

Neil Forbes

Museums, European Society and the Legacy of 1918

Abstract The article* considers, among other things, what the responsibilities of the museum are and the challenges that may arise if those responsibilities are to be effectively discharged. In recent years there has been a welling up of interest among the public in remembrance and commemoration, and the museum plays a central role in facilitating such developments. When, for the first time in modern history, the vast majority of Europeans have had no direct experience of the horrors of war or warfare, the museum should be a key repository for the authentic and accurate representation to new generations of war and its awful legacy.

Keywords remembrance, memory, war, Europe, democracy, museums

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The years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the transition of power from communist regimes to democratic governments across Eastern Europe, seemed to herald a new era of peaceful coexistence between countries. To what extent, however, is it possible to retain a high level of confidence that the chauvinistic rivalries and extremist ideology that propelled nations to take up arms against nations and divided citizens within nations are phenomena that are historical in nature and consequently far removed from contemporary experience?

This short article comments on how, in the context of a world in which international relations can never be said to be in a settled condition, the museum is positioned one hundred years after the First World War. The article considers, among other things, what the responsibilities of the museum are and the challenges that may arise if those responsibilities are to be effectively discharged. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that celebrating societal and cultural diversity should be a way to recapture traditions of civilization rather than be a source of tension; on the other hand, the glorification of national narratives has the potential to sustain old enmities. In recent years there has been a welling up of interest among the public in remembrance and commemoration, and the museum plays a central role in facilitating such processes, sometimes referred to as a vital combination of perpetuation and closure. Above all, when, for the first time in modern history, the vast majority of Europeans have had no direct experience of the horrors of war or warfare, the museum should be a key repository for the authentic and accurate representation to new generations of war and its awful legacy.

Anniversaries serve an important and valuable function in providing an occasion for particular reflection, not least by historians, some of whom are keen to use the opportunity presented by an anniversary in order to bring out publications purporting to offer new interpretation. One hundred years after the guns fell silent on 11 November 1918 is certainly a moment to think about the meaning the past holds and how that meaning should be articulated in terms of contributing to attempts to shape the future. But, in this sense, the act of remembering can be far from straightforward. The Armistice of 1918 was preceded, on 9 November, by the abdication of the Kaiser and the de facto establishment of the German Republic. However, for Germany in the year 2018, 9 November was not only the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, it was also the 29th anniversary of the opening of the Berlin Wall.

In today's Europe, the experience and memory of war, the nature of identity and the practices of remembrance are closely connected; they involve issues which continue to generate controversy and stir up passionate debate. Of course, war in Europe has not always been just between states. Spain is slowly coming to terms with the legacy of its terrible Civil War, and dealing with the challenges left in its aftermath, such as the recent decision to exhume and relocate the remains of Franco from the Valley of the Fallen.

It was a widely-held view in 1918 that the war that had just ended was the war to end all wars. Tragically, of course, the twentieth century proved to be Europe's most deadly century. The coming of modern industrial warfare dictated that war became total war, requiring the mobilisation of the state's entire resources in order to sustain the prosecution of the conflict. In this way, therefore, civilians away from the battlefield or conquered territories became, for the first time, legitimate targets in the eyes of the combatants. There was a front line where fighting took place, and a home front where non-combatants contributed to the war effort and paid a terrible price for doing so.

The conditions imposed on Germany under the Treaty of Versailles, concluded in the year following the war, were regarded as disastrously punitive by John Maynard Keynes, the economist, and disastrously lenient by Marshall Ferdinand Foch, Supreme Allied Commander. The 1928 General Treaty for the Renunciation of War – the so-called Kellogg-Briand Pact – attempted to make aggressive war, in the sense of the conquest of territory, illegal. But it took, of course, another world war before Europe – at least the western part of the continent to begin with – resolved to take an internationalist, even transnationalist approach in conducting affairs between states.

Given that European powers were in 1945 still, to some extent, controlling overseas colonies and territories, Europe's experience of war did not come to an end in 1945. Rather, it assumed an extra-European character with, for example, wars of insurgency where the fight was for liberation from colonial domination. After 1945, in some cases, former allies very quickly became enemies – and not just as a result of the coming of the Cold War. During the Second World War, the British set up the Jewish Brigade. Some of those enlisted men, who had fought in Italy in the last year of the war, joined the Irgun – the militant, right-wing Zionist underground organization; on Monday 22 July 1946 they carried out a terrorist bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem – the British administrative headquarters for Palestine was housed in the southern wing of the hotel. Some 90 deaths resulted.

The year 2017 marked the centenary of the commitment Britain had given to the Zionist cause – the Balfour Declaration – to establish a homeland for Jews in Palestine. The dire consequences of failing to give, at the same time, adequate protection to the rights of the majority Arab population have been plain to see ever since.

