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The First World War Centenary in the UK: 'A truly national commemoration'?

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## *Introduction*

After period of considerable anxiety in some sections of the British press about an apparent absence, UK Prime Minister, David Cameron unveiled the UK government's plans to mark the centenary of the World War One in a speech at the Imperial War Museum in London in October 2012. He argued it was crucial to commemorate the 'Great War' due to 'the extraordinary sacrifice of a generation' and the considerable impact of a conflict that 'changed our nation' and the world more widely. His ambition was, he claimed, to recognise the durable emotional connection of the conflict through the development of 'a truly national commemoration' whilst also seeking to acknowledge the sacrifice of 'friends in the Commonwealth' and from across all of Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

Centenary commemorations have however proven increasingly open to public contention, revealing tensions and divergence between politicians, academics, and other commentators with regards to the thematic justification, coherence, and purpose of the United Kingdom (UK) government's plans. This article seeks to explore some of these tensions, particularly the extent to which a 'politics of war commemoration' is founded on ideologically-driven disputes regarding how the First World War is remembered. It will also assess the historical and contemporary challenges to establishing 'national' narratives and memory cultures to mark the First World War centenary that are inclusive and yet recognise diversity in how the conflict is remembered across UK and across its former empire. This will be realised by considering how multi-nationality and transnationality have problematised the UK government's aspirations, as Cameron asserted, for the centenary of World War One to capture 'our national spirit'.

## *The Politics of War Commemoration*

The deaths of the last surviving British combatants and the centenary of the First World War have initiated considerable political, academic and public deliberation about the causes, conduct, and legacies of the conflict, and the potential lessons to be learnt. Intense debate has highlighted the complex and ever-increasing interactions between and interdependencies of history and memory. According to Jay Winter (2006), since the end of

the First World War, the position of historians as the primary mediators of nationhood through the articulation of national history has been gradually superseded by at least two 'memory booms' widely embraced by nation-states and their citizens alike. Emergent memory cultures have stimulated public discourse and transformed how past events are remembered, interpreted and articulated. Winter argues the initial 'memory boom' was a response to the trauma of the First World War and sought to fortify and elevate national identities in an imperial age through war commemoration projects. However he believes that a second 'memory boom' emerged in late 1960s, founded on revisionist approaches that fractured national ideological and cultural frameworks of collective war remembrance.

Winter's 'memory boom' thesis is important in developing understanding of the centrality of the First World War in shaping contemporary approaches to war commemoration. As 'collective' national forms of memory are intimately connected with the present, they are susceptible to instrumentalisation, manipulation and politicisation. This is, according to Pierre Nora (2011), increasingly realised through on-going public debate about the content and purpose of history in which historians have been peripheralised. While history was once a *political* activity that supported the nation, it has become *politicised* in sustaining divergent ideological constructions of the present. These so-called 'history' or 'memory' wars have become a persistent feature of public discourse in many states including the UK, and are typically linked to broader politicised debates about political, social, economic and cultural citizenship and identity. They reveal a shared belief amongst protagonists that states have the potential to articulate and inculcate homogenous collective identities founded on particularistic interpretations of the national past.

How past conflicts are interpreted and commemorated is a significant element of these emotionally charged debates, providing reference points for complementary or contradictory forms of memory and identity that underline political and cultural tensions between individuals and groups within and amongst nation-states. War commemoration is therefore primarily a political project whereby the state and its institutions mediate and order formal and informal collective memories and histories. The promotion of a homogenous national identity that references important conflicts is seen to establish symbolic continuity between the past, present and future of a nation-state (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2004). This process is inherently multilateral, and is thus both

contentious and contested. Politicised disputes over the interpretation, framing and articulation of past conflicts and their commemoration by public institutions such as museums, universities and schools are often febrile and also counter-intuitive as they enhance division rather than solidarity. This is, in part, because 'official' forms of war are typically founded on dominant or hegemonic state-approved historical narratives that seek to preserve and reinforce particular elites and ideologies. Consequently they are seen by opponents as reflecting and reproducing unequal power relations shaped by phenomena such as race, ethnicity, class, gender and other social hierarchies (Graff-McRae, 2010).

