The First World War Centenary: Giving the people what they want?

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After what's seemed like a fair old wait the 'official' plans for the commemoration of the First World War centenary have been released in the last few weeks (if you've missed out on them you can find out more here).

They seem to be fairly appropriate so far; visits to the battlefields for thousands of school children across the country, a candlelight vigil to mark the outbreak of war, and collaborations and memorials with Germany.

But these are very much the elements of the commemoration that the government and other organisations want. Which is entirely fine. But it does raise another question; what is it that the general public want from the First World War centenary and, in fact, the First World War itself?

I was at an AHRC arranged seminar at the BBC last year along with numerous others to offer some input into their forthcoming programming for the centenary. One of the things that really struck me was that the BBC mentioned that, in recent years, viewing figures for WW2 related documentaries and programmes had been in decline and yet figures for WW1 shows was rising.

Now on the surface this shows that there is a very clear interest in the First World War in the build up to the centenary (and if you're not amongst the interested parties then the next 4 or so years could prove difficult). But what areas is this interest directed towards?

Matthew Leonard has written on this site about the history relating to the changing memory of the First World War, and I've written before on the politics of the memorial process but what I feel these evolutions point to is a particular focus on the experiences of individuals set against the suffering of the many. The First World War is, of course, far more complicated than that, but there is a definite currency surrounding the war regarding the notion of 'unknown soldiers'. Now in this instance any soldier can actually be 'unknown'. It is not the lack of a name that makes them 'unknown' but rather their inherent ordinariness. By being nobody they can become everybody. Their personal stories hold a dual weight of being both individual and representative. But at the same time these stories themselves become fairly heavily edited and selected. We do not, for instance, hear of the stories of those soldiers who greatly enjoyed their time in service during the war.

The First World War soldier Charles Carrington perhaps best summed up the popular image of the war with the words;

I never meet an 'old sweat?', as we like to describe ourselves, who accepts or enjoys the figure in which we are now presented though it is useless 'undignified' to protest. Just smile and make a
soldier's wry joke when you see yourself on the television screen agonised and woebegone, trudging from disaster to disaster, knee-deep in moral as well as physical mud, hesitant about your purpose, submissive to a harsh, irrelevant discipline, mistrustful of your commanders. Is it any use to assert that I was not like that, and my dead friends were not like that, and the old cronies that I meet at reunions are not like that??

The focus on the individual experience is not necessarily a problem in itself, but it does highlight a wider deficit regarding the war's military context. The recent anniversary of the D-Day landings blended a mixture of personal experiences and the wider strategy. The actual details of how the Second World War ended (such as D-Day, the advance of the Red Army, the use of the atomic bomb) are fairly widespread and acknowledged in our social subconscious be it from tv documentaries, dramatisations or even sources like computer games. Yet the details of how the First World War ended are nowhere near as present. It is viewed as a war that simply petered out with victory claimed by the last man standing.

Now whilst I believe that this wider military context should have a place within the centenary commemorations to help improve our understanding of the war itself, I must also wonder whether or not the public actually wants to know.

The First World War does fulfil the role of 'bad war' in our society and much of our interaction with it is framed in such terms. Does building on this foundation leave room for a more focused examination of the actual military details or would the British public rather have their own expectations and understandings reinforced?

Is there a balance to be struck by First World War historians between what we can say and what the public want to hear?

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