War is certainly embedded in the national, collective memory. Individual countries have their own traditions, conventions, laws, customs and institutions even if, for good or ill, ideas flow across national borders. There are several potential problems with a statist approach – the promotion and promulgation of a national history and associated national memorialisation. To begin with, “collective memory” is in itself a problematic concept. Memory is malleable – the past may be made to serve present, political aims – and the collective may be defined in ways that are exclusive rather than genuinely inclusive. In this light, dangers may lie ahead in situations where identity is shaped by collective memory. It seems not only appropriate but vital, therefore, to consider why certain acts of remembrance take place and to reflect on the way they are conducted.

There have long been critics who regard communal ceremonies and memorials as beautifying and thereby suppressing the past. To Ian Buruma, such choreographic representations of history replace memory itself and impede reflection; they are viewed as manifestations of a culture of remembrance that is all-pervasive.¹ Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum from 2005 to 2015, and a founding director of the Humboldt Forum, has recently suggested that Britain, unlike France and Germany, has been slow to abandon its intensely national acts of commemoration and instead embrace a shared, common memory.² What, precisely, should be remembered will always be the subject of debate. Some commentators seek to reframe the terms of the debate by asking why it is necessary to remember at all, and whether society would not be better served if nations, communities and individuals could learn how to forget responsibly.

Yet, just as with officially-sanctioned remembrance, it may be politically convenient, to say the least, for the state to forget whole historical episodes; in the void that then opens up, myth-making tends to flourish. The conflict

1 Buruma, I. (2009) *Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan*. London: Atlantic Books.

2 MacGregor, N. (2018) To End All Wars. *Financial Times* 10/11 November 2018, p. 1.

between rising nationalism and multi-ethnic empires, which had partly caused the First World War, left a bitter legacy of division after 1918, nowhere more so than in the case of relations between Britain and Ireland. The Republic of Ireland came to regard the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin as a foundational moment for the state; for the British Empire, just at the time when 500 Royal Dublin Fusiliers were dying on the Western Front from a chlorine gas attack, it was an existential crisis. It has taken the best part of a century for Ireland to come to terms and acknowledge that 49,400 citizens died fighting for the Allies, for Britain, to acknowledge its colonialist role in Ireland, and for public acts of reconciliation to be undertaken by the Queen, and by Irish Presidents Mary McAleese and Michael Higgins.

History museums are, of course, key venues of history education and history entertainment; innovations in design, layout and in exhibiting, along with a rise in interest among the general public, have allowed heritage sites, sites of memory and memory institutions to enjoy record visitor numbers in recent years. It is suggested that the history museum has become the premier site of negotiation about official historical narratives, enjoying the backing of important institutions, and representing a central element in the purposeful and self-reflective construction of European identity.³ The important sub-genre of the war museum is part of this broad development. In some cases, museums are aligned to a national narrative such as one constructed around victimhood, where the states has suffered under occupation; in other cases, exhibitions that portray the violence of war to the public may give rise to ethical concerns.⁴ The current, EU-funded project UNREST is taking a critical look at such official, state-sponsored histories of the European wars of the twentieth century in the light of what is referred to as “Europe’s pressing memory problem”. The project questions what is referred to as the efficacy of cosmopolitan memory, and is concerned to examine the extent to which critical voices are accommodated.⁵

But there is also a countervailing trend in remembrance away from regarding its primary function as way to signify and even reinforce the idea of

3 Kaiser, W. et al. (2016) *Exhibiting Europe in Museums. Transnational Networks, Collections, Narratives and Representations*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books.

4 Muchitsch, W. ed. (2014) *Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

5 UNREST: Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe [Online]. Available at: www.unrest.eu [Accessed: 30 June 2019].

the national community. Instead of engaging in attempts to achieve certain overarching, strategic policy objectives, remembrance is becoming personalised in order to reflect a more diverse and heterogeneous society. One aspect of this has been referred to as the construction of the “witness” perspective within the museum, whereby individuals, either inside the museum or through online activities, carry the burden of memory; they are charged with a moral duty to ensure remembrance is maintained not just for themselves but also for the family, the community. In the words of one author, the experience of war is recreated as a “lived, contingent trauma”.⁶ Yet other scholars entertain serious doubts about the value of such an approach: Juliet Steyn has commented that it rests upon notions of empathy and identification, and that an assumption is at work which asserts that experience naturally pertains to comprehension.⁷

