

A European Year of Remembrance: An Introduction

By Ilana Bet-EI

When Europe went to war in the summer of 1914 it was the most powerful continent in the world. Sitting at the centre of a global web of trade and finance, underscored by its colonial outreach and deadly military power, and enhanced by its focus on education, industry and culture, it was the richest – and most arrogant – region on earth. As such, it dragged many other states and peoples into its conflict, to an extent of it becoming a world war.

A century later, it is both the same – and different. Europe as a whole is still the richest region in the world, sitting at the centre of a global web of trade and finance, enhanced by its focus on education, culture and industry – now coupled with technology. However, following two world wars its colonial enterprises were thankfully abolished, and at the end of the Cold War most European states turned away from the military too, preferring to take the 'peace dividend'. Europe is now the pioneer of 'soft power', preferring influence to force, democratic institutions to colonies, welfare to war. And rather than arrogant, it has become introverted, practically self-obsessed, and largely disinterested in affairs outside its borders – other than if they affect trade and economic issues. Yet others actively seek its interest and association, from Ukraine and Georgia to many other states in its neighbourhood and far beyond.

In the wake of the global financial crisis and the ensuing eurozone crisis, there has emerged a perception of European decline as part of a greater shift of power between west and east. Of an impoverished and aging continent, weak in the face of its own history and ideals as well as on the international stage. But the perception does not necessarily correspond to reality. As noted above, Europe remains at the core of global financial and political affairs, and a source of immense influence and power. Moreover, it is united round a European Union that encompasses much of the continent and is largely at peace with itself – a very hard won status it is deeply reluctant to concede in any way. Indeed, contemporary Europe is actively uncomfortable with war – and that must be the most striking difference between Europe in 1914 and 2014.

The transitions from war to peace, from divisions and enmity to unification, from hard to soft power are the context of the European century that started in 1914, and thus of the arc of events encompassed in *A European Year of Remembrance*. And while the two world wars in the first decades of the century symbolized all the first halves of these shifts, then all the remaining events reflect both their other halves and the passage itself: the transition. They are all anniversaries marking the end of intolerant and intolerable states created and maintained by hard military power, and movement towards open states freely belonging to a union at peace with itself and the world. Thus forty years ago dictatorships ended in Greece and Portugal; twenty five years ago the Berlin Wall came down, the democratic revolutions in Poland,

Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria began, the Hungarian Republic was proclaimed and the Romanian revolution could be watched live on television. Then, ten years ago, in May 2004, the Eastern Enlargement of the EU took place, in which seven former Soviet republics plus Malta, Cyprus and Slovenia joined the union.

Each of these events was monumental in itself, but they are remarkable as a series in that together they reflect the milestones on the long path of transition to peace and unification through soft power: a fitting context to a year of commemoration, but not necessarily one agreed by all.

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Round anniversaries tend to be seductive, suggesting a meaning beyond the logic of a calendar date. In many ways this is true: the vantage point of a specific spot on the continuum of time forces a perspective on past events that allows for both new examination and relevance. Distance helps to remove the pain of experience, much as it allows for new insights, about the present as well as the past. The very act of looking back bridges the two points in time – but timing is everything. When this essay was commissioned in January 2014, demonstrators in Kiev’s Maidan Square inspired respect and admiration in their peaceful fight for democracy, and the right to associate with the EU and its values. By early April, when it was being written, approximately one hundred demonstrators and policemen had been killed, and Russia had annexed the Crimea and amassed tens of thousands of troops on the Ukrainian border. Within just a few short weeks the notions of Europe united, at peace and in need of no more than soft power were being challenged. Hard military power was wreaking havoc in its east, and Europe was not finding it easy to find a response.

It is not possible to understand the modern European aversion to hard power without going back to the starting point of this year of commemoration: the First World War – or the Great War as it is often known – of 1914-1918. All wars are shattering in their ability to wrench life from its daily, known pattern and impose an absolute alternative reality, which is often harsh and heart-breaking. However, the Great War was distinct in that for the first time it affected every level in Europe^{*}: the geopolitical, the physical landscape, the economic output, and above all the people. It was the first total war, and it imposed a total break with the past. For that reason historians see it as the start of the 20th century (the 19th having historically begun with the Congress of Vienna of 1815, which also imposed a completely new order on the continent and ultimately far beyond).

