# Commemorating catastrophe: Remembering the Great War 100 years on

Jay Winter

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# Commemorating catastrophe: Remembering the Great War 100 years on

**JAY WINTER**, YALE UNIVERSITY



In much of Western Europe, and in what used to be the outreach of the French and British empires, this is a season of commemoration of the outbreak of what we call the Great War. But that is not all. I can attest personally to our being subjected to an avalanche of events, more public than academic, which now is entirely global. From Tokyo to Beijing to Hong Kong to Singapore, to Santiago de Chile, to Quito, to Rio, public and academic groups have sought out Western scholars to help ignite interest in the Great War among their own populations. In part this is a fading of the screen memory of the Second World War, which occluded any recognition that the violence of the 1930s and 1940s had its direct and unmistakable origins in the war of 1914-18. The same occlusion marked Central European scholarship; the Second World War is what mattered. When I started studying the First World War nearly 50 years ago, I was well aware of the almighty fuss over Fritz Fischer's work on the similarity between German war aims in the two world wars, but aside from that, there was little of the huge interest that attended the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the war in 1964. Fortunately, that imbalance between English and French scholarship on the one hand, and German scholarship, on the other, has been rectified. Particularly on the level of the *Land*, there has been a flurry of activity in Germany with an impressive level of scholarship attached to it. And in Innsbruck, Vienna, and Graz, there is work of the highest level underway on the Great War. Further east in Europe, there are signs of discovery of the Great War, but the legacy of communism is still an obstacle to a full recognition that 1914 was at least as important as 1917 in the history of the twentieth century. There is evidently work still to be done to present to a global public a global history of the first fully global, industrialized war. That is one reason why I was delighted to accept your invitation to speak on the 1914-18 war here tonight.

Much of this global burst of activity is not only reflective but reflexive. That is, there is increasing attention by those engaged in commemoration in examining what they and millions of other men and women are doing when they remember in public the 1914-18 conflict. This is a very welcome development for many reasons. First, it enables us to treat remembrance as a cultural practice at the local level, open to ethnographic work linking kinship and politics. Families do the work of remembrance, and addressing the astonishingly varied initiatives emerging in civil society tells us much about the inability of states and national leaders to script the way people remember war and the victims of war. Reviewing these developments also reinforces the chastening view to us historians that we do not script the narrative of war broad populations accept about war in general and the Great War in particular. So if political leaders and academic scholars do not shape the story of the Great War, then who does?

My tentative answer to this question is that families do, and alongside broader associative networks, they use images – photographic, filmic, digital – as their fundamental point of reference. What people see matters much more than what they read. Of course 'seeing war' (in inverted commas) mediated in this way is not seeing war at all. But the visual comes as close as possible to providing a non-verbal lexicon and a grammar of war which has lasted an entire century.

One more caveat. Everywhere, remembrance is a business. It provides both pilgrimages and tourist packages; toys, replicas, and kitsch for all tastes; books for all ages, as well as films, museum exhibitions, and many radio and television series, talk shows, and documentaries. All require lots of money, and this

money comes from many sources, not only and not primarily from national funds. The memory boom will make a fortune out of the Great War and out of the conversion of the story of the war into light consumer durable goods. This is true world-wide and necessarily makes the story of commemoration a chapter in business history which we ignore at our peril. My guess is that selling the Great War is not much different in different parts of the world, trivializing a story transmitted in many different ways. I do not believe that commercialization necessarily distorts the meaning of commemoration; it provides 'stuff' to enable families to enter into the commemorative moment.

We must not be so sophisticated as to deny that commercial popular culture matters in the commemorative world. Let me use the example of the children's book/play/ film 'War Horse' to show that kitsch can pack a punch. It has power arising from an astonishing set of life-size puppets – men creating the uneven cadence of horses. The effect is amazing, much more realistic that Stephen Spielberg's living horses in his adaptation of the play, which now has been translated into 50 languages. Was the play pacifist? Was it trivializing? Yes to both. And what made it so powerful, especially on the stage was its use of puppets to associate terror with war in a way children and adults understood perfectly. No glory here, just pointless suffering. An equestrian turn away from war.

