

Juliane Haubold-Stolle

Why Does Germany Tend to Forget 1918?

Abstract There was a huge difference between the public attention the centenary of the beginning of the First World War received in 2014 and the arguably lesser attention for the centenary of the end of the war in 2018. Is it easier to remember going to war than to remember peace-making?

My first argument is: lessons learned from the beginning and the end of the First World War differ – indeed, there is a “European lesson” learned from the beginning of the First World War, but the conclusions drawn from the end are national ones. These lessons tell much about concepts of nation and democracy in different European countries as well as the lived reality. Therefore it is time to discuss those differences and to change history museums into institutions where democracy and nation are debated and not only presented.

Keywords commemoration, culture

This day, the 9th of November 1918, is a milestone in the history of German democracy. It stands for the birth of the republic in Germany. It stands for the breakthrough of parliamentary democracy. And this is why it deserves pride of place in our country's culture of remembrance,

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said during the official ceremony on 9 November held in the German Bundestag.¹ Titled “German Schicksalstag” (day of destiny/fateful day) it did not only celebrate the founding of the first German republic in 1918. It also pointed out that 9 November was the 80th anniversary of the anti-Jewish atrocities of 1938, the “*Reichskristallnacht*”, as well as the 95th anniversary of the Hitler's putsch in Munich – and also the 29th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall. Understandably a day like this is no easy jubilee. If you had wanted to especially celebrate the end of war, you could have chosen 11 November. But that did not happen. That shows it is still not easy to talk about the First World War in Germany – even one hundred years later.

This is even more astonishing if you remember the huge attention the centenary of the beginning of the war received.² In 2014 there had been a “commemorative avalanche”³ in Europe – an enormous public resonance to the commemorative events centering around the one hundredth anniversary of 1914, surprising even in Germany where traditionally the First World War was, and is, overshadowed by the Second World War.

Indicating that in Germany the events of November 1918 would not be as prominently remembered as they could and should be, I remember a visit from French colleagues in 2012. They asked the director of the German Historical Museum, where I worked then, to organize a joint exhibition about the end of the Great War and the changes it brought about in Eastern Europe – and he declined because he didn't want to go along “with all these anniversaries”. You can think as you like about anniversaries, but to pass over

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- 1 Speech by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in the German Bundestag, available at: www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/577898/1fab911443e38b78dc622d2b7d1aee6/Rede_BPraes_09November2018-data.pdf [Accessed: 13 July 2019].
 - 2 Fenn, M. (2016) Der Krieg, der Fern War, ist Jetzt Nah. Staatliches Erinnern an “1914“ im Mega-Jubiläumsjahr 2014 in Deutschland. In: Fenn, M. et al. eds. *Auf dem Weg zur transnationalen Erinnerungskultur. Konvergenzen, Interferenzen und Differenzen der Erinnerung an den Ersten Weltkrieg im Jubiläumsjahr 2014*. Schwalbach: Wochenschau Geschichte, pp. 66–96.
 - 3 Wolfrum, E. et al. (2016) Introduction. In: Wolfrum, E. et al. eds. *European Commemoration: Locating World War I*. Stuttgart: ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy, pp. 5–11, p. 5.

the centenary of the end of a war, which influenced Germany's history for the next 50 years, or to ignore the revolution of 1918, which produced the first German republic, was in my view a political mistake.⁴ The end of a war that killed about 9 million soldiers and 7 to 10 million civilians is worthwhile remembering vividly. The beginning of the first German republic two days earlier is worth being celebrated! Nevertheless, back in the year 2012 the then acting director of the museum was not alone in his unwillingness to talk about the revolution of 1918 – for what reason?

The most important difference was that, though in 2014 most of the stories told were national ones, an overall European lesson was repeated again and again: the importance of diplomatic talks and the prevention of war, because 1914 showed how very easy it is to start a war and how very difficult to end it.

While the conclusions drawn from the end of the First World War are primarily national ones, and each country narrates its own lesson, these lessons learned tell us how nation and democracy are seen in the different European countries. That is one of the reasons why there is an uncertainty about how to remember 1918 in Germany: the lessons learned from 1918 are not easy to determine. We still have not come to terms with this war and its end. There is no “easy” German narrative covering 1918. This became evident in 2018, when we could not hide behind a European narrative like we did in 2014. It is easy to join in when everybody mourns the dead of war. But in 2018 you had to define what the war meant for your country or for Europe. Almost no one in Germany was willing to answer – because if you did you would have had to talk about the concepts of nation and democracy today – and about the Second World War.