The numbers alone confound comprehension:[†] between the sides over 65 million men were mobilised over the four years. Of these, some 8.5 million were killed, 21 million wounded and some 7.7 million taken prisoner or else reported missing in action. For a continent that had been relatively peaceful since the Napoleonic wars, this was not so much a break with the past as a shattering of the principles of life. To

* Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Spain were neutral. However, over the four years daily life in these states also became affected by the war due to economic considerations.

† Overall casualties for both world wars are approximate, largely because statistics available for Russia then the USSR, China and various parts of the European colonial empires are not exact enough to allow for absolute numbers.

be clear, there had been wars and battles on the continent throughout the 19th century, from smaller ones such as the Battle of Solferino in 1859 – which was witnessed by one Henri Dunant, a Swiss businessman who happened upon it, and was so horrified by the casualties that he went on to found the organisation that became the Red Cross – to much larger and longer events such as the Crimean War of 1853-56, or the German wars of unification 1864-1871. However, while these and others were awful for the soldiers who fought them, they nonetheless tended to be much shorter and confined actions, which may have involved conscripted soldiers – especially later in the century – but on the whole they did not affect the lives of most civilians. Engagements still took place on defined battlefields between soldiers, while economic and most other aspects of life more or less continued in their known forms.

The Great War made a nonsense of this detachment. From the start most states put millions of men into the field – mostly civilians who in their youth had been conscripts, now called up to do their duty alongside the current crop of serving youth – and over the years each continued to drain its manpower resources, feeding the inexhaustible needs of their military machines.[‡] Women for the first time came out of the home *en masse* and replaced the men in the factories and the fields – building bombs and missiles, harvesting food, all to feed the insatiable killing machines. By the end of the war there was no normal life in the sense of that which preceded the opening shots in August 1914, and after the hostilities ended it took time for such life to resume.

In 1918 the Spanish Influenza raged across the continent, then far beyond, killing tens of millions of men, women and children, soldiers and civilians around the world. (The pandemic was thought to have started in the British training and staging camp in Étaples, France, from where it spread rapidly due to the proximity of troops within a civilian setting and the international nature of the war and its warring factions.) Following the Paris Conference, by mid-1919 the continent had been completely remade geopolitically – with Germany defeated and shorn of some lands, and the Ottoman, Habsburg and Tsarist empires having been destroyed and replaced with a host of successor states and, in the case of Russia, a Communist revolution. No less significantly, chaos and starvation loomed for at least two years after the war in most parts of Europe, until food and industrial production were rechanneled for civilian peaceful purposes. But above all, there was the pain. The pain of the wounded – the many millions who were mutilated by the war, and who were very visible in every street, village and city across the continent. And the pain of the dead, the invisible millions who were so tangible for so many – the mothers and fathers, the siblings and grandparents, and the young lovelorn women, many of which would probably never marry due to the shortage of men.

This outcome was a far cry from the expectations apparent in August 1914: the outbreak of war was greeted with cheers and exaltation across the continent. The long standing competition for power and hegemony between Germany and Britain and the two sets of alliances they had around them would finally be decided: after years of build-up, there would be a decisive fight and a champion would emerge. This was to be a glorious and heroic endeavour, in which men would prove their masculinity and patriotism by becoming warriors and fighting for their women and

[‡] Great Britain was the exception since at the start it still had a smaller professional army which it then augmented by volunteers and only resorted to conscription as of 1916. But volunteers or conscripts, these too were civilians converted into soldiers, and by the end of the war over five million men had joined the military, plus another three million from across the empire.

their nations. Above all it was to be decisive – and short; probably over by Christmas (1914), which is why so many men rushed to sign up in the first weeks and months. No-one wanted to miss out on the great adventure.

