
REVIEW

Reflections on the "Commemoration of Conflict"

'The Commemoration of Conflict', Postgraduate Conference, UCL
Department of History, London, UK, May 27, 2014

Marjolein Van Bavel*

2014 marked the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War, an event commemorated in ceremonies and events around the world. This comes as no surprise, considering the central place that both World Wars occupy in our collective memory. But conflict commemoration is not just a modern-day phenomenon, nor have all aspects of war been remembered in the same way. From Simonides' commemorative epigrams after the Persian Wars and the foundation of Battle Abbey following William the Conqueror's victory, to the establishment of Decoration Day in memory of American Civil War casualties, communities have memorialized the impact of war in a variety of ways. On the 27th of May, research students in the UCL Department of History organised a Postgraduate Conference titled "The Commemoration of Conflict" that considered how various conflicts from the ancient world to the present were remembered and commemorated.

Introduction

Although we arguably live in a commemorating age – as exemplified by the yearly successes of the Poppy Appeal and this year's First World War Centenary 'celebrations' – there has been a lack of attention for the historicity of commemoration. As Ian Atherton has observed, 'the current wave of commemoration needs historicising. Most studies of remembrance, memorials and commemoration are present-centred, focusing on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' (Atherton 2013: 389). Moreover, scholars – as voiced by Timothy G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper – inevitably shape the memories of war by the questions

they ask or fail to ask when interrogating their sources (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2004).

In light of these reflections, the organisers of "The Commemoration in Conflict," last year's instalment of the UCL History Department's annual Postgraduate Conference, brought together six papers presented by historians from across the country: Dr Andrew Smith (UCL), Dr Ian Atherton (Keele University), Professor Robert Cook (University of Sussex), Dr Siobhan Talbott (University of Manchester), Dr Valerie Hope (Open University) and James Taylor (Head of Content, First World War Galleries, Imperial War Museum). Drawing on the rich variety of historical scholarship and practice on offer throughout the day, several important themes emerged, which will be divulged over the course of this review. Consequently, the conference formed an

* Department of History, UCL, UK
m.bavel.12@ucl.ac.uk

important contribution to a dialogue about broader questions of commemoration.

The commemoration of war dead

The vast cemeteries on the Great War's Western Front and the 888,246 ceramic poppies that recently filled the Tower of London's moat, each representing a British fatality in that war, as well as contemporary newspaper reports on British soldiers who have fallen in Afghanistan and Iraq, indicate just how accustomed we have become to treating war dead with dignity and individuality. The casualties of war, however, have not always been commemorated in such a way. In ancient Rome, Valerie Hope argued, they seem to have been little remembered, respected, and mourned. While ornate tombstones were set up for Roman soldiers in peacetime, and arches and columns erected to celebrate victories, no war memorials existed listing the names of the dead, nor any military war cemeteries or annual commemorative rituals. Romans conventionally understood dying for the Empire to be glorious, honourable, and a source of fame. And yet, the bodies of dead soldiers after battle were hastily gathered, cremated, buried en masse, and soon forgotten. Thus, despite acknowledging the communal benefits of war in the public and the civil sphere, this society viewed the individual sacrifices of soldiers to be of little importance (Hope 2014).

Ian Atherton similarly noted that while many battlefields of the Wars of the Roses in the fifteenth century were quickly marked by commemorative structures, such as crosses or chantry chapels, those of the seventeenth-century English Civil Wars went unmarked and their soldiers forgotten. Hence, it appears that there have been significant shifts in the ways in which contemporaries remembered and commemorated their battlefields. Further, Atherton argued, 'contemporary attitudes to battlefields as sacred spaces to be preserved, as hallowed ground sanctified by the shedding of blood, are not, therefore, the result of an unbroken tradition of battlefield commemoration stretching back to a distant medieval past', but rather,

'a product of eighteenth-century antiquarian investigations and nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments about the relationship between the state and the individual citizen-soldier' (Atherton 2014: 13).

Consequently, Hope and Atherton's papers indicate that in thinking about commemoration, one must also consider the absence of commemorative *practice*, as well as the absence of commemorative *objects* and what such absence may mean to commemoration practices.

The materiality of commemoration

In addition to reflections on the absence of commemorative objects, participants throughout the conference discussed a variety of commemorative objects, including monuments such as memorials and statues, as well as museums and written accounts. Two conference papers in particular focused on the materiality of commemoration.