For other countries this seems to be easier. In France the memory of the First World War constitutes an important part of the national identity. *La grande guerre* is widely and vividly remembered – across the country, in towns, villages and families. The memory concentrates not only on the victory but foremost on the joint national effort, and the suffering of soldiers and civilians.⁵ The fact that France won this war gives – or seems to give – the suffering a meaning, as President Macron did when he explained that

4 They are planning to do a smaller exhibition about Weimar democracy in 2019.

5 Dalisson, R. (2017) Du Héros à la Victim: le Mythe du Poilu dans les Fêtes Nationales, de 1945 à nos Jours. In: Jalabert, L. et al. eds. *La Longue Mémoire de la Grande Guerre. Regards Croisés Franco-Allemands de 1918 à nos Jours*. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presse Universitaires du Septentrion, pp. 183–198.

the French soldiers not only died for France but for democracy and human rights. In Macron's eyes, in 1914–1918 France was the carrier of universal moral rights and beliefs. The president even tried to include those French into his narrative whose ancestors only fought for France because they were forced to – as colonial soldiers – i.e. the approximately 100,000 soldiers and forced labourers from Africa. Considering the socially-fractured condition of today's France, this is an attempt to unite the nation through memory. But the French national narrative does not only include the French. Since 1963 and the beginning of the French-German process of reconciliation, the way the Great War was remembered in France changed: as an experience not dividing but connecting France and Germany. An example is the 370-meter-wide elliptical “Ring of Memory”, opened in 2014 in the Lens area of northern France, commemorating 580,000 dead of several nations. The names of the fallen are listed alphabetically and no mention is made of their nationality. This is a new way to remember war victims – friends and foes alike.

One of the main French lessons learned from the “Great War” is the importance of keeping peace with Germany – or at least to keep Germany under control. Without peace between France and Germany, there is no peace in Europe. This lesson even meant that in 1939 not every French person was willing to go to war to defend Poland's freedom. And this lesson was repeated after 1945.

This year on 11 November President Macron not only invited the German Chancellor to commemorate the Armistice – but over 60 heads of government. It was an international event and a very French ceremony at the same time, aiming to demonstrate that France still is a great power.

Great Britain, to no one's surprise, had its own commemorative ceremony. Like the French, but in a different way, the British memory concentrates on the dead and the suffering of the First World War and the joint national effort. British commemorations emphasize the “military aspects, prioritize the stories of combat soldiers and honour the memory of our nation's military dead”.⁶ The red poppy as a symbol for this highlights the heroic

6 See, for example, Sharp, I. (2016) How do Germany and Britain Remember the First World War, and Can the Differences Explain Brexit? Available at: <http://beyondthetrenches.co.uk/how-do-germany-and-britain-remember-the-first-world-war-and-can-the-differences-explain-brexite/> [Accessed: 13 July 2019]; Badsey, S. (2017) A Hundred Years On: Recent and Changing Views on the History of the First World War. In: Hain, J. et al. eds. *The First World War in the British and German Commemorative Culture*. Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, pp. 13–30.

patriotic sacrifice made by young men in times of war – there is no discussion whether their sacrifice was necessary. Britain’s approach to the Centenary is more inward-looking, aiming to use something uniquely British in the past to fix today’s fractured national identity.⁷

Yet the commemorations in both Great Britain and France had elements in common. Both invited Germany to join their commemorations. This year marks the first time a German head of state was invited to the ceremony at the Cenotaph in London – President Steinmeier laid a wreath. By this gesture Great Britain included the fallen enemy soldiers from Germany into the memory of loss.

Both countries also tried to take this day as a point of departure towards better French-German and British-German understanding. There is no triumphalism. The national stories of France and Great Britain do not exclude a European story. To both countries international cooperation between equally strong partners poses no threats. This is – for good reasons – different in the eastern European countries.

