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GREAT WAR AND THE DIVISION OF IRELAND:
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This paper will briefly explore the history and current state of commemoration of the First World War in Europe. It will suggest that the scale of death in the Great War made it the seminal experience of mass remembrance and commemoration for many, though not all, European societies because it democratized sacrifice in the name of the nation-state. Whether it was possible to turn such commemoration away from national self-affirmation to the goal of reconciliation between former enemies became a critical issue. In this sense the commemoration of the Great War (with its achievements and its failures) speaks to one form of commemoration in contemporary Europe, that of nation-states and their shared histories of conflict.

However, other, thornier cases of shared history emerged in the twentieth century, producing different types of commemoration. One was that exemplified by the Holocaust, in which no redemptive ideal of sacrifice is possible, but only the commemoration of victims of a massive repudiation of international human rights. Another was the Civil War in which the defeated side was forced to repudiate any public expression of its memory in order to survive. In the case of Spain, this led after the fall of Franco to the “pact of silence” by which reconciliation was sought on the basis of official commemorative amnesia and the building of a common future.

In the run-up to a decade of commemoration (2012-2023) of the shared histories of the founding crisis of the twentieth century in Ireland, Europe and beyond, Europe itself offers an unrivalled terrain for reflection of the modes and functions of commemoration.

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People in Ireland, north and south, are already starting to think about how we should commemorate the centenary of a sequence of events that runs from the Solemn League and Covenant Pledge of 1912 in Ulster (which made it clear that there would be no smooth path to Home Rule and began the arming of Ireland) through the Great War and the Rising to the War of Independence, Partition and the Civil War. Lest we think this a uniquely Irish span, it’s worth recalling that the two Balkan Wars of 1912-13 were the violent curtain raisers to the Great War and that the bitter war between Greece and Turkey did not finish until 1923, with the birth of the modern Turkish Republic. Anyone south east of Sarajevo can also look forward to a decade of centenary commemoration—should they want to. More generally, the question of how Ireland’s commemoration will relate to the broader centenary of the war makes it worth reflecting on just what the commemoration of the Great War has meant in the past and means today in different parts of the continent.

The obvious starting point is to ask what commemoration is and what it does. There is, at root, a deep human impulse to remember the past. A society without some mechanism for collectively recalling its past and assigning it value and meaning is as unthinkable as a functioning individual with permanent memory loss. Mythology and religion testify to this since both reside on the commemoration of past events, real or supposed. As modern societies since the Renaissance have accorded more and more weight to human agency, so commemorating events in the historical past has grown more important. Dynastic jubilees, centenaries of cities and universities, anniversaries of military victories (or defeats) and revolutions all served this purpose because they were identified with a cause or identity, because they provided an occasion for evaluating the passage of time and things achieved or because they were seen as a turning-point, a pathway to the present. The nineteenth century was an age of commemoration. We only have to think of the centenary of the Rising of 1798 (the crosses still dot our landscape) or the growing importance of the 12th July for a popular Ulster Unionism.

This provides the clue to the significance of commemorations of the First World War—which both fitted this pattern and also subverted it. The fundamental historical significance of the Great War was that it marked the triumph of the nation-state as the organizing principle of politics and political identity in Europe (just as World War Two would do for much of the colonial world, leading to rapid decolonization). But it did so at a huge, unprecedented cost. For the Great War was the world’s initiation into mass industrialized warfare, and this proved traumatic for many European societies and for the colonies caught up with them. Edwardian society was already one like our own in which the worst scourges of mortality had been mastered and the old normally died before the young. Now the logic of progress was reversed on a vast scale. Freud (who had two sons and a son-in-law at the front) noted in an es-
say written in 1915 that where pre-war society had grown unused to death, now: “Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it. People really die; and no longer one by one, but many, often tens of thousands, in a single day”. He concluded that this strained the process of mourning and challenged assumptions as to the role and meaning of death.

