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DOI:

[10.1080/07292473.2017.1384136](https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2017.1384136)

Document Version

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

McCartney, H. B., & Morgan-Owen, D. G. (2017). Commemorating the centenary of the First World War: National and trans-national perspectives. *War and Society*, 36(4), 235-238.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2017.1384136>

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Commemorating the centenary of the First World War: national and trans-national perspectives

Helen B. McCartney and David G. Morgan-Owen

Centenaries can be moments of reflection for states and their people. They provide an opportunity to re-consider existing narratives about past events and confirm or repurpose their meaning to inform individual and collective identities as well as important political and social relationships.¹ This special edition has taken 2017 as a moment of reflection, to assess the development of First World War centennial commemoration in its first three years. It attends to the ways in which contemporary political, diplomatic, social and cultural trends have influenced commemoration and the portrayal of the First World War in Europe, Russia and the Middle East.

The inspiration for this collection of articles came from a symposium organised by the First World War Research Group, King's College London. Held in January 2017, its aim was to take stock of the range and depth of developing commemorative activity from national and trans-national perspectives.² Australian, Canadian, French, Russian, Turkish, German, Irish and British commemorations were discussed, building on recent work which has compared the preparation for and initial phases of First World War commemorative activity across a range of states.³

The papers presented here represent a snapshot of this discussion. Four articles trace the commemorative activities in Germany, France, Russia, Turkey, Ireland and Britain. Taken together, we can trace the similarities and differences arising from the commemoration of different societies with different historical, political and social realities.

All the articles show the ways in which commemorative activities have been shaped by the actors involved to communicate understandings of their past, their present and, perhaps most importantly, their visions of the future. Indeed, Jay Winter concludes his article with the observation that memory activists at

¹ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

² Participants included Professor Jay Winter, Professor Annika Mombauer, Dr Heather Jones, Dr Jenny Macleod, Dr Helen McCartney, Dr Catriona Pennell and Hanna Smyth. Recordings of the proceedings are available online and can be found by clicking on the name of the individual participant. <https://soundcloud.com/defence-studies-dept/sets/commemorating-the-centenary-of>, accessed 28 May 2017. A blog post is also available. Aimee Fox and David Morgan-Owen 'Conference Report: Commemorating the Centenary of the First World War', DefenceinDepth.Co, <https://defenceindepth.co/2017/02/28/conference-report-commemorating-the-centenary-of-the-first-world-war/>, accessed 28 May 2017.

³ Joan Beaumont, 'Symposium: Introduction: The politics of memory: Commemorating the centenary of the First World War.' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 50, 3, 2015, pp. 209-211; Bart Ziino, (ed.), *Remembering the First World War* (Routledge: London, 2014); Helen McCarthy, 'Public History and the Centenary of the First World War in Britain' *20th Century British History*, 27, 4, 2016, p. 505.

work today 'may be doing work more important than they know, for the narratives they describe may become the narratives we live with for the foreseeable future.' For this reason alone, investigation of the changing public scripts of the centenary is significant because it can help to illuminate wider sociological and political trends, both within states and trans-nationally.⁴

The democratization and decentralization of commemoration emerges strongly as a key theme across different states. Trans-national developments, including a growing interest in family history, the increased use of social media and the web for commemorative purposes, and a resurgence in the development and application of local history have all contributed to this trend.⁵ These transformations, alongside changes in the political landscape, have helped to complicate and diversify national narratives about the First World War.

The centenary period has seen European-wide movements that aim to collect and digitise memorabilia and documents and make them available on the web. Both nationally based initiatives and internationally focused programmes, such as the Europeana project, have provided unprecedented access to First World War material.⁶ Annika Mombauer and Jay Winter both point to the significance of this development in France and Germany, while Helen McCartney argues that commemorative projects have used digital archival material, and exploited opportunities presented by social media, to engage a broader range of participants in commemoration.

While official state-constructed narratives do retain utility for diplomatic, peace-building and community strengthening reasons, these public scripts are increasingly being challenged by a multiplicity of actors who have different motivations and objectives for engaging in commemoration.⁷ In France and Britain, the national state narratives are weak, with some local commemorations, for example, projecting messages of familial or local pride, at odds with the subdued tone of state level commemorations. Similarly, in the case of Germany, at least three distinct narratives co-existed. Official state scripts stressed the importance of European integration and the responsibility of later generations to

⁴ Anthony King, 'Sport War and Commemoration: Football and Remembrance in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries', *European Journal for Sport and Society*, Vol. 13, 3, 2016, pp. 208-229.

⁵ Jay Winter, 'The generation of memory: reflections on the "memory boom" in contemporary historical studies.' *Archives and Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 1: 0, 2007, p. 370; For an example of web commemoration from the Second World War see: Lucy Noakes, 'The BBC's "People's War" website', in Michael Keren and Holger Herwig (eds.), *War, Memory and Popular Culture: essays on modes of remembrance and commemoration* (North Carolina: Macfarland, 2008); Maggie Andrews, 'Web-remembrance in a confessional media culture', in Maggie Andrews, *Lest We Forget: Remembrance and Commemoration* (Stroud: The History Press, 2011), Kindle Edition, Loc. 1155.

⁶ <http://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/collections/world-war-I>, accessed, 17 May 2017.

⁷ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

preserve peace; the public debate in the media focused on shared responsibility for the outbreak of war influenced by concerns over Germany's future leadership role in Europe, while local exhibitions exemplified the narrative of German war-guilt. Indeed, as Catriona Pennell shows, even in Ireland, where state narratives had greater strength and ubiquity, being tied to reconciliation and peace-building, there was diversity in commemoration. The underpinning idea that there had been a shared experience of loyalist and republican soldiers fighting side by side did not go unchallenged. Political and social imperatives existed that meant other groups reacted to and appropriated First World War commemoration in ways that did not sit comfortably with the official script.

While a range of narratives about the First World War now circulate within individual European states, partly stimulated by trans-national social and cultural trends, the concerns reflected in the commemorative messages are still focused on individual, local or national challenges and imagined futures. Yet, if we examine commemoration more broadly, as Jay Winter argues in his article, these commemorative activities and their narratives can be seen to nest in a wider framework. Winter argues that two memory regimes currently exist, the sacred and the secular, which 'use entirely different terms to describe what is worth remembering about the First World War.' Western European commemoration fits into what he has termed a secular memory regime, that is, one which frames commemoration in terms of human rights and the turn away from war as a consequence of a decline in religious faith. By contrast, practices in Russia, Turkey and Armenia use religious terms and language in commemoration, designating the dead as martyrs, rather than victims. It is here we can see the greatest divergence in commemorative narratives, reflecting different cultural attitudes towards the use of force and the interpretation of loss of life in war.

Taken together, the following four articles investigate the changing landscape of First World War commemoration across a range of different states, showing how the character of commemorative forms and the narratives which they support are shaped by the twenty-first century preoccupations, challenges and aspirations of their creators.

Abstract

This special issue examines the ways in which contemporary political, diplomatic, social, and cultural trends have influenced centennial commemoration of the First World War in Europe, Russia and the Middle East. The four articles identify and examine a diversity of narratives that have emerged over the centenary period, charting similarities and differences between states, organisations and individuals. While divergent narratives certainly exist within and between states, the greatest differences may be located in attitudes to the use of force and the way in which different cultures interpret the loss of life in war.

Key words: First World War, commemoration, centenary narratives

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