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Looking Forward to the Centenary of the Second World War: Lessons from 2014-2018

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ABSTRACT
This is the text of a keynote presentation to the Second World War Research Group's Annual Conference in 2019. It reflects on the centenary commemorations for 1914-1918 from the perspective of a First World War historian to suggest some lessons for the forthcoming centenary of the Second World War. As such it discusses the relationship between history, memory and national identity, the role of historians in shaping that relationship, and the actions that need to be taken in anticipation of the centenary. Taking inspiration from Ireland's Decade of Centenaries 1912-1923 it explores the potential of a similar approach for Britain's commemoration of the Second World War.

Opening Remarks[1]

I am grateful to Professor Gary Sheffield both for his invitation to speak on this topic and his subsequent advice on publication.

Context is everything in history

In 2019, Britain is in the midst of the worst political crisis since the 1920s when the United Kingdom broke apart. The post-war settlement is unravelling – the norms of behaviour and party political alignments are coming undone. A culture war has been unleashed. Two very different world views and value systems, two very different ideas of Britishness have hardened into opposing camps.

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[1]This is a lightly edited version of a keynote presentation to the Second World War Research Group's Annual Conference, 'Armageddon: The Second World War in Comparative Perspective' held at the University of Wolverhampton on 13 & 14 June 2019.

LOOKING FORWARD TO THE CENTENARY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The causes, course and consequences of Brexit will launch a thousand theses and examination questions for years to come. Amongst the many factors that have influenced Brexit, the way in which the discourse has been shaped by the Second World War is particularly noticeable. The cartoon 'Very Well Alone' featuring a British soldier standing on the white cliffs, shaking his fist in defiance at the gathering clouds encapsulates the mind set for me.[2]

There's a good case to be made for 1940 as the most consequential year in Britain's twentieth century. The New Zealander, David Low, drew this image just as the Dunkirk evacuation had been completed. Britain was preparing to fight on alone, and the Battle of Britain was looming. Those few months were pivotal in the war and in the defeat of Germany. A magnificent, heroic effort.

One of the legacies of 1940 is that a virtuous self-image lives on in the national imagination wherein Britain saved the world from Nazi tyranny. From that proposition, we step easily to the idea that Europe more generally has brought us nothing but trouble. And that we can stand up to it alone. Here's Norman Tebbit speaking a year after the referendum to that effect:

> Henry VIII rescued the church in England from Rome. Elizabeth I rescued Europe from Philip of Spain. The Duke of Wellington rescued Europe from Bonaparte. Lloyd George and co rescued us and Europe from the Kaiser. Churchill and Attlee rescued us from Hitler. When did they [the EU] ever rescue us?[3]

Nigel Farage tapped into similar sentiments. According to the *Financial Times*

> Mr Farage turned UKIP – whose ageing members could, he said, be recognised by their Bomber Command ties – into populists. After a late night dinner, one friend asked what was his biggest regret. 'Nigel said it was not taking part in D-Day.'[4]

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[2]University of Kent, British Cartoon Archive, LSE2791, David Low, 'Very Well Alone', *Evening Standard* (London), 18 June 1940.

[3]Tim Bale, 'Tory humiliation down to campaign length and cult of May – Norman Tebbit interview' [Blog post] *Queen Mary University of London, News*, 29 June 2017. Available online: https://www.qmul.ac.uk/media/news/2017/hss/tory-humiliation-down-to-campaign-length-and-cult-of-may--norman-tebbit-interview.html. Accessed 4 July 2022.

[4]Sebastian Payne and George Parker, 'Nigel Farage, changing British history from the margins', *Financial Times*, 10 May 2019.

What I think has been apparent in recent years in public discourse has been a marked nostalgia for the Second World War and an 'us and them' mentality: an idea of Europe as the enemy lives on. That everything will be better if we can withdraw from European entanglements and be alone and free once more.

But, but! Britain was not alone, men and women from 50 different nationalities joined the British armed forces during the war. It had the support of the Empire and its people and resources. The Few encompassed personnel from the Empire, from occupied Europe and beyond.