My talk today addresses the question as to what is happening today and will go on happening for at least the next five years. Who is doing the work of remembrance of the Great War and how do they do it? I can venture the beginnings of an answer to this question in part because I have been involved personally in three such enquiries in France, in Ireland, and In Australia. I have also been on the sidelines of another case, a very odd one, that of Belgium. This is, of course, a tiny sample of global commemorative activity, but it offers us a place to start.

## 1. FRANCE

First France. I have been fortunate to serve as a member of the French presidential commission to prepare the commemoration of the centenary of the Great War in France. Here fictive kinship really operates, since I am not French, but have written two books with the president of the commission, Antoine Prost. This commission has as its brief to coordinate the upsurge in public events marking the passage of 100 years from the day the Great War began. It has a budget of 20 million euros to start with and lots more to come.

Our brief included the scrutiny of more than 1200 local projects which aimed to secure the 'labelisation' or imprimatur of the Centennial Commission, as projects worthy of public support (and later on, of public finance). Roughly 800 were approved. There are five features they shared in common. The first is that they came from local groups and individuals, not from political parties or national representatives. They spoke for civil society. Secondly, not a single one used the word 'martyrs' for the dead of the Great War; Catholics submitted dossiers for formal approval, but they did not use Catholic language in doing so. Thirdly, these projects bore virtually no trace at all of the scholarly publications of the last 30 years on all aspects of the Great War. It was as if historians were phantoms, just brushing past settled and stable stories about the past, which was both local and familial in character. This is what Maurice Halbwachs meant by collective memory – the memory of small groups of people who tell a story of the past which is stable and impervious to change. In the memory boom of 2014, we historians swim in a current we neither created nor control.

The fourth feature of the body of commemorative activity is its trans-national character. It is emphatically not limited to white, metropolitan France. There are substantial projects which show what Algerians and Moroccans did in the Great War, alongside exhibitions, theatrical performances and songs associated with *les Tirailleurs sénegalais*, the Vietnamese and even Polynesians. Here is the voice of imperial France now liquidated in history, but very much alive in the space of collective memory of people of all races who now make France their home and bring their family memories with them.

This cosmopolitan response is of considerable importance for the politics of multi-culturalism in France. In his last years in office, President Sarkozy, like Angela Merkel, announced the end of the politics of multiple identities, of what Hispanic activists call 'living on the hyphen'. Now a Socialist government under François Holland has found a way to revive multi-culturalism through the commemoration of a war fought not only by white men, but also by yellow, black, and brown men in French uniforms. Commemoration is, in his hands, a politics of ethnic unification through the memory of a war which killed regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity.

Fifthly, this body of popular commemorative initiatives was both a reflection of the importance of *anciens combattants* in France, and of their pacifist traditions. The government took one decision which reflected its recognition of the electoral importance of veterans. It decided to braid together commemoration of 1914 with that of 1944, and make both moral narratives about the liberation of French soil from occupation armies.

In the contested history of the Second World War in France, the only point on which everyone agrees is •••

that 1944 saw the liberation of France from German occupation. Virtually everything else about the sorry history of France under occupation, and in particular about the war between collaborators and resisters, is highly contested terrain. Not so the theme of liberation. In this narrative 1914 saw the arrival of one million uninvited German guests on French soil, where they remained for four years, until they were forcibly ejected by armies from all parts of the world. The veterans of the Great War – now all gone – accomplished this feat of arms, at the cost of 1,400,000 men killed and twice that number injured. Half of the French army were casualties of war. The survivors created a powerful veterans movement, one of the very few which were pacifist in outlook. Their moral authority to talk about war and to demand its abolition was unquestioned, that is, until Hitler made their stance untenable. After the debacle of 1940 thousands of them joined the Resistance and went back to war despite the repugnance of having to do so. The political message of the Hollande government is that there was a unity in the war service of the men and women who fought for France in the two world wars. Here was a message Hollande's besieged government has seized to its advantage.

This embrace of the veterans' movement is also an embrace of the human rights movement in France, which came out of it. René Cassin, the primary (though by no means the only) drafter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was severely wounded in 1914; his survival of a stomach wound was something of a miracle, though he never saw it that way himself. His commitment to human rights was the way a distinguished jurist expressed his pacifism, a pacifism borne of profound knowledge of the wrenching cruelties of war. Here is the link between remembering 1914 and reinforcing the public's recognition of the significance of European unification as a way of turning away from war. Honoring the victims of war in France is a very Euro-friendly matter.

