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Symposium: Introduction

The politics of memory: Commemorating the centenary of the First World War

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This symposium examines how the centenary of the First World War has been marked in five countries: Australia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. Given their distinctive national historical experiences and political cultures, the metanarratives of the war in these countries differ; as does the relationship between the state and sub-state actors in memory making. However, in each case the commemorations of the war have been shaped by a negotiation between the state and other agents of memory at the sub-state level. National memory has also been consciously projected into international relations, through carefully orchestrated anniversary ceremonies and performative memorial diplomacy. But, despite these transnational commemorative practices, the centenary of the war remains predominantly framed within local and national imaginings.

Keywords: Anzac; commemoration; First World War; national memory; war memory

In 2014–15 there have been remarkable displays across the globe of collective and national memory in the form of commemorations of the First World War. This wave of remembrance has been so diverse and complex that it has been beyond the capacity of a single scholar to track. This symposium therefore brings together a group of scholars to consider how the centenary of the First World War has been marked thus far in five countries: Australia, France, Germany, the UK and the USA. In particular, we consider how the character of the centenary commemorations in 2014 and 2015 has been shaped by particular national historical experiences; how the state and sub-national groups have interacted in the processes of memory formation; and how the centenary commemorations have generated debates within these countries.

The recent commemorations of the First World War may seem exceptionally intense, but it is important to recognise that they are part of ‘memory boom’ that has a longer history. For at least three decades societies and governments, particularly in the West, have been turning to the past, seeking a means of investing today’s social
structures and values with meaning and significance. The reasons for this ‘memory boom’ have been much debated. Within a now voluminous literature there is a consensus that individual and collective memories have always been fundamental to the human ability to conceive the world: that is, ‘group identities require a relatively widely shared understanding of history and its meaning, the construction of a narrative tracing the linkages between past and present, locating self and society in time’ (Bell 2006: 5). It is also agreed that social memory is nothing new – attention was first drawn to it in 1925 by Maurice Halbwachs’ landmark *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* – but the public manifestations of collective memory, and in particular the role of the state in the remembrance of war and trauma, gained a new intensity and prevalence from some time in the 1970s.

In recent decades, it is argued, a number of developments have intersected. Many governments, conscious of the decline of the modernist and progressive narratives according to which the state provided every expanding welfare benefits for its population, have invoked the past as a means of shoring up their legitimacy. The concurrent erosion of national sovereignty by globalisation and market economics also served, somewhat paradoxically, to fuel a resurgence of cultural nationalism, affirming the primacy of the nation-state even as it declined. At the same time eyewitnesses to the world wars and the Holocaust began to age and die. This spurred an anxiety about the loss of the 'authentic' memory of these most defining catastrophes of the 20th century. Then, the end of the Cold War allowed the ‘unfreezing’ of memories that had been previously constrained by ideological rigidity, the emergence of new sovereign states in central and eastern Europe, and the associated proliferation of identity politics at the sub-state level. For many engaged in these political processes, the past served as a storehouse of unfulfilled claims and grievances, which could be mined to justify contemporary demands for recognition and inclusion (see Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2000; Gillis 1994; Müller 2003; Olick, Vinitsky–Seroussi and Levy 2011).

To add to this, there was a pervasive fin de siècle mood as the end of the century and the millennium approached in the 1990s. This predisposed populations to look to the past at a time when in the West, at least, formal religion’s promise of a life beyond this world was fading. Finally, the birth of the Internet provided the technology whereby individual and local memories could intersect with ‘national memories’ – perhaps best described as the discourse, rituals and practices performed in the public sphere and sponsored by the state. With ready access to military and other online databases, individuals could retrieve their families’ histories and position these, imaginatively and digitally, ‘in a wider, at times universal context’ (Winter 2006: 40). Hence, collective memory became more than ‘a key element in the symbolic repertoire available to the nation–state for binding its citizens into a collective national identity’ (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2000: 7), important though this traditional role remained. Memory was – and continues to be – a dynamic, interactive and often contested dialogue between the state and its citizens.