There are endless other possible examples of the gap between specialist knowledge and what the public 'knows' or the converse, the gaps in knowledge, the events of the past that have been forgotten or ignored. Much of Britain's role in its Empire probably falls into this category. Then we have the rise in allegations of Antisemitism – understood by its recipients within the most vivid context of the Holocaust, whilst those who stand accused ignore or deny any parallels.

The important question for us, as historians, is – does this matter? If it does, what should we do about it? I think historians should push back against ignorance and oversimplification. We should offer alternative readings of the past to shift the basis upon which Britain's place in the world is characterised in the public realm. And whilst historians of all periods and genres can probably find grounds to criticise the way in which their subject is popularly characterised, my contention is that it is the era of the Second World War which offers the most pressing case for action.

But how?

Once upon a time, the main way in which academic historians would shape that debate was twofold – firstly, we would train a legion of history students to go out into the world as better-informed citizens. Secondly, we would research the past and write densely constructed arguments to be hidden away in journal articles and in weighty tomes. I'll admit right now that those are the elements within the role of academic historian where I feel most comfortable. And, of course, they remain important.

But are they sufficient?

At least since impact case studies were incorporated into the Research Excellence Framework (REF), there has been a formalised expectation that some of us would seek to influence opinion, policy, social change.[5] I guess today I'm trying to persuade

[5]REF 2014, 'REF 2014 impact case studies' https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/. Accessed 15 June 2022.

you, and myself, that we need to do more collectively to shape the way in which history is understood by the general public. Not just by conducting research and somehow letting it seep through to the public in some kind of slow, sedimentary process, but by getting involved more directly. In short, we cannot just leave it up to Dan Snow.

What I'd like to do then is to offer some observations based on how the centenary of the First World War unfolded. A key theme in my research is how nations make use of their past: which moments in history are selected and polished up for the purposes of national myth-making. That is one of my themes today: which parts of our past wars are we to highlight in our commemorations?

These observations are incomplete, you'll no doubt be able to add to them, but I offer them along with a proposal in order to start a conversation.

Lesson 1: Plan ahead

Andrew Murrison MP was appointed as the Prime Minister's special representative for the First World War centenary commemorations in November 2011.[6] Do you want to know the reason why that happened? It was because whilst our EU counterparts were pressing ahead with their plans, the UK was completely distracted by preparations for the London 2012 Olympics. The appointment was made so that the UK could be seen to be doing something. Let's rather plan ahead next time.

One of the most ambitious academic efforts has been the International Encyclopedia of the First World War. Funded by the German Research Foundation, but with numerous international partners, it originated in 2011. It launched in October 2014.

One thousand academics from fifty-four different countries had been involved at that point,[7] and as of June 2019 it has 1,370 articles.[8] It has a rigorous process of

[6]"PM's "catch-up" on WW1 Events', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 3 November 2011. Accessed 24 June 2022.

[7]Richard Moss, 'A wiki for the First World War? International Encyclopedia of the Great War to launch online', 24 September 2014, *Culture 24* [website] https://www.culture24.org.uk/history-and-heritage/military-history/first-world-war/art500229-a-wiki-for-the-first-world-war-international-encyclopedia-of-the-great-war-to-launch-online. Accessed 7 June 2019.

[8]1914-1918-online, 'The project started in 2011, and was launched in October 2014. Since then we've progressively added articles (now 1,370). Oliver Janz has published about the encyclopedia, if not specifically about the process, see https://geschkult.fu-

commissioning, editing and reviewing, which ensures that it provides the best possible scholarly summaries of a range of themes which cover military, political, social, cultural history and more. Designed to be global in its reach, and transnational in conception, one of the motivating factors behind it has been described as a way to "discuss the roots of and possibilities for European integration".[9] What would it take to build a Second World War equivalent?

If you want to coordinate scholarship in the form of a series of monographs, then of course the lead time is even longer. Jeff Grey edited a series for Oxford University Press, *The Centenary History of Australia and the Great War.* He started planning it in at least 2008. Six years ahead of time.

But really, if you want to effect a deep and wide change in our understanding of the Second World War, you had better check the state of your field. Who is studying the war and where are they? Is the Second World War taught in universities mostly in War Studies pockets or by German historians? Who is researching the war? In First World War Studies, I like to think that a series of generations of PhD students since the 1990s have brought more gender balance to the field, whilst also being part of the enrichment and diversification of the topics encompassed by the broad field. As such, historians of the war are to be found in all sorts of academic departments. Has the same thing been happening regarding the study of the Second World War?

