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The Centennial of World War I, 1914–1919 and the National World War I Museum and Memorial: Special Exhibitions

Abstract In 2013, the staff of the United States' National World War I Museum and Memorial developed themes and guiding questions for how the museum, which was founded in 1920, should use its international collection and exhibitions in yearly (1914–1919) observances of the Centennial of the First World War. My paper illustrates how this was done and what is still being done. The museum specifically collected new objects and documents for each of the years to enhance what was already in the diverse collection of all nations involved in the war. The exhibitions include *Over by Christmas, August–December 1914* and *Crucible: Life and Death in 1918*.

Keywords global, commemoration, war, impacts

The National World War I Museum and Memorial in Missouri, USA, determined in 2013 that some of the major observances of the First World War Centennial would be through special exhibitions, both on-site and travelling, and associated public programming. Calling upon the diverse and comprehensive collections of the museum, which was founded in 1920, the special exhibitions would cover the global nature of events.

By way of introduction, the Liberty Memorial and World War I Museum, now the National World War I Museum and Memorial, announced its creation in a ground-breaking ceremony in November 1921 in Kansas City, Missouri. Five main Allied leaders attended, the only time in history they were all together in the same place. They were General Jacques of Belgium, General Diaz of Italy, Marshal Foch of France, General Pershing of the United States and Admiral Lord Beatty of Great Britain. The previous year, a fund-raising campaign had raised $2,500,000 for the lasting monument to those who served in the First World War.

Construction started in 1923 and was completed in 1926. President Calvin Coolidge opened it to the world on 11 November 1926. The museum had already been collecting for six years before the building was finished. It has always been the mission of the museum to represent every nation actively participating in the war and it continues that today.

In 2006, the museum expanded its museum and visitor services space to almost 200,000 square feet. In 2018, over 500,000 visitors came from all over the world to the museum, the memorial and the surrounding grounds. Thousands of students come to the museum to learn.

In 2013, the museum hosted an international conference to discuss Centennial observances. A guiding statement came from First World War American Lieutenant General Bullard:

> On this war men will think and write for a thousand years. They will! And the things that will concern, interest and fill the thoughts of the great bulk of humanity who do think and want to know, will not be the great battles, not the tactics and the strategy of generals and mighty armies, but human feelings and actions as fill these little stories.

After the conference, from many brain-storming sessions in the museum came more questions than answers:

» How do we commemorate?

» What is the museum's role internationally?
» How do we make it all relevant to visitors (both on-site and on-line), school groups and the country?
» Where is the museum in the global effort to remember and understand war?

Themes and guiding questions emerged for each year of the war, including 1919 for the Centennial activities of the Museum: 2014_Confrontation: Why global war?, 2015_Escalation: How did the world respond?, 2016_Devastation: What were the costs?, 2017_Revolution: How did the world change?, 2018_Realization: War is over? What have we learned?, 2019_Commemoration: Is peace possible?

2014 – Confrontation: Why global war?

The first special exhibition opened before 2014. It was called *Road to War: World Power and Imperialism, 1904–1914* (fig. 1, p. 36). The exhibition explained that the ten years leading to the outbreak of the First World War, between 1904 and 1914, witnessed a series of small and large conflicts between the major European powers over territory in Europe and overseas possessions.[1] They ranged in geographical distance from Manchuria on the Asian Pacific coast to North Africa to the Balkans. These conflicts only lasted a year or two but provided the world a preview of what twentieth century warfare would be like. The nineteenth century Napoleonic concept of the "nation at arms" was replaced by its twentieth century version of the "nation at war"; limited war had become total war. The small, professional armies fighting each other for limited strategic objectives for short periods of time gave way to massive forces recruited from nation-wide drafts that were armed and supplied by working civilian populations.

Ever-increasing expenditures from national budgets were paid to maintain large standing armies and vast pools of trained civilian-reservists. Allocating these large sums to military establishments, and having a significant

1 This text, and following exhibition descriptions, are provided at www.theworldwar.org [Accessed: 14 July 2019] and related pages of the National World War I Museum and Memorial website.

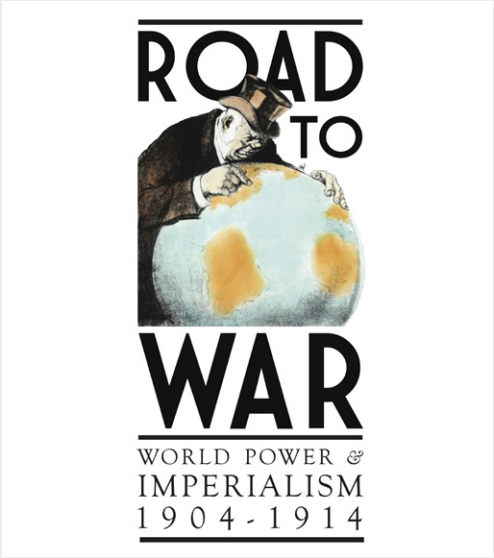

Fig. 1: Marketing for *Road to War: World Power and Imperialism, 1904–1914* exhibition. ©National World War I Museum and Memorial, 2013