## 2. IRELAND

The Irish case shows the way contemporary politics transform commemoration. The Good Friday agreement of 1998 both transformed the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland and the shape of First World War commemoration in Ireland as a whole. In the space of 16 years, 1914 and 1916 have literally been fused together. Now it is no longer necessary to choose between them. Both the Irish and British governments have accepted the suggestion of joint working groups of people both north and south of the Irish border to mark in schools and public ceremonies the decade of conflict between 1912 and 1922 which tore Ireland apart. Placing the four years of the Great War within what Irish historians now term the 'greater war' offers something for everyone. The growth of Catholic and Protestant armed groups through gunrunning, the military service of over 100,000 Catholic Irishmen in the British army from 1914 on, and the bloody price these men paid especially in the Battle of the Somme alongside Protestants serving King and Country now form a seemless web. Superimposed on this story is the Catholic tale of the Rising on Easter Monday, with all the sacred language of martyrdom intact. But instead of barring the way to joint commemoration, now the 1916 rising is part of a wider story of suffering which disfigured Irish history for the rest of the century. The explosive material in the story of the Irish revolt has been defused through placing it in a new frame, a new form of what Jan Assmann terms cultural memory. More on that in a moment.

I have seen Gerry Adams, the President of Sinn Fein sitting alongside the Reverend Ian Paisley, former Protestant firebrand, at the Ulster tower on 1 July, marking the tragedy of the Battle of the Somme together. I must admit that I blinked several times at this sight, which would have been impossible 20 years ago. Making 1914 and 1916 two links in a longer chain of violence has made all the difference. This is the strongest case to date of Great War commemoration shifting from highlighting, even exacerbating conflict, to transcending it. In Ireland, 2014 and 2016 will be remembered as events requiring us to deepen and reinforce the recent turn away from civil war.

Note too that this change has occurred at a time that the Roman Catholic Church has lost much of its authority in Ireland north and south. Sexual abuse scandals have accelerated a move away from the Church which has happened all over Europe. Perhaps this has made it easier for Roman Catholics to bury the language of martyrdom and the sacredness of blood sacrifice imbedded in the rhetoric of the Irish revolution and the poetry of Patrick Pearce. The Protestant churches too have suffered a hemorrhage of the faithful, rendering the politics of No Surrender virtually untenable. Blind hatreds persist, but they no longer inform and deform much of political conflict and commemorative politics.

## 3. GALLIPOLI

The language of sacrifice and martyrdom are still very much alive in one special commemorative environment. I speak here of Gallipoli, which in 2015 will be the centre of remembrance for Turks, Australians, New Zealanders, -- and here's the rub – Armenians.

For nearly a century, a striking commemorative bond linked to Gallipoli has drawn together Turkish, Aus-

tralian and New Zealand sentiment expressed in a powerful and very unusual bond of solidarity, both national and shared at the local level. Have a look at this war memorial, on which is carved the words of Mustafa Kamel Ataturk about the sense of loss all three nations share:"Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives. You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours.... You, the mothers, who sent their sons from far away countries, wipe away your tears. Your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace after having lost their lives on this land. They have become our sons as well." This inscription is on a plaque in Gallipoli; it is also on a monument in Canberra, in front of the Australian War Memorial, and in Wellington, New Zealand, where it is inscribed on a stone looking out over the Tasman Sea towards Gallipoli, 8000 miles away.

There will be hundreds of commemorative events in all three of these countries in 1915. Until now, these acts of remembrance have bypassed or suppressed the problem that the Armenian genocide began to unfold at exactly the same time as the Allied amphibious landings at Gallipoli in 1915. Now political tensions are higher than ever before, in part because this is a concerted effort again on the local level to insert the Armenian genocide in the narrative of 1915 these nations share. This will not be done easily, but the fact that it is now possible is a development of considerable importance.

There are three ways in which the Armenian genocide is now part of the landscape of commemoration. The first is that the Parliament of the State of New South Wales voted in August 2013 to recognize the Armenian genocide.[1] Other legislatures have done so, particularly the French, but for Australians to join them was ominous to the Turkish Foreign Office, which immediately threatened to block the entry into Turkey of those Parliamentarians who voted for this recognition.