This explains why the First World War provided the template, or at least a powerful source, for one register of commemoration down to the present—what I will call the national register. This took place within a national framework, since the nation-states that characterize Europe today achieved something like their definitive form through the war. It did so through mass participation, since it was based on huge armies of citizen soldiers, and also through enormous suffering and a scale of violence that always raised the nagging doubt as to whether the outcome was truly worth the sacrifice. And it was precisely “sacrifice”—not the sacrifice of captains and kings but of ordinary soldiers—that proved central to commemoration of the conflict as it unfolded between the wars. The so-called “victors” elaborated a national ritual that has lasted to the present. At its heart in London and Paris were the dead and the missing, who were evoked by the cenotaph (or empty grave), the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the two minutes’ silence—all of them invented in 1919-1920.

I do not claim that there was no precedent. Probably the first modern statesman to understand that mass sacrifice by the ordinary soldier potentially transformed the nature and meaning of the national community was Abraham Lincoln. In his terse and celebrated speech on the battlefield of Gettysburg in 1863 he declared that: “We have come to dedicate a portion of [this] field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that [the] nation might live”. But Europeans were not noted in the nineteenth century for seeing the shape of the future in America and they invented their own version of this equation through the Great War. We can get a sense of just what this meant, and how un-triumphant and non-militaristic it made commemorations of the Great War, from the report in the Manchester Guardian of Armistice Day 1920, the first to observe the silence.

The first stroke of eleven produced a magical effect. The tram cars glided into stillness, motors ceased to cough and fume and stopped dead, and the mighty-limbed dray horses hunched back upon their loads and stopped also. Someone took off his hat, and with a nervous hesitancy the rest of the men bowed their heads. Here and there an old soldier could be detected slipping unconsciously into the posture of “attention”. An elderly woman wiped her eyes, and the man beside her looked white and stern. Everyone stood very still. The hush deepened. It had spread over the whole city and become so pronounced as to impress one with a sense of audibility. It was a silence which was almost pain. And the spirit of memory brooded over it all.

Of course, it was not like this everywhere. But the exceptions prove the rule. Because the Great War not only marked the triumph of the nation-state in Europe but was also the crucible in which the ideological conflict between democracy, communism and fascism was forged, Bolshevik Russia dismissed the war as one of imperialism. There was no commemoration of the two million Russian war-dead in a state whose founding event was the bloodless coup of November 1917, and this has remained the case. Only in émigré White Russian circles was the Great War
officially recalled, and then as a lost cause. But when the Soviet regime found its real legitimization in the “Great Patriotic War” against Nazi Germany in 1941-45, the ceremonial and message of national sacrifice that it adopted were very close to those of Britain and France after the Great War—with tombs of unknown soldiers, local war memorials and a national ritual. This continues to function today, in Putin’s Russia, as shown by the sixty-fifth anniversary commemorations of VE Day in Moscow in May of this year. Fascism, on the other hand, could not ignore the Great War. But since Fascism in both Germany and Italy emerged from defeat (real or perceived), it proved impossible to achieve a national consensus in either country on what the war had meant. Mussolini and Hitler mobilized the capital of sacrifice locked in the figure of the fallen soldier and used a heroic image of the front warrior in order to fight a new and even more terrible war.

This does not mean, however, that remembrance of the Great War remained in the straightjacket of a purely national symbolism. I have already suggested that the scale of death and “sacrifice” meant that the horror of the war was never far from its retrospective meaning. As after all conflicts, reconciliation between erstwhile opponents was part of the process of building peace—of what elsewhere I have called “cultural demobilization”. This term describes the process by which former enemies dismantle the passions and hatreds of wartime in order to find a common measure of accord, most typically in agreeing that the real enemy is war itself and resolving never to return to it. This requires the sacrifice of the war dead to be reinvested not just in a national identity but also in something that transcends it. When Great War veterans, without necessarily repudiating what they had done and been through, talked about “la der des der”—“the last of the last”, “the war to end all wars”—they meant exactly this.

