



Continuations or New Beginnings' Changing attitudes to the First World War

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"I adore war. It's like a big picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic. I have never been so well or so happy . . . Here we are in the burning centre of it all, and I would not be anywhere else for a million pounds and the Queen of Sheba." (Captain Julian Grenfell DSO 1914)

You smug faced crowds with kindling eye

Who cheer when soldier lads march by

Sneak home and pray you'll never know

The hell where youth and laughter go. (Captain Siegfried Sassoon MC 1918)

The varied responses to the Prime Minister's announcement regarding the plans for the forthcoming First World War commemorations have highlighted just how contested the nature of the conflict still is in modern memory, just as the quotes above reflect how it was in the contemporary consciousness. Recent comments in the national press have ranged from hysteria to outright controversy, and as a result notions of commemoration, celebration and the war in its entirety have become blurred, fractured and distorted; bent over the passage of time.

In Britain, we mark the beginning of the First World War as 4th August 1914, the day that war was declared on Germany, but by that date the hostilities were already well underway, for it was a global conflict, not a localised one. On 28th July 1914, Austria-Hungary had declared war on Serbia, on the 1st August, Germany declared war on Russia, and then two days later on France. But to some degree, these dates are simply arbitrary figures that allow us to give the war a structure, a defined beginning, just as the 11th November 1918 allows for a defined end. The reality, however, is that the war had been set in motion far earlier than 1914, and that 1918 only marked a hiatus in hostilities. The lessons that were not learned in 1918 lead global war to flare up again only two decades later, and many would argue that it still continues today.

Since the Prime Minister's recent announcement, many have commented that the anniversary of the war should not be celebrated, and some even that it should not be commemorated. One major newspaper asked whether or not the money earmarked for the centenary would be spent on any more 'needless memorials' to the First World War, reflecting how differently the First War is regarded in respect to the Second, a conflict far more costly, barbarous and violent than its predecessor. As the quotes from Sassoon and Grenfell highlight, war is seldom viewed in the same way by those that experience it, and this being the case it is hardly surprising that the same is true for those that haven't. The manner in which the First World War is currently remembered differs across the world. For instance, around this time of year it is common to see people across Britain and the

Commonwealth wearing the red poppy. Yet in France, usually it is the blue cornflower that is worn. In the United States, Americans favour a red, white and blue ribbon and in Germany the armistice is traditionally not celebrated at all.

Part of the Prime Minister's plans for the centenary involve more schoolchildren visiting the battlefields of France and Belgium, a practice that currently takes place, but is not universally embraced. When greater numbers do visit places such as Ypres and the Somme it is hoped that they will not only learn about the battles that occurred there, but also the wider reasons for the war, as well as the repercussions of its eternal legacies. The In Flanders Fields Museum in Ieper (Ypres) welcomes many schoolchildren from all over the world every year and according to Wouter Sineave of the museum's Education Department a message that is often relayed to those that visit is as follows:

The confrontation with the personal stories of those who were here, standing on the place where you now stand ... is a confrontation that makes you realise that war is a story of 'the lost': A wife losing her husband, parents losing their son, children losing their father ... If you take the time to realise this, you will understand that you can't make peace by fighting a war. As long as people think the opposite, we will continue just to talk about that 'First World War'....

The way in which the memory of the Great War has changed over the years can also be seen in regard to one of the most notorious figures of the conflict; Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. Since 1918, he has been branded a butcher, an incompetent and a failure, yet when he died (in 1928) he was afforded a state funeral, carried up Whitehall on the same gun carriage that bore the body of the Unknown Soldier to Westminster Abbey, and hundreds of thousands lined the procession route to pay their respects. At the time, Britain recognised that he had done what had to be done, that the cost of the war was one that had to be paid, and that it was hoped it would never have to be paid again. At the time, the feelings of loss, as expressed by the In Flanders Fields Museum, were still painfully felt, yet today the passage of time has dulled this realisation.

The changing attitudes to Haig, the rise of tourism across the Western Front, the commercialisation of the conflict and the development of Ypres from a city of war into a centre for peace together show how over the years the realities of the conflict have changed or been renegotiated. Yet almost a hundred years after the 'war to end all wars' the current climate of economic instability and differing global approaches to geo-politics dictate that the world currently faces, at least to some degree, similar challenges to those it encountered in 1914. Past and current practices concerning the commemoration of the war appear to have done little to assuage conflict throughout the world, so perhaps it is not a case of less commemoration that is needed, but more. Not fewer memorials, but a greater number, and not an ignorance of the way the country felt in the twenties, but a closer understanding.

Neither Grenfell nor Sassoon was right or wrong in what they said. War is a complex and ambiguous undertaking and there were many who shared the sentiments of both men, often at the same time. The greatest sadness of all is that the writings of these two old soldiers, and many like them, graphically display how barbaric man had become by the beginning of the twentieth century. As the famed historian John Keegan once declared, 'war is first and foremost a cultural act' and if we are to remember this then as a society we must ask if attitudes to commemoration should take the form of continuations or new beginnings. But it must also be accepted that memorials are never needless, memory is never pointless, commemoration and celebration is not a waste of time or money, and that the education of younger generations is always necessary, if we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

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