Secondly, Turkish historians are now joining Armenian and European historians in several international colloquia on 1915, including the Armenian genocide. Even though it is still against the law, supposedly to insult the Turkish nation, for a Turk to speak in public about the Armenian genocide, many do so today. That was not true even five years ago. I had an invitation from the Orient Institute in Istanbul then to speak on the Armenian genocide. This German-funded body's director received a phone call from a German diplomat who noticed that there were many journalists in the front row of the auditorium to hear my talk. He approached me and asked (virtually on his knees) if I could please not talk about the Armenian genocide. Too politically sensitive, and so on, even though that title was the advertised one which we had agreed months before. I hesitated, but then did what he asked. I gave a lecture on the social construction of silence, the journalists were bored enough to leave after 10 minutes, and at the end of my talk, a stream of Turkish students congratulated me on the best lecture they had heard on the Armenian genocide.

My point is not to highlight my predicament on that day, nor the pressure to avoid controversy in academic discussion. It is to say that on 9 May 2014 I am going back to Istanbul to give the lecture I was unable to give five years ago. And my Turkish friends tell me that this incident is a small indication of a major shift, both in discussing Armenian history and Kurdish history, equally no go areas in the past.

Let me offer a best-case scenario. Suppose that the Turks and Armenians, pushed not by national political groups or diasporas, but from small groups of activists at the local level on both sides, take a leaf from the book of Irish commemoration. Suppose they place the loss of life of 600,000 men in the Ottoman army in the First World War alongside the loss of life of perhaps one million Armenians in the deportations of 1915 and after. Suppose they accept the framework that the Great War was a lethal conflict in which the collapse of four empires led to the deaths of millions of men and women, soldiers and innocents alike. Then Turkish opinion, high and low, just might admit that genocide happened in Turkey as part of a total war which destroyed not Turkey but another regime in power in another century. Using the commemorative framework of a turn away from war may be the only way that the Turkish government can bring together Islamist and Kemalist opinion in accepting a version of the past with room for a genocide that everyone in the world recognizes except Turkey.

I have seen the wave of patriotic tourism now enveloping Gallipoli. It incorporates thousands of veiled women and secular Turks alike. They are proud of Ataturk and the victory over which he presided in the Dardanelles. Australians and New Zealanders are justifiably proud of the war Anzac forces engaged with Turkish defenders there, establishing their national credentials in the service of a lost cause.

Pilgrimages to Gallipoli from the Antipodes have increased annually. Last year over 100,000 Australians made their way to Turkey, most below the age of 30. The Australian government has limited the number of pilgrims in 2015, simply because there is no room to put them all on the peninsula.

Why does it still matter in Australia and New Zealand, and why is the cult of Anzac greater and more powerful today than ever before? The answers are complex, ●●●

and arise out of a study of contemporary opinion and practices conducted by Monash University in Melbourne under the direction of historian Bruce Scates. Their findings are still to come, but a preliminary report states that Anzac matters primarily for three reasons. The first is that it is part of family history. The second is that it symbolizes the making of the independent Australian and New Zealand nations, present at their birth as it were. Ordinary men did extraordinary things on Gallipoli; so did ordinary Turks; they both believe that each fashioned a nation that did not yet exist. The third is that perhaps more so among Australians than Turks, it is an expression of the strength of civil society, and not the state. Conscription never came to Australia, Hence thousands of war memorials have been constructed to honor those men who went out of conviction that they were defended their families, and in a way, the wider British family from which so many of them came. But standing up in Britain's cause they earned the right to go their own way. And so they have.

## 4. FLANDERS

-Belgium is a country divided against itself. The French part of the Belgian State has been at odds with the Flemish (or Dutch) speaking part since the First World War itself. In the 1970s, the University of Leuven decided that its great Library would be divided between a Flemish-speaking university and a French-speaking university. In the opposite of a Solomonic decision, they divided the library in the following manner: one volume on a shelf went to Leuven, the next to the new French university library of Louvain-la-Neuve.

-In subsequent years, the cultural war has been extended to new fronts. There is now a representative of the non-existent Government of Flanders in 22 countries, including Germany. This political body, financed by the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium offers university or art academy scholarships to American students, and runs a full cultural programme highlighting the distinctiveness of Flemish culture. Two restaurants in Flanders, the website of what they call Flanders House tells us, have won a second Michelin star for *haute cuisine*, or whatever its Flemish equivalent is. There are Dutch courses for children in Flanders House, in London.