Such debates therefore often hinge on the extent to which protagonists believe state-led war commemoration should be founded on 'orthodox' or revisionist reinterpretations of past conflicts. Such challenges reveal schisms about whether war commemoration should seek inculcate positive collective forms of patriotism or more critical and pluralist interpretations. For example, popular responses to how past conflicts are remembered can often be allied with expressions of grief and mourning of traumatic loss that challenge attempts by states to promote more celebratory approaches to war commemoration (Marshall, 2004). War commemoration of past conflicts is also contextual and liable to re-interpretation by subsequent generations.

### *Historical Approaches to commemorating the First World War*

Complexities relating to history, memory and war commemoration raise significant challenges with regards to the stated aims of the UK government centenary plans. One of the most pressing questions relates to what is actually being commemorated during the centenary and why. As the conflict came to an end, the British state was proactive in seeking to mediate the 'official' and 'unofficial' collective memories to shape commemoration of First World War. This involved the 'invention' of national forms of commemoration involving repetitive mass public participation in rituals, ceremonies and memorials, together with the dissemination of state-sponsored narratives concerning the conflict in museums and mass education programmes. But official and unofficial forms of commemoration of World War One have proven neither static nor universal in terms of participation or meaning. While the inter-war and immediate period after World War Two saw significant numbers involved in

acts of war commemoration, public participation slowly declined in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the gradual dying out of the First World War generation, a series of significant conflict anniversaries, and the engagement of the UK in a series of conflicts have encouraged greater public recognition and participation in war commemoration (Shaw, 1997).

Participation in British First World War commemoration has been motivated by diverse narratives emphasising an (appropriately respectful) patriotic acknowledgement of the positive contribution of military action, a futile and terrible warning of the dangers of war, or even a call for world peace. Mosse notes concerted efforts undertaken by the British state after the war sought to justify the fighting and sacrifice through the promotion of patriotic national myths and commemorative acts and rituals 'to make an inherently unpalatable past acceptable' (Mosse, 1990). This was driven by a need to justify the scale of losses in the war in the name of the British nation *and* empire, not least so that others might risk their lives in future wars. While the sense of shock regarding the scale of loss of life has proven durable, the precise nature of the cause for which combatants died has proven open to reinterpretation (Todman, 2005). More positive conceptions of the World War One that celebrated victory, prominent in the inter-war period, have largely dissipated in the wake of the Second World War. Since the 1960s, many Britons have been strongly influenced by revisionist accounts that construe World War One as a largely futile conflict in which the huge loss of life was the result of political and military elite incompetence. State forms of war commemoration have reflected this more sombre revisionist tone.

### *The First World 'History' Wars*

Tensions between state and popular perceptions of how World War One is now understood and remembered have been evident in UK government pronouncements regarding their centenary plans and the ensuing debate. The special representative for the Centenary Commemoration of the First World War, Andrew Murrison MP, has stated commemorations would focus on remembrance, thus 'making no judgment about fault, right or wrong, or indulging in any jingoistic sentiment'. He acknowledged 'there are bound to be differences of opinion about how the Great War is remembered', but argued 'it would be wrong for the

government to insist on a particular narrative'.<sup>2</sup> The dominant themes underpinning contributions of politicians of differing ideological hues have often reiterated established revisionist themes regarding poor political and military leadership and the scale of human loss. This has been linked to a perceived need to avoid celebratory or jingoistic overtones in remembering the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

But heated debates between politicians, historians, and the media more widely have highlighted that political ideology is an instrumental factor in framing the history, memory and commemoration of the conflict. For some on the political right have sought to actively counter revisionist themes disseminated by 'Marxist' historians since the 1960s that have skewed public perceptions of the conflict. UK Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, claimed that the 'existing left-wing version of the past' had strongly influenced British popular culture but were founded on myths deliberately designed to 'belittle Britain and its leaders'.<sup>4</sup> Others from the political right, such as UK Independence Party leader, Nigel Farage, and Conservative London Mayor, Boris Johnson, concurred with Gove's analysis, with the latter denouncing the 'intellectual dishonesty of the left'.<sup>5</sup>

