



WAR MEMORIALS: TEN QUESTIONS FOR HISTORIANS

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WAR MEMORIALS: TEN QUESTIONS FOR HISTORIANS*

I – WHY HAVE HISTORIANS NEGLECTED THEM?

They are among the most visible objects in the urban and rural landscapes of many countries: a characteristically modern addition to the world's stock of monuments. Expressing as they do their creators' thoughts and feelings about war, nationality and death, these artefacts constitute a vast and rewarding resource for historians. Yet their literature is slender, and until recently mainstream historians have been rare among writers on the subject. Why?

Is there a clue in the modern tendency to separate the artistic from the civic, which makes war memorials of little interest to the historian of high art, either because they are the work of artisans rather than artists or because when done by artists they are mediocre? A Hungarian study reports more than 2,000, but judges that "fewer than a dozen are of interest as art. The majority are merely tools of propaganda, political symbols which truly reflect the official ideology of the period, and its changes up to the end of the Second World War".¹ May it be also that modern war memorials are too familiar for us to see them as History? And has their investigation been inhibited by a reluctance to contemplate death, or a bafflement about how to make it a subject of study until Philippe Aries began to show us? Whatever the explanation, the fact is plain that war memorials have taken a long time to get on the historians' agenda. The first books on the subject in England and Canada have been by amateurs who found themselves unexpectedly drawn to it, and the first American book comes out of a school of architecture.²

* This is a revised version of a paper delivered at a conference convened by the Institute of General History of the USSR Academy of Sciences in Moscow in October 1991 on the theme « Social history and problems of synthesis ».

1. I. N., War Memorials, *New Hungarian Quarterly*, 101, 1986, 121-122.

2. D. Boorman, *At the Going Down of the Sun. British First World War Memorials*, York, 1988; R. Shipley, *To Mark our Place. A History of Canadian War Memorials*, Toronto, 1987; J. M. Mayo, *War Memorials as Political Landscape*, New York 1988.

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II — WHY HAVE HISTORIANS LATELY BECOME MORE INTERESTED
IN THEM?

The simple passing of time has helped. Hardly anybody alive now remembers the making of 1914-18 memorials. The urge to study every aspect of that war has strengthened as the period makes the passage from memory through a sort of limbo to History, becoming entirely a country of the dead. Even World War II has travelled half a century towards History. Moreover, as fashions in aesthetic appreciation change, the disdain of early observers itself becomes a fact to be interpreted.

The emergence of new disciplines, the lowering of barriers between old ones, and fresh perspectives in the minds of historians: all these tendencies have encouraged scholars to look at war memorials, among other monuments. Material Culture is proclaimed as an autonomous province in the republic of scholarship.³ What matter that fewer than a dozen of those Hungarian memorials are good high art, when all two thousand embody political messages waiting to be decoded, and better still *changing* meanings, clues to the dynamics of history? *Popular* culture, material and immaterial, is a field on which historians and other scholars converge, and what older students winced at for vulgarity and banality now becomes precious evidence about common perceptions of nation and community, life and death. With cultural anthropologists and literary critics, historians share a new interest in *Representations*, and the multi-disciplinary journal of that name has published illuminating work on the commemoration of war.⁴ French historians, in and out of the journal *Annales*, have engaged in bold exploration of *mentalites*, about which war memorials can readily testify. Two stand out for offering revelations about French monuments and as models for students elsewhere. Maurice Agulhon's studies of national image, symbol and ceremony, and Antoine Prost's analyses of war memorials, are founding works of an enterprise which might be called iconographic history.⁵ Historical scholarship on war memorials is dateable as before and after Prost: his work is rigorous, analytic, and always directed at using the artifact to interpret the society in which it was built. In and beyond the United States, the creation and

3. J. D. Prown, *Mind in Matter. An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method*, *Winterthur Portfolio* Spring 1982, 16.

4. See e.g. J. E. Young, The biography of a memorial icon: Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument, *Representations*, Spring 1989.

5. M. Agulhon, *Marianne au combat. L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1880*, Paris, 1979, and *Marianne au pouvoir. L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1880 à 1914*, Paris, 1989; see also his *La Statuomanie et L'histoire, Ethnologie française*, 1978, 145-172. Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants et la Société française 1914-1939*, Paris, 1977, vol. 3: *Mentalites et Ideologies*, and *Les Monuments aux Morts*, in P. Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, I: *La République*, Paris, 1984, 195-325. A notable recent analysis of French memorials is A. Becker, *Les Monuments aux Morts*, Paris, 1988.

fate of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has enhanced scholarly interest in the whole genre.

The study now flourishes. In London the Imperial War Museum is constructing a National Inventory of war memorials to be completed over five years.⁶ Australia and New Zealand have been surveyed.⁷ Paris was the venue in September 1991 for a conference devoted to war memorials around the world which has yielded several contributions to this issue.⁸

III – WHAT WAS NEW ABOUT THE MEMORIALS OF 1914-18?