-Of great importance to this group of Flemish activists is the centenary of the Great War. 'Nearly one hundred years later, we remain firmly convinced that the events of the years '14 -'18 continue to exert a fundamental influence on our society and that the victims of this horrendous war are deserving of a dignified commemoration. The Government of Flanders has decided to frame the commemoration of the Great War Centenary within an overarching compass that embraces different themes. One is the creation of Flemish memorial gardens in many parts of the world, especially in Britain. Schools in Flanders and Wallonia will 'adopt' a Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery, together with a British school, and transport some soil from the battlefields of the First World War to specific civilian commemorative sites in Britain and elsewhere. The ties between Flanders and countries which sent men to fight there in the Great War will be strengthened through four years of commemorative events, including the creation of peace gardens mixing the soil of Flanders with the soil of England, under the sponsorship of the Guards Regiment, one which drew soldiers from all over Britain.

-This programme of economic, academic, cultural, and public diplomacy is at the heart of a broad offensive to achieve Flemish independence from Belgium. What is relevant here is the use of war commemoration for this purpose. The story of Flemish participation in both world wars is both mixed and murky. Hostility to French-language domination of Belgium led some Flamands to support the German occupiers of Belgium in both world wars. The way Flanders House bypasses this embarrassment is to claim that their approach to the Great War is a pacifist one. That is unobjectionable, but it does raise difficult questions about how to understand Flemish collaboration with the Nazis. In much of European history, the Second World War occludes the First, but not in Flanders. The horror of the Great War was shared by everyone, and commemorating the war as a site of suffering and mourning provides a shelter of respectability and common cause with many nations.

-The legal basis for much of this activity is clear. The Belgian state has delegated cultural politics to Flanders and to Wallonia. Consequently, 'Flanders pursues a foreign policy regarding all of its competences, using applicable international treaties that are concluded with other (federated) states and organisations. This competence results from the principle "in foro interno, in foro externo", which they interpret as meaning pertaining to both domestic and international matters. Consequently, Flanders directs the cultural programme associated with the centenary in a manner almost if not entirely independent of the Belgian state.

-It should be noted though that the official commemorative initiatives are separate from those of Flemish nationalists working outside of regional government offices. These individuals reflect more radical Catholic streams of thought which are not those of the Flemish regional administration. At times it is difficult to tell one from the other, but well-informed sources say that most academics are aligned with the Flemish admi-

nistration and not with the nationalist periphera. In separate ways, both are dedicated to making the commemorative moment a step on the way to independence from the Belgian state.

-At the same time, historians and museum workers in Flanders have been among the most successful in the field. The 'In Flanders Fields' Museum in Ypres attracts more than 300,000 visitors expected in 1914, according to its director, Piet Chiliens. He is a highly-respected scholar, and the pacifist tone of his museum is fully international in character. As always, commemorative activity is a house of many mansions, and 'In Flanders Fields' is one of the most impressive museums of the Great War in Europe. The use of funereal background music throughout the museum is not to everyone's taste, but the great strength of the representation of war is its emphatic setting in the Ypres region. Chiliens and his colleagues have shown well that among the injuries inflicted by the war were many to the land and environment of Ypres itself.

## 5. MEMORY REGIMES AND THE CENTENARY OF THE GREAT WAR

How can we evaluate these developments? The first way to do so is to suggest how geographically and culturally limited they are. Let me make the point in the following way. My claim is that there are three overlapping but distinctive memory regimes in operation in different parts of the world today. They are differentiated by their approach to war and martyrdom. The presence of the terms 'martyr' and 'martyrdom' and their correlates varies over time and space, increasing in frequency and significance the further east you go. In the first of the three, the Western European memory regime, the term 'martyr' largely has faded from use; its decline has been rapid and irreversible in the twentieth century; in Eastern Europe, where a second memory regime operates, the notion of 'martyrdom' is still alive and well, informing a host of national and religious monuments, most of which refer not to the 1914-18 war but to the Second World War and the Soviet period; and in the Middle East and beyond, there is a third memory regime in which the braiding together of war and martyrdom is not only palpable, but at times radioactive. Anti-colonial struggles adopted this framework, and more recently, Islamic radicals have done so, creating commemorative practices in parts of Asia and the Far East quite different from those in Europe.