But then it all went horribly wrong. The opening stages may have been rapid, but the fast moving militaries on all fronts could not supply themselves at the same speed so got bogged down. The mass armies were armed to the teeth with mechanised weapons, such as automated machine guns, grenades and flame throwers that tore into the formations and the flesh of all soldiers, causing immense casualties to all. This was a far cry from the Romantic visions of knights bearing bows and arrows of medieval legend or even the dashing cavalry charges of a century before. This was trench warfare on the western front, and large scale brutal battles on the eastern front. Above all, these were log-jammed military situations that demanded a constant stream of men and materiel to feed them, often just to maintain the status quo.

1917 was the crucial turning point. First, because the US entered the conflict, on the side of the Allies, following the sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German submarine. It was also the year Russia collapsed and retreated into revolution, allowing the eastern front to effectively cease and come to some closure by early 1918. By this point the US forces were starting to pour into the western front, backing up the exhausted Allied troops – but it still took most of the rest of the year for a definitive victory to be attained, such as could end the war.

On 11 November, at 11:00, an Armistice was signed, four years and three months after hostilities began. It was a definitive victory for the Allies, but it was a far cry from any heroic adventure. If anything, it was a tragedy – a fact that contributed significantly to the way in which it was to be remembered, and forgotten.

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Once the initial shocks of the war had receded and normal civilian life slowly began to resume, it became clear there were gaping holes in many societies and states: those created by the absence of the millions of dead. At the same time, there were desperate attempts to forget the war and seek respite and recovery. And so a duality emerged: alongside new forms of expression that produced jazz, flappers and the great cultural output of the 'Roaring Twenties' or *les années folles* as they were known in French, mourning remained at the heart of life as a pervasive factor. And this overwhelming encounter with mass death drove remarkable endeavours of commemoration, such as had never been seen before. At a local level, memorials appeared in many cities, towns, villages and streets across the continent. In this way the personal was made public and shared: the losses of war became the glorious dead and a permanent fixture in daily life. At a national level, mass projects were commissioned: on the battlefields of the western front and many other theatres of the war, such as Italy or Gallipoli in Turkey, large cemeteries were constructed by specially created bodies in many of the former belligerent nations. Then as now, they are known in one way or another as war graves commissions. Whether the vast reaches of the cemetery in Verdun or the smaller ones in Mons or Ypres, these were and remain gardens of death and sacrifice. Each nation created its own distinct but uniform style which ran throughout all their cemeteries, with identical grave stones for all the fallen set in green grounds, with a main memorial structure either at the centre or at one end reflecting the sacrifice of the fallen and the gratitude of the nation. This was mass death made collective, palatable and restful.

The other national endeavour true to many states took place in capitals: large central memorials were erected, around which annual ceremonies of remembrance began to be enacted. Yet again, the personal pain of loss was brought into the public domain, focused around a day of collective mourning. No less significantly, by gathering together the individual losses, the sacrifice became collective: the glorious dead sacrificed themselves for the nation. Across the former combatant nations, it was a crucial forging of the relationship between people and state. In the states of the former Allied powers, the 11th of November was usually chosen as the national Memorial Day and effectively remains so today. This was not the case in Germany, which rejected the date as one of defeat – and as time went by, with a sense of grievance of it being an unjust defeat with even more unjustified terms, as set in the Versailles Treaty of 1919. Notwithstanding such sentiments, the passage of time also brought a recognition of the need to create a collective monument for the nearly 1.8 million men who fell in the war. Thus in 1931 an architect was commissioned to convert an existing building in the centre of Berlin, the Neue Wache, into a central memorial for the fallen of the war.

With the rise of the Nazis in 1933, the Neue Wache became increasingly associated with them and the Third Reich, as soldiers were regularly marched past the memorial, taking the salute. This remained the case throughout the war, until the building was severely damaged in the Battle of Berlin in 1945. Being situated in what became the Russian Sector of the city it subsequently remained in the GDR and as such was rebuilt and rededicated as a memorial to the victims of fascism and militarism. In this way the memorial, much like the First World War and its memories, became subsumed by the Second World War – which was hardly surprising. For just twenty five years after Europe had brought untold mass death upon itself, its empires and the US, it did so again in 1939, this time unleashing furies of murder and destruction previously unknown in the history of mankind, which spread far and wide across the globe.

