



The Centenary Commemorations of the Great War in Belgium

History and the Politics of Memory

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As the start of the centenary commemoration of the First World War (wwi) in 2014 drew closer, Belgium saw the rise of a bigger 'commemorative competition'. The different governments launched their own commemorative programmes, parallel to (and sometimes against) each other. In the slipstream of this, a huge commercial and business competition erupted in a struggle for funding and visitors. There was also an unprecedented funding of new academic wwi-research. This contribution first makes some remarks on this research, and then looks briefly at the commemorative and memorial policies. On the one hand, current wwi policies confirm (and reinforce) the differences in similar policies related to the Second World War. The narratives, as well as the moral or didactic categories, are clearly distinct. On the other hand however, there are some similarities to be found in the policy frameworks created after 1995. Some characteristics of such policy mechanisms are a more pro-active role (national) authorities adopt in the construction of memories, a strong interconnectedness between public and private interests and an underlying driving meta-narrative of a national duty to remember connected to the target of an emotional and active investment of each individual citizen.

De herdenkingen van 100 jaar Grote Oorlog in België. Geschiedenis en de herinneringspolitiek

In België ontstond in de aanloop naar de herdenking van de Eerste Wereldoorlog (wwi) in 2014 een grote 'herdenkingscompetitie'. De verschillende regeringen ontwikkelden hun eigen herdenkingsprogramma's naast (en soms tegen) elkaar. In de slipstream daarvan zagen we een grote zakelijk-commerciële concurrentieslag om subsidies en bezoekers en een ongekennde financiering van nieuw academisch

wwi-onderzoek. Deze bijdrage plaatst eerst enkele kanttekeningen bij dat academische onderzoek. Vervolgens gaat deze bijdrage kort in op de herdenkings- en herinneringspolitiek van de diverse overheden in België. Enerzijds bevestigt (en versterkt) de huidige wwi-politiek een aantal verschillen met de herdenkingspolitiek rond de Tweede Wereldoorlog. De narratieven alsook de morele of didactische categorieën liggen ver uiteen. Anderzijds echter, worden ook overeenkomsten zichtbaar. Die bevinden zich bij de beleidskaders die na 1995 geleidelijk zijn gecreëerd. Enkele kenmerken van die gelijklopende beleidsmechanismen zijn: een veel pro-actievere rol van (nationale) overheden in de herinneringsconstructie, een sterke vermenging van overheids- en zakelijke belangen en een onderliggend duwend meta-narratief van nationale herinneringsplicht gekoppeld aan het streefdoel van een emotionele en actieve investering van elke burger.

Memorial competition

The Belgian centenary commemorations of the First World War (wwi) are the largest commemorative event the country has ever seen, fiercely discussed by policy-makers and academics, fiercely celebrated by the rest of the population. What immediately stands out is the political nature of these discussions (and, in a certain sense, of the celebrations as well). The driving force behind the commemorations is memorial competition between the different governments that make up the federal state of Belgium. But competition also exists between museums and cultural actors, in the tourist business and even between certain municipalities.¹

The Flemish commemorative Action Plan of 2011 already showed great ambition, mainly in the domain of (international and national) tourism and international relations.² Large public investments were made in 'strategic projects' (for example the In Flanders Fields Museum and the Passchendaele Memorial Museum) as well individual local projects.³ The overarching master narrative of central Flemish policy was a simple one: branding Flanders as a global centre for international peace and reconciliation.

Partly motivated by a sense of competition, the Francophone Community followed suit. Two commemorative resolutions (15 December 2011 for the Walloon Region and 2 May 2012 for the Francophone Community) created a programme that rivalled the Flemish one in ambition,

1 'Yperiet zou beter Nieuwporiet heten', *De Morgen*, 9 November 2013; Fre Devos, 'Ontgoocheld en woest'. Koksijde grijpt naast subsidiepot "100 jaar Groote Oorlog" en overweegt om beslissing aan te vechten', *Westkustmagazine*, s.d.

2 Mélanie Bost and Chantal Kesteloot, 'Les commémorations du centenaire de la Première Guerre mondiale', *Courrier Hebdomadaire* 2235-2236 (2014).