Since this is not my field, I tried to find a way to gain a snapshot of it. The Bibliography of British and Irish History has the facility to compare the numbers of books and articles published on a particular subject, and gives a list of the top fifty most prolific authors on a subject. Yours is a vast and prolific subject area – between 1992 and 2019, 9,700 books or articles have been published on the Second World War. The figure for First World War books and articles is only 70% of that. It's interesting to note, however, that in the period of the centenary the rate of publishing on the First World War surpassed the Second World War rate. It seems fair to assume that when 2039 rolls around, publications about the Second World War will go stratospheric. The top fifty most prolific authors on both wars were overwhelmingly men (although there were slightly more women on the First World War), and there was only one identifiably non-European name on each list. When I tried other search terms that

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berlin.de/en/e/fmi/institut/mitglieder/Professorinnen_und_Professoren/janz.html. Also see https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/Introduction/.' [Twitter] 7 June 2019.
Available online: https://twitter.com/19141918online/status/1136979959560515585?s=20&t=0Z8Nn3mpTQlYH-C80RzGUQ. Accessed 24 June 2022.

[9]Moss, 'A wiki for the First World War?'

were nonetheless specific to the Second World War – the Beveridge Report, the Blitz, Dunkirk Evacuation, and the Holocaust – in all but the case of Dunkirk, the list of authors contained a better proportion of women. What is it about a close focus on a military operation that deters women? Is it the subject matter or something structural?

The picture gets even more exaggerated for the list of top authors on Churchill – around forty books and articles are published about him steadily every year – among the top fifty authors on Churchill, there were only two women and both were related to him (Mary Soames and Celia Sandys). Why don't women authors seem to get involved in writing Great Man history? Can we extrapolate from authorship to readership?

This is a rough and ready metric. But I suggest that if historians of the Second World War consider their subject to be of national importance, perhaps the historians of the subject should look a bit more like the nation, and frame the subject in a variety of ways so that there is a better chance of speaking to a wider cross section of the nation.

Lesson 2: Change is possible

At the start of the lecture, I offered a caricature of how the Second World War has been represented – and the D-Day commemorations of course had a quite different tone – but even with an event like Dunkirk where the myth seems to be hard baked into the national psyche, I'd argue that the memory of the First World War offers a clear example that change is possible.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, the dominant perception of the First World War in Britain was that it was futile. This is not how it was perceived at the time: the germ of the idea emerged during the war books boom of the 1930s, but it was one among a range of ideas. It only became the mainstream opinion in the 1960s. Faring badly in the shadow of the morally and politically unambiguous Second World War, fuelled by anti-militarist sentiment of CND supporters and Vietnam critics, not to mention generational change and some powerful representations in popular culture, the idea that the soldiers of the Western Front were 'lions led by donkeys' took centre stage and remained there for decades.

If there was a moment where futility was likely to be the dominant trope once more during the centenary, it was likely to be 1 July 2016, the anniversary of the first day of the Battle of the Somme. The worst single day in the history of the British Army, with 60,000 casualties and 20,000 dead. But as it turns out, there was more variety than one might have expected – that's true of the interpretations and of the interpreters themselves. Helen McCartney argues that during the centenary of this event 'a greater

number of actors with divergent preoccupations were interpreting the themes in a public forum, diversifying the meaning of the Battle of the Somme for the British public'.[10] One of the things her research shows, as a consequence of this, is that the needle had shifted – subtly but to an appreciable extent – from an emphasis on futility to a narrative of terrible sacrifice. One of the interesting elements in this was the focus upon *connections* to individuals rather than just the whole.