From this distinction, follows my second argument. It is that the fading away of the lexicon of martyrdom in the Western European memory regime distinguishes the commemoration of 1914-18 there from commemoration of the Second World War, in which the subject of the Holocaust has become more and more important over time. The theme of martyrdom is still present in Holocaust commemoration, but not in stable ways. During the war itself, indeed in the heart of the Warsaw ghetto, there was a shift in Jewish thought on the Holocaust which distinguishes between dying *al Kiddush Hashem*, to sanctify the name of the Lord, and living as sanctifying the Lord, *be Kiddush HaChaim*.

Still, some groups use the language of martyrdom to describe the Holocaust, but most do not. Primo Levi abjured the notion of martyrdom, which preserves a sacred framework in which to place the Holocaust. For him, there was a simply choice. Either Auschwitz existed, or God exists. Most people follow his lead in making commemoration of the Holocaust a non-religious act.

The screen memory of the Second World War has had major effects on how we remember the First. In Western Europe, commemorating both world wars has moved out of the register of martyrdom into the register of pacifism. In doing so, it has enhanced its popular appeal, especially to men and women in secularized societies. That is what will draw tens of thousands to pilgrimages and other commemorative gestures in the coming years. My central theme this evening is the slow development of attitudes to war over the twentieth century, not uninterrupted, and not without reversals, which turns the commemoration of the 1914-18 conflict into a turn away from war.

Let me reiterate the limits of this argument. In Eastern Europe, and even more so in the Middle East and parts of Asia, the centenary of the Great War in 2014 does not have the same echoes and reverberations, in part because a secularized religious language of martyrdom in the Second World War is still very much alive, and distorts discussions and commemorations of the First world war. I will omit the United States, which seems to me to have all three of these memory regimes in working order, understandable given the tide of immigration which still runs unabated from the deeply Catholic Hispanic world as well as from East Asia. Like a giant commercial bazaar, the United States has everything for sale in the memory business.

There is a second case which seems to me to be exceptional. I have already referred to Turkey, which, together with Australia and New Zealand, has created a variant on the theme of martyrdom which appeals to religious and secular alike. Theirs is the story of the birth of their nations, and their emergence as separate entities from the two empires they served in the Great War. In Turkey, this story has both a Kamelist form, with its secular nationalism uninflected by Islam, alongside an Islamic form, in which the Ottoman fallen are martyrs whose blood made the emergence of modern Turkey possible. This is part of the reason why •••

admitting the Armenian genocide is so difficult. It compromises the story of martyrdom at Gallipoli by shifting the focus to other martyrs – Armenian martyrs – massacred or left to die of thirst in Anatolia and the Syrian desert. Conflicting stories of martyrdom compromise the story of the birth of the Turkish nation. It is only by seeing both Turkish soldiers and Armenian civilians as victims not martyrs that that gap can be bridged. The work of Bruce Scates's group with others at Cenakelai university and in Istanbul is a step in that direction; so is a joint working party on Turkish military archives of which I have taken part too. This is a long road, but it is one on which a large group of people have embarked.

Let me return to the implications of this contrast between memory regimes in Western and in Eastern Europe. First, in no sense will there be a European let alone a global commemoration of the global war of 1914-18. In Russia and Poland, 1914 is not a date in the calendar; in contrast, 1917 and 1918 are years of 'liberation' for the two countries, the first from the war and Tsardom, the second from domination by Poland's imperial neighbors. Consequently, commemoration of the centenary of the war's outbreak there is a non-event in Poland, Russia, Byellorus, and the Ukraine, where so much of the war on the Eastern front was fought.

Further east in Asia, silence will greet the centenary, save for the voices of family members visiting the thousands of Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries scatted across the globe. This contrast should not cause much surprise. Commemoration happens when groups of people agree on a specific meaning or moral value in a past event or events. With respect to the Great War, millions of men and women now give the Great War a pacifist meaning, one in which the family history of war is the family history of a lost generation of 10 million men. In Western Europe, the Great War was a tragedy, one shared by the people of both sides in ways quite distinctive from their experience or memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Even if my claims are true in general, we must still attend to the differences in commemorative strategies within countries practicing what I have termed the Western European memory regime. In this the centenary season, German public events are numerous than ever before, but much more subdued than similar events in France, in Britain, and in the Anglo-Saxon world, including the Antipodes. But the thrust of events marking the centenary are almost always ecumenical, meaning that a German presence at 'Allied' events is now normal and necessary. Angela Merkel will be at Sarajevo on 28 June and again in Paris on 3 August for a set of public ceremonies marking the outbreak of the Great War 100 years before. She will also attend commemorative ceremonies marking the 70th anniversary of D-Day in Normandy. German diplomacy is now committed to joining in such ceremonies, and no longer as 'the enemy' but as the custodians of a shared memory of a common and disastrous path.