Define war memorials flexibly enough and they are as old as history: in the highlands of Papua New Guinea certain vegetation signifies victories and defeats, for those who know how to read it. In the early history of the European nation state, monuments record the triumphs of rulers and their generals. Triumphal arches modelled on ancient Rome's were raised on both sides engaged in the Napoleonic wars. The grandest of all monuments to those wars, achieved at Leipzig in 1913, honored not rulers or generals but the People, and had a truculently modern ring in its dedication to the purified German race.

At various points during the transition from autocracy to democracy the service and death of ordinary soldiers began to be registered on monuments. In the United States, monuments erected in north and south after the Civil War, the first truly democratic war and the most lethal to that time, are recognisably modern in bearing sculpted representations of the ordinary fighting man. In England the first war memorial incorporating common soldiers is probably the monument erected in London in 1859 to the memory of officers and men of the Brigade of Guards "who fell during the war in Russia 1854-56", which shows three guardsmen beneath a female representing Honour. Later in the century, British memorials to the dead of particular regiments on service overseas commonly bear the names of rank-and-file men as well as officers. For the United Kingdom, the South African war of 1899-1902 marks a transition: the dead are identified as both soldiers and citizens, as belonging to counties as well as regiments. Their names are listed in order of rank, as are names on French monuments after 1870.

After 1914-18, both official policy and popular taste leaned towards equality in death. In most countries the names listed on memorials are usually given in alphabetical order, not in order of rank. Statues repre-

6. The Research co-ordinator is Catherine Moriarty.

7. J. Phillips and K. S. Inglis, War Memorials in Australia and New Zealand, *Australian Historical Studies* 96, April 1991, 179-91; C. Maclean and J. Phillips, *The Sorrow and the Pride. New Zealand War Memorials*, Wellington, 1990.

8. Les Monuments aux Morts : Colloque international, organised by La Mission permanente aux Commémorations et à l'Information historique, in collaboration with le Centre de Recherche de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne.

sending ordinary soldiers are common. Inscriptions declare them to have been serving their local community, their region, their country, not their regiment. They are honoured as citizens, and the making of the memorials is as never before a communal act of homage on the part of their fellows.

IV – WHAT UNIFORMITIES AND WHAT DIFFERENCES ARE EVIDENT FROM COUNTRY TO COUNTRY?

George Mosse has suggested that the cult of the fallen soldiers from 1914-18 “seems to contain some identical features in all warring nations”.⁹ Sculptors everywhere avoid realistic horror when they depict dead and wounded men. Inscriptions in all countries employ what Paul Fussell has called “high diction”, the literary equivalent of the sculptors’ tact.¹⁰ Images and words together convey mixtures of grief and triumph, fused by the notion of the dead men’s sacrifice.

There are fewer differences than we might expect between the monuments raised by winners and by losers. Sad soldier figures can be found on the memorials of victor nations and vanquished. In any case, a triumphal monument in a defeated nation may have been initiated before history decided who won and who lost. The Arc de Triomphe in Paris is the world’s most famous testimony to that form of hubris, and it was in 1917 that a government decree ordered the construction of war memorials in Hungary. Though Mosse suggests that “for Germany and Italy, one of which had lost the war and the other of which regarded itself as loser, the cult of the fallen took on a special significance”, the forms he describes do not express defeat: in Germany as in England, St. George and the Archangel Michael vanquish dragons.¹¹ And when young Adolf Hitler, artist and war veteran, sketched in 1925 a monument to Germans killed in the war, it was modelled on Paris’ Arc de Triomphe, though larger. The creators of war memorials need not be constrained by what a later, detached observer takes to be reality. They may be engaged in forgetting and inventing as well as remembering.

There are also, however, striking differences from country to country. The dead soldiers of the Russian empire were given no honour by a revolutionary government which disowned their fate. In the west, the practice of commemoration was affected by the diverse disposition of dead bodies. Germany had Heroes’ Groves, military cemeteries without graves, for most of the German dead were buried in France. Mourners in France and

9. G. L. Mosse, National cemeteries and national revival: the cult of fallen soldiers in Germany, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14, 1975, 15.

10. P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York and London, 1975, 21-3.

11. G. L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, New York and Oxford 1990, 93, 101.

the United States had a better chance than those in the United Kingdom, and a much better chance than those in Canada or Australia or New Zealand, of seeing the graves of their dead men. In France some bodies were returned to their places of origin and others were buried in military cemeteries close enough for relatives to think of a visit. British policy was to leave all bodies where they lay (though reburying them in cemeteries created by an Imperial War Graves Commission); only relatives who could afford the journey to Belgium or France or further could expect to see the graves. The us government had promised that no dead American boy would lie in a foreign field unless his family agreed, and about half of American bodies were repatriated. So for the Germans and the British, more commonly than for the French and the Americans, the homeland memorial had to serve as substitute for the grave. In British communities the word "cenotaph", meaning empty tomb, gained a singular resonance.

