

*Kieran Burns*

# Shaping European Lives, Then and Now

Placing the First World War in the Narrative  
of the House of European History

**Abstract** The House of European History opened in Brussels in 2017. It takes a transnational approach to the history of Europe and in its narrative, the First World War, is presented as a conflict which changed subsequent European history and constitutes a fundamental part of European memory, albeit one which is viewed from a variety of different perspectives. The House of European History aims to convey this profound and lasting impact by adopting a museological approach that goes beyond the traditional confines of the national museum and the military museum, and places particular emphasis on the impact of this conflict on the lives of ordinary Europeans.

**Keywords** Europe, museums, museology, transnational, narrative, perspective

## Introduction

When the Imperial War Museum North opened in Manchester in 2002, an aluminium plaque outside the Daniel Liebeskind-designed building bore the inscription “War Shapes Lives”. It embodied the simple idea that war is not exclusively a military endeavour. Instead, its impacts are felt far beyond the theatre of conflict – both in societies as a whole and in the lives of citizens through fighting, labour and loss. That this impact continues to be present and shapes our modern world is perhaps self-evident for museum curators and professional historians. As noted by Jay Winter, “the colours and shapes we see in the contemporary world are shaded and shaped by the staggering consequences of war.”<sup>1</sup> It may be less apparent for wider society, especially since much of the representation of conflict in European museums in general, and of the First World War in particular, is filtered through a national lens, with some notable exceptions.<sup>2</sup> It was with these two elements in play – the impact of war on society and its transnational dimension – that the House of European History set about developing its gallery on the conflict of 1914–1918. If war shapes lives then it stands to reason that a European war which killed 10 million soldiers alone must have had a profound effect in shaping many European lives, not just in the historical moment but over subsequent generations.

### 1. Placing the First World War in the exhibition narrative

The House of European History adopts a chrono-thematic approach for the structure of its permanent exhibition. In that framework, a main narrative line starts with the late eighteenth century and treats the major developments of the nineteenth century, the great cataclysms of the first half of the twentieth century, and the post-war reconstruction, political division and reunification of Europe. It continues up to the age of globalisation and greater European integration, and to contemporary events such as Brexit. This approach

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1 Winter, J. (2013) Museums and the Representation of War. In: Muchitsch, W. ed. *Does War Belong in Museums? Representations of Violence in Exhibitions*. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 21–38, p. 37.

2 Some instances of museums which present war in a transnational context include l’Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne in France, In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres in Belgium and Kobarid Museum in Slovenia.

follows that set out by the foundation document of the project, the *Conceptual Basis for a House of European History* from 2008, which stated that “the broad thrust of European history must be presented so that more recent history, and the present, can be understood.”<sup>3</sup> In keeping with more recent trends in museology, however, within that thrust (or narrative line) thematic treatments form the main clusters through which the visitor encounters a given historical event or phenomenon.

This hybrid methodology necessitated two tasks for the curatorial team in relation to the First World War. The first of these was placing the conflict within the overall arc of the exhibition’s narrative. The second was creating an accessible yet academically-sound thematic framework through which the constitutive transnational elements of the conflict might be organised and presented to the visitor. Concerning the first of these tasks, it was originally suggested by the academic experts who oversaw the *Conceptual Basis* that the museum narrative should start principally with the First World War, albeit with surveys of earlier periods of European history in the *longue durée*.<sup>4</sup> One of the chief challenges in this approach, however, was how to explain the complex causes of this conflict to visitors via a narrative that started with 1914 as a year zero. The war did not burst upon the European stage fully-formed, but rather was brought about by an intricate web of causes in the long and short term, combining in 1914 to create the deadly reaction for which the Sarajevo assassination was the catalyst.

For the curatorial team it became clear that the outbreak of conflict would be more understandable if visitors were also familiar with historical phenomena such as nationalism, colonial tensions, industrialisation and social Darwinism that began to coalesce in Europe in the nineteenth century. In the House of European History, therefore, the section entitled *Europe, a Global Power: 1789–1914* shows the radical upheavals and changes of the long nineteenth century in the areas of politics, economics, industrialisation, science and colonialism. The endpoint of this segment of the exhibition provides the immediate pre-figuration of the outbreak of the First World War in physical space, narrative line and on a symbolic level. Here, in a

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3 *Conceptual Basis for a House of European History*. Brussels 2008, p. 5 [Online]. Available at: [www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/documents/dv/745/745721/745721\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/745/745721/745721_en.pdf) [Accessed: July 2019].