It is this notion that the Great War was a catastrophe, and that it symbolizes the disintegration of Europe in 1914 which makes it such a strong symbol of the integration of Europe 100 years later. We all know the fragility of this achievement, and its uneven quality, particularly in Britain. But many in Western Europe now takes it as given that there were no victors or vanquished in the Great War, only survivors, and this is a significant change in the way millions of people view their common past.

In Western Europe, our secularized commemorative language now has little room left in it for images of martyrdom. A turn away from war is a turn away from the glory of war and its association with both martyrdom and sacrifice. The two are not the same, though the sacralization of sacrifice is the essence of martyrdom. When the suffering on active military service and the loss of millions of lives in the Great War are no longer framed as matters of glory, but as matters of regret, then the nature and meaning of commemoration changes as well. That is one striking finding which each of these national and local initiatives shares.

## 6. WHY TODAY? CULTURAL MEMORY AND COMMUNICATIVE MEMORY

In conclusion, perhaps I may offer a few words on present and future possibilities. You may very well ask why now; why has this new commemorative moment, focusing on victims rather than martyrs, appeared now, and not 50 years ago? The distinguished Egyptologist Jan Assmann has developed an approach to what he terms 'cultural memory' which helps us understand the stakes of commemoration in different parts of the world today.

In our daily lives, we all listen to stories and tell them in turn. We engage in what Assmann calls 'communicative memory', in which we frame narratives about our past and that of our families in a social setting. We find out who we are by listening to stories about the group into which we were born – a family, a neighborhood, an ethnic group, a region, a nation. This storytelling has a freshness, an immediacy to it, reinforced by exchanges at the kitchen table or at a grandmother's knee. Gabriel Garcia Marquez said everything he knew about his family, he learned at his grandmother's knee. That direct exchange lasts about three generations, or the length of time which separates us

now from the outbreak of the Great War, Gallipoli, Verdun and the Somme, and the Easter Rising in Ireland.

After this three-generational period of first-person storytelling, we do not have access to direct witnesses, however accurate or fanciful they may have been. The group that framed our childhoods has vanished or mutated through death, migration, indifference or inter-marriage. First-person narrators are no longer there. 'I remember the day when…' is a thing of the past, when 1914 or 1916 are in question. At this precise moment, then, we have to resort to other kinds of storytelling, imbedded not in individual voices, but in documents, in historic sites, and in the rituals and ceremonies surrounding them. This Jan Assmann has termed 'cultural memory'. Here is his understanding of the term: 'Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). We call these "figures of memory."'[2]

I want to draw your attention to the fact that we are at precisely that moment with respect to the Great War and the upheavals it occasioned. Let me be clear about this: I believe that 'cultural memory' is not immutable; we can shape it; we can give it a different inflection; we can move it in new directions. Who would have thought that the Ulster tower would be a site for the coming together on 1 July of men with completely different points of view, but with a common past? Now they can turn that recognition into a common narrative about war.

Many people are now in a position to shape cultural memory, to make it performative, and thereby to construct a different kind of story-telling and public recognition of the Great War as 'Our war', as the Irish historian John Horne had the courage to put it recently. The point is that 'our war' was everyone's war, a global disaster. National exceptionalism is a thing of the past, with a musty, past-the-sell-by date, aroma to it. The first way earlier narratives have changed is by making them global. That is certainly the case in the commemorative calendar already announced for 2014. To recall war and civil war at one and the same time also requires attention to very local perspectives, since it is at the local level that most commemorative projects are played out.

I want to close on this central point. The period separating divisive 'communicative memory', built on the bitterness of tales of comparative victimhood, on martyrdom and victimhood, and a creative and wide-open discussion of 'cultural memory', built on a commitment to move away from war in all its forms, is a limited one. Someone has to seize the microphone, or someone with more nefarious motives will do so in our place. Silence or scholarly diffidence is not an option. In the years of commemoration of the Great War, many people are seizing the chance to construct a new narrative of war, one which shows to everyone, young and old alike, the abomination that it was and is. Now that the men and women who lived those bloody years are gone, it is up to us to tell the story. And to keep telling it as a tale of a monstrous and global catastrophe that need not blight the future in the way its shadow has blighted the past.