Over 63 million people died in World War II (of which 15 million were in China and nearly 24 million were in the then USSR i.e. excluding most east European states, which suffered their own heavy losses, especially Poland in which 7 million perished). Of the overall total, 23.5 million were military deaths – an unfathomable statistic in itself; however, even more unfathomable is the fact that the balance, some 39.5 million, were civilians. Men, women, children and babies, in Europe and around many parts of the world, killed. As collateral damage – in their houses or shelters during aerial bombings and ground battles, or due to famine, disease and other horrors imposed by war. And on purpose, as a target or a war aim – many millions, everywhere, including six million European Jews exterminated in the Holocaust: in the face of shooting squads or in the gas chambers; at the end of a noose or on death marches; planned deaths executed by soldiers and collaborators who were there, seeing and often knowing the victims. In the First World War the people had rushed to the colours, fighting for their states in the biggest ever state on state war. In the Second World War, the people were called up again – but the states also turned on them: this was the first and biggest war of the state against the people.

World War II lasted nearly six years in Europe, and the untold mass death was accompanied by harsh occupation in many parts and immense destruction across the continent: much as civilians were the enemy and the targets, the battlefield had expanded to encompass everywhere, and everything. If the First World War saw the first iteration of total war, subjugating civilian life to the war, the Second World War saw its annihilation: there was no longer a distinction between the military and the civilian, the battle and the political war: total war had mutated into every area of life, and in many cases destroyed it. By 1945, when the unconditional surrender of

Germany was attained in Europe, the continent was largely destroyed – and divided. Hard power had reached its acme: for even the most hardened warrior, the prospect of a third iteration of total war seemed unthinkable and unpalatable.

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Post-war Europe was a divided continent, forced to be in confrontation. Many of the states created from the dissolution of the Russian and Habsburg empires at the end of the First World War were swallowed up by the Soviet empire, their sovereignty discarded and their statehood redefined as no more than satellites of the USSR. Geopolitics trumped geography, and lands that had for centuries been open to each other now found themselves on two sides of a largely impenetrable border running through Europe. This Iron Curtain that came down after the war became the context for a new form of hard power – one in which hardware was amassed and constantly upgraded, troops were trained, positioned and paraded, but mercifully no conflict took place. The introduction of nuclear weapons at the end of the war effectively ensured that: the danger of escalation had become too high. Deterrence thus replaced active destruction, but enmity and division between the two sides of the continent remained a fact – at least at the official level. As time went on and the years became decades, ideology and propaganda became an integral element of this cold war, which meant its underlying meaning mutated. While the nuclear tipped missiles, tanks and fighter jets remained poised to attack on both sides, the daily stuff of the war became increasingly focused upon the quality of life: which ideology and system could better provide it and how.

The western part of Europe chose democracy. It was a conscious choice, encouraged by the new undisputed leader of the bloc, the US – and initially paid for by its Marshall Plan. It was also an historic choice, not only within the context of the Cold War, but in its view of history: two world wars and thirty years of conflict, preceded by decades of deep enmity between Germany and France and complicated relationships of mistrust between others, suggested peace and democracy were the best paths to counter such violent trends. And, moreover, that unity would be the best way to achieve these ends – at least unity rather than rivalry regarding the issues that had caused most tensions: resources, markets and trade. The Coal and Steel Community established in 1951 was the framework that made this vision a reality and from it grew what we now know to be the European Union – a remarkable political achievement. For the first time ever, in Europe and elsewhere, states democratically decided to pool the resources that not only enabled war, but also held within them the ability to attain great riches. But no less remarkable was the transformation this measure enabled at every level of life, the personal as well as the political: through it peace delivered prosperity and democracy, to ever growing circles. For the success of this initial union quickly aroused the interest of other states around them – both those at liberty to choose and those bound to other interests. Soft power was beginning to emerge.