On 11 November we saw 200,000 Poles in Warsaw remembering Independence Day. After the great Central and Eastern powers were defeated (first Russia, then Germany and Austria-Hungary) the disarmament of the German military in Warsaw at the end of the First World War was the beginning of the rebirth of Poland; 11 November became Polish National Independence Day (*Narodowe Święto Niepodległości*). Since the inter-war years this day has been marked as a national holiday. After 1945, the communist authorities banned it from the official commemorative calendar, but it survived in opposition memory, and since 1989 it has been celebrated again. Because 2018 is dedicated to remembrance of the one hundredth anniversary of independence, we see that in Poland the First World War is remembered for its end.⁸

As the existence of Poland and a free life for its people was threatened once again by Germany during the Second World War, and because after 1945 the sovereignty of the Polish state was limited by the Soviets, the independent Poland of today is even more celebrated and cherished by the Poles. Curiously enough, though the Polish soldiers in the Russian, German and Austrian armies suffered as much as the French or British soldiers, and that is

7 Sharp, op. cit.

8 Górný, M. (2014) All Quiet? The Memory and Historiography of the First World War in Poland. *Rubrica Contemporanea* 3(6), pp. 37–46.

also true for the civilians who died of hunger or sickness during the war – the Poles do not mourn these dead and losses in public. To be clear, the families did mourn their dead, but the nation remembered the gain of independence. The monument for the “unknown soldier” in Warsaw, erected in 1923, does not represent the fallen soldiers of the whole war but only those who fought for the independent Poland in the battles 1918–21.

The lesson learned from the First World War in Polish political thinking reads like this: It is good for the small nations of Europe if the so-called “great European powers” are weak. In Polish experience, democracy and republic are linked to the nation. Knowing this, it is no surprise that many Poles are hesitating and somewhat hostile about the political European Union. Dariusz Kosiński put it:

In Poland and in many countries of Central and Eastern Europe, 1918 has a completely different meaning. For us, it is the year of regaining independence after 123 years of joint occupation by Russia, Prussia, and the Austro-Hungarian empires. For us, this is our moment of liberation from a captivity that ‘old Europe’ had treated us together with its Great Other – Russia. The memory of this captivity, which returned 20 years later, together with an affirmation and consent of ‘old Europe’, not only has fed nationalist resentment causing Poland to transition so easily from leader to hooligan of the European Union, but also complicates to the extreme our sense of European identity. We feel European, however, it is clear that we are not the same as the countries of ‘old Europe’, which, through all the changes, still act as arbitrators of Europeanness.⁹

He ends by suggesting that 1918 reminds Poles – and Europeans more broadly – that they live “in contrast” in Europe.

For Poland, the outcome of the war was positive; in Germany the end of the war is marked by the “*traumatisme de la défaite*.”¹⁰ The end of the war

9 Kosiński, D. (2018) 1918–2018: Why Remember? The Importance of the Year 1918 for Poland. Available at: www.culturepolonaise.eu/3,3,831,en,1918-2018_Why_remember [Accessed: 13 July 2019].

10 Weinrich, A. (2017) Le Traumatisme de la Défaite. Mémoires et Politiques Mémorielles en Allemagne 1918–1939. In: Jalabert, L. et al. eds. *La Longue Mémoire de la Grande Guerre. Regards Croisés Franco-Allemands de 1918 à nos Jours*. Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, pp. 109–122.

as well as the German revolution are linked to the defeat and the Versailles treaty. In 1918 no victory gave meaning to the tremendous German losses. All the effort, given in the same amount as in France or Great Britain or Poland, was given in vain. The deaths could not be justified by victory. But we always aim to give death a meaning. After 1918 in Germany there existed two ways of doing this.¹¹

1. For the political left the only sense of this war was to ensure that there never again would be a war. To remember the fallen soldiers should prevent a next war. This pacifist interpretation stood in contrast to the militarist interpretation of the political right.
2. The political right – and many of the men and women in the political centre, too – were convinced that the only way to make sure the war victims had not died in vain was to seek revenge.

For this reason, only some of the war monuments built in Germany in the inter-war years had a pacifist message. The idea of a revenge was mixed with the belief of the political right that the defeat was the outcome of the revolution and not the other way around. The Republic was burdened with the defeat but only because the political right did not accept the regime change in 1918. That is why

in German national memory the name ‘Versailles’ remained for a long time the placeholder for this war. It was bound up with a memory of guilt, shame and an ignoble peace. For this reason, the First World War never really ended in the minds and hearts of many Germans, who prepared themselves for a subsequent war that was to give them back everything they had lost in terms of territories, pride and self-image.¹²

11 Kramer, A. (2016) “Too Early to Say?” Centennial Perspectives on the First World War. In: Wolfrum, E. et al. eds. *European Commemoration: Locating World War I*. Stuttgart: ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy, pp. 17–30, p. 25.