For reasons which owe much to the dominance of the Holocaust in European and American memory, the wider ‘memory boom’ has been notable for its focus on war, mass death and atrocity. Communities and nations have been encouraged to confront their ‘difficult pasts’, while victimhood and trauma now define the hierarchy of those who have the right to be remembered. Civilians, who constitute the majority of casualties in today’s warfare, have come to dominate the narratives of war, displacing general and admirals (Winter 2006: 6). Soldiers are now assumed to be victims, psychologically damaged rather than empowered by military service. Meanwhile,
demands for compensation and recognition have become core to the politics of memory. The state now arguably has a duty of remembrance (Bell 2006: 19–25; Graves and Rechniewski 2010: 11–12), obligated to commemorate the dead, remember past injustices and legislate to prevent, for example, the denial of the Holocaust or the Armenian genocide. Governments are thereby ‘allegedly judged on how well they atone for their past misdeeds rather than on how well they meet their fiscal obligations and inspire future projects’ (Olick, Vinitsky–Seroussi and Levy 2011: 3–4).

Memory politics, of course, takes different forms in specific political, social and cultural contexts, as the essays in this symposium show. But common to all collective memory are the processes of selection, politicisation and contestation. The choice of who and what is remembered is shaped by contemporary power structures, and memory is ‘socially and politically mediated as well as historically and culturally embedded’ (Kidd 1997: 157). Moreover, it is now agreed that the formation of collective memory is manifest at multiple levels in any given society. The names given to these levels are various – the individual, private, local, vernacular, collective, national, transnational, and more contentiously ‘global’ – but no domain is mutually exclusive. Rather they are inter-related and constitutive of each other.

It is therefore no longer adequate to argue that the memory of war is entirely shaped by the state, which imposes a Gramscian-style hegemonic ideology ‘from above’ on a population that accepts this as natural and beyond critique. Certainly, the state can play a key role in national war commemoration and remembrance – Australia’s recent ANZAC commemorations are a notable instance of this, as Joan Beaumont shows – but all the case studies examined in this symposium reveal that there are many sub-state collectives that are themselves agents of memory making. These may invent their own traditions of remembering; though commonly they also embrace the identities constructed via the state’s rituals of remembrance. They may even appropriate these rituals in their own struggles, as marginalised groups, for recognition by the state: vide the current demand by Aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders for recognition within the rituals of ANZAC for their service in the defence of Australia.¹ Or, like those communities who created the rituals of remembrance during the First World War, they may seek in these processes a means of positioning their private grief within a public sphere. Even when this death and suffering is in the remote past, as it often is for many engaged in today’s remembrance, the memory of loss can retain an emotional power. Marianne Hirsch has called this phenomenon ‘post memory’: that is,

the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch 2008: 106–7, original emphasis)

¹ The author is currently a Chief Investigator on an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant, Serving our Country: A History of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in the Defence of Australia (see: <http://www.ourmobserved.com/>). Indigenous Australians engaging with this project clearly attach much value to official recognition of Indigenous defence service, although this service has been historically in defence of the state which was the agent of Indigenous disadvantage.
The case studies in this symposium reveal that this complexity and contingency of war memory is more than evident in the centenary commemorations of the First World War thus far. To some degree Australia, France, the UK and the USA shared a common historical experience, so far fighting on the Western Front was concerned. All five countries witnessed the bodies of their citizens being torn apart by rapid-fire weapons and artillery; and all – although the USA to a lesser extent since its forces were deployed in Europe only in 1918 – struggled to resolve the strategic stalemate resulting from military technologies which privileged the defensive over the offensive. Germany, of course, was the enemy of the other four, but it too suffered huge losses of life, not just on the Western Front but in titanic battles against Russia on the Eastern Front.²