4 *Ibid.*, see point 22, p. 8.



Fig. 1: *Notions of Superiority and Progress*. A display inspired by the industrial exhibitions of the nineteenth century. ©House of European History/European Parliament, 2017

sub-section entitled *Notions of Superiority and Progress*, the rapid advances of European science and technology from the railways, to electric light, the moving image and Darwin's theory of evolution are presented in a symbiotic relationship with Europe's colonial expansion, with its vast abuses and oppression underpinned by spurious notions of scientific racism and social Darwinism. A rich panoply of objects is displayed in a showcase which mirrors in its architectural form the pavilions of the great industrial exhibitions of the nineteenth century (fig. 1).

The last objects in this showcase relate specifically to the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900. One of them, an engraving from the exhibition's catalogue, depicts elegantly dressed visitors strolling casually among the weapons of mass war displayed in the exhibition's *Palais des Armées de Terre et Mer*. It is a foreshadowing of future events.

## 2. Thematic framework

The central gallery devoted to the First World War is structured around three main themes: *From European War to Global War*, *Mass War* and *Aftermath*. In keeping with the overall approach of the exhibition, although the main flow of the section follows a chronological sequence from 1914 to 1918, it is not presented as a simple timeline but rather a series of thematic explorations. In selecting the topics to be addressed the team was cognisant of several current trends in historical writing and research. In the first instance, the arrangement shows that war was not something fought only in the trenches of the Western Front, but also largely, and in a different way, on the Eastern Front; and that through the colonial connections of the European powers it spread into Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Secondly, the themes were also established to capture what John Horne has referred to as the trend in First World War writing towards studies of “heterogeneity and richness – of soldiers in combat and prisoners of war, of women maintaining the home but also engaged as nurses and munitions workers, of children caught up in the conflict, and of civilian victims of violence.”<sup>5</sup> But perhaps above all, in line with the overall mission of the House of European History, the main aim of this thematic arrangement was to capture the essentially transnational and European nature of the conflict, acknowledging the fact “the spaces of World War I have begun to be denationalized” and positing one version, in museum form, of what a “truly European or global history of the war might consist of.”<sup>6</sup>

### 2.1 From European war to global war

The most difficult task of this section was to address the causes of war. It is, after all, a subject which has been much debated and considered by historians from the moment the war began. Christopher Clarke refers to John W. Langdon’s estimation that by 1990 the number of books and articles on the origins of war numbered some 25,000. Clarke also notes that “the debate over why it [WWI] happened began before the first shots were fired and has been

5 Horne, J. (2012) Introduction. In: Horne, J. ed. *A Companion to First World War*. Oxford: Wiley and Blackwell, p. xxiv.

6 *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

running ever since. It has spawned an historical literature of unparalleled size and moral intensity.”<sup>7</sup> Of the myriad of potential causes of First World War the curatorial team identified six which it wished to focus on: Nationalism, Colonial Competition, Militarism, the Mood of the Times, the Alliance System and the Chain of Events, specifically focussed on the reaction to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie. The challenge was how to render these historical phenomena in a clear and comprehensible way that did not over-simplify or omit salient facts for the sake of brevity. The decision was taken therefore to confront this complexity and to make interconnectedness a central part of the interpretation in this section. This was done in the following ways.

In the first instance a large showcase displays objects and object ensembles, each related to one of the aforementioned causes. A quote from Marinetti’s *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) “We will glorify war – the world’s only hygiene”<sup>8</sup>, along with an enlarged version of the brooding etching *Der Krieg* (1903) by Alfred Kubin, both capture the prevailing spirit. An array of cadets’ rifles from Hungary and from France, together with a school boy’s training manual *Tu Seras Soldat!* (1888) by Émile Lavissee, convey the sense of militarism common in Europe. Colonial tensions, meanwhile, are represented by two propaganda pieces: a colonial clock from the German Empire, circa 1905, and a British plate made to commemorate the jubilee of Queen Victoria’s reign in 1887. Crucially, both are decorated with a variation of the slogan “the Empire on which the sun never sets”, highlighting the competing imperial ambitions of both powers.