Such comments provoked a furious response from politicians and historians alike. Richard Evans, Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge, forcefully drew attention to the work of a number of 'right-wing' historians who were also critical of British military leadership.<sup>6</sup> Martin Pugh argued the centenary commemoration plans were a product of 'a selected bunch of conservative historians and generals', offering a 'blinkered' focus of the Western Front without recognising the radical impact of the First World War on British society.<sup>7</sup> Labour MP and historian, Tristram Hunt, agreed, noting the significant social and political implications of the war in terms of class, gender, and British global power. He also declared Gove sought to 'sow political division' by rewriting the history of the war and to shift focus for its complex causes onto Germany alone.<sup>8</sup>

Boris Johnson responded by demanding Hunt's resignation, accusing him of denying that German militarism 'was at the root of the First World War'.<sup>9</sup> His comments revealed a wider tension about the extent the British victory should be commemorated or actively celebrated, particularly in relation to Germany. A leading member of the UK government's centenary advisory committee, Brigadier Sir Hew Strachan, argued the avoidance of a more

stridently positive tone to the commemorations revealed 'intent in government not to upset the Germans'.<sup>10</sup> This view has been supported by some sections of the British media. For example, an editorial in *The Times* suggested the UK government policy would appear to be 'don't mention we won the First World War'. It noted the Britain's role in the war was 'essentially just', being 'a necessary military response that stopped aggression by an expansionist power' which was 'xenophobic and anti-democratic'.<sup>11</sup> One commentator even made a case for 'why we SHOULD upset the Germans', arguing there was a 'politically correct' notion to 'suit contemporary sympathies' that it was 'somehow insulting to the millions who died to suggest that it wasn't all a monstrous waste of blood'. He concluded, 'give it long enough and we may find that we actually lost the Great War after all'.<sup>12</sup>

Uncertainties about the 'justness' of British cause in the First World War have also permeated debate about how it has shaped contemporary society. Some, such as Hew Strachan, argue that the motivations of those who fought were of another age, suggesting they sought to defend the patriotic values of 'strongly religious society' which was deeply hierarchical and whose 'collective loyalties' were shaped by monarchy, empire, and nation.<sup>13</sup> Politicians have however sought to relate the conflict to contemporary forms of patriotism and citizenship. For example, David Cameron has claimed that those who fought and died were defending 'the values we hold dear', though he struggled to articulate what these were beyond 'friendship, loyalty, what the Australians would call 'mateship''.<sup>14</sup> Michael Gove proposed that those fighting in the First World War were driven by a desire to defend Britain's 'special tradition of liberty' and 'the western liberal order'.<sup>15</sup> Richard Evans responded such claims were compromised by the British preparedness to form an alliance with authoritarian Tsarist Russia.<sup>16</sup> *Guardian* columnist, Seamus Milne, went further, noting 'the idea that the war was some kind of crusade for democracy when most of Britain's population – including many men – were still denied the vote, and democracy and dissent were savagely crushed among most of those Britain ruled, is laughable'.<sup>17</sup>

Some commentators have sought to link the First World War with contemporary political issues. For example, British right-wing Eurosceptics have identified the genesis of the European Union as a political 'deception' by elites who fought in the First World War and then sought to build a 'United States of Europe' in the wake of the Second World War (Booker 2014). Influential right-wing polemicist, Charles Moore (2014), has argued that



opportunistic socialists took advantage of the necessities of 'total war' to expand the power and influence of the state through nationalisation and welfarism. This, he insisted, had led to long-term economic and social decline, initiating a moral collapse by making the poorest reliant on the state. On the left of the political spectrum, historian John Newsinger argued that the centenary commemorations were an attempt by the 'ruling class' to foster 'the spirit of Britishness' to suppress working-class 'by mythologising a conflict of unimaginable horror'.<sup>18</sup> For some commentators, the lessons of the 'savage industrial slaughter' pursued by 'predatory imperial powers' have not been learnt, indicating there is a significant threat of another global conflict between great powers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> This is, according to Frank Furedi (2014), due to the divisive legacies of the First World War that have fragmented the potential for a universal liberal framework of political, economic and cultural values and ideologies that might negate conflict within and between states.