Jeremy Deller's artistic project, 'We're here because we're here' used 1400 volunteers representing a soldier killed in battle. They handed out cards with their personal details and date of death. It was deeply moving. Its presence in multiple, non-traditional places made for an arresting experience, and one that was designed to be amplified via social media so that the public became participants in the event.[11] Helen McCartney also studied an event and installation at Heaton Park, Manchester, 'Path of the Remembered' – and this is particularly interesting because of the evidence it provides of ordinary people's perceptions. The idea was that individual members of the public could make a tile which then became part of a temporary path. Some people were motivated by a family connection, and this is an important driver of the more diverse sentiments attached to the commemoration – those making the tile wanted to convey sorrow and tragedy, but also pride. Another emergent theme was that 'soldiers deserved to be remembered as individual personalities, with admirable characters'.[12]

The simplistic futility myth had been overwritten by something more subtle.

What factors had driven these changing perceptions? Our nation's changing relationship to the Armed Forces and warfare in the era of Iraq and Afghanistan, greater sensitivity to the ensuing losses through Royal Wootten Bassett, Armed Forces Day, and the Military Wives Choir may all be factors. The rise and rise of family history has also been an incredibly important driver of a greater sense of a personal connection with the past. Particularly interesting for our profession is the question as to whether the work of historians has had any impact. Starting with John Terraine's work to defend, or at least contextualise, Haig, and gathering pace from Gary

[10]Helen B. McCartney, 'Commemorating the Centenary of the Battle of the Somme in Britain', *War & Society* 36, 4 (2017), p. 290.
[11]14-18 Now, '*we're here because we're here*' (1 July 2016). Available online: https://becausewearehere.co.uk/. Accessed 24 June 2022. For an example of a tweet about the event, see, Greater Anglia, '1st day of the #Somme British Army suffered 57470 casualties & 19240 killed. Let us all remember & pay our respects', [Twitter] 1 July 2016. Available online: https://twitter.com/greateranglia/status/748813576794583041. Accessed 24 June 2022.
[12]McCartney, p. 299.

Sheffield's *Forgotten Victory* in 2001, operational military historians have been arguing for a more nuanced understanding of the experience of fighting on the Western Front. For a long time, however, there seemed to be an unbridgeable gap between academic views and public views. With the centenary, that gap appears to have narrowed. Does it just take a long time for new ideas to percolate through?

If it is the case that academic history has had any influence in this area, but with considerable time lags – getting on for fifteen years post publication – and then you factor in the time it takes to write and publish a book; if you want to change perceptions of the Second World War by this means, then the dark joke from academic twitter applies: You Should Be Writing.

Lesson 3: It is hard to avoid a national focus

The most arresting moment of the commemorations of the Somme in the UK had a British focus. Those with a transnational bent had less impact in Britain. Alongside the aforementioned commemorations of the Somme, was a commemorative ceremony at Thiepval in France. For the first time, it was a joint Anglo-French ceremony and the French President, François Hollande attended alongside Prime Minister David Cameron, Prince Charles, the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins and the former German President Horst Köhler. Coming just a week after the Brexit referendum, 'the solemn expressions of international harmony' seemed particularly poignant.[13]

At the beginning of the centenary, we had seen the extraordinary installation of ceramic poppies at the Tower of London, *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper. It is estimated that five million people visited during its five months in situ.[14] It comprised over 800,000 individual poppies, each representing a British or colonial serviceman who had died in the war. Afterwards, a portion of the poppies were sold to the general public. I have one in my office. When the *Guardian's* art critic Jonathan Jones criticised the display as 'trite and inward looking', essentially

[13]Esther Addley and Helen Pidd, 'Silence the Most Fitting Memorial at Somme Commemorations', *The Guardian*, 1 July 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/01/somme-centenary-commemorations-silence-fitting-memorial-uk-france. Accessed 13 July 2022.

[14]Jenny Kidd and Joanne Sayner, 'Unthinking Remembrance? Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red and the Significance of Centenaries', *Cultural Trends* 27, 2 (15 March 2018), p. 68.

a bit UKIP-py, there was an uproar, but from this side of the referendum he seems to have had a point.,[15]

As far as I can tell, there were only two occasions when a German politician was included in commemorations on British soil. The most widely noted was at the final Remembrance Sunday of the centenary. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier was the first German leader ever to lay a wreath during the annual ceremony.[16] The other occasion saw the inclusion of the Steinmeier's predecessor Joachim Gauck at the ceremony in Orkney for the Battle of Jutland. As Heads of State, such occasions are part of their duties. It is a step forward that they were invited, but such gestures remain a far cry from a thoroughgoing effort at reconciliation.