On the hand-held tablet device, given to every visitor to the House of European History, a series of six short movie narrations delve deeper into each cause using one of the objects in the display case as a trigger. Rather than shy away from the complexity of the outbreak of war, this interactive embraces it by representing each phenomenon as a junction in a tangled web of intimately-connected causes. These dynamic connections are highlighted throughout each short movie, allowing visitors to move laterally through the interactive as their curiosity is piqued.

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7 Clarke, C. (2013). *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. London: Penguin, p. ii.

8 Marinetti, F. (1909) *The Manifesto of Futurism*. Cited in Kramer, A. (2007) *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 168.



Fig. 2: *From European War to Global War*. An integrated scenography on the causes and spread of the First World War. ©House of European History/European Parliament, 2017

The central element of this opening section involves a stand-alone showcase that contains a FN 1910 Browning pistol, the same model used by Gavrilo Princip and his co-conspirators. It points directly at the main audio-visual which supports the narrative of the exhibition and leads into the rest of the gallery. This audio-visual, entitled *To End all Wars*, uses some of the immense photographic legacy of the conflict to focus on images which display people and faces, reiterating the theme that war shapes lives. Significantly, the presentation is without commentary. Instead, more than one hundred images are set to music, utilising to strong effect a contemporary rearrangement of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Rather than deploying a "closed" narrative commentary, the audio-visual opens the interpretative transaction and allows the visitor the space to contemplate and reflect on the immense scale of this conflict on a human level. The effect of this scenographic juxtaposition of the causes of war – a large-scale audio-visual and the small hand-held pistol made by the *Fabrique Nationale* in Belgium – is to convey that the fragility of Europe in 1914 was such that two shots from such a small weapon could ignite such an intense and sustained conflagration (fig. 2).

## 2.2 Mass war

The central section of the House of European History's First World War gallery meditates on the phenomenon of a mass war, which although still largely confined to the battlefield, is of such a scale that it impacts all of society. The space which the exhibition occupies plays a key role in the establishment of this narrative, being one of the lateral wings of the museum's original historic building. This structure dates from the 1930s and was part of the dental clinic founded by the American philanthropist and photographic innovator George Eastman for the poor children of Brussels. Designed as a hospital ward, it is a long and narrow space with high ceilings and was quite easily adapted as a museum gallery. The brief given to the designers was to create a space with a functional aesthetic, taking inspiration from the strong block forms used in war memorials and military installations. In its footprint the gallery is the mirror image of the space dedicated to the Second World War in the museum, which focuses on the theme of total war. The relationship between the two galleries thereby provides a consistent spatial arrangement through which the visitors might contemplate the similarities and differences between the two conflicts.

The focus is several sub-themes: industrial and technological war, war and civilians, and war propaganda. A full-scale showcase displays artillery shells from across Europe, among them a donation of French, German and British artillery shells unearthed in the very recent past from the fields of Flanders by DOVO (*Dienst voor Opruiming en Vernietiging van Ontploffingstuigen*), the unit of the Belgian Army specialising in bomb disposal.

The theme of mass is further underlined in a showcase that deals with the technical innovation represented by the introduction of poison gas as a weapon of war. This showcase functions in part as object display showing, for example, the evolution of gas mask technology from early French cotton masks of 1915 to complex British box-filter models of 1917–18. It also functions in part as art installation, capitalising on the fear-instilling nature of gas and its function as a dehumanising innovation of mass industrial war. As noted by Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, “the use of [poison] gas left an enduring memory of terror.”<sup>9</sup>

Civilians were also victims of the war, though generally to a lesser extent in the First World War than later wars. The exhibition references some of these instances, including the 1914 German Army attack on civilians in

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9 Audoin-Rouzeau, S. (2012) *Combat*. In: Horne, J. ed. *A Companion to World War I*. Oxford: Wiley and Blackwell, pp. 173–187.



