

EVENT REPORT BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

What Do We Commemorate When We Commemorate WWI? The Impact of the First World War on Europe Today¹

One hundred years ago, on 28 July 1914, Austro-Hungary declared war on Serbia. This was the opening act of the First World War, which lasted four devastating years, caused the death of over 15 million people and left 20 million injured and maimed. It was a European catastrophe, which brought disaster upon the rest of the world. Peace lasted only 20 years. It took another even more devastating war before European leaders realised things had to change. When Europeans commemorate the beginning of WWI this summer they should therefore be reflecting not only on the political causes of the war and the human tragedy it caused but also on the start of a new era for Europe: the birth of the European project that began with the Schuman declaration in May 1950, which evolved into the European Union. The EU has been considered a success story for many years; with a high point in 2004 with the “Eastern enlargement”, when the East/West divide seemed to be finally overcome. However, at least since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2007-8, the European Union has come under pressure with the rise of Eurosceptic, populist and nationalist forces. Are the EU-institutions and the Member States ready to continue and strengthen the integration process, will they try harder to reach out to citizens and re-involve them in the project, which has given them more than 60 years of peace and relative prosperity? Or will European countries return to their nationalist end egoistic past with all the consequences? And, what about Germany? Embedded in the European Union, the reunited country has become the most powerful, stable and wealthy European state. It owes the European project its success, but is it ready to play a leading role in the further integration process?

World War I in context

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The event took place on 25th June 2014. Guest speakers were Dr Maarten van Alstein, researcher at the Flemish Peace Institute, Dr Fraser Cameron, director EU-Russia Centre, Brussels and Susanne Spröer, head of Culture Background, Deutsche Welle, Bonn, Germany. The event was moderated by Dr Ilana Bet-El who is a historian, writer and political analyst. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

2014 is a year of important anniversaries for Europe. It is crucial to look at these dates of commemoration not just through a historical lens, but to ask the question how all these historical incidents interrelate and affect Europe today. In that respect it is useful to differentiate between commemorating and remembering. Remembering emphasises the look backwards, whereas commemorating focuses on the interrelation between the past and the current situation. The First World War, the beginning of which hundred years ago marks one of the most important historic dates in 2014 is usually remembered in national rather than transnational context. A cross-border dialogue is necessary to increase understanding of the different ways (its) history is remembered. Still, it is for the first time that we remember the beginning of WWI and not its ending as a victory over others, which has been the case over the last hundred years.

It is probably easier to square the circle than to summarise the complexity of WW I, its causes and implications. Whereas this event's focus lies on the British, German and Belgian experience of the 'Great War', one cannot *not* speak about **France**, whose northern parts were occupied during the war and which suffered the most in terms of losses per capita. Further to the east fundamental historical change was brought about by WWI, since three empires were demolished: the Russian, the Ottoman and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Tsarist **Russia**, a repressive dictatorship, was overthrown by revolution, but this did not change all the structures and patterns present in the country. Russia has no history of democracy, which still affects the country today. For Russia, it has always been the heroism and sacrifice of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 that remain uppermost in the national psyche rather than the disasters of the First World War, including defeat and revolution. President Putin has recently lamented the changes after the First World War that left millions of Russian speakers in the Soviet Republic of Ukraine and is using this as an argument in his defence of the Crimea annexation. This strategy has been highly successful, not only in Russia where Putin's level of support is currently at a height, but even in Western countries people fall for his dubious interpretation of history.

The **Ottoman Empire** collapsed, making way for the foundation of modern Turkey, whereas the Arab part of the former Ottoman Empire was divided into spheres of influence by the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement between France and the United Kingdom (with the assent of Russia) concluded in 1916. Many analysts point to this European carve up of the Middle East with the many artificial borders as the root cause of the continuing turmoil in the region today. The **Austrian-Hungarian Empire** did not survive WWI either. It disintegrated into numerous new states in eastern, central and south-east Europe, which has contributed to ethnic tensions in this region up to the civil war in the Balkans later on in the 20th century.