3 In August 2014, Minister Bourgeois quoted the sum of €34 million. Bost and Kesteloot, 'Les commémorations', 31.

financial investment and nation-branding. Three obvious differences stood out. The first was that there was much less overt attention to the front experience.⁴ Second, the Francophone programme inscribed itself in a Belgian national narrative. Third, there was a stronger connection between the commemorative programme and academia.⁵

The Belgian state itself lacked cultural competencies – and even when it still had them as a unitary state, it was consistently weak in developing a central politics of memory. In this competitive context however, the Belgian government decided to act by launching its own separate commemorative programme (summer 2011). Lacking a Belgian ministry of culture, the ministry of defence received the political responsibility. The appointment of commissioner-general Paul Breyne (the former governor of East Flanders) as central coordinator (March 2012) set things in motion and on 7 March 2013 the Belgian parliament adopted its own commemorative resolution (under heavy protest from several of its Flemish nationalist members).⁶ Despite budgetary limitations this national Belgian programme did manage to create significant visibility in 2014, notably by integrating initiatives of the different communities, or simply by strategically using the historical Belgian framework connected to the Great War to its fullest potential (examples were the big opening ceremony in Liège on 4 August 2014 with delegations from 83 countries, the ceremony in Ieper and Nieuwpoort on 28 October 2014; there is also a grand closing ceremony planned for 11 November 2018 in Brussels).

All of this meant that by 2014 not one, but three national commemoration programmes were underway in Belgium (not counting the bilingual programme of the Brussels Capital Region). Unsurprisingly, all of this provoked political debate and criticism, the latter initially aimed at the Flemish government for instrumentalising the Great War for petty nation-branding.⁷ Admittedly, the Flemish government did make things easy for its critics. In the preparatory phase it was rather assertive, and dogmatically ignored the Belgian political dimension (and the Belgian historical framework of WWI). It sought international cooperation with over fifty states from which the Belgian state was conspicuously absent. This was ultimately

4 Comines-Warneton was the only Walloon part of the Western front; a Centre of Interpretation was launched here called 'Plugstreet 14-18 Experience'.

5 Professor Laurence Van Ypersele (Université Catholique de Louvain) presided over the preparatory working group and became lead coordinator of the commemoration programme. The Universities of Namur and Louvain La Neuve were involved in educational projects. The regional ministry of research financed three PhD

research projects. The difference in academic involvement in the commemorations in each linguistic community is a structural issue. Nico Wouters, "'Poor Little Belgium?': Flemish- and French-Language Politics of Memory (2014-2018)", *Journal of Belgian History* XLII:4 (2012) 192-199.

6 Bost and Kesteloot, 'Les commémorations', 21-22.

7 Nico Wouters, 'Le cavalier seul de la Flandre', *La Revue Nouvelle* 8 (2014) 42-46.

counterproductive for Flanders itself. The Flemish government was not harmed by the criticism from historians or from the Francophone community, but it had to bow before international protests.⁸ The confident go-it-alone attitude of Flanders before 2014 undermined its international position (and – ironically – its own master narrative of international peace and reconciliation, of which ‘intercultural dialogue’ was one explicit element).

In short, the centenary commemorations created unprecedented struggles over memory in Belgium. Where does this leave the history of the Great War and its historians? I will make two brief observations, firstly on the place of academic historians in the commemorations and secondly on dominant narrative(s) and politics of memory.

Poor little historians

Initially, Belgian academics took a critical position regarding the commemorations (albeit mainly the Flemish programme).⁹ Their main points of criticism were the lack of involvement of academic experts in policy choices, the lack of sufficient funding for fundamental research (both points raised against Flanders and later also against Belgium)¹⁰ and the ahistorical nature of certain dominant political and policy narratives. One example of the latter is the criticism (by leading WWI historians Sophie De Schaepdrijver and Laurence Van Ypersele) of the dominant (Flemish) narrative of the ‘absurd’ or ‘pointless’ war, arguing that for Belgium the war against the German aggressor was anything but pointless, instead representing what we would now call a ‘just war’.¹¹

8 See one echo of this in: ‘A Century Later, New Rifts flare over World War I: Modern-Day Tensions emerge across Europe over how to Commemorate Great War’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 March 2015. This was best illustrated by the ‘In Flanders Fields Declaration’, an initiative meant to spearhead Flanders’ diplomatic strategy. After the Flemish refusal to include Belgium in this declaration had provoked international protest, the Flemish government was forced to cooperate with Belgium in 2013. On 6 January 2015, Flemish Premier Geert Bourgeois admitted before the Flemish parliament that the Declaration initiative would have to be abandoned. The reason cited was that the national commemorative approaches of all the different countries involved

were simply too different. The Flemish Premier also said that several countries had expressed the opinion that ‘no more war’ was far too absolute a statement. For the parliamentary commission meeting of 6 January 2015, see: <https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/commissies/commissievergaderingen/943628/verslag/945424>.