Firstly, Andrew Smith showed how one particular object, the Occitan cross, has been used variably in diverging commemorative practices and identity projects in the Languedoc region of southern France. According to Smith:

by tracing the varying deployment [sic] of this symbol from the head of protest marches in the 1960s to the [flags on] top of government buildings after the decentralisation drive of the 1980s, an illuminating analysis of both Occitan and Languedocien identity emerges. This identity was constructed from a narrative of struggle that encompassed a variety of different conflicts, from the medieval massacres of the Albigensian Crusade to mass protests about the price of wine in 1907. (Smith 2014)

The memory and commemoration of these conflicts shaped later debates about identity. Moreover, the Occitan movement and winegrowers employed Occitan symbolism in its identity struggles and economically inspired violence.

Distinct from other papers given at this conference, which tended to reflect upon commemorative practices of third parties throughout history, James Taylor discussed the commemorative practices of himself and his team at the Imperial War Museum. Drawing on his recent experience of setting up the IWM First World War Galleries, which opened to the public in July 2014, Taylor addressed the issue of handling commemorative objects in a museum environment and their wider commemorative meaning. He asserted that it is not a public gallery's aim to tackle the subject objectively. Instead, it seeks to give an impression of the war, along with contemporary testimonies, to indicate where commemorative myths originate, and to allow members of the public to make up their own minds. Subsequently, Taylor suggested the museum environment might contribute to a reconsideration of the public mythology surrounding the First World War that has caused this conflict to take pride of place over other conflicts in public memory (Taylor 2014). All historians have much to learn from such a self-reflexive approach. Even when critically analysing commemorative practices, historians play a role in the very shaping of them within their societies, whether by legitimising certain voices from the past or by creating alternative historiographies of past events.

Different ways of commemorating

Just as commemorative objects can be appropriated differently, historic events can be remembered in different ways. This observation raises many interesting questions. For example, in her conference paper, Dr Siobhan Talbott (University of Manchester) examined whether literary works should be categorized as 'commemorative,' or whether the use of artistic licence removes their historic value. Exploring the literary representations of the Thirty Years' War, Talbott explored how war has featured in creative literature, such as historical fiction, plays, poetry, and songs. In the context of these less conventional sources of commemoration, Talbott wondered what

the most appropriate form to remember war might be (Talbott 2014).

More questions arise when one considers that distinct groups attach new meanings to conflicts by commemorating them differently. Conventional wisdom suggests that it is the victors of conflicts who write their histories, and conflict histories might look very different if the losing parties wrote them. In this regard, it is worth contemplating whether commemoration could also further the understanding of how conflicts came about. Histories written from the perspective of those countries that started the violence, such as Germany and Austria in the case of the World Wars, are therefore of special interest in trying to understand how commemoration has inspired subsequent violence.

Commemorative groups moreover include both the subjects involved in past conflicts, as well as the historians writing about them. Professor Robert Cook (University of Sussex) touched on this point in his paper addressing why the victors of the American Civil War appear not to have written its history in the aftermath. While the northern Union's military triumph in the War over the Confederacy in the south generated a powerful strain of Union memory that valorised the victor's narrative of events, Cook argued, 'this collective memory has received relatively little attention from historians, certainly in comparison with the South's Lost Cause interpretation of the Confederate War which underpinned the creation of that region's racially segregated society'. By 1915, the Union cause became eclipsed in American culture by a sentimentalised variant of Civil War memory that celebrated the reunion of northern and southern whites, and integrated elements of the Lost Cause agenda that romanticized the 'Old South' and the Confederate war effort. He subsequently assessed the reasons for the rapid disappearance of the initial Union Memory and demonstrated how veterans made their own contribution to shifts in US historical memory (Cook 2014). As such, Cook's work forms part of recent developments in the historical study of memory,

enabling us to innovatively interrogate the existing scholarship and methodologies of conflict and commemoration.

Conclusion

In closing, with the advent of the First World War Centenary, the Postgraduate Conference "The Commemoration of Conflict" represented an excellent opportunity to posit wider questions as to why certain conflicts are commemorated and others are forgotten, and in what ways commemoration serves political and social purposes. Commemoration thus presents us with a vast field of research, which truly opens up once one considers who is commemorating what, with what aims and means, and why. Although, in this instance, the commemoration of conflict was the focus, this conference also raised questions of concern for all historians, questions that demand further reflection.

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