One more point needs further attention. It is that we need to know much more about the visual images that these local commemorative projects share. Photography is the basis of this visual archive, and a comparison of photographic images of war in different cultural environments would be very instructive. But we need to add too that film, television, and the internet are active players in transmitting the visual archive of war, and a systematic comparison of such images is necessary for us to appreciate what people see when they say 'the Great War'. My guess is we 'see' victims' where earlier generations saw 'heroes' or 'martyrs'. But this is only a guess.

## « EN GUISE DE CONCLUSION »

My direct experience of commemorative projects is entirely within what may be described as Western European cultures. On the basis of this evidence, it is possible to argue that the language and imagery of Christian spirituality and sacrifice, still so present in Eastern European commemorative forms, has slowly vanished from Western European commemorative practices and art. That is what marks out our landscape of remembrance a century after the outbreak of the Great War, and separates it from other landscapes of memory.

Are these differences likely to remain? I think the answer is yes. The conceptual gap between East and West in Europe is deep and likely to deepen further. This distinction is unavoidable, and is bound to be part of our discussion of commemorative practices today. In particular there still looms the difficult matter of locating the Jewish tragedy of the Shoah within today's Eastern European story of war and suffering, of providing sufficient space for both ways of looking at history.

But even if we put aside the vexed problem of the Holocaust, there are very different cultural and political constraints on the commemoration of the Great War in Eastern Europe for which there are no simple remedies. There will be a museum of the War of Independence in Poland opening in a few years. This is a tribute to those who died in the creation of the Second Polish Republic in fighting primarily against Soviet

forces, defeated in 1921. It will resemble the heavily Catholic iconography of the Museum of the 1944 rising in Warsaw, replete with its Catholic martyrology.

In post-Soviet Russia, the martyrs have grown in number. The Russian Orthodox Church has no bureaucratic constraints like those of the Vatican for considering those who died for the faith as martyrs. By 1995, the Orthodox Church had beatified over 1000 martyrs. In many cases, they took the mug shots of priests, nuns, or the faithful taken by the KGB, and simply surrounded them with gold leaf. Instant iconography. This context of the recognition of martyrdom comes directly out of a living community of the faithful. We in the West have nothing similar.

And perhaps that is our strength. I wonder if it is true to say that martyrdom today is a zero-sum game. My point is that there seems to be in the cultural structure of martyrdom and its recognition room only for those who die for the 'true' faith, that is to say, your own. There seems to be no room for others who died for other faiths at the very same time. A trivial way of making this point is to say that there is room for only one martyr on the head of a pin. Thus Polish martyrs occlude Jewish ones; Turkish martyrs occlude Armenians; Palestinian martyrs occlude Israelis, and so on. Could it be, therefore, that one of the preconditions of the turn away from war so evident in Western European commemorative practices is a loss of religious faith and practice in the majority of the population? Most sociologists locate this phenomenon as reaching the bulk of the population in Western Europe in the 1960s. Thereafter sacred practices in the traditional churches became the property of a shrinking minority. If this is so, then the distinction among the three memory regimes I sketched out earlier may be permanent features of our global cultural life. Religious life outside of Western Europe shows no signs to my knowledge of going the way of the west. And until and unless it does, martyrs will still be proclaimed, and the way we look at war and violence in Western Europe, the way we commemorate events such as the Great War, will separate us from those who see sacrifice and the loss of life in warfare in very different ways.

As I have noted, commemoration is a very pliable art; it changes when ideas about war and loss of life in war change. Nothing is certain about what will be in two or three generations. All we can assert firmly is that we live now at an unusual turning point, separating the communicative memory of the Great War from the cultural memory of the Great War. Here is another good reason to keep an eye of the thousands of groups of memory activists at work today; they 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. Cultural memory matters and so does an understanding of how it comes to be. And here indeed is the place where historians, modestly might get back into the act again. ■

## Notes

1. < http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-21/turkey-threatens-nsw-parliament-over-armenian-genocide-vote/4903444. >
2. Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, '*Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*', *New German Critique*, 65 (Spring - Summer, 1995), pp. 125-33.