9 Birgit Leenknecht, *Een klaprozenexplosie. Analyse van de kritieken van historici op 100 jaar Grote Oorlog in Vlaanderen, 2014-18* (Master Public History University of Amsterdam 2014).

10 Amongst others: ‘Hou historici niet buiten de deur’, *Knack* 7 (18 February 2015).

11 To support her argument, she drew parallels with current-day ‘just wars’. ‘Als morgen de salafisten hier binnenvallen, laten we hen dan begaan?’, *Knack* 45 (7 November 2013).



▲
 The Dutch PhD researcher Rose Spijkerman (UGent/Universit  Catholique de Louvain) before the poster of her research on notions of honour and shame among the Belgian military during the First World War. With this poster, drs. Spijkerman won the first prize of the WWI-poster session during the 'War and Fatherland' conference in the Egmont Palace in Brussels (October 2015). No less than 34 PhD researchers are currently conducting research on WWI in Belgium. Private Collection CEGESOMA Brussels.

Academics also organised more general debates, reflecting on their position within such commemorative events. These debates never really went beyond confirming different positions. A good example was the closing roundtable on the ‘Belgian Day of Contemporary History’ on 9 May 2014 at the University of Antwerp, where in particular Pieter Lagrou (*Université Libre de Bruxelles*) and Laurence Van Ypersele (*Université Catholique de Louvain*) defended opposite viewpoints (the principle of academic autonomy vs. the principle of pragmatic active involvement). The debates never homed in on the potential mutual ground between these two opposite positions or unpacked the concrete elements that form part of this debate on principles.

Everyday commemorative reality in 2014 and beyond shows a nuanced image of the role of historians. On the one hand, academic historians do suffer from a certain public invisibility. Academic debates went by largely unnoticed by the broader public. The first centenary year of 2014 created a powerful combined cultural agency of books, large and small exhibitions, remembrance ceremonies, (digital) heritage projects, tv series and documentaries, all kinds of tourism-based events, a (very successful) musical, and the unavoidable wwi beer and chocolates.¹² Academic historians were never a dominant voice. The majority of books, including the most visible and/or influential among them, even came from non-academics.¹³

On the other hand, academic historians are present and active. Some of them are visible and in the public eye (Sophie De Schaepdrijver hosted a documentary series on Flemish national tv). They act as experts in certain larger (local) projects such as exhibitions. They have a back-office job in project-evaluation committees, notably on the Belgian level. Some have played an active role in commemoration policies (Laurence Van Ypersele in Francophone Belgium most notably).

Even more essentially, academia was able to launch an impressive collective research effort. In 2016, no fewer than 34 young historians are conducting doctoral level research on Belgian wwi history. In some cases funding for this came from specific wwi calls or funding schemes, but even in the other cases it was the commemorative context that created the impetus for research proposals to be launched and funding to be approved.¹⁴ So under

12 Tyne Cot military cemetery in Zonnebeke attracted nearly 650,000 visitors in 2014 (an increase of eighty percent relative to 2013) and the In Flanders Fields museum in Ypres attracted 500,000 visitors (sixty-five percent more visitors relative to 2013). Tourist revenues in West-Flanders in that year rose ninety-two percent compared to 2013. *Flanders Today*, 6 April 2015; ‘Herdenkingstoerisme levert Westhoek 76,3 miljoen euro omzet op’, *De Standaard*, 7 April 2015.

13 To name just one influential and highly successful non-academic book: Stefan Hertmans, *Oorlog en terpentijn* (Amsterdam 2013).

14 This is notably the case for the MEMEX research network (five researchers) coordinated by Laurence Van Ypersele, the Great War from Below research network (four researchers) coordinated by the author (both networks are funded by the Belgian federal Science Policy Level) and the three researchers funded by the Francophone community.

the radar of the commemorative machine, academic historians have used the context to push forward their own impressive (and unprecedented) research agenda.