number of civilians trained and ready to mobilize at the first call to arms, created a psychological need to use armed force in foreign policy matters. This could be either in self-defence against a perceived threat or in self-interest to expand national territory. Imperialist competition and fears of falling behind in the new world economy led to expansion by the European Great Powers and Japan. The Boer War, the Spanish-American War, the Russo-Japanese War and the Italo-Turkish War were outcomes of the ongoing competition for new territory. The leaders of Austria-Hungary, Germany and Russia all worried that they would be isolated or become losers in imperial and economic rivalries.

The first special exhibition in 2014 was *On the Brink: June–July 1914*, which illustrated the events of those two months through photographs, graphics and news reports of the time. Outside the museum on the memorial grounds, on 28 June 2014, a living exhibition of young people in character of potential assassins and the actual assassin in Sarajevo stood as mute witnesses to the day's events. Each held a placard which described their actions

on that fateful day. One example was Vaso Čubrilović, 17 year-old Bosnian Serb, writing from Zenica Prison, 1918:

> I first thought of it [the assassination] in October 1913 in Tuzla, incensed by the fights we had with our teachers, the mistreatment of Serbian students, and the general situation in Bosnia. I thought I'd rather kill the one person who'd really harmed our people than fight in another war for Serbia...[2]

Over by Christmas: August–December 1914 opened in August. For so many, war was romantic. War was colorful flags, spiked helmets and flashing sabers. War was an adventure. Those called to arms would be heroes, defending their homelands and way of life. The war would be over in days, surely by Christmas. Christmas was supposed to be a time of peace; but it was not. The exhibition highlighted the first five months of the war through specific topics or case studies. These included "Germany Mobilizes", "Germany's Rush to War", "Invasion: Belgium and France" and "War in the East".

2015 – Escalation: How did the world respond?

Sand to Snow: Global War 1915 opened on 1 May 2015. The year 1915 was pivotal in terms of the world-wide involvement in the war from the Balkans to Europe to Africa. This exhibition illustrated the convergence of diverse military, political, economic and social forces from the nations at war to the neutrals on the sidelines. The faces, actions, voices and objects of the people, often from an individual viewpoint, were our guides. Their contributions and sacrifices were the central themes.

The diversion of European factories to war production disrupted the entire world economy. To fight a global war the combatant nations incurred enormous debts to produce the weapons, ammunition and equipment necessary. Soldiers and sailors fighting across the globe required uniforms, supplies and food. The United States remained politically-neutral, not wanting to be drawn into a European war, but sold war material to both the Allies and Central Powers which included Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire.

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2 Palmer, S. and Wallis, S. eds. (2003) *Intimate Voices from the First World War*. New York: William Morrow Publishers, p. 4.

Fig. 2: Marketing for *They Shall Not Pass: The Somme and Verdun 1916* exhibition.
©National World War I Museum and Memorial, 2016

2016 – Devastation: What were the costs?

They Shall Not Pass: The Somme and Verdun 1916 was next (fig. 2). Mud and mayhem, death and destruction, staggering unnecessary losses, aptly describe the two pivotal battles of 1916 on the Western Front: the Somme and Verdun. An attack along a front of 18 miles from Maricourt, north of the River Somme, to Gommecourt by British and French forces, was meant to break the Western Front stalemate. It did not.

The Battle of the Somme in 1916 was actually the second Battle of the Somme. In September 1914, the British Expeditionary Force was not involved in the battles of Picardy and Albert, so it is not as well recorded or reported.

Although fighting around the ancient fortress city of Verdun had started in 1914 and would continue until 1918, the huge German offensive there starting on 21 February 1916 and lasting until the French counter offensive on 15 December was meant to break the French spirit. It did not. On 23 June French General Robert Nivelle exhorted his men to hold: *vous ne les laisserrez pas passer* (you shall not let them pass). The shortened adopted French battle cry then and forever after the 1916 battle was *on ne passe pas* or *ils ne passeront pas* (they shall not pass).

This exhibition drew on the extensive collection of the museum to show the immense scope of the 1916 Western Front battles and other areas of action, including the Eastern Front. It also illustrated personal experiences: from a Canadian soldier lost in the morass of the unforgiving Somme battlefield to German *Soldaten* at the walls of Verdun.

2017 – Revolution: How did the world change?

The 1917 centennial exhibition, *Revolutions 1917*, showcased the incredible events that occurred worldwide from America's official entry into the war and Russia's upheavals from an Imperial state to popular rule. The battles on the Western Front and in other theaters, and troubles on the home fronts, also led to societal changes, mutinies and revolts.