There's a different way of doing things.

As David Reynolds' work shows us, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the loss of the Soviet Union as an 'other' against which Europe could define itself, the European Union set about commemorating the world wars as a shared European tragedy that profoundly shaped the 20th Century and beyond.[17] Here are two powerful examples of EU commemorations of the First World War.

The first is the Notre Dame de Lorette international memorial.[18] It was opened in France in 2014 and it lists 580,000 names of those who died in the war in the region. It makes no distinction by nationality, gender, rank, or religion. The sheer quantity of names almost overwhelms. Each one etched in letters a couple of centimetres high on endless bronze plaques taller than you or I. Sheet after sheet of Smiths, is followed by sheet after sheet of Schmidts. On just one plaque chosen at random you find Victor Hall and Wilfred Hall and endless William Halls not far from Pierre Hallas and Alice Hallam and Wilhelm Halle.

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[15]Jonathan Jones, 'The Tower of London Poppies Are Fake, Trite and Inward-Looking – a Ukip-Style Memorial', *The Guardian*, 28 October 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/oct/28/tower-of-london-poppies-ukip-remembrance-day. Accessed 13 July 2022.

[16]UK Government, 'German President to lay Wreath at Cenotaph Service, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/german-president-to-lay-wreath-at-cenotaph-service. Accessed 13 July 2022.

[17]David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: the Great War and the twentieth century,* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013)

[18]Jonathan Glancey, 'The Ring of Remembrance, Notre Dame de Lorette; Architect Philippe Prost's New International Memorial of Notre DamedeLorette Is as Beautiful as It Is Moving, Says Jonathan Glancey', *Telegraph.Co.Uk*, 10 November 2014.

The second example goes to show the longevity of Franco-German political leadership in reconciliation through commemoration. On 22 September 1984, Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany and President François Mitterand held hands at Verdun, the site of the terrible battle of 1916.[19] The ossuary there holds the remains of more than 130,000 French and German dead. The image recalled Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and President Charles De Gaulle at Reims Cathedral in 1962.[20] It was repeated by Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Emmanuel Macron who engaged in a symbolic embrace at the commemoration of the armistice in France on 10 November 2018.[21] It was the first time a German leader had visited the site of the signing of the Armistice since the Second World War. There was no such symbolism from the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, and her German counterpart.

How would you say the habits of commemoration for the Second World War compare? If a visible and recognisable German political presence on British soil is a yardstick of the absence or presence of an inward-looking nationalism, then the recent D-Day commemorations seem to be a positive indicator of reconciliation. Chancellor Merkel attended the commemorations in Portsmouth. Not everyone approved. The former Arkansas Governor, Mike Huckabee's tweeted in response, 'Must have been an "awkward" moment for Angela Merkel to sit in ceremony as the Allies commemorated D-Day that broke the back of Nazi Germany'.[22] His tweet attracted thousands of critical comments.

This is a step forward from the official arrangements for the First World War commemorations, but there's still plenty of work to be done. I'd be interested to know how you consider this point relates to how the history of the Second World War is written? I suspect that Nazi Germany and its armed forces are far more

[19]New York Times, 'Mitterand and Kohl Honor Dead of Verdun', *New York Times*, 23 September 1984.
[20]Cvc.eu by uni.lu, 'Mass for Peace: Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle at Reims Cathedral (8 July 1962)', https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/mass_for_peace_konrad_adenauer_and_charles_de_gaulle_at_reims_cathedral_8_july_1962-en-93162a4b-7c22-4d61-a27a-8f053554c92e.html. Accessed 24 June 2022.
[21]Kim Willsher, 'Trump Misses Cemetery Visit as Macron and Merkel Vow Unity', *The Observer*, 10 November 2018.
[22]Gov. Mike Huckabee, 'Must have been an "awkward" moment for Angela Merkel to sit in ceremony as the Allies commemorated D-Day that broke the back of Nazi Germany' [Twitter] 5 June 2019. Available online: https://twitter.com/GovMikeHuckabee/status/1136393050916347906?s=20&t=0Z8Nn3mpTQlYH-C80RzGUQ. Accessed 4 July 2022.

extensively studied and known than their First World War-era equivalents. How does that influence diplomacy and commemoration, if at all?