12 Assmann, A. (2016) European Commemorations of the First World War – from National to Transnational Memory Cultures. In: Wolfrum, E. et al. eds. *European Commemoration: Locating World War I*. Stuttgart: ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy, pp. 55–66; p. 55.

To put it clearly: the Weimar Republic did not fail because of the Versailles treaty. The Republic failed because during its last days there were not enough men and women who defended it. Nevertheless, the Republic has not yet been fully accepted as a part of a democratic German heritage. And though there exists a plan to build a museum dedicated to the Republic in Weimar, during a ceremony dedicated to 9 November President Steinmeier called it “our poor relation of our democratic history”: “However, in spite of all this, the revolution barely even features in our nation’s consciousness to this day. While the 9th of November 1918 is listed on the map of German places of remembrance, it has never been accorded the importance it actually deserves.”¹³

This is true for the Armistice as well. We are pleased to be invited to ceremonies in France and Great Britain, to be included in a family of European nations mourning their dead, because if we talk about 1918 it is always connected with the end of the Republic in 1933. It is a lot easier just to join the mourning. But we are not at all able to pretend that 1914–1918 German soldiers had fought for democracy and human rights. And we cannot easily join the positive assessment of the war’s outcome in Poland. That is why we do not have an undisputed national narrative of 1918.

As often in German history, the *national* narrative is told by *regional* museums. But they do not aim to tell a general story. They concentrate on the events, places and people in their region. But in doing this together they form a national narration. This, historically seen, is the way nation was, and is, taught to the Germans. Museums in Germany, as elsewhere, were part of the construction of the nation-state. They taught people in the different regions what it meant to be German. And so – though they may not intend it – they continue to do this work, although in a different style. If we look at these exhibitions and at those in Paris, London or Warsaw, we see that the way the conflict is told changed. No nation ignores the historical experience of its neighboring countries.

- » The First World War Galleries in London represents mainly the British war experience, but do not omit Germany’s experience.
- » In Poland, the Army Museum in Warsaw opened an exhibition about the First World War, which tells the story of the war – and not only of its end.

¹³ Speech by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, op. cit.

- » And the French Army Museum in Paris opened an exhibition about the *War in the East, a War Without End, 1918–1923* last autumn, trying to inform the French public that the fights didn't stop in 1918, which is important, because the history of the inter-war years is crucial to understand Eastern Europe today.

This is a positive and truly European development. All three Army museums – and army museums tend to be conservative institutions – tried to use a more European way of narrating history. But in my opinion, it should not stop here.

It is not only necessary to understand that other nations' perspectives are important. We have also to realise who our national narrative excludes – this “national” narrative being as faulty today as it was in 1914. The nation then included some but not all inhabitants – the same is true today. History museums should try to make people feel that they, too, belong to the city, the region and the country they are living in.

The Polish Army Museum, for example, should try and collect the history of the Polish, but also Yiddish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Latvian men and women who lived in the Polish regions during the First World War – even if the great-grandsons and granddaughters of these Poles often do not live in Poland anymore, but in Great Britain, France and Germany. The history of the Poles in the First World War is also part of the “national” narrative in other countries – or at least it should be. The same is true for the descendants of the colonial soldiers fighting for France and Great Britain: they do not live in these two countries; they live in many countries all over the world, and also in Germany. And just as these stories are even nowadays neglected in the “German” narrative of the First World War, so too are the stories of Turkish, Arab, Serbian or Russian migrants. They have totally different stories to tell of this European and global conflict.

Nations in 1914–1918 were more diverse than we think – and they are even more diverse in 2018. This has to have consequences in the way history is told and taught. We cannot expect people to develop a feeling of belonging if we do not listen to their family's history. Museums should constantly try to get in touch with their audiences and collect their stories. These stories are not just something we should add to our existing national narratives. We should take them as the point of departure towards a discussion about how and what we should remember from 1918.

Often enough, we will find that the different stories contradict. But that is no reason to stop collecting and exhibiting them. We need history to explain

and define who we are today. And yes, that will lead to discussions. Shying away from these discussions only conceals the problems our societies are facing. Let us develop museums into venues where discussions about the interpretations of history and about identity politics take place. Or, as Duncan Cameron put it, let museums be “forums for confrontation, experimentation and debate”.¹⁴

14 Cameron, D. (1971) The Museum, a Temple or the Forum. *Curator* 14(1), pp. 11–24.