Despite some commonalities, however, each of the five belligerents had specific experiences of the First World War which, together with their particular political cultures, informed the construction of distinctive metanarratives. Australians, for example, had their ‘baptism of fire’ at Gallipoli in April 1915, an event which acquired such immediate symbolic power, that, although 87 per cent of the 61,500 Australian deaths occurred on the Western Front in 1916–18 (Beaumont 2013: 489), Gallipoli was constructed as ‘the birth of the nation’ even before the war ended. France lost a sixth of its territory to German occupation, 1.4 million of its military forces perished, and its civilian population was subjected to violence and displacement. Hence, France ultimately ‘won the war’, but the national memory, as Romain Fathi explains, was shaped by the reality that ‘[r]uin, death, disease and suffering were all that the war left behind’. The UK, for its part, was neither invaded nor occupied, and its military losses (perhaps 800,000) were lower than those of either France or Germany. Yet many of these deaths occurred in campaigns of relentless attrition: notably the Battles of the Somme from 1 July 2016, which Keith Jeffery describes as ‘the most iconic of all the United Kingdom’s First World War battles’, and the Third Ypres (Passchendaele) from August to November 1917. Hence, Britain was victorious, but the dominant cultural trope soon became that of futile slaughter for irrelevant goals. Germany, meanwhile, fought a war on two fronts, faced starvation and revolution at home, and most importantly lost the war. As Martin Bayer shows, Germans struggled to come to terms the humiliation of defeat, the huge number of deaths (perhaps two million) which were thereby denied meaning and the collapse of the Hohenzollern monarchy. Finally, the USA had a unique experience in that it entered the First World War late, in April 1917. Hence, as Douglas Craig shows, the war was seen primarily as European one, becoming ‘American’ only for five months in 1918 when the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) was finally deployed in France. As it happened, in this short period the AEF suffered a comparable number of deaths to Australia, but this was a much smaller proportion of the American population (Wikipedia 2015).

² Russia is not a case study in this symposium in part because of its relatively limited engagement with the centenary of the First World War. As Professor Evgeny Sergeev, of the Russian Academy of Sciences has said, ‘The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the rise of Bolshevism and the Soviet Union means that the First World War – labeled an ‘imperialist war’ by Lenin – has been somewhat overshadowed’ (cited in Centenary News 2013). Nonetheless on 1 August 2014, the centenary of the declaration of war by Germany on Russia, a monument to the First World War was installed in Moscow. A total of three sculptures to the war were also unveiled across the country (Euronews 2014).
With such different experiences of the war, it was only to be expected that each of these countries would select different events to remember and consecrate different battles. Even more important was the mediation of these memories through later historical experiences. In Germany, for example, as Bayer shows, the political divisions of the Weimar Republic made it impossible to form a common narrative of Germany’s First World War. Any progressivist notions of the nation’s history were then shattered by the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust, catastrophes that would ultimately become the foundational myth – albeit a negative one – of the German state today. In France, as Fathi shows, the Second World War also had the effect of marginalising memories of the First World War. Not only did 1940–44 complicate the heroic narratives of 1914–18 – Philippe Pétain was both the saviour of Verdun in 1916 and the leader of the collaborationist Vichy regime – but the divisive issues of resistance and collaboration under Nazi occupation gained far more public exposure in cultural media. For the USA, meanwhile, the death toll in the Second World War was perhaps eight times that of 1914–18, and the latter war enshrined the nation as a superpower for the subsequent seven decades. Hence, Craig argues, the First World War remained a curtain raiser to the Second which together with the even more catastrophic Civil War of 1861–65 – still the most costly conflict in US history – continue to bookend national memory.

Yet, if their memories of the war differ, each of these case studies testifies to the importance in the commemoration of war of the dynamic negotiation between the state and other social agents. In Australia, as Beaumont shows, the federal government has played a particularly dominant role in orchestrating the commemoration of the First World War. As in the UK, the events of the past have been invoked by the state and conservative media to underscore the national and civic importance of remembering – even celebrating – service in the armed forces of the state today. As Jeffrey says (of Britain but it can be equally said of Australia), ‘it appears to be difficult even to be agnostic (at least) about the former without apparently denigrating the latter’. Yet, for all the substantial orchestration of war memory by the Australian state, there has been much evidence also of popular and media enthusiasm for the anniversary of Gallipoli, and the centenary has generated a plethora of vernacular memory-making, some of which involved the commodification of war that is a feature now of war memory across the globe. How widely this enthusiasm extends, however, and whether the state rituals of ANZAC resonate with Australians of culturally diverse backgrounds, remains unclear.