The action or inaction of central government is a significant variable. In France the National Assembly voted to subsidize local memorials. The grants were small enough to require substantial local fund-raising, but they represent an involvement absent in English-speaking countries. *Inscriptions* are more various on their monuments, for there was no British or American equivalent to the official, legally meaningful *MORTS POUR LA FRANCE*, which Prost finds on well over half in his sample. To adopt that inscription, he observes, is to speak the official language of the city, not that of local tradition or spontaneous sentiment.¹² In the British empire and the United States, phrases of metropolitan origin, such as *THE GLORIOUS DEAD*, composed by the prime minister Lloyd George for the Cenotaph in Whitehall, and Rudyard Kipling's *LEST WE FORGET* and the biblical declaration Kipling selected (from the Apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus) for use in war cemeteries, *THEIR NAME LIVETH FOR EVERMORE*, were often inscribed on pedestals; but they were chosen freely by local committees which drew also on their memories of the bible and literature and their own sense of what was appropriate. For that reason English inscriptions reveal more than French about local sentiment. The collection of *names* to be inscribed on a memorial was similarly, in English-speaking countries, a local and voluntary activity; nobody thought of involving the army or the ministry of defence or any other agents of the state. In France, by contrast, the names of those officially deemed to have died for the nation were supplied from Paris. Nor, in English-speaking countries, did the state affect the *forms* chosen for commemoration, as the French state did by the law of 1905 prohibiting the use of ecclesiastical symbols on secular ground other than cemeteries.

Much discussion of similarities and differences will remain speculative until we have better quantitative data. An example from my own research

12. Prost, *Mentalités et Idéologies*, 42.

illustrates what counting can disclose. The naming of men who served and survived in 1914-18, as well as those who died, is rare in France, more common in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, and more common still in Australia, where it occurs on most memorials. A cogent explanation for this pattern, it seems to me, is that the French army was composed entirely of conscripts, the British and New Zealand armies of volunteers until 1916 and conscripts thereafter, while the Australian army, almost uniquely among those on either side, consisted entirely of volunteers. Conscripts were not to be praised on monuments merely for doing their civil duty; high diction, on the other hand, could honour a volunteer for offering his life whether or not he then lost it. The element of volunteering in British military tradition is relevant also for a difference which is worth a separate question.

V - WHY « MONUMENTS AUX MORTS » IN FRENCH
AND « WAR MEMORIALS » IN ENGLISH?

Because, I suggest, in British countries they are not always confined to the dead, and because they are often other than monumental in form. Counting so far of inscriptions in the United Kingdom reveals that the names of men who served and returned are inscribed on about one in twenty, and that where no individuals, living or dead, are named, collective tribute is offered to the living as well as the dead on about half the memorials. A rhetoric honouring volunteers had flourished in the United Kingdom during the first two years of war and was still there to be used at the end, when the volunteers and the conscripts began to come home.

The other and possibly more important reason is that whenever people in English-speaking countries gathered to plan commemoration, they had a debate unknown in France, about whether to create an object with no other function than to pay tribute (cross, obelisk, statue), or to combine tribute with utility by putting up or extending a civic amenity (hospital, hall, library), or, by way of compromise, to endow the community with a memorial both monumental *and* useful (clock tower, fountain, carillon). Outcomes varied from country to country, the utilitarian character prevailing most often in the United States and possibly least often in New Zealand. The French never thought of a hospital or a library as a suitable memorial. Where Catholic culture visualises the sacred, the Protestant tradition has a streak of iconophobia, a preference for amenity over image. In France, moreover, either the state or the Church traditionally endowed institutions which in England and its cultural dependencies were objects of a Protestant and voluntarist tradition whose custodians were alert to have their institutions benefit from any essay in public commemoration, be it connected with jubilee, coronation or war. All in all, *monument* had too narrow a meaning for the enterprise.

The comparison of names used in different languages would be worth pursuing. *Monumenti ai Caduti* is not a perfect synonym for *Monuments aux Morts*, and *Kriegerdenkmaler* has a resonance of its own.

VI – WHY UNKNOWN SOLDIERS?

The tomb of an Unknown Soldier is the most striking of all “identical features” from country to country in the veneration of war dead after 1918. Its presence is connected with the failure of plans for massive national monuments. In London, Paris, Berlin and Washington, schemes for large monumental structures were launched, debated sometimes with acrimony, and finally abandoned. Unknown Soldiers, by contrast, were entombed in or close to all those capitals, and others, in early postwar years, and quickly acquired the character of national memorials.