However, have they really done so? The impact of this research as well as its autonomy remains open to debate. While it is possible to detect certain schools and trends of research into WWI before 2014, the current field is so diverse that it is not entirely clear where pre-2014 research trends have gone now and whether we are experiencing a rupture with or a reinforcement of those research trends. Will this research have a broader social impact? Most of its results will reach a wider audience after 2018, when public interest might arguably have shifted to other domains. There is also the issue of the so-called ‘autonomy’ of the academic agenda *vis-à-vis* the commemorations. No academic research is ever autonomous of the social context in which it emerges, but here the direct correlation between context and research is stronger than usual (at least in the Belgian context). It is noteworthy that most of the current fundamental historical research is national in its orientation. Despite the fact transnational perspectives were on the rise in pre-2014 Belgian WWI-research, current fundamental research has now (temporarily?) re-focused on the Belgian framework. One might hypothesise that research funding opportunities within any strong national commemorative context will tend to favour national issues and disinclined to fund too many transnational or international research subjects. The absence of political history – or history that explicitly tackles the Flemish-Belgian divide in the historical perspective of WWI – is another remarkable issue. Between the 1970s and 1990s this topic drove the majority of WWI-research.¹⁵ These observations are by no means a negative appreciation of ongoing WWI-research. The point is that the commemorative context most likely had a strong influence on the content of the research agenda – the choices for research topics – and has therefore steered Belgian WWI research in a different direction after 2014. For the moment, the centenary seems to leave academic historians as one of many actors that thrive in their closed academic sphere but hardly influence national historical consciousness.

States and politics of memory

The second observation concerns the politics of memory and the dominant narratives in this commemoration. In theory, one would assume that each state-sponsored national commemoration at least starts with an underlying master narrative. It is clear that current Belgian reality is more complex. Different types of actors, as well as governmental levels,

15 Nico Wouters, ‘Historiography 1918-Today (Belgium)’, in: Ute Daniel e.a. (eds.), 1914-1918-

online: *International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (Berlijn 2014) DOI 10.151463/1e1418.10498.

interfere, seemingly creating a multitude of competing narratives. This lack of a dominant narrative appears to be confirmed by local realities.¹⁶ Every Belgian village or town has its own First World War commemoration activities, mostly built around specific elements of local WWI history. This creates an obvious divergence in themes but also in commemorative practices. Some localities rely on traditional (military) and historical tropes to commemorate, continuing the older and traditional narratives of national defeat and victimhood. Other towns tend to go for more innovative and artistic interpretations or try to use history to address more general, current issues.¹⁷ This commemorative diversity creates certain contradictions. One obvious contradiction is that between the creation of immersive and even aesthetically pleasing spectacles versus the narrative of the Great War as the absolute horror of industrial slaughter. The other most obvious contradiction is that between the competing policies of commemoration of the different national levels (especially Belgium and Flanders).

All these tensions however, seem to evaporate on the local level. There is certainly no tension between a Belgian and Flemish narrative on that level. Divergent and even contradictory trends can easily co-exist in this local memorial landscape. The local horizon itself is simply dominant. Even large national events are often rooted in a prominent local historic specificity – the events around the ‘martyred cities’ (Dinant, Leuven etc.), the opening national ceremony in Liège, the bridges event in Antwerp (recreating the pontoon bridges over the River Scheldt on 3-5 October 2014), the Light Front event (17 October 2014, 8400 torches illuminating the Westhoek frontline).

Another common trend – which might be considered as some kind of common narrative – is that of the common man (or woman or child) caught up in the destruction of an incomprehensible and ultimately absurd total war. Connected to this is a dominant preference in many projects to aim towards personal identification of audiences. The latter is done through the use of emotionally immersive techniques (scenography in exhibitions, music, light,

16 Mélanie Bost, *Le centenaire de la Grande Guerre en Belgique: Tour d'horizon des projets commémoratifs* (Unpublished Report, CEGESOMA, Brussels February 2014). www.cegesoma.be/docs/media/Accueil/MB_commemorations_texte_long.pdf.

17 The exhibition *Ravaged* (March-September 2014 in Museum M in Leuven) used the destruction of the Leuven library in 1914 as the stepping stone for a more general reflection on the fate

of cultural and artistic heritage during war and conflict. The exhibition *Shock! 1914* (September 2014-February 2015 in the Royal Library of Belgium) reflected on the role of the media in war. Border communities offer attention to the issue of Belgian refugees. In some cases, explicit parallels with current day refugee problems are drawn.

and actors in films and documentaries), the use of individual life stories or the use of active physical participation of audiences (re-enactment for example, or active participation in tourist attractions).¹⁸ Most projects want to evoke basic emotional experiences among participants and spectators, thereby launching a process of personal identification. This approach of identification is mostly a continuation and reinforcement of the most essential, traditional core-narrative of WWI commemorations, namely the pacifist one.