The human cost of the First World War was horrendous. More than 16 million people, both military and civilian, died in the war. Looking at the way it was fought, the phrase "lions led by donkeys"² comes to mind, meaning that a soldier's life did not count much in the eyes of his superiors. We should not forget that the value of human life, especially that of the common people, was not high on the agenda of the prevailing social systems, where universal suffrage did not exist and the aristocracy ruled. The horrors of the Great

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The phrase was originally used to describe the British infantry in WWI.

War remain alive in Europe today and can be considered the root-cause for most Europeans' reluctance to resort to war to achieve political ends.

The war was not only a calamity for Europe, it also involved hundreds of thousands of soldiers from the European colonies and British Dominions, including India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa as well as the United States and Japan, making it a world war in the very literal sense.

History is with us all the time; today it is discussed whether Gavrilo Princip, the man who shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, is a hero or terrorist. Recently we witnessed the situation that a former IRA commander led the Queen of England around a prison where he was kept for ten years. And, of course, there is the example of Nelson Mandela, who was considered to be a terrorist by Margaret Thatcher a long time ago. These examples show that history changes very quickly and there is no such thing as one solid history. Opinion and perception change all the time; remembrance is very personal and subjective and varies from country to country and from person to person. For this reason it is important to acknowledge how different countries remember the Great War and what implications this has for today.

UK

In British memory WWII is much more a clear-cut war between 'good' and 'evil' than WWI. Several right-wing historians even argue that Britain should not have entered WW I to rescue 'little Belgium' which looks strange from a European perspective. The situation after WW II was unique and Europe moved in the right direction by creating the predecessors of the European Union of today, leaving behind international politics of solely military power for a more peaceful way to handle inter-state differences of opinion and of interest via discussions and the search for consensus. There are still conflicts in the EU but they are settled around a table and not on battle fields. This narrative seems to be almost forgotten, since the national leaders of the Member States failed to deliver the positive narrative of the EU, which has led to stability and facilitations such as freedom of movement and limited currency exchanges. Interestingly, in other parts of the world the EU success story is not forgotten, but rather duplicated, e.g. the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the Union of South American Nations (USAN). That especially in the UK politicians failed to establish a positive EU narrative, has a lot to do with reasons which vary from island mentality, a feeling of superiority to a fear of Germany. The island mentality creates the image that Europe is the continent, to which Britain is only semi-detached. The 'angst' regarding Germany exists at the extreme right as much as at the extreme left. This feeling was enhanced in the era of Margaret Thatcher who had a deep anti-Germany feeling herself, allegedly resulting from her own family's wartime experiences. Moreover, there is an anti-German undercurrent in British political culture, originating from fear, envy and a failure to grasp modern Germany, which is the most stable, democratic and economically successful country in Europe, one might say it is 'the best Germany that has ever been in history'.

Germany

Whereas Belgium, the UK and France remember the Great War, Germany has just started to re-discover that part of its history. Still, most of the German collective history is overshadowed by WWII and its Nazi history. On the academic level discussions and publications on WWI exist, but they do not shape common knowledge, except maybe

recently Christopher Clark's bestseller 'The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914'. Whether more interest for WWI will be raised in Germany depends on families and their way of family history telling. A typical German story is that of Susanne Spröer's family, in particular that of her grandmother who was born in 1914 and experienced in her lifetime five different political systems: the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi regime, the Soviet occupation zone, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). In 1943 her daughter was born during the war, in which her husband and brother died. In 1956 she gave her daughter to a complete stranger to take her to West Berlin, while she crossed the green border by foot. For the German post WWII generation the question whether their family members had been Nazis overshadowed the family history before that.