Furthermore, the trend of personalisation brings with it significant risks: identity politics is pulling liberal democracy apart. There is an insatiable desire for recognition of the self – a self equal to others. Populism of the right is capturing those who feel excluded, especially by the liberal elites. Whilst diversity should be celebrated, liberal society works only if diverse groups can live together rather than become fragmented into a collection of groups, each with its own set of demands. These fissiparous tendencies make the task of building a majority or consensus around a set of common values all the more difficult, with the result that internationalism based on the post-1945 liberal world order is undermined. As Kwame Anthony Appiah – the philosopher and cultural theorist – has pointed out, what everyone has in common is human identity. Notions of essentialist identity need to be refuted. Nationalists delude themselves when they believe that a nation’s citizens are anointed with a set of special characteristics: any close examination of identity based on race, religion or culture shows the extent of cross-fertilisation throughout history.⁸

6 Wilson, R.J. (2013) *Cultural Heritage of the Great War in Britain*. Abingdon: Ashgate, p. 154.

7 Steyn, J. (2014) Vicissitudes of Representation: Remembering and Forgetting. In: Kidd, J. et al. eds. *Challenging History in the Museum: International Perspectives*. Abingdon: Ashgate, pp. 141–48, p. 143.

8 Appiah, K.A. (2016) The Reith Lectures: Mistaken Identities: Country [Online]. See: www.bbc.co.uk [Accessed: 30 June 2019].

Of all the functions and purposes which the museum sector fulfils, none can be more important than that of a role in educating the public about the horrors perpetrated by fascism – a political movement that not only originated in Europe but was a particularly European phenomenon. Although contemporary, right-wing, extremist parties tend to avoid referring to themselves as fascist, the ideological ingredients are re-appearing – the mobilisation of mass groups based on their perceived social and economic exclusion, xenophobia, racism, nationalistic emotions and desire to attack parliamentary democracy. The mere existence of civil society institutions may not be sufficient by itself to defend democracy. When authoritarian and fascist elites are able to achieve hegemony, war is invariably the end product of this ideological conflict. In 2014, Tony Barber – Europe Editor of the *Financial Times* – wrote an article celebrating the opening, in Warsaw, of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Barber praised Poland’s young, vigorous democracy, which had a sense of its place in a Europe of unity, tolerance and dialogue. The museum was designed to show carefully, in its core exhibitions, historical episodes of Polish anti-Semitism and violence against Jews.⁹ Yet the recent attempts by the Polish state to penalize any suggestion that it was complicit in the extermination of the Jews would seem to fly in the face of the values of tolerance, unity and dialogue that country has only recently been praised for upholding.

It could be argued that experts can be trusted only if they remain above the fray of political debates, or opinion or sentiment. But the distinction between impartial expert and partisan politician has become blurred. Facts are increasingly made to serve a political purpose – conveyed by the usage of the term “weaponised”. Indeed, facts are frequently simply denied, and the result is that evidence-based policy is ignored, people’s emotions are stirred and demagoguery triumphs. Where does that leave the historian and the museum professional in regard to the question of the use of artefacts and exhibition, representation and interpretation, especially in the age of digitisation?

One example of how bringing a range of such skills and expertise together can have an extraordinarily powerful impact on the public was the creation of the film *They Shall Not Grow Old* – a product of the 14–18 Now:

9 Barber, T. (2014) Life from the Shadows. *Financial Times Magazine* 25/26 October 2014, pp. 26, 45–47.

World War I Centenary Art Commissions.¹⁰ Released on 11 November 2018 to coincide with the First World War Armistice, the film was a collaboration between the Imperial War Museums, the BBC and Peter Jackson, the film director. What Jackson wanted to do with the film was to take away the intervening one hundred years by digitally enhancing original film material – especially through the use of colour – and to be able to convey to viewers a firm impression of contemporaneity. In this respect, and notwithstanding a number of criticisms that were expressed in relation to authenticity, the work was an outstanding triumph. It achieved exactly what the Imperial War Museums had set out to do: inspire audiences to find out more about the events that took place during the First World War.

In conclusion, it may be said that museums have become sites of struggle where issues of power, control and authority, authenticity, ownership, voice and silence are all challenged. They are places where collective and personal memories come together, and where questions related to identity may be reflected upon, formed and perhaps even transformed. Of course, this is frequently contested ground, but museums have a vital role to play in the coming years in helping to defend the values of liberal, democratic society. By means of participatory governance, and co-designing the environment, cultural diversity and the multi-vocality increasingly evident in societies undergoing fundamental change can be respected.¹¹ Furthermore, conflicting interpretations can be channelled, moderated and mediated. Above all, museums are the repositories of knowledge; those who work in them should never be reluctant in claiming expertise in interpreting what is, and what is not, authentic, reliable and credible evidence and argument. In building a more resilient society, views based on “alternative” facts must be challenged and those holding such views must be confronted wherever and whenever necessary.

10 Jackson, P. (2018) *They Shall Not Grow Old* [Online]. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0brzkzx [Accessed: 30 June 2019].

11 For an overview of the scope of the challenges facing the museum sector, see Said Business School (2018) *Museum Leaders' Report*. Oxford: University of Oxford.