The ceremonies of entombment began in London and Paris on 11 November 1920, second anniversary of the war’s end. London’s was an enterprise of the Church of England, the inspiration of clergymen troubled by the secularity of the Cenotaph in Whitehall and determined that the nation’s commemoration should not exclude the established church. The government assented. A British body was shipped home from France in time for its burial in Westminster Abbey to be attended by the same official party, including King George V and the Archbishop of Canterbury, as had inaugurated the Cenotaph a few minutes earlier.

In Paris the ceremony connected the war dead not with Christianity—that was impossible in the Third Republic—but with both imperial glory and the beginning of the Republic itself, which happened to be fifty years old. The nameless *poilu* was brought to lie under the 386 names of generals inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe. Socialist deputies had wanted him in the Pantheon, devised by the men of the revolution to be a national shrine, a post-Christian equivalent to Westminster Abbey. Only days before the ceremony was due, the politicians compromised on a ritual which would associate the honouring of Gambetta and the unknown soldier as joint saviours of the republic. Gambetta’s heart and whatever remained of the soldier were laid briefly together before the former was lodged in the pantheon and the latter carried past the pantheon to its resting place under the Arc.¹³ In Paris, *ICI REPOSE UN SOLDAT FRANÇAIS MORT POUR LA PATRIE*; in London he is *A BRITISH WARRIOR UNKNOWN BY NAME OR RANK*—*warrior* rather than *soldier* officially on the ground that he also represented sailors and airmen, but also because *warrior* fitted the high diction of the statement with which the coffin was to be covered: a rhetoric both Christian and feudal, for

13. *Ibid.*, 35-8.

people to read as they came upon the tomb just inside the Abbey's main entrance.

The Unknown was understood to represent all his dead comrades, but especially the Missing, the huge numbers of men blown to pieces or rotted in mud or otherwise unrecognisable. After 1865, Americans had given collective honour to the missing ("those... whose last resting place is unknown", says the inscription on a memorial urn in the cemetery at Cambridge, Massachusetts) as THE UNKNOWN DEAD; and in British war cemeteries of 1914-18 the words KNOWN TO GOD, a piece of high diction composed by Kipling, were carved on the graves of unidentified bits and pieces of bodies presumed to British. Both the British and the French authorities ensured that the soldier was utterly unknown by exhuming a number of missing bodies (six British, eight French) and choosing solemnly by lot between candidates. In France the seven runners-up were given special tombs at Verdun. Custodians of commemoration in other countries followed the French and British examples. In Rome the Unknown was built into the Victor Emmanuel monument, completed in 1910 to celebrate the creation of Italian unity. The American version, exhumed in 1921 for reburial at the Arlington National Cemetery which had been inaugurated by the victors in the Civil War, inspired rhetoric which raised him as high as Abraham Lincoln: "one of our greatest and most hallowed symbols of democracy", wrote W. Lloyd Warner, "and the only very powerful one to come out of World War One...".¹⁴

The Unknown was a man for all seasons and places, and people in places which did not have him wished they could. Marseille wanted one to represent l'Armee de l'Orient, but that was turned down because it would destroy the unity of the symbol created in Paris. Australians and Canadians wanted one, but imperial authority explained that the Warrior in Westminster Abbey represented the whole empire. In his Parisian setting the Unknown was accompanied by a flame, ancient Greek symbol for eternity. Such paganism could have no place in Westminster Abbey, but it appealed to the makers in other secular polities, including eventually the USSR, when an Unknown Soldier was interred close to the wall of the Kremlin in 1967, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the defence of Moscow during the Great Patriotic War. The Tomb is much venerated. The eternal flame arising above it has been copied for thousands of other monuments around the country, becoming an equivalent of the cross in locations farther west: an emblem of immortality acceptable in an officially secular polity. Moscow's Unknown Soldier reminds me how Benedict Anderson begins *Imagined Communities*, 1983, a bold attempt at a new left perception of nationalism. Try to imagine, he challenges the reader, a

14. W. L. Warner, *The Family of God*, New Haven, 1961, 229. Originally published as *The Living and the Dead*, New Haven 1959, in the Yankee City Series, 5 vols. 1941-59.

Tomb of the Unknown Marxist or a cenotaph for fallen Liberals. "Is a sense of absurdity avoidable? The reason is that neither Marxism nor Liberalism are much concerned with death and immortality."¹⁵

If the makers of Moscow's monument thought that theirs was to be the world's last Unknown Soldier they reckoned without Saddam Husein, who commissioned one for Baghdad in 1982 to honour Iraqi soldiers killed in the war against Iran.

VII – WHAT CEREMONIAL OCCASIONS HAVE BEEN CONNECTED WITH MEMORIALS?

