



Commemorating War 100 Years after the First World War

If the First World War was the first total war, arguably it was also the first war that generated a ‘total’ commemorative culture. As soon as the war was over governments of former belligerent nations decided to insert the war experience into the curricula of primary education in order to imbue all future citizens with the lessons of the war. It soon became apparent that those lessons were less univocal than had been thought. In Belgium, but also in the United Kingdom and Ireland for instance, unifying patriotic readings of the war were subverted by competing and often irreconcilable (sub)national interpretations. Moreover the heroism and militarism of the official commemorative policies were immediately challenged from a pacifist perspective. Intellectuals on the left hinted at the meaninglessness of the suffering and promoted the transformation of the memory of the war into an instrument of transnational peace education.

As the following contributions on the centennial commemorations of the First World War in Belgium and the Netherlands reveal, both these national memory competitions and the duality of a nation-oriented and a transnational, ‘peace-oriented’ discourse, which date back to the 1920s, have left traces on today’s commemorative landscape. Since then of course, new layers of war-related memories have been added. In former neutral countries such as the Netherlands or the United States, which had long sought neutrality, the memory of the Second World War has overshadowed the memory of the First, but elsewhere the memories of both wars have become intertwined. Since the rise of the Holocaust as central moral and political signifier of the Second World War, the difficulties in associating the First World War with one univocal moral and political message that goes beyond the rather empty ‘no more war’ message have become even more apparent.

The centennial has nevertheless given rise to an amazing amount of local commemorative initiatives, in particular in former belligerent countries. In these exhibitions, publications and cultural performances, national frames of reference have often been replaced by local stories and individual trajectories that sometimes succeed in bringing in a new, global dimension. In

general however, both official and bottom-up initiatives tend to confirm what is no longer contested – friendship between European nations, for instance: more delicate issues are rarely touched upon. The legacy of colonialism and the role of the First World War in sustaining European imperialism is one of these issues. While the current presence of refugees has incited drawing parallels with Belgians’ own history of escaping war, the lasting impact of the Sykes-Picot-treaty of 1916 on the contemporary problems in the Middle East has not received much attention as yet. It is almost a truism that the act of commemorating is also, and inevitably, an act of deciding what to forget. Nevertheless it remains an instructive perspective when we analyse critically the centennial commemoration of First World War.

On behalf of the editors,
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