While the common conception of the United States' entry into the war on 6 April 1917 is one of unbridled patriotism and unified support, the country went through painful transitions and anti-war efforts. The dichotomy of American involvement in the First World War was, of course, that America was in the war fighting to make the world safe for democracy, but many African Americans in the United States did not enjoy that very premise. While the migrations to the north fostered a sense of revolution in attitudes and treatment, it was often not the case.

Russia reeled under two revolutions and a military uprising. German sailors mutinied against low morale and mistreatment. In Berlin, 300,000 workers went on strike, joining protesters against many shortages including food. French soldiers, many of them veterans of three years of fighting, refused to attack. From the Canadian troops' actions at Vimy Ridge, Brigadier-General A.E. Ross declared after the war that "in those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation. Vimy became a symbol for the sacrifice of the young Dominion."

Another Centennial exhibition for the year 1917 was *Posters as Munitions*. Soon after the outset of the First World War the poster, previously the successful medium of commercial advertising, was recognized as a means of spreading national propaganda with unlimited possibilities. Its value as an educational or stimulating influence was more and more appreciated. The poster could impress an idea quickly, vividly and lastingly.

Historian Pearl James wrote "when World War I began in 1914, the poster was a mature advertising tool and artistic medium."[3] Lithography, paper rolled over a treated and inked stone, had evolved from the first uses in the late eighteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, chromolithography was in use. Improvements in printing techniques allowed for large numbers of posters in the First World War to be produced. Posters flew off the production lines like cartridges, helmets and uniforms.

For the first time, the museum created an outdoor travelling exhibition for 2017, *Fields of Battle, Lands of Peace: The Doughboys, 1917–1918*,[4] of the incredible contemporary photographs of British photographer Michael St Maur Sheil, which depict the battlefields of the Western Front where the Americans fought. They witnessed environmental degradation, obliterated villages, vast cemeteries and continuing massive destruction in a landscape that was already very foreign to them. Large color images – many 7 x 4 feet (213 x 122 cm) – exhibition text and archival documents conveyed those human efforts, actions and feelings in a spectacular fashion.

Online exhibitions included *Make Way for Democracy!*, which portrayed the lives of African Americans during the war through a series of rare images, documents and objects. In an era of federal segregation, the national call as "champions of the rights of mankind" rang hollow. Many African Americans saw the war as an opportunity to redefine their US citizenship and improve social, political and economic conditions. *Wonder Women from WWI* built upon the popularity of the movie, *Wonder Woman*, in showing the incredible efforts of women during the war.

3 James, P. (2009) *Picture This: World War I Posters and Visual Culture*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, p. 4.

4 The colloquial name for American Expeditionary Forces troops in the First World War.

2018 – Realization: War is over? What have we learned?

In February 2018 the special exhibition *John Singer Sargent: Gassed* opened in a new exhibition space in the museum. Reaching a British dressing station south-west of the French city of Arras in summer 1918, famed American artist John Singer Sargent found his subject for an overdue painting. Sargent had been commissioned by the British Government to "contribute the central painting for a Hall of Remembrance for the World War". He had procrastinated until he saw the dressing station. The dressing station at the small village of Bailleulval was treating a number of British soldiers who had been blinded by a mustard gas attack. The final product, *Gassed,* would become a monumental work from the war, over 9 feet tall and over 20 feet long (274 x 610 cm), and was loaned from the Imperial War Museums in London for the exhibition.

Representing the final year of the war, the exhibition *Crucible: Life and Death in 1918* is not an illustration or timeline of how or why the 1918 battles were fought. It focuses instead on individuals and their lives and deaths in the crucible of 1918.

For the Doughboys on the Western Front, 1918 was their year. It was the crucible where the Americans forged their fighting force. They fought alongside their main allies – the British Empire, French, Italians, Czechs and the White Russians – from Cantigny to Belleau Wood to the Champagne region; the Piave River to the Marne; St Mihiel to the Meuse Argonne to Vladivostok. The crucible gave American women great and unforeseen opportunities to serve their country in uniform.

Crucible:
a situation of severe trial, or in which different elements interact, leading to the creation of something new.

The British and French generals wanted the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) Commander General John J. Pershing to integrate US units into their armies. But Pershing insisted on a separate American army. At an Allied conference in May 1918, when Allied lines were near breaking, French Marshal Foch demanded, "Are you willing to risk our being driven back to the Loire?" "Yes, I am willing to take the risk," Pershing replied. "The time may come when the American Army will have to stand the brunt of this war, and it is not wise to fritter away our resources in this manner." Except for a few units detached to help stop the German advance in the spring of 1918 and a few other times, the AEF fought as an American force under Pershing's direct command.