London's Cenotaph, which is a model for others throughout the United Kingdom and the British empire, is a monument created to be used in a ceremony: it was put there to be saluted during the Victory march of 19 July 1919, and made permanent in response to its totally unforeseen popularity among bereaved people.¹⁶ More commonly 1914-18 memorials were erected to stand in their own right, as material tributes; but by 1920 makers knew that the memorials would be sites for continuing acts of commemoration, and tended to choose places suitable for ritual gatherings. In most though not all belligerent nations the central day for ceremony was 11 November, anniversary of the armistice. At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, a silence enclosed the congregation at the memorial and fellow-citizens elsewhere, in church or at home or even at work. Bereaved people gave dead soldiers, as nearly as they could contrive, the funeral they never had.

In the United Kingdom 11 November was not a public holiday, for the government "did not want a dislocation of business or an occasion of public rejoicing"¹⁷. But elsewhere in the empire Canada made the day a public holiday; and so did France, where it has been consecrated to commemoration since 1922. In French it is simply *Le Onze Novembre*, a name which sets no limit to meaning, signifying that as a ritual occasion it transcends the particularities of its origin to become, in Prost's judgement, the one unanimously popular republican festival, surpassing even 14 July, Bastille Day.¹⁸ In the USSR, 11 November was an unmarked date four days after the festival celebrating the revolution. In Germany the day was officially adopted by the Weimar Republic in 1925.¹⁹ Around the war memorials of Australia and New Zealand ceremonies very like

15. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, 1983.

16. E. L. Homberger, *The Story of the Cenotaph*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 November 1976. This essay filled a near-vacuum in studies of British war memorials.

17. Cabinet committee minute 5 Nov. 1920 cited in O. Chadwick, *Armistice Day, Theology*, November 1976, 326.

18. Prost in Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, I, 207-22.

19. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 82, 98.

those of London were enacted, but the day was not, as in Canada, a public holiday, nor was it the primary anniversary of the war. That status was reserved for Anzac Day, 25 April, when in 1915 soldiers from the two dominions landed in Gallipoli and, in the idiom of a rhetoric which quickly became obligatory, gave nationhood to their peoples. In the United States, 11 November was similarly a secondary occasion. The remembering of 1914-18—or rather, for Americans, 1917-18—was incorporated into the rituals of Memorial Day, officially and popularly observed since 1874. In W. Lloyd Warner's account of the "cult of the dead", war memorials and cemeteries are used in ceremonies honouring the war dead from 1861 to 1918 and connecting the dead and the living, the mourning community and the venerated nation²⁰.

VIII — WHAT SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES ARE EVIDENT
BETWEEN MEMORIALS OF 1914-18 AND 1939-45?

Some countries had fewer dead to mourn after the second world war (the United Kingdom and empire, France, Italy), some more (Germany, the United States, the USSR). In English-speaking countries and France, new lists of names were added to old memorials, which continued to serve as locations for commemorative ceremony. Memorials which had recorded men's rank after 1918 now omitted it: the soldiers were being recognised entirely as citizens. Where the new war had killed men and women out of uniform—deportees and hostages, victims of air raids—their names shared the pedestal with members of armed forces. From Coventry to Hiroshima, local authorities created eloquent testimony to the suffering of civilians by leaving ruins to become their own memorials. If new memorials were constructed in English-speaking countries they were likelier to be utilitarian. In countries which changed sides between the two wars the monuments became semiotically intricate, as any visitor to Italy can see.

11 November stayed in the ritual calendar, though in the United Kingdom and much of the old empire Armistice Day was replaced by Remembrance Sunday and silence no longer interrupted the workaday week. In France the commemoration became less popular as survivors of the 1914-18 war died, but the day remained a public holiday, and the civic rituals were still briskly performed.

Infinite change is evident in the USSR, from nothing to a landscape in which war memorials stand out as cathedrals did in medieval Europe. Christel Lane reports that large resources in all town and many villages were devoted to the making of monuments to the Great Patriotic War,

20. Warner, *op. cit.*, 216-59.

which on Victory Days (throughout the Union 9 May, marking the end of the war in 1945, and in particular places anniversaries of local significance) were at the centre of festivals she judges more popular than those of May Day or 7 November²¹. The scale of loss must go a long way towards explaining the proliferation of monument and ceremony: ten million dead, even before counting civil victims. But why (as Lane finds) was the number of memorials to 1941-45 actually increasing thirty years after the war ended? Lane reports what to me is the amazing fact that in the Ukraine alone, there were *twenty seven thousand* war memorials. How is such production to be interpreted? In George Mosse's judgement, based as he admits on inadequate evidence, "the Myth of the War Experience... lives on in the Soviet Union as apparently nowhere else in Europe".²²

Michael Ignatieff agrees. Visiting the USSR late in Brezhnev's reign, and contemplating a huge war memorial representing the Motherland erected in Kiev as recently as 1980, he observes that the further the war recedes in actual memory, "the more insistent becomes its inscription in collective myth, the more grandiose and gigantic the war monuments have become". Why? "War memorials", he proposes, "are the churches of the Soviet military build-up". I found scholars in the Moscow of 1991 agreeing that the spate of monument-building initiated by Moscow's Tomb represented Brezhnev's will to reaffirm connexions with the patriotism of the past which had been neglected, even run down, during the Krushchev years. There is an interesting puzzle about their continuing popularity, as evidenced by the stream of newlyweds having their photographs taken as they lay wreaths before the Unknown Soldier. Ignatieff thinks Soviet war memorials may well have "a resonance for the Soviet citizens who view them which must ever escape a Western heart".²³ Have they?