#### *'A truly national commemoration'?*

Debates about the centenary are further complicated in multi-national states like the UK where war commemoration can simultaneously draw on shared experiences of past conflicts involving all of nations within the overarching state but also highlight distinctive or divergent sub-state national forms of remembrance founded on contradictory constructions of official and unofficial history and memory. British war commemoration has been predominantly framed on mutually-inclusive narratives, rituals and symbols of remembrance involving all of the nations of the UK.<sup>20</sup> However, the conflation of British and English narratives informing state war commemoration reveal ethno-national hierarchies that have often marginalised or overlooked non-English official and unofficial histories and memory cultures. Such 'Anglo-myopia' appears to have influenced the UK government's approach to the centenary. For example, David Cameron has claimed the commemorations will draw on 'our national spirit in every corner of the country'. However the vast majority of UK government funding for 'national' events and projects has been allocated to England. For example, a programme involving the battlefield visits for school children was claimed by one government minister to have the potential to 'bind us together as a nation', although funding was only made available to English schools.<sup>21</sup>

The proposition of a universal 'British' experience of the First World War thus conceals multi-national asymmetries in 'national' forms of history, identity and memory informing war commemorations that are layered and interdependent but not necessarily homogenous. Scholars have explored the distinctive impact and legacy of World War One in Scottish and Welsh national terms, drawing attention to distinctive frontline and domestic experiences and, in the case of Scotland, the disproportionate human cost.<sup>22</sup> But the changing political climate in the non-English nations of the UK, particularly since the creation of devolved parliaments in 1998, are clearly have an impact of the tone and focus of centenary commemoration plans.

In Scotland, the election of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in 2011 to take sole control of the Scottish Parliament has encouraged a distinctive approach to the centenary, emphasising the Scottish nation rather than the UK more widely. In March 2013, the Scottish Government announced the formation of a Scottish advisory panel under the leadership of Norman Drummond who noted 'it is important that Scotland remembers the sacrifice of those who served during the First World War and the wider impact that the war has had on our country and upon Scots across the world'.<sup>23</sup> This noted, the Scottish government has drawn on a similar centenary narrative as the UK government, declaring it was in 'no sense a celebration of the centenary of this devastating conflict'.<sup>24</sup>

The forthcoming independence referendum in Scotland has provided a further dimension to debates about the centenary, although both pro- and anti-independence campaigns have formally signalled a 'political armistice'.<sup>25</sup> Supporters of Scottish independence have raised concerns about UK government's 'jingoistic celebrations' of the 'Great Slaughter' of Scotland's young who died because of 'misplaced loyalty'.<sup>26</sup> The greater ratio of Scots mortality rates on the Western Front when compared to other parts of the UK has been emphasised by Scottish nationalists, with one suggesting 'British military commanders have always viewed Scottish forces as expendable'. A vote for independence would, he argued, ensure future generations of Scots could not be 'sent like lambs to the slaughter for a monarch or a crusading Westminster zealot'.<sup>27</sup> Historian Michael Fry concluded the centenary was part of a UK government-orchestrated and politicised 'Britfest' which began with the Diamond Jubilee and Olympics celebrations in 2012.<sup>28</sup>

Conversely, those supporting the Union have argued the centenary provides 'ample opportunity to remind the Scottish people how they stood together with the English, Welsh and Northern Irish'.<sup>29</sup> Unionist politicians in both the Scottish and UK parliaments have accused the Scottish government of investing more funding in marking the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, where the Scots defeated the English, whilst deliberately overlooking the centenary.<sup>30</sup> Such an approach has been interpreted by one commentator as an attempt by the Scottish Government to appeal to the 'inner nationalist' of Scots rather than their 'outer Brit'.<sup>31</sup>