1918 was by no means solely an American show: the Allies still shouldered the lion's share of the action. The *Devastated Lands, 2019* exhibit explores the utter devastation that occurred in all areas of the world war where battles were fought through original photographs, artwork and posters from the period.

> It was a waste so utter that even the ruin was ruined. – John Masefield[5]

Adelaide Travis, canteen worker for the American Red Cross Foreign Service, wrote home on 19 May 1919 from France:

> We went to the front a week ago today: to Montdidiers [sic], Amiens, Albert, Lens, Arras, St. Quentin and back through the Forest of Compaigne [sic]. There is no use my trying to describe the destruction and desolation up there. No description, picture or amount of imagination would give you any idea of it. I was awfully shocked and after seeing it all I marvel that any of them are alive to tell what they have been through. It was just a tiny part of the British front that we saw but it has made a lasting impression on me that will last as long as I live.[6]

A French poster, "The Voice of the Ruins" by Victor Prouve, shown in the exhibition, lamented that (translated): "The Voice of the Ruins is rising from the ravaged earth, from the devastated orchards, from the burned factories, from the destroyed villages, from the walls, fallen or gasping, from the moving solitude of phantom cities."[7]

Unexploded ordnance from the war still lurks in the soil of Europe. Trained crews of disposal experts travel constantly through the battle areas finding, transporting and destroying live artillery shells, including poison gas shells, ammunition and grenades. Farmers often turn them up in their fields and place the still-lethal objects alongside roads. Teenagers harvesting potatoes in Belgium must be careful because dirt-covered German "egg" grenades look like *pomme de terre*. It is estimated that it will take another

5 Vansittart, P. ed. (1985) *John Masefield's Letters from the Front, 1915–1917*. New York: Franklin Watts. John Masefield later became Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom.

6 Collection of the National World War I Museum and Memorial Archives

7 Ibid.

one hundred years to find and remove the still-potent remnants of the First World War and the war to follow 20 years later. – The deadly legacy of the war is still with us.

2019 – Commemoration: Is peace possible?

In 2019, the museum will host *Color of Memory: Fabric Art of WWI,* exploring expressions of remembrance through striking and moving works from the collection.

"Remember Me". "Souvenir de France". "Mother Dear". "Merci!" These and countless other sentiments are expressed in the fabric art that came out of the First World War. Romantic and patriotic scenes were created on silk and cotton and wool felt. Needlepoint, silk screen, embroidery, quilting, painting and cross-stitch all served to express love, fear, loss and memory. Many of the objects were made in direct response to loved ones going to war from every country. Others were made for commercial purposes to serve the clamor for souvenirs. Regardless of initial purpose, the fabric art became a colorful reminder of how deeply the war affected those at home and away.
Corporal Walter Bullard, Co. F., 603rd Engineers, wrote home:

> I am enclosing a handkerchief that I bought for you. It is rather pretty with the French flag and Stars and Stripes together. They sell quite a bunch of them to the boys to send home and there is hardly a town that I have been in that you can't find hundreds in stores. They have all colors and with different words and such. Some have all the Allied flags worked in the corner.[8]

Two months after *Color of Memory* opens, the National World War I Museum and Memorial will launch the final exhibition in its First World War suite: *1919: Peace?* This exhibition will explore how the First World War transformed the world, but left a legacy of unresolved issues and conflict.

1919: Peace? shows that after the Armistice men and women still lost their lives – either directly from unceasing hostilities or indirectly from lingering wounds and diseases. The influenza epidemic continued unabated until the summer of 1919. The threat of war reigniting was very real. Although

8 Collection of the National World War I Museum and Memorial Archives

most fighting was over, global volunteers' relief efforts against famine, agricultural failures, destruction of environments and religious persecution persevered. President Wilson's urgent appeals to Americans for help in the "Near East" grew.

Following the outpouring of joy for the Armistice and the triumphant return of the US troops, many African American military veterans and civilians alike found that little had changed and that the fight for equality at home was still many years in the making.

For those world-wide who lost loved ones and comrades in arms, loss was still palpable. Remembrance and memorials could help soothe the pain but could not replace those far from home.

Russia struggled in civil war. Japan's power in Asia and the Pacific grew. China fell into civil war. Arab nations seethed for independence. Under British rule, Jewish settlement expanded in Palestine. The United States assumed an uneasy mantle of world leader. The war transformed the world but left it a legacy of unresolved issues and conflict.

Conclusion

In conclusion, from uniforms to documents, from posters to weapons, from photographs to helmets, the special exhibitions of the National World War I Museum and Memorial effectively explored the trials and triumphs of each of the years from 1914 to 1919. The exhibition programme benefited from its international collection, providing depth and diversity to the topics covered and presenting visitors with touchstones for each of the centennial years. Personal voices and rich collections provided depth and authenticity to this important programme, exploring experience and memory in a global context.