Belgium, as well as attacks by the Austrian Army in Serbia in the same year. It mentions the British naval blockade from 1914 to 1919 which caused hunger in Germany and Austria, as well as the German U-boat campaign which inflicted civilian deaths at sea. Crucially, it also addresses the 1915 Ottoman Government attack on the Armenian population within its empire and the resulting genocide, involving mass executions of civilians and soldiers, as well as starvation and disease. Finally, in this section, war propaganda is presented not only through the medium of graphic art and satire, but also through everyday propaganda items from homes across Europe. From a French mustard pot which shows the head of a German soldier in the form of a pig to the child's football game from England where a goal can be scored in the Kaiser's mouth, the section explores how enemies were demonised and dehumanised, marking a low point in European relations. It also pointedly illustrates how the conflict was represented as a struggle between civilisation and barbarism, each country believing its cause was just.

### 2.3 Aftermath

The last section of the First World War gallery deals with the end of the conflict and addresses two of its chief legacies in subsequent European history. Firstly, it explores the changes in European memory and memory practices brought about by the immense loss of life generated by the war. It also shows the far-reaching consequences of the war's conclusion including the dissolution of old empires, the emergence of new states and the treaties negotiated in Paris from 1919 onwards which resulted in a radical redrawing of the map of Europe. In relation to memory, the exhibition mentions the concept of the unknown soldier as well as the elevation of the ordinary soldier, rather than the general, as the true hero of the war, represented in the gallery by Émile Pinchon's *Le Poilou*, a plaster model for a memorial raised by public subscription in Bois des Colombes, outside Paris. From the east, a concrete and barbed wire grave marker from the Soča/Izozzo front (in modern-day Slovenia) bears the names of two young soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian Empire who were killed in action March 1916. As a back-drop to this ensemble, Wilfred Owen's immortal lines "The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori." (*Dulce et Decorum est. 1917–1918*) are deployed to suggest an awareness of the limits of patriotism and nationalism, phenomena which can be understood as underlying causes of the conflict itself.

### 3. Guiding museological principles

Each visitor brings to a museum visit their own social and familial narrative, and processes what they see in a given exhibition in that light. A museum therefore is the site of interaction for multiple historical and personal perspectives. This process is amplified in a museum such as the House of European History, which attempts to formulate a common transnational narrative from a multiplicity of historical points of view. Evidence suggests that narrative, or storytelling, plays a fundamental and positive role in the acquisition of knowledge and learning, especially among young people, helping in the process of meaning-making and improving understanding of their lives and the world around them. According to Falk and Dierking, “Universally, people mentally organise information effectively if it is recounted to them in a story or narrative form.”<sup>10</sup> For this reason, throughout the development of our gallery on the First World War, the project team attempted to conceive an exhibition that would tell a story, and that story should have a strong internal dramaturgy and natural flow. Not only has this meant the deployment of a clear and concise narrative line; it has also necessitated the adoption of non-textual and visual tools designed to capture the visitor’s attention and engagement. Objects and images with a strong iconic and auratic appeal were therefore selected to help create a narrative top line which would be clearly understandable to the visitor and engaging on an emotional as well as a cognitive level. An inherent part of that methodology was to step away from the traditional representational strategies deployed in war museums – what Jay Winter has referred to as the “boys with their toys” model<sup>11</sup> – and to offer instead a meditation on the truly profound ways in which the First World War in Europe shaped lives and became a watershed in its history. Our efforts are of course only a beginning, but they underscore the possibilities opened up when the conflict of 1914–1918 is addressed on a pan-European level, commensurate with its true historical significance and its enduring relevance. As Paolo Monelli noted prophetically in 1918 “this is going to be our evil inheritance or our good inheritance, in any case our irrevocable inheritance – and we are going to be fettered by our memories for ever.”<sup>12</sup>

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10 Falk, J.H. and Dierking, L.D. (2000) *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*. Plymouth: Altamira Press, p. 51.

11 Winter, op. cit., p. 36.

12 Monelli, P. (1921) *Le scarpe al sole (Cronaca di gaie e di tristi avventure d'alpini, di muli e di vino)*. 2008 ed., Milan. Cited in Englund, P. (2012) *The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of the First World War*. New York: Vintage, p. 506.