After WWII Germans tried to forget about the horrors of what had happened. It took about 20 years until they started to deal with it. 100 years after its beginning it is finally possible to remember WWI at least at the official level. Chancellor Merkel attended the D-Day celebrations and the Ypres commemoration, the presidents of Germany and Poland will meet on 1 September and other events will be attended by High German officials. Unfortunately the German government had no long-term coordinated strategy how to approach the remembrance of WW I. Whether these first cautious steps are a starting point for a German debate about WWI or not is difficult to forecast, since it is not clear if German citizens have been sensitised enough. Media coverage and programmes could create awareness for the history of WWI and its repercussions on life of today, but it remains the task of the families to unlock their own histories beyond questions about grandpa's and grandma's involvement in the Nazi regime. It is also crucial not to look only through the national lens, but also to acknowledge different kinds of memories in other countries. This is exactly the attempt of many projects such as the documentary '[14 diaries](#)', which tries to generate that jigsaw puzzle of different national memories. Normally, films, series and documentaries are adjusted to the country where they are emitted. '14 diaries' creates one version for all to answer the purpose of mutual understanding.

Belgium

WWI plays a crucial role in Belgian's collective memory, because the country was invaded and much of the fighting took place on Belgium territory. It is in places like Ypres, where remembering and commemoration of WWI can take place. To understand how Belgium remembers WWI it is important to realise that Belgium is a divided country; remembering is different in the Walloon and the Flemish part; it also depends on the place in society one's ancestors come from and what part they played between 1914 and 1918. Many Flemish soldiers experienced unjust treatment in the Belgium army and therefore more likely shifted towards the Flemish Movement, which started directly after the war in the 1920s with the Flemish autonomy discourse. Others developed a more Belgium-oriented patriotism. Hence WWI is an important reference point and an integral part of Flemish identity. An unsolved issue of Flemish remembrance is the blind spot that during the Nazi occupation of Belgium large parts of the Flemish movement collaborated with the occupant. In many contexts political division lines today can be traced back to those divisions developed or deepened during WWI. It has also influenced the way projects of commemoration of the beginning of WWI were planned. A well-known aphorism says that 'Belgium is mini-Europe', in this respect it might be worthwhile to look

at Belgium's remembering as a 'test case' for a European way of remembering and how Belgians are able to bridge the divides between different regional and ideological groups.

On the federal level, the planning for the year 2014 started one or two years ago. There will be formal events in Liège, Brussels and Ypres. Most of the events and projects on the federal level are patriotic military-style events. French speaking Belgium focuses mainly on active participation of citizens and classic issues like remembering the losses in the war. Flanders is the most active part of Belgium in commemorating WWI. The planning of projects started as early as 2007-8, most of which emphasise the idea of peace. Even though Belgium is a multi-cultural and multi-lingual country, in terms of the remembrance of WWI Belgians are united in a strong affiliation with the idea of peace, superbly summarised in the slogan for the Royal Army Museum exhibition "remembering is keeping the peace". This idea has proven adequate to unite all strands of Belgium commemoration and could serve as an idea for a Europe-wide commemoration.

Lessons learned

The EU has been largely absent in the commemorations of WWI. There are good reasons against a EU commemoration, since the EU acts more as an apolitical institution than a nation-state with a history. In that sense the question whether an EU effort of commemoration is needed is debatable. On the one hand it might help to re-engage citizens with the EU project and it would enhance transnational cooperation. Formal events, such as the Centenary Event in Ypres are important; but projects of public history in terms of exhibitions and free museums, public debates with historians are the key to engage broader audiences with history. The importance of online forums (such as [Europeana](#)) and television documentaries should not be underestimated. These are the kind of projects the EU should engage with. How remembering is framed is important and officials and decision-makers should not shy away from complexity. They should trust people to grasp the complexity of history rather than patronising them with clear-cut and linear explanations. This is done exemplarily by the [In Flanders Fields Museum](#) in Ypres.

As we have seen in the recent European elections the dangerous nationalist ideas which have led to the horrors of two World Wars are still alive and sadly revive in times of crisis. It is therefore more than ever important to expand (exchange) programmes to create more international and European understanding to overcome nationalist ideologies. What we need is a history-sensitive approach and a more positive and prominent stance towards the roots of the EU as a peace project within and beyond Europe.