Let me illustrate the process by quoting briefly from a speech—famous at the time—made by the French Foreign Minister, Aristide Briand, to welcome his counterpart, Gustav Stresemann, as Germany took its seat in the League of Nations in October 1926. Having declared it to be almost miraculous that “barely a few years after the most frightful war that has ever convulsed the world, when the battlefields are still almost damp with blood, the same peoples […] should affirm their common desire to collaborate in the work of universal peace”, Briand addressed the German delegates directly on the issue of the war dead and national sacrifice.

Our peoples, he said, have no need to prove anything to each other regarding their vigour or heroism. Both have shown heroism on the field of battle, both have reaped an ample harvest of glory in combat. Henceforth, they can seek successes in other fields.¹

In effect, Briand was applying what we might call “parity of esteem” in order to recognize the Germans as equals and partners and thus no longer the enemy. He proposed that each side should embrace peace but without rejecting its own cause or

the martial virility with which it had fought for it. In this way they would collaborate against the new enemy—war itself.

We know that Briand and Stresemann failed, and that the Fascist cult of revenge and celebration of violence to which I have already referred triumphed in the 1930s. But it is not unimportant that Briand and Stresemann were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1926 or that Briand (with Stresemann’s approval) made the first proposal for a European Union in 1929. The point is that the national register of memory and commemoration, which was redefined for many European countries by the Great War, could be used precisely for attempts at reconciliation between the antagonists, and could supply a form of commemorative ritual that expressed this. If there is anywhere in Europe today where this remains the case it is Verdun. Already in 1936, ten thousand French and German veterans met at the ossuary (or charnel house) of Douaumont, which is the sacred centerpiece of the battlefield, and, to the backdrop of searchlights stabbing the night sky, swore a solemn oath to preserve peace between their two peoples. Verdun became the symbolic site of Franco-German reconciliation after the Second World War and remains so today. One thinks of the touching image of Chancellor Kohl and President Mitterand in 1984 holding hands and contemplating the white crosses that seem to stretch into infinity.

The process by which a national register of memory and commemoration is modified in order to accommodate reconciliation with former enemies has a much wider significance. It applies to other wars and other conflicts. Usually it requires not just a willingness to reconsider in relative terms causes that were once held to be absolute but also actively to seek out the ambiguities of the past. An excellent example concerning the Great War itself is provided by the Island of Ireland Peace Tower at Mesen/Messines, where the 16th (Irish) and 36th (Ulster) Divisions fought alongside each other in 1917, and more generally by the willingness in both parts of our country to recognize the complexities of Ireland’s relationship to the Great War. This was shown by the official ceremony in the Republic to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme in 2006, in a deliberate parallel to the commemoration of the Easter Rising.

Yet in general the memory of the Great War and its commemorative practices in the different countries involved have remained firmly locked in the national framework. This is perhaps not surprising in view of what I have said about the war’s seminal role in consolidating the nation-state through violence and sacrifice. But it makes the result at the European level very uneven. In Britain and France, for slightly different reasons, the Great War remains hugely significant. In part this is because the Second World War, though just as fundamental an experience, resulted in fewer military dead, so that the Great War still stands for the destructive futility of war in general—the "pity" that Wilfred Owen made the subject of his poetry before he was killed in November 1918, and which is undoubtedly how British opinion now understands the conflict. Germany, by contrast, experienced far greater trauma in the Second World War. The conflict was more lethal for Germany since, unlike the First World War, it was largely fought in Eastern Europe and Russia, and it raised issues of meaning that could not be resolved by negotiating the national register of memory with former enemies. The Holocaust was foremost among these issues. Though
omnipresent in German memory down to 1939, the First World War now arouses little interest and no commemoration (11th November in the Rhineland is the start of Carnival).