In France, Germany and the USA, meanwhile, as Fathi, Bayer and Craig show, the central state’s intervention in First World War commemoration has been on a lesser scale. To a considerable degree this has been instigated, if not outranked, by commemorative initiatives ‘from below’. In France, Fathi argues, the engagement with the memory of the First World War has been stronger at the sub-state level. Perhaps this is because memories that conflict with the unifying narratives promulgated by the state can find their voice most readily at the local community level. Indeed in the UK, Jeffery shows, the ‘national’ commemorations of the First World War have had to contend with strong local narratives which expose the ‘multi-national’ nature of the state itself. The anniversary of the start of the war coincided with the Scottish vote on independence, while the wider war commemorations sit squarely within an Irish ‘decade of centenaries’: a violent rebellion against British rule (in 1916); the ‘Irish War of Independence’ (1919–21); and the Irish
Civil War (1922–23), events which continue to shape the memory politics of the two parts of that island. The British commemorations of 2016 will have a particular complexity, encompassing both the centenary of the Easter Uprising in Dublin, which the British ruthlessly crushed, and the Battle of the Somme, on the first day of which the 36th (Ulster) Division loyally served as part of the British army and suffered over 4900 casualties (The Great War 2015).

This negotiation between competing memories of the First World War is not confined to the sphere of domestic politics; it is manifest also at the international level. Of necessity, many national commemorations are played out on battlefields – or to use Pierre Nora’s famous term, ‘sites of memory’ – that are located extra-territorially, in France, Belgium and Turkey. States and individuals must therefore accommodate the memories of the host countries, some of which were formerly enemies whose defeat was a subject for rejoicing in the past. Beyond this, there are diplomatic sensitivities which influence the mode and choice of location of commemoration. One anniversary of the outbreak of the war in August 2014, for example, was conducted at St Symphorien cemetery near Mons because equal numbers of British and German soldiers are interred there.

International commemorations such as these also represent a conscious projection of war memory beyond the national domain into international relations. Of course, remembrance of the war on the Western Front has always had an inherently multinational character, given that memorial building in the immediate post-1918 years required Allied cooperation (Beaumont 2015); but now key wartime anniversaries are being instrumentalised for diplomatic benefit in what Matthew Graves has termed ‘memorial diplomacy’ (Graves 2014: 169–70) and Fathi calls ‘commemorative diplomacy’. Stellar casts of national leaders and royalty meet in ‘carefully choreographed public ceremonies [held] on the anniversaries of historic occasions at selected sites of memory, long established or of recent invention, typically on the margins of international summits or intergovernmental forums’ (Graves 2014: 170). The theatre of such occasions obviously appeals to the media and to audiences at home but they are also assumed to play a positive, if performative, role in facilitating more pragmatic bilateral and multilateral relationships. For the French and Germans, for example, as Fathi argues, the key political messages shaping the First World War commemoration are peace, reconciliation and Europe, all of which promote the European ideal. Memorial diplomacy meanwhile can contribute to a sense that the duty of remembrance that extends beyond the national state to include citizens of other countries and the wider international community. As Bayer shows, the German government was initially inclined to allow the centenary of the First World War to pass without undue ceremony at the national level but was stirred into a more proactive agenda by the examples of others.

Whatever the role played by memorial diplomacy – and the academic community has yet to engage strongly with the question of how national and other collective memories shape the conduct of international relations (Bell 2006: 1, 3) – it is difficult to argue that it reveals anything approaching a new transnational memory of the war. Certainly there is a shared rhetoric of sacrifice, reconciliation and ‘never again’, but this does not constitute a new synthesis of memories of the war that is more than the sum of the constituent national memories. Memorial diplomacy has made possible much of the commemorative activity described in these case studies – by providing access for national governments to extra-territorial sites of memory and blessing national commemorations with an imprimatur of international amity – but the
commemoration of war of the First World War remains framed within national and local imaginings. It is these historically contingent variables, and the contemporary values and priorities of the nation-state and local sub-national communities, which continue to shape the modes of remembering the war.

Disclosure statement

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