Lesson 4: How you frame it is important

I'd like to talk about Australia and Ireland now, as examples of two different ways to conceptualise a centenary.

The 75th anniversaries of D-Day have strong parallels with Australia's efforts in 1990. Bob Hawke's government chose to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Anzac landings at Gallipoli in style. Almost $10m was spent flying 58 veterans, plus politicians, diplomats and military representatives from around the world, doctors, nurses, journalists and school children to Turkey for three days. For the first time ever, the Dawn Service at Gallipoli was televised and for the first time the prime minister was in attendance. Since then, Australia's commitment to remember the Anzacs has grown and grown.[23] Attendance at commemorations has steadily risen, as has political commitment to the cause – particularly under John Howard's leadership, who valued war commemoration in and of itself, but also as a means to sidestep questions of Aboriginal reconciliation.

By the time 2014 rolled around, the Australian government was committed to spending twice as much as the United Kingdom.[24] Such was the deep commitment to defining Australia in terms of a military identity, that the centenary was framed, not as the centenary of the First World War, but as the centenary of Anzac. During the 2014-18 cycle, not only the landmark moments of one hundred years earlier were marked, but so were the landmarks from all subsequent wars. Surely this led to overload, fatigue and confusion? I don't think this is a model to emulate.

Even though I do not think the British have done enough to remember the post-1945 wars and violence inherent in the process of decolonisation, and in particular we need to do far more to remember and educate ourselves about Operation Banner and the Troubles, I do not think it would be the right thing to do to try and expand the commemoration of the Second World War to include events from decades later as Australia has done.

Australia's celebration of its Anzacs places the Anglo-Celtic origins of the nation at the heart of its identity. That it does so with gusto at a time of increasing ethnic

[23]Jenny Macleod, *Gallipoli*, Great Battles Series, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 89–102.
[24]Macleod, p. 101.

diversity is not a coincidence. One solution to this has been what Frank Bongiorno has called 'contribution history' wherein different ethnic groups can seek inclusion in the national story by identifying some of its members within the first AIF.[25] But they do so as a bolt-on to something pre-existing, rather than as an integral part of the nation's story. I think a version of this is almost inevitable in the commemoration of the Second World War, and it will be a welcome complication of the myth if the public were to learn more about, say, who really comprised The Few at the Battle of Britain.

But given that the history of the Second World War and its impact on the UK is a far broader canvas than Australia has in Gallipoli, it does not need to be the entire story.

Nonetheless it does bear noting that Australia has chosen to use the experience of war to define itself, and more precisely, the actions of a relatively small group of young men to define what it means to be Australian. This necessarily places women in minor supporting roles. Where they are commemorated – say as nurses risking their lives near the front line – they are primarily being celebrated for the typically masculine achievement of being brave.

Nations use their past to define themselves. What I'm suggesting is that we should be thoughtful about the past we choose to emphasise.

Shall we turn now to Ireland?

Ireland's experience during the First World War was particularly complex and divisive. In establishing its own separate identity, what eventually became the Republic of Ireland made heroes of those involved in the Easter Rising and suppressed its memories of its involvement in the First World War. The national memorial to service in the British Army during 1914-18 literally became overgrown by the 1980s. However, a series of developments gradually served to detoxify that facet of its history. These were diplomatic, political, economic, and historiographical. A series of commemorative events developed which moved the reconciliation forward. The first event where the heads of state of both Ireland and the UK took part, significantly, was overseas when in 1998 President Mary McAleese and Queen Elizabeth took part in the official unveiling of the Messines Peace Tower in Belgium. The process culminated in 2011 with the first visit by a British monarch to the Republic. In doing so, she visited both the memorial to the Easter Rising and the memorial to the First World War.

[25]Frank Bongiorno, 'Anzac and the Politics of Inclusion' in Shanti Sumarto and Ben Wellings (eds) *Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), p. 96.