It is upon this background that we must understand the two revolutions in 1974 that brought an end to military dictatorships in Greece and Portugal. It was the people in both states that desired an end to oppression, who sought a democratic option: they sought to wrestle the state back to them. But it was also the knowledge that others in Europe had achieved this great aim: that states need not oppress the people – indeed, that states could serve the people, and that states could even democratically join together to ensure this outcome. As noted above, some amount of military force was used in Greece, but the Carnation Revolution in Portugal was largely peaceful,

hence the allusion to the flowers that were put into the barrels of rifles that were not fired. Significantly, the political course of both revolutions was not predestined: the allure of democracy was clear, but the Cold War was also a fact. For the west, including the nascent EU, the danger of either state being tempted somehow over to the Soviet Bloc was also a spur to ensuring the interests of the people in Portugal and Greece were served: through their evolving instruments of soft power they helped both states reform in the post-war west European image, and brought them alongside and then in to the European Community. This was a clear win for the people – and the west.

Neither the success of the peace and prosperity project in Western Europe, nor the abject failure of the mirror project in the Soviet Bloc, directly brought about the end of the Cold War. But both trajectories contributed significantly to the end of the confrontation: the growing disparity between the standard of living on both sides of the continent – which became increasingly obvious as communications evolved and penetrated the Iron Curtain – as well as the clear differences in the relationships between state and people eventually became overwhelming. As the economic and political abilities of the Soviet Union disintegrated and those of the west grew, it eventually took but the boldness of the people to demolish it. This happened across the Bloc, and in 1989 we saw the people of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary Bulgaria and Romania throw off the shackles of the post-war order and take back democracy. But in many ways the achievement would not have been possible without that most symbolic of events, that carried with it the Meta reality of the end of the division upon the continent: the breaking down of the Berlin Wall. That event, of November 1989, watched raptly by many in the west as well as the east, in which people started to demolish the bricks that had barred them from democracy and prosperity, and which effectively went unchallenged by the military in East Berlin, marked the point in which it became impossible to stop the tide of history. The Soviet Union was no more: the ideology behind it lost, as did the threat of hard power. The people of its former satellites and across its massive territories won.

The lure of democracy, peace and prosperity were undoubtedly crucial to the victory, but once it's reality was established it became clear that soft power had to be given an edge: here was a mass of states in a vacuum, no longer part of a bloc that no longer existed, but not of a level of economic or political evolution that enabled them to be part of the growing European club. The people had delivered revolutions, but now it was to the states to deliver the rest. The manner and means in which the European Community, then the European Union, developed the manner – and the money – to allow for this development, as well as the willingness and abilities of these states to do so, is a testimony to the potentials of soft power: in the right time, with the right tools, and the right amount of willingness on all sides, it can bring a level of achievement that is far greater than any weapon or political threat. Within the amazingly short period of fifteen years seven states that had previously been in the USSR, alongside three others, joined the EU: in this way they magnified each of their individual capabilities, and those of their peoples, far beyond any level dreamt of before. In so doing, the capabilities, influence and ultimately power of the EU were magnified to a degree unthinkable in the dark days of wars and hard power. That happened ten years ago, in 2004. And the success remains today, even after the eurozone crisis.

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A European Year of Remembrance is a fascinating concept – not least because of the events enshrined in it. The focus of this essay is upon the transitions from hard to

soft power implicit in the project, but that is not necessarily the only option. Memory is as much about what is excluded as that which is included – about what we choose not to remember and commemorate as well as what we choose to mark. To many in Europe, especially in the UK and France, the seventieth anniversary of the Normandy landings will be an event of great significance. As a military rather than political-military event it probably does not belong on the series chosen here, but many commemorative events are planned for June this year in and around Normandy. More significantly, it is a good example of how we, as societies and states, select our events and ideas to remember – and commemorate.

The two concepts are not synonymous. In order to afford a measure of clarity, I would suggest that within the context discussed here memory, in the sense of remembering, is about the events themselves: those who participated in them, those killed in the wars, the wounded, the battles, the barricades in revolutions, the breaking of the Berlin Wall. In short, it is about the past. Commemoration, on the other hand, is about the here and now: it is an expression of contemporary understanding of the past event, and at the same time a reflection of the meaning of the event in national and international life. In short, the content and manner of the commemoration is about the present. For example, when French President Francois Mitterrand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl met in Verdun cemetery in September 1984, and having laid wreaths reached out and held hands – they were commemorating both the Great War and its horrendous deaths on both sides, and in so doing they were also reflecting the passage of time and the reconciliation between France and Germany within a new Europe.