IX — ARE WAR MEMORIALS THE SHRINES OF A CIVIL RELIGION?

In Warner's account of Memorial Day and Prost's of 11 November, the people who assemble around war memorials can be seen as engaged in a Durkheimian act of collective self-worship. Prost goes so far as to argue that "le culte republicain" of the war dead as practised in France

21. C. Lane, *The Rites of Rulers. Ritual in Industrial Society—the Soviet Case*, Cambridge, 1981, 146-7.

22. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 213.

23. M. Ignatieff, Soviet War Memorials, *History Workshop Journal* 17, Spring 1984, 157-63. See also the passage on war memorials in C. A. P. Binns, "The Changing Face of Power: revolution and cultural accommodation in the Soviet ceremonial system", part 2, *Man*, n.s. 15, 1980, 180. For a Brezhnevian (and richly illustrated) Soviet study, see I. Azizian and I. Ivanova, *Honour Eternal. Second World War Memorials*, Moscow 1982.

between the two world wars is the one case in history of civil religion as Rousseau defined it.²⁴ This is an arresting statement, and Prost makes it with a clearer awareness than most writers who have used the term over the past 25 years of what Rousseau actually said about civil religion in the *Social Contract*. He is nevertheless selective, not mentioning that among the dogmas Rousseau declared it necessary for the citizen to accept—on pain of banishment or execution—were the existence of God and the life to come.

In English-language social science and theology, civil religion has been a concept much used since Martin Bellah proclaimed his discovery of it in 1967 as the faith of American society.²⁵ As an interpretive device it differs only in idiom from the cult Warner found expressed on Memorial Day, with its “rituals comprising a sacred symbol system which functions periodically to integrate the whole community...”²⁶ There are two things wrong with Warner’s celebratory functionalism, as with the version of it in Bellah’s account of civil religion and even with Prost’s brilliant rendering of what happens at the monuments aux morts on 11 November. It begs questions about responses, accommodating only full commitment, not indifference, abstinence or opposition; and when employed cross-culturally it blurs a variety of relationships with traditional religion which are better seen as distinct. If the concept of civil religion is to be employed fruitfully, the user needs to measure the demand for symbol and ritual as well as their supply, and to analyse complexities rather than obscure them behind cloudy generalities.

Interrogating Warner’s own analysis we glimpse tensions ignored in his bland conclusion. Above all, he is silent on a division which the festival itself proclaims. The participants in his Yankee City identify civilization, virtue and godliness with the northern cause in the civil war. 30 May was not the date for a festival in the states of the old confederacy. They had their own Memorial Day, for mourning around their own war memorials, in their own way, on the birthday of the rebel president Jefferson Davis, at ceremonies expressing not the unity of the nation but the persistence of sectional division.

In order to render the diversity of relationships between war commemoration and religion, we may place societies on a spectrum which has at one end the provision of memorials and ceremonies by traditional custodians of the supernatural and at the other end the denial of religion. Japan before 1945 occupied the first position. At Yasukuni, a Shinto temple in the centre of Tokyo, the souls of all war dead were enshrined. Had Japan won the war, ceremonies at the shrine of the state religion would presumably have been tranquil and popular events. But as Japan

24. Prost in Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, I, 219.

25. M. Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, *Daedalus*, 96, 1967, 1-21.

26. Warner, *op. cit.*, 259.

lost, and as the dead included war criminals, the annual ceremony at the shrine on 15 August became an object of controversy, intensely so in 1985 when Yasuhiro Nakasone attended officially as Prime Minister. A court has since ruled that it is illegal for the Prime Minister to do that.

