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978-0-521-85415-3 - The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940

Stefan Goebel

Excerpt

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the first global and mass-industrialised war, contemporary observers coined the terms ‘the Great War’ and ‘der große Krieg’ to suggest a temporal watershed, a departure from the conditions of warfare as they had been known before. The Great War of 1914–18 and its attendant emotional shocks and socio-political upheavals rocked the foundations of all belligerent European societies. Some survivors, though, set out to heal the fractures of war by asserting historical continuity through memorials and acts of remembrance. The aim of war commemoration should be, the architect Herbert (later Sir Herbert) Baker suggested shortly after the Armistice, ‘to express the heritage of unbroken history and beauty of England which the sacrifices of our soldiers have kept inviolate’.¹

This book explores the kind of temporal anchoring in the wake of the Great War envisaged by Baker, but from a comparative, Anglo-German perspective (excluding Ireland).² In both Great Britain and Germany, there were people whose epochal consciousness was premised on continuity, people who refused to see history as irretrievably past. Looking to a misty past in order to understand the war-torn present, they enveloped recollections of the First World War in an imagery derived from interpretations of native, pre-industrial history, particularly the Middle Ages. The ‘medievalising’ of the memory of the Great War is the subject-matter of this study. It argues that the Middle Ages figured centrally in the remembrance of the First World War in both Britain and Germany between 1914 and 1940. The Crusades, chivalry and medieval spirituality and mythology provided rich, protean sources of images, tropes and narrative motifs for people to give meaning to the legacy of the Great War.

¹ Herbert Baker, ‘War Memorials: The Ideal of Beauty’, *The Times*, 41993, 9 January 1919, p. 9.

² For a discussion of war and remembrance in Ireland, see Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 4; Anne Dolan, *Commemorating the Irish Civil War: History and Memory, 1923–2000* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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2 The Great War and Medieval Memory

Sites of mourning, sites of mobilisation

Scholars have interpreted war commemorations in general, and war memorials in particular, as either sites of personal mourning or as sites of political (re)mobilisation. Grief was ubiquitous by the end of the First World War, but arguably, so were anger and resentment at the unfulfilled expectations of August 1914. In terms of casualties, the war's toll was appallingly high; in the military service of Britain and Germany roughly one in eight/six men died.³ Politically, Britain had not been transformed into the promised 'land fit for heroes', while Germany was burdened with the twin problems of defeat and revolution.⁴ The rituals and rhetoric of war commemoration have thus been read as attempts to console the bereaved or soothe the frustrated.

In an influential article published in 1981, David Cannadine draws attention to the existential character of commemorative activities. British war memorials, he argues, 'were in large part spontaneously generated by the bereaved for their own comfort [. . .] this "cult of the dead" was not so much "an expression of patriotism" as a display of bereavement'.⁵ Jay Winter, taking his cue from Cannadine, is the most eloquent and decided representative of what might be called the grief school, a historiographical school which assesses the cost of war at much more intimate levels than historians interested in nationalism and identity politics. Winter's main contribution to the debate, which appeared in 1995 under the programmatic title *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, surveys the cultural history of the war in western Europe with the politics left out.⁶ The proliferation of commemorative artefacts and signifying practices (both public and private), he suggests, were above all

³ J[ay] M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Basingstoke and London, Macmillan, 1986), provides full casualty figures.

⁴ For an introduction, see Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1993); Gerard J. DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (London and New York, Longman, 1996).

⁵ David Cannadine, 'War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain', in Joachim Whaley (ed.), *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death* (London, Europa, 1981), p. 219.