In Wales, commemoration plans for the centenary have similarly focused on Welsh national as well as British experiences but have proven less politicised than in Scotland. First Minister, Carwyn Jones, has noted, 'it is extremely important that we remember those who died and reflect on how it changed Wales'.<sup>32</sup> But Welsh nationalists have suggested that the centenary commemorations are 'reminiscent of the jingoistic nonsense we saw from the British state elite to drum up support for the war in the first place'.<sup>33</sup> One leading Plaid Cymru member has claimed that the origins of the Welsh independence movement can be located in World War One as a response to 'British imperialism' within the UK.<sup>34</sup>

Commemoration of the First World War in Northern Ireland highlights most clearly the politically contentious and culturally divisive legacies of the First World War. The centenary is part of wider series of high-profile commemorations between 2012 and 2021 that mark events such as the Home Rule disputes, the Battle of Somme, the Easter Rising, and the Irish civil war that both draw attention to the contemporary resonances of historical events surrounding Ireland's partition. The UK government has sought to extend established narratives underpinning the centenary to Northern Ireland that emphasise shared focus on British participation in the war – a theme that unionists politicians have keenly supported. For example, Theresa Villiers, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, has stated, 'World War One profoundly affected the whole community across Northern Ireland and involved terrible sacrifice.....it is important that a century on, this generation recognises and pays tribute to those who gave so much for our country'.<sup>35</sup> It has also indicated that centenary commemorations offer further opportunities for reconciliation with the Republic of Ireland, with UK government representatives stating they will reflect Irish involvement.<sup>36</sup> However, the potential for 'poppy wars' to highlight enduring divisions across Ireland is significant.<sup>37</sup>

While representatives of Sinn Fein have recently taken part in Remembrance Day services in Northern Ireland for the first time, dissident Republican groups have denounced the centenary of 'a war of imperial conquest'.<sup>38</sup>

### *World War One and the legacies of empire*

The role of Ireland in British centenary commemorations draws attention to the transnational dynamics of World War One. The contribution of its empire ensured British forms of war commemoration extended beyond the boundaries of the state to include former colonies that contributed soldiers and resources to previous conflicts. UK government representatives have sought to stress enduring Commonwealth ties, with David Cameron noting it was vital to recognise the 'extraordinary sacrifice' and 'catastrophic' death toll of 'our friends in the Commonwealth'.<sup>39</sup> This would appear to confirm Jay Winter's (2006) proposition that, in the wake of the conflict, the 'shadow of empire mattered' in encouraging a sense of shared loss and trauma underpinning transnational networks of memory. Such networks were particularly resonant for the large numbers of Australians, Canadians, South Africans and New Zealanders in the so-called 'White Dominions', many of whom were British-born or who had British ancestry, thus indicating that imperial war commemoration was strongly defined by shared bonds which were often racially-determined.

The centenary of the First World War has however revealed the extent to which post-colonial revisionism in the wake of empire compromises dominant British national narratives and collective memories informing war commemoration. Although shared transnational modes of war commemoration across the 'White Dominions' have endured, the sacrifices of the First World War have become increasingly understood in terms of post-British nation-building and progression towards self-determination. Historical narratives and memory cultures have thus drawn on postcolonial interpretations of the perceived British military incompetence and scepticism of the British political leaders who took the Empire to war. For example, the 'legend' or 'myths' of Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZACs), particularly those troops involved in the Gallipoli landings of 1915, often emphasise perceived shared personal and group attributes and characteristics, such as

courage, humour and ingenuity, and egalitarian values associated with ANZAC soldiers when compared to their British commanding officers and the 'mother country' more widely. Such mythology has been exposed to critical analysis (Wilson, 2012) but has proved powerful in shaping public perceptions of the war in Australia and government plans for the centenary.<sup>40</sup>