Some way along the spectrum, the Church of England though established by law was long accustomed to sharing its territory with dissenting faiths and more recently with secular civil usages, especially since the acquisition of an empire had given the British crown millions of subjects who practised non-Christian religions. The War Graves cemeteries were tactfully designed, on the whole, to accommodate followers of other faiths and none; the headstones were not crosses, though the addition of a Cross of Sacrifice in each cemetery represented a small Anglican victory. The Cenotaph also was ecumenical in message. Around the country, local memorials might be placed either in Anglican churchyards, recognising the traditional complementarity of church and parish, or (especially in larger towns and cities) they might be on secular ground; even there, they were commonly in the form of a cross, traditional emblem of Christianity. Whether in churchyard or not, the ceremonies of Armistice Day involved non-Anglican as well as Anglican clergy, civic dignitaries, and war veterans. In the United States, whose constitution separated church and state, the cross was less commonly employed as an emblem except over graves in the overseas cemeteries constructed by the US Battlefield Monuments Commission, which scrupulously allowed the Jewish dead to lie under a Star of David. Memorial and Armistice Day rituals involved a wide spread of religious organisations, patriotic associations and lodges: in Warner's account of Memorial Day, belief in immortality is expressed by a leader of the Elks. In France Prost discerns a difference between catholic and dechristianized regions, a cross in the cemetery being common in the former, and secular symbols (column, soldier, rooster) in the latter. Separation of church and state decrees wholly secular official ceremonies, though the same participants may attend both the ritual around the monument and mass in the church. Moreover, in France and other traditionally Catholic countries, the graves in cemeteries may still be adorned on 11 November with flowers laid there on the first of the month, All Souls' Day. Wartime ceremonies on All Souls' Day, Prost notes, had prefigured the rituals which were to become traditional on 11 November, including a minute of silence and the laying of a wreath; and there were proposals after 1918 to remember the dead soldiers on 1 November and the living on the 11th.²⁷ Whatever the state decreed, bereaved citizens who were also believers could make up their own compound of traditional and civil religion.

There is a place on the spectrum for symbols and rituals in which the soldier himself becomes the object of a cult which is religious in

27. Prost, *Mentalités et Idéologies*, 52.

incorporating a sense of the supernatural and in borrowing or imitating the forms of religion. Shipley reads Canada's Remembrance Day ceremony as parallel to, or equivalent to, or significantly resembling, the Eucharist or Holy Communion.²⁸ Becker cites one sculptural form often chosen for French monuments which represents the *poilu* as a new Christ.²⁹ In England, mourners sang a new hymn, *O Valiant Hearts*, identifying the dead soldier with the crucified Christ. Some clergymen encouraged that equation, others winced quietly because they believed that it was blasphemous. The belief entertained in several countries that dead soldiers returned to comfort, reproach and instruct the living was certainly heterodox, and may be counted as an element of civil religion.

At the anti-religious end of the spectrum we have no example from the first world war, and the USSR and its dependencies as exhibits from the second. Lane argues that the term *civil religion*, as employed especially to characterise the United States and the United Kingdom, is too weak for the USSR, for which she proposes *political religion*. In Lane's view the memorials of the Great Patriotic War have become "“holy” or “sacred” places”—the quotation marks signal paradox—for a system of beliefs and practices which should be differentiated from civil religion in that it sacralizes the existing political order (instead of just linking that order with a transcendent power affirmed by the various religious creeds professed in a society) and which claims authority over the whole of social life (instead of just confining itself to political affairs). Her account is by no means functionalist: indeed Lane, writing in 1981, argues that political religion contains the seeds of its eventual decline, and suggests that the institution of a system of socialist rituals—some of the most ardent located at war memorials—is “an attempt by the leaders to halt the decline of political religion.”³⁰ How does that prophecy read in 1992?

X – WHAT NOW?

Will war memorials come to share the fate of churches in societies tending towards religious indifference? In Brighton, England, the custodians have found it necessary to attach a notice to the fence surrounding the memorial reminding people of its commemorative purpose and asking them not to sit on it. At Lille, in France, the pavement in front of the war memorial is ideal for skateboarding. Will it be the more and more common fate of war memorials to be functionally visible only at widely separated ceremonial moments? How is a reverent regard for war memorials to survive the generations which created them?

28. Shipley, *op. cit.*, 142.

29. Becker, *op. cit.*, 27.

30. Lane, *op. cit.*, esp. 41-4, 223-4, 255-60.

Indifference and disrespect, intended or unintended, are by no means the only likely outcomes. In England, village memorials at least are commonly cherished, though Remembrance Sunday is tending to atrophy in the cities. In France 11 November is still a public holiday, and the state participates in the ceremonies around monuments as it did in their creation: the mayor of any commune who does not want to bother composing his own speech for the occasion can deliver one supplied from Paris. It remains a public holiday in Canada, where the historian Alan R. Young observes that while the focus of ritual has shifted to veterans of 1939-45 and Korea, "there is no reason to think that when they too are no more, the attention given to the Remembrance Day ritual will in any way diminish". His argument is that the memorials used on 11 November have a thoroughly secure place in "the Canadian popular consciousness", associated as they are with the making of the nation.³¹ In Australia and New Zealand Remembrance Sunday observance has been declining as in the United Kingdom, while 25 April remains even more clearly the day of the year for wreaths, marches and rhetoric centred on memorials. In the twilight of the USSR foreign leaders were taken to war memorials, and there may have been significance in where they chose, or were led, to lay their wreaths: in Kiev, President Bush paid his tribute not at the great memorial to mother Russia but at the Babi Yar monument. In the United States a belated communal urge to remember Vietnam has led to the refurbishment, even rededication, of memorials long forgotten. In Israel memorials to the wars of the young nation state are as pervasive as monuments to Jews exterminated before its creation, and are intended to be just as instructive. In Yugoslavia war memorials are, or were until lately, used as teaching aids.