This detoxification process laid the basis of how Ireland approached the centenary years.[26]

The wider point I want to make here is about how Ireland framed its commemorations of the First World War. They were folded into what was termed a 'decade of centenaries' which covered the tumultuous years of 1912-1923, from the signing of the Ulster Covenant through to the establishment of the Irish Free State. Rather than seeking to erase or ignore some elements of its past, Ireland has embraced and recognised all of the waymarkers in that period.[27]

This is the model I would like to propose for the commemoration of the Second World War. Instead of the familiar 1939-45, punctuated by the outbreak, the Battle of Britain, Blitz, D-Day and VE Day, what would it mean if we framed the war as being part of a long 1940s that shaped our world for decades? So, we could have a decade of centenaries, with a little poetic license as per the Irish, that ran from 1938 and Munich through to 1949 and the founding of NATO. We make our canvas broad enough to encompass all of the momentous events, and all of the people who shaped it and contributed. We pay deep honour to our soldiers, but we do justice to the society from which they were drawn and the changes that inspired them. This could draw upon important developments in the recent historiography, Jonathan Fennell's book, *Fighting the People's War* chief among them.[28]

I started my pitch with the suggestion that historians of the Second World War are the most important for our nation. I had a qualm or two in saying that, mostly because I think the British have not properly reckoned with their imperial past. But during our decade of centenaries we could direct our nation's attention to the workings of empire, to our 'Great Betrayal' of our Dominion soldiers at Singapore, to the Bengal Famine, to the Quit India campaign, and to the bloody partition of British India.

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[26]Catriona Pennell, "'Choreographed by the Angels"? Ireland and the Centenary of the First World War', *War & Society* 36, no. 4 (2 October 2017): 256–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2017.1384140; Edward Madigan, 'Centenary (Ireland) | International Encyclopedia of the First World War (WW1)', in *1914-1918-Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. Available online, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/centenary_ireland. Accessed 24 June 2022.

[27]For examples of the scope of activities, see https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/. Accessed 15 June 2022.

[28]Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People's War : The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

The same framework would enable us to trace the progression from Kristallnacht through to the Final Solution, beyond to the liberation of the camps, and ultimately to the founding of Israel.

We could properly weave the experiences of civilian men, women and children into our nation's story. They've been a little short-changed by the way we've commemorated the war, I think. From 1945, the commemoration of the Second World War was folded into the modes of the First World War, with Armistice Day becoming Remembrance Sunday. It is proper that soldiers and their sacrifices are commemorated, but this decision erased the citizens who died in the Blitz from the main stage of their nation's story. Yet they died because their membership of the nation put them at risk: in this total war, they were an integral part of the war machine.

This was a People's War. But we did not get a People's Commemoration. What might that look like a century later?

We could make much more of the process by which the Welfare State was built, the deprivation which inspired the Beveridge Report, the decisive change in our expectations of the state and of fairness that ensued. The shining symbol of this is the National Health Service. I'd like to see its founding day become a new bank holiday. Instead of war as the means to characterise the nation, I'd like the NHS to become the holy grail. We already have a deep commitment to it. Here's why I think it could work as a vehicle for national identity. What are the reasons why nations define themselves through war, and particularly the world wars? They are momentous events, matters of life and death, and ones that touch every ordinary person in the country, linking them to the bigger story of the nation. The NHS is about a million momentous events for those it touches, certainly they are matters of life and death, and everyone is affected by it. But if we were to celebrate it, rather than war, we would not be elevating violence and a small cohort of men, we would be elevating science and caring, doctors and nurses, cleaners and porters, men and women, many of them immigrants. It would place a set of admirable values at the heart of our nation. It would make free health care at the point of use politically untouchable.

Finally, if we frame the long 1940s as a decade of centenaries, we do not just leave the story in 1945 as if peace makes itself, but we build in an education in international cooperation. We make the founding of the United Nations and the establishment of NATO part and parcel of the story. We build a bulwark against petty nationalism.
By the time we reach the decade of centenaries, it is possible that these institutions that I personally hold dear will have been submerged by the rising tide of populism.

I hope not.

Given that commemoration is always present-minded, perhaps a different set of political priorities will appear to be pressing when the moment comes nearer. But I hope that as historians we will be able to work together, to reach beyond the academy, and prepare to help to shape events for the better.