commemorated in August of this year with major events including a vigil at Westminster Abbey and a ceremony at St Symphorien Cemetery in Belgium. The furore was sparked by comments from education secretary Michael Gove, who asserted that Britain was right to enter the conflict in 1914 and criticised what he saw as inaccurate claims that the war was futile, presented both in British popular culture, such as the satire *Blackadder*, and by those he described as 'left-wing' historians.¹

The response was dramatic: a month-long and highly polarised debate in the press, drawing in prominent historians including Niall Ferguson and Gary Sheffield. Most media commentators responded along well-established political trench lines: those on the right, including London's mayor Boris Johnson, proclaiming the first world war as a patriotic, just war against German aggression; those on the left decrying it as a futile slaughter of the British working classes for imperialist aims. Only the Labour party's shadow education secretary, Tristram Hunt, a former academic historian, tried to highlight how historically anachronistic it was to project contemporary left-right political divisions onto the events of 1914–18 in this way. Hunt pointed out in the *Guardian* that the British left had overwhelmingly supported the war at the time, as had most socialist movements across Europe.²

Overall, the debate provided a discomfiting insight into the ways in which the legacy of the first world war often serves in contemporary Britain as a proxy for current identity politics, something which risks distorting public knowledge of the actual history of the conflict itself.

1 Gove M (2014) 'Michael Gove blasts "Blackadder myths" about the First World War spread by television sit-coms and left-wing academics', *Daily Mail*, 2 January 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2532923/Michael-Gove-blasts-Blackadder-myths-First-World-War-spread-television-sit-coms-left-wing-academics.html>

2 Hunt T (2014) 'Michael Gove, using history for politicking is tawdry', *Guardian*, 4 January 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/04/first-world-war-michael-gove-left-bashing-history>

The reality is that there is no simple, clear-cut historical narrative of the British experience of the first world war as either patriotic and just or imperialist and coercive. It was all of these things simultaneously. The war bereaved families from all classes within the UK and, across the broader empire, from all racial backgrounds. Stereotyped caricatures of political affiliation or class do not help us to understand the conflict. In fact, British infantry officers suffered higher casualty rates than their men, as they had to lead from the front in offensives, while many working class young men who were skilled workers were exempt from the front as they were essential to industry back home. Many working class combatants supported the idea of the British empire as a force for good; many middle class men, who proclaimed their patriotism loudly, sought exemption from conscription at local tribunals – a peculiarly liberal and unique aspect of the British war effort – which were set up with the introduction of conscription to allow those who felt they should not be conscripted, because they were needed on the home front for family or business reasons, to make their case. The poorest in British society actually ate better during the war due to the introduction of rationing, which particularly helped to reduce infant malnutrition through the milk ration. In 1914, Britain had simultaneously one of the most liberal war efforts – it was the only belligerent to debate entering the war in parliament and to respond initially to the need to expand its army in 1914 by asking male citizens to volunteer for service of their own free will – and some of the most reactionary draconian wartime martial laws, introduced across the UK at the outbreak of the war by the Defence of the Realm Act.

And this strange balance worked. Unlike France, which saw an estimated two-thirds of its army mutiny in 1917, or Russia, which was crippled by antiwar fever in October of that year, in Britain the war effort remained solid throughout, with the exception of one part of the then-UK, Ireland, where the war effort ultimately served to radicalise the republican nationalist movement. Much of this solidarity was due to the belief among the British public that the ruthless Central Power expansion and occupation of large swathes of Europe – which involved major atrocities against civilians – had to be stopped. In short, supporting national war efforts in 1914 united almost all of the British political spectrum relatively durably, to the surprise of many contemporary observers, and profoundly blurred the lines between left and right. It appears that British commemoration this year, going by the tone of the recent press debate, has started in terms likely to have precisely the opposite effect.

This is a real pity, as the 2014–18 commemoration cycle offers a rich opportunity to develop public knowledge of the new academic history of the war and to situate Britain's war experience within its broader European and global context. Such an approach is badly needed: one of the most disappointing aspects of the debate provoked by Gove's comments is the extent to which it revisited two old, parochial questions – was the war futile, and should Britain have stayed out – which have dominated British discussion of the war for over 40 years and which are now surely exhausted, especially after the long debate in 1998 on whether Britain should have entered the war that was provoked by Ferguson's book *The Pity of War*.

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Worse, the recent press discussion largely addressed these two old questions from a national history paradigm – thus far, there has been too little discussion of the broader international relations problems that gave rise to the conflict, or of the actions and experiences of the other states involved, or of the broader imperial dimensions, particularly the role of the French, Russian and Ottoman empires. There has been too little awareness of the wider context in which global war broke out – after all, the first round of the war fired by a soldier in British military service took place in Africa – in Togo, by Sergeant-Major Alhaji Grunshi. To read the British press coverage at the beginning of this year, one would be forgiven for not knowing that Austria-Hungary was the first state to fire in anger in 1914, intending to destroy Serbia; instead, the whole emphasis has been on Germany, as Britain's main enemy, with the conflict presented – again in a paradigm that is inaccurate – as basically an Anglo-German war. The implication is that Britain was the main actor. The reality – that until 1916 Britain's expeditionary force on the continent was comparatively tiny and that the French played the major role in staving off the Germans in 1914 – remains little-known. The eastern front and the Italian–Austro-Hungarian fronts have barely received a mention, despite the fact that British troops fought in Italy. All this is despite the fact that for the past five years the historiography has increasingly emphasised and presented new research on the global nature of the first world war.