Their meaning may change, as the meaning of the Arc de Triomphe was transformed by having the unknown soldier buried beneath it. Additions after 1945 to memorials raised after 1918 altered *their* meaning; it is instructive to see how often the new generation avoids the high diction employed by people innocent of the knowledge that what they called the Great War would not, after all, be the greatest. In Spain local initiative is literally changing the meaning of memorials to the country's civil war, altering inscriptions and adding names to convey messages forbidden under Franco. In reunited Germany, Berliners wonder whether the goddess newly replaced on the Brandenburg Gate stands for Victory or for Peace. In the United States the meaning of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1982, became the subject of a passionate national debate whose outcome was to add a dimension of meaning not present in (and on one view not compatible with) the original.

31. Alan R. Young, "We throw the torch": Canadian Memorials of the Great War and the Mythology of Heroic Sacrifice, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 24, 1989-90, Winter, 5.

That Memorial in Washington will be seen, I think, as one of the two historic war memorials of the 1980s. A divided and defeated democracy installed in the national capital a stark, self-effacing monument bearing no inscription, no symbol, nothing except the names of 60,000 dead, in chronological order, and so no statement except that this man and this man and this man died on this and this and this date. The Memorial was entirely paid for by voluntary subscription, the state merely consenting for it to be put on public ground. The designer, chosen by competition, was a young female Chinese-American architecture student. When the monument failed to satisfy conventional triumphalist tastes, the government commissioned a statue of three soldiers and a flag to accompany the wall of names. Peaceable critics of the addition do their best to accommodate it. "Some observers", writes one, "have said that it seems as though the soldiers... are searching for their own names".³² Seen through the eyes of tradition, however, it could still seem to lack something. So when the postal authorities put the Memorial on a stamp for its second anniversary in 1984, the three buddies were made to occupy the foreground, and the high diction deliberately avoided in the design was added: OUR NATION HONORS THE COURAGE, SACRIFICE AND DEVOTION TO DUTY AND COUNTRY OF ITS VIETNAM VETERANS.³³

The other historic war memorial of the 1980s could hardly be more different from Washington's. This is Baghdad's Victory Arch, created by Saddam Husein and inaugurated in 1989 to celebrate the outcome of the war against Iran. The monument depicts the actual fists and forearms of Saddam Husein, made from a cast and then magnified at a foundry in England until it was as high as the Arc de Triomphe. The fists grasp swords which meet forty metres above the ground. The supposedly defeated enemy is represented by five thousand actual Iranian helmets taken from battlefields, and Iraqi soldiers are honoured anonymously, collectively—in this respect the memorial resembles those of pre-democratic Europe—in the steel the swords are made of, taken, according to the official account, from broken machine guns and tanks of Iraqi martyrs. The whole construction rises again, in duplicate, at the other end of a vast parade ground. The monument is designed to complement two others in the landscape of Saddam Hussein's Baghdad, the Unknown Soldier Monument of 1982 and the Martyrs' Monument of 1983, all three commemorating the war against Iran and possibly conceived by the leader even before the war began. The Iraqi author of a powerful meditation on this construction, Samir al-Khalil, asks of his country, as Germans have asked of Nazism: how was the regime that produced this object possible? "Saddam Husein's Iraq", he writes, "is not Idi Amin's

32. J. C. Scruggs and J. L. Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation. The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial*, New York, 1985, dustjacket.

33. I owe this observation to A. R. Young, *loc. cit.*, 21 and n. 89.

Uganda. Like Hitler's Germany, it rests on an authority that has been legitimated".³⁴

Hitler had plans to remove Nelson's Column and erect it in Berlin as a symbol of the Thousand Year Reich. Some among Germany's enemies in 1914-18 wanted to destroy the truculent People's Battle Memorial in Leipzig. Will somebody one day pull down Saddam Husain's Victory Arch? Samir al-Kahlil hopes not. At the end of the book he declares: "The monument will one day have to be confronted, not excised... The responsibility for it—whether individual or collective—is a question which invokes the entire problematic of what happened in Irak."

It is rational to argue that a memorial which should never have been put up should for that very reason not be pulled down? Evidently war memorials have not lost their power to provoke questions.

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34. Samir al-Khalil, *The Monument. Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq*, London, 1991. The author, who is living outside Iraq, writes pseudonymously.