⁶ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995). This book has inspired many titles in the *Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press) and *The Legacy of the Great War* (Berg) series, both edited by Jay Winter. See, for example, David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Great Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919-1939* (Oxford and New York, Berg, 1998); Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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reflections of the depth of the trauma of 1914–18, understood as a sustained mass experience leaving particularly dense memory traces.⁷

This is not to say that one huge community of suffering was created by the losses of the Great War; what mattered was the accumulated presence of death in society, and it is through this fog that individual emotions were mediated. War memorials providing symbolic foci of bereavement functioned as substitutes for the graves of the missing and the absent dead (soldiers and sailors).⁸ Notably, in Britain and Germany, the two major belligerents which, generally speaking, did not repatriate their fallen soldiers, monuments helped to trigger memory in the absence of bodies. Originally advanced by historians of Britain, the grief theory has recently been endorsed by works on the German memory landscape. A thorough case study of the Rhenish district of Viersen stresses the sombre, existential purpose of war memorials and – despite French occupation – their relative freedom from expressions of bitterness and revanchism.⁹

In placing emphasis on the personal instead of the political, these authors react against an older strain of historiography which has neglected to take seriously contemporaries' need to mourn the dead. The functionalist school conceptualises memory as a resource of symbolic power which can be marshalled just like material power. In a groundbreaking article published as early as 1978, Reinhart Koselleck traces the evolution of the cult of the fallen soldier in Europe since the late eighteenth century. In the modern age, Koselleck maintains, the meaning of death is no longer attached to references to the hereafter. Instead, political meanings of this world are invented. The war memorial as a political tool, Koselleck writes, 'gives the remembering of the soldiers'

⁷ Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, 'Setting the Framework', in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 6–39. See also Paul Lerner and Mark S. Micale, 'Trauma, Psychiatry, and History: A Conceptual and Historiographical Introduction', in Mark S. Micale and Paul Lerner (eds.), *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870–1930* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 20–1.

⁸ K[en] S. Inglis, 'War Memorials: Ten Questions for Historians', *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains*, 167 (1992), p. 9.

⁹ Arie Nabrings, '... eine immerfort währende Mahnung . . .': *Denkmäler für die Gefallenen des I. Weltkriegs im Kreis Viersen* (Viersen, Kreis Viersen, 1996), pp. 125, 141. On nearby Düsseldorf, see Susanne Brandt, 'Trauer und fortgesetzter Krieg: Totengedenken zwischen Trauer und Kriegsverherrlichung in Düsseldorf nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg', in Jost Dülffer and Gerd Krumeich (eds.), *Der verlorene Frieden: Politik und Kriegskultur nach 1918* (Essen, Klartext, 2002), p. 260. On rural Bavaria, see Benjamin Ziemann, *Front und Heimat: Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern 1914–1923* (Essen, Klartext, 1997), p. 460.

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death an earthly function directed only towards the future of those still living. This disappearance of the Christian interpretation of death creates a vacuum for the establishment of purely political and social meanings.¹⁰ In subsequent publications, Koselleck and his pupils have refined the argument, but the late Professor Koselleck's definitive work on European war memorials was still unpublished at his death. Meanwhile, George L. Mosse has written a stimulating account of Great War remembrance and its nineteenth-century precursors, extending the work of Koselleck. In his book *Fallen Soldiers*, Mosse shows how the dual impulses of trivialisation and sacralisation played into the hands of extremist forces who thus managed to instrumentalise the memory of the world war.¹¹ A congenial discourse to right-wing politics, war commemoration, especially in Germany, became eventually subsumed in rehearsals for fascism.

The functionalist position taken by Koselleck and Mosse reflects two general features of the German historiographical agenda: its political focus and its preoccupation with National Socialism. Mosse's *ideologiekritisch* stance on inter-war commemoration, in particular, has been moulded by the Nazi cult of the dead. With the wisdom of hindsight, he conflates the phenomenon of war memory with its fascist incarnations. Unsurprisingly, British research into the political implications of war remembrance has, by and large, followed a different trajectory, emphasising negotiation rather than manipulation. Nevertheless the work of Bob Bushaway departs from this interpretative pattern. Like Mosse, he assumes that commemorations reinforced a kind of