Eastern Europe, too, is more preoccupied by the devastation of the Second World War, a trauma that it has only been possible to explore fully since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Communism. Moreover, if many nation-states (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland) were formed as a result of the Great War, by definition they did not participate in it. Yet the multi-national dynastic empires of which they were part (Tsarist Russia, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Turkey) vanished with the conflict, so that no state has had the responsibility for commemorating what was a seminal experience for the eastern part of the continent, or actively pursuing research into it. Ever since I tried in vain to get Polish colleagues interested in a European conference on the military dead of the Great War, I have summed this up as the Polish paradox. In a country that was split between three empires (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia), in whose opposing armies three and half million Poles fought and nearly 400,000 died, whose territory was the cockpit of the Eastern Front and whose newly independent Republic became the custodian of the post-war cemeteries, the First World War, according to a leading Polish historian, is today a “forgotten war”.

The vicissitudes of the national framework of remembrance result in another kind of paradox. Historians in the last fifteen years have rediscovered many aspects of the Great War. These include the suffering of civilians subject to occupation, forced labour, near starvation, massacre and genocide. Yet none of these fits easily into the national register of commemoration or accords with the sacrificial figure of the soldier. A good example is the deliberate extermination of the Ottoman Armenians by the radical nationalist Young Turks who ran the Ottoman war effort. Most historians now recognize this as genocide. Yet genocide is defined by an entirely different moral and commemorative register, one of international human rights and crimes against humanity. It is a universal scale that only became widely accepted in Europe after the Second World in response to the Holocaust. Its emblematic figure is not the sacrificial soldier but the victim of crimes that have no conceivable redemptive quality. If there is a European (as opposed to national) commemorative tradition regarding the wars of the twentieth century, I would suggest that it is to be found here, in international human rights and the victims who testify to the horror of any regime not based on such rights. The Holocaust, not the Great War or even the Second World War, is now the bedrock of this European remembrance of the past and the war in Bosnia (and elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s) was its stark reminder.

Ironically, it is hard to commemorate aspects of the First World War that better suit this commemorative register in these same terms—because, unlike national memory, they are not negotiable. That is why successive Turkish governments so resent the call to address the genocide, because it means acknowledging the unilateral responsibility of an earlier Turkish state for a massive crime against humanity, rather than recognition of an Armenian “sacrifice” that is offset by Ottoman Turkey’s own wartime suffering. It is also why it is hard to find a symbolic space in which to ad-
dress the issue. In April, I tried to interest the Dublin media in this question when President McAleese went to Gallipoli to pay tribute to the Turkish war dead and the previously ignored 3,000 Irish soldiers who died in that campaign. This was a good example of the negotiable nature of national memories when addressing past conflict. Yet when I tried to point out that in the time-span of the Gallipoli campaign (April-December 1915) and not unrelated to it, about one million Armenians had perished in the genocide (that is, more than the military dead of the British Empire for the entire war), there was no interest. It was as if the commemorative code for dealing with it was so different that the two events, Gallipoli and the genocide, could not be related to each other.

Where does this leave European commemoration of the centennial cycle of the Great War? The pessimist in me says that this will largely occur in the national framework which has always been its natural home, and that where the war was never part of a national memory, or has ceased be so (as in Germany), little will happen beyond the odd museum exhibition and TV series. The optimist in me says that the ability of the national commemorative register to adopt new perspectives in the interests of reconciliation and a deeper understanding of the past may mean that the wider significance of what by its very nature was a European and global event can be taken into account as part of national remembrance. The rank utopian in me dares to imagine that the European Union might take responsibility for commemorating the centenary of the Great War since it exemplifies the challenge of how to help Europeans think in European terms about a recent past that they have lived through nationally. But if it was only the optimist who was to win out, what better place to start than in Ireland whose own contemporary identities (and reconciliations) are deeply connected to a renewed and fuller understanding of the Great War, and which, for that reason, should realize better than most the need to raise its eyes beyond its own shores.
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