Suggestions by UK government ministers that the centenary offers opportunities to reflect on why 'Britain and her family' went to war reveal further tensions of empire.<sup>41</sup> Many troops did enlist voluntarily, their actions underpinned by a confluence of domestic and broader imperial motives (Omissi, 2007). However a considerable number were conscripted and many lacked a comprehensive understanding of cause for which they were expected to fight.<sup>42</sup> Many more imperial subjects supported the British war effort by providing resources and commodities – a contribution that is rarely acknowledged. Unlike their 'White Dominion' counterparts, transnational 'collective memories' informing the content of British war commemoration often overlooked the sacrifices of troops from the colonies and they not afforded equal recognition in remembrance on war memorials.<sup>43</sup>

Although such 'memory gaps' were of particular resonance to those 'new Commonwealth' migrants who settled in the UK from the late 1940s, the contribution of troops from the Indian sub-continent, Africa and the Caribbean has proven a growing dimension of war commemoration and the wider historiography of the First World War (Das, 2011). Indeed the UK government has sought to explicitly recognise the contribution of ethnic minority communities and the impact of the war on multicultural Britain. The First World War, according to David Cameron, marked 'the beginnings of ethnic minorities getting the recognition, respect and equality they deserve'.<sup>44</sup> As UK Faith and Communities Minister, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi has noted, 'our boys weren't just Tommies; they were Tariqs and Tajinders too'. She argued that centenary offered opportunities to acknowledge that 'so many men from so far away came to Europe to fight for the freedoms we enjoy today. Their legacy is our liberty, and every single one of us owes them a debt of gratitude'.<sup>45</sup>

The proposition that subjects from across the empire sought to defend British domestic liberties is highly-questionable though, particularly when considering the exploitative and hierarchical nature of British colonial rule. The post-war rewards for those from the colonies

for fought were also scant and British rule remained largely unreformed in the inter-war period. Such claims also overlook the pervasive influence of racial categorisation and discrimination of troops from British colonies and other who supported the war effort. The experiences of those who served from the British dominions and colonies were profoundly different both in terms of experience. For example, while two Indian divisions fought on the Western Front, West Indian troops were not trusted and instead were allocated dangerous but menial manual labour.<sup>46</sup>

There has been a failure to appreciate that debates about the legacies of the First World War are deeply entangled with those of British colonialism. Such an approach often overlooks the complex transnational dynamics of World War One commemoration or that the resonance and meaning of the conflict differs considerably across its former empire. For example, the history of the 1.3 million Indian soldiers who fought in the conflict has been largely forgotten in India, lost in the pursuit of independence after World War One and the subsequent framing of post-colonial Indian nationalism.<sup>47</sup> How the First World War is commemorated across the Commonwealth is also not centrifugal in its relation to the experiences of the UK. The Australian government's plans for the centenary commemoration focus on the strength of post-conflict ties with New Zealand and Turkey, highlighting shared sacrifice between them rather than the UK.

### *Conclusions*

This article has argued that a 'politics of war commemoration', underpinned by tensions between official and unofficial collective memories and histories, have shaped public debate about the centenary of World War One. The UK government has claimed its role in the centenary was merely to provide leadership and encouragement in organising commemorative acts whilst not dictating the themes of commemoration itself. This position, though somewhat understandable, is naïve and overlooks its own role in stimulating ideologically-founded divisions concerning how the conflict should be commemorated and what are the legacies for contemporary British society. The UK government also appears unaware of the implications of seeking to realise its aspirations to host a 'truly national commemoration'. By framing the First World War centenary in 'national' terms, it has failed to fully acknowledge the extent to which the multi-national

framework of the British state has and continues to layer and fragment war commemoration. Moreover there appears lack of recognition regarding the complex legacies of empire affect transnational forms of British war commemoration. The centenary has the power to (re)ignite a diverse range of postcolonial responses that impair the UK government's proposition for a shared approach to the centenary across the Commonwealth. Therefore UK government's plans for the commemoration of the First World War centenary have failed to fully recognise and sufficiently accommodate the complex and entangled memories and histories of the citizens and nations of the UK and its former empire.

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