This year of European remembrance is essentially sparked by the centenary of the First World War: it was and remains the founding event of the twentieth century, and thus of our times. And its trajectory in memory and commemoration throughout that time tells us much about who we were, and who we have been. The intense efforts of commemoration in the interwar period, intended to alleviate the memories and convert the pain into collective sacrifice for the nation and the state, reflected both the acute pain caused by the losses of the massive war and the changing nature of the relationship between the people and the state. The overshadowing of the first war by the second was understandable, not only because of the harsh realities of war but because of its changing nature: in many parts it was the civilians, the people, who bore the brunt of the events – and it was them and their sacrifices that were remembered by those that survived, and commemorated hence after. The accompanying shift in relationship between people and state that this signified ensured that it remained the significant event – on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Without the Second World War there was no logic to the Cold War. Within this scheme, the First World War slowly assumed a new meaning, and commemorative status – as the cause of the second.

The fiftieth anniversary of the First World War was the starting event of this narrative, as younger generations took a new interest in it. However, these were generations born just before or during the Second World War, thus people imbued with the need to find a logic to the world in which they lived: of the Cold War, which resulted from the Second World War, which people came to believe happened because of the harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty which were imposed due to the horrors of the Great War. Such thinking, and the relative absence of commemoration that came with it, served the purposes of both sides in the Cold War, since it gave their ideologies substance – each side adapting it to their own purposes. As a result, the event remained languishing in the backwater of collective commemoration in most parts of Europe: the negative spark that had no reality in its own right, but which led to the disaster of the second.

The big transformation in the memorial fortunes of the Great War came in the 1980s, when a new generation of artists and academics in a number of states began to re-examine both the events themselves and the cultural output from it – which was immense. The First World War was the first literary war, and in most states also the first literate war, in which men of all ranks on all sides wrote diaries and letters, and the subsequent outpouring of literature – poetry, novels, memoirs and histories – was striking by any measure. The new generation of researchers and commentators no longer had any direct memories of the war, nor did their parents – but they could still call upon the dwindling survivors to evaluate their ideas and research findings. As a result, the First World War slowly started to be remade in the public mind across Europe as a startling event, not just a tragedy: a point in which Europe started on its new cultural century as well as its historical tragedy. Within this perspective, the first and second wars finally became separated – and the Great War came to be understood as a pivotal event in itself.

The unification of Europe as of the 1990s continued this trend: the successor states to the Russian and Habsburg empires finally came into their true statehood, which stemmed from the First World War and its aftermath. Germany was reunited, this time from a position of continental collectivity rather than a demand for hegemony. The First World War weaved its way through these events, in a manner both acknowledged and implicit. No leading politician speaking of the European project post 1989 could ignore the past, nor its point of departure. 1914-18 had become the logical starting point which ultimately led to a unified Europe within the European Union. No less significantly, it offered the perfect contrast between the brutality and apparent redundancy of hard power and the transforming and redeeming capabilities of soft power -- but without the horrendous weight of civilian deaths as evident in 1939-45. In European commemoration, it has become the ultimate redeeming event: a tragedy of hard power, a triumph of bravery and heroism, an example to avoid.

A European Year of Remembrance is about much more than the First World War, but it is also about its legacy. For above all, it is about the people of Europe: those who fought for their states in two wars, those who were killed by the states in the second war, those who were repressed by the USSR in the Cold War, those who demanded and attained the services of the state in the West after 1945, those who rose up against their oppressors in 1974 and as of 1989, those who came together in an enlarged union after 2004. The people of Europe are those who we are commemorating in this project.



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Ilana Bet-El's first book was *Conscripts: Lost Legions of the Great War* (1999). She has also co-authored two books with General Sir Rupert Smith: *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (2005; published under the name of General Smith), and more recently *Le Grand Désenchantement - Vivre À L'ère De L'insécurité* (2012). She has contributed editorials and comments to the *Guardian*, *Boston Globe*, and *The Wall Street Journal Europe*.