The older difference with the classic core-narrative of WWII therefore remains. Unlike the narrative of the ‘incomprehensible and absurd’ nature of the First World War, the Second World War remains the emblematic example of the ‘necessary war’ against the ultimate evil. This is not only simply because WWII was an ideological war and WWI was not (at least not initially). Another factor is that the old debate on the causes – and therefore the political or moral responsibilities – for the outbreak of WWI also remains unresolved (it flared up again briefly, for example after Christopher Clark’s 2012 book).¹⁹ Clear moral categories (right and wrong) still dominate WWII memories, but for WWI – with former belligerents joined by the unifying experience of blind mass slaughter and with a blundering Kaiser instead of a Hitler-figure – ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ have lost much of their use as clear political or didactic categories.

Although WWI and WWII narratives clearly differ, I would like to argue that an underlying commonality does exist in terms of the broader commemorative context, in particular regarding the (self-proclaimed) role of states. The legal commemorative context of the Centenary in Belgium first emerged as dominant during the 1990s. The national commemorations of the fifty-year anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 1995 marked a turning point.²⁰ One element of this turning point was that the (newly created) governmental levels in Belgium considered it to be a political imperative to actively steer and create memories, much more than the ‘old’ Belgian state had ever done. In both Flanders and the Francophone community, legislative confirmation of this came in 2009: with the creation of the Special Forum for Memory Education in Flanders and the Memory Decree of the Francophone community.

In the 1990s and 2000s, all of this was centred mostly on the classic human rights narratives directly tied to WWII. The differences between the World War narratives, however, should not blind us to the fact that the

18 ‘Herdenking WOI mag geen Vlaamse kermis zijn. Paul Breyne trekt van leer tegen commerciële herdenking’, *Nieuwsblad*, 9 March 2013; ‘Herdenkingstoerisme levert Westhoek 76,3 miljoen euro omzet op’, *De Standaard*, 7 April 2015.

19 Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London 2012).

20 Nevertheless it must be noted that this paradigm shift occurred much earlier in classrooms and educational programmes, partly under the influence of UNESCO. See: Tessa Lobbes, *Verleden zonder stof. De gedaanten van het heden in het Belgische geschiedenisonderwijs (1945-1989)* (Ghent 2013).

various WWI commemorative programmes in Belgium in fact are a practical application of this new legal and political memorial context. The main commonality is that of a state-imposed 'duty to remember' for populations, but also the self-imposed duty by governments and states actively to take a lead in this remembrance. Although the specific narratives will obviously differ (depending on the historic anniversary), common mechanisms occur: a strong synergy between state policies and the private sector, the attempt to impose a central narrative connecting the political and institutional state with the nation, and an underlying moral address to members of this nation to participate and feel personally involved. This moral duty to remember creates seamless policy connections between WWI and WWII memories. Just one practical example is *Démocratie ou Barbarie*. This policy cell for the Francophone community was created in 1994 and upgraded after the Memory Decree of 2009, mainly to coordinate peace education activities revolving around WWII narratives. In 2014 however, the task of offering support in coordinating WWI commemorations was added to its remit without any objections or contradictions. This policy commonality also explains why, in both Francophone and Flemish policy, even specific WWI narratives are easily translated into generic values that are ultimately specific translations of human rights values: (international) reconciliation, victim reparations and recognition, intercultural dialogue, democratic and civic education. On the surface, the three national programmes in Belgium use different narratives, but in order to reinforce their specific national identity, the three governments use generic and interchangeable underlying values.

We know very little about the actual reception or outcome of these state politics. Suffice to say that they do not always seem to have the intended outcome in terms of Flemish or Francophone nation-branding.²¹ Paradoxically – and largely by accident – the Belgian level seems to come out of the centenary relatively strong. First, within this multitude of actors and narratives, the most basic historical framework simply emerges as a dominant anchor point, and with regard to WWI, that is still a Belgian historical framework. Second, the attempt to apply generic underlying 'human rights values' to WWI is simply not very convincing. In this case, these commemorations have appeared fairly immune to all too evident political steering.

21 Within memory studies we still tend to examine the elitist construction of memories from above rather than the way these policies are actually received and perceived by local populations.

Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory* 41 (2002) 179-197.
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