Richard Evans, writing in the *New Statesman*, saw fit to remind readers that Britain went to war allied to the absolutist despotic Tsarist Russia.³ Well might he remind them: the factual knowledge of the wider history of the war among the broader population of the United Kingdom remains weak. A survey reported in the *Telegraph* in November 2012 found that only 46 per cent of respondents aged 16–24 were able to correctly name 1914 as the year that the first world war started, and only 40 per cent knew it ended in 1918.⁴ Only a quarter knew that Passchendaele was a first world war battle, and 12 per cent thought that the battle of Waterloo (1815) was a Great War battle. This lack of knowledge is highly problematic, because the first world war remains a key factor in how certain states view the UK to this day. A recent British Council report found, for example, that Egypt's view of the UK was heavily influenced by its experience of the first world war.⁵ In the wake of the highly strained Anglo-Irish relations of the 20th century, the commemoration of the first world war also offers an opportunity to change Irish perceptions of British history for the better, through an emphasis on the shared experience of British and Irish soldiers, both Protestant and Catholic, in the conflict (and something both David Cameron and Enda Kenny promoted during their joint visit to the Ypres battlefield on 19 December 2013).

Ultimately, the debate triggered by Gove's comments highlights that there continues to be a remarkable chasm between popular public memory in Britain of the war and academic research, with little sign that media

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3 Evans R (2014) 'Before the First World War: what can 1914 tell us about 2014?', *New Statesman*, 23 January 2014. <http://www.newstatesman.com/2014/01/1914-to-2014>

4 Copping J (2012) 'Half of young Britons fail to name date of First World War,' *Telegraph*, 4 November 2012

5 Bostanci A and Dubber J (no date) *Remember the World as well as the War*, London: British Council

commentators are aware of scholarship in languages other than English. This is a pity, as the latest French, German, Italian and Belgian scholarship on the war has highlighted the extent to which the conflict marked the birth of phenomena – both positive and negative – that would mark the rest of the 20th century and beyond, many of which we still live with today. The latest historiography on the war has revealed that it was a laboratory for ruthless occupation practices by the Central Powers in both western and eastern Europe, some of which later influenced how the Nazis planned their second world war occupation policies. The first world war is increasingly seen as having radicalised concepts of biological racism across Europe and as the moment when European states developed widespread prisoner of war and internment systems for the first time – the technology of the camp that would be used to such deadly effect after 1939. The first world war marked the start of the development of new forms of radical mass removal of ethnic minorities by states, including Tsarist Russia's deportation of its Jewish population, which was suspected of being pro-German, and the Ottoman empire's genocide of its Armenian population.

The Great War is also increasingly understood as the birth point of modern international humanitarianism, bringing about the professionalisation of the International Red Cross and the foundation of the charity Save the Children, to cite but two examples. And there is renewed interest in the ideas of collective security and the League of Nations arbitration systems that it brought about. The origins of today's concept of IMF bailouts lie in the international financial bailout of Austria that followed its economic collapse at the end of the war. The chaos of the current Middle East descends from the disastrous Sykes–Picot agreement of 1916 and Britain's Janus-faced dealings in the Arabian peninsula – simultaneously promoting both Arab self-determination and the Balfour declaration in the same territories to competing interest groups. The war led to the creation of a string of new eastern European states that aspired to ethnic nation-state homogeneity; only now in the 21st century do we see this process beginning to reverse, through free movement across the EU. However, multiculturalism remains a fraught issue in many European states; the first world war's promotion of the homogeneous nation-state ideal haunts us still.

The commemoration cycle of the next four years offers unparalleled opportunities for us to learn from the lessons of the Great War. Its central problems are with us still: the way in which secret decision-making by political elites dealing with regions with a history of interstate tensions can rapidly turn a crisis event between two states into war and spark off regional chain reactions; the danger of alliances blocking arbitration to prevent war; the dangers of nationalist history demonising the population of a neighbouring country. For contemporary examples, consider the secret talks between Bush and Blair in the wake of September 11 about going to war in the Middle East; the ways that the alliance between Russia and Syria has determined the international attempts to reign in Assad's regime; the rise of dangerous nationalist attitudes in China and Japan. Today's terrorist assassins – much like Gavrilo Princip in 1914 – train abroad, often with the tacit knowledge or support of some members of a foreign state's

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intelligence services, and have diaspora support. There also remain many contested annexed territories – the West Bank or Kashmir, for example – where resentment fuels militancy and poor relations between neighbouring states, just as the Hapsburg occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina did before 1914.

Above all, central to why the Great War lasted so long was the lack of international arbitration mechanisms to allow for talks between belligerents during the conflict, preventing any possibility of an early peace deal. To many, the first world war appears archaic; in a contemporary world where the leading international institution of arbitration, the United Nations, appears increasingly weak and undermined in resolving conflict, we would do well to remind ourselves of what horrors can happen when such international arbitration bodies do not exist. The ultimate message of the commemoration of these next four years is as much about learning lessons for the future as it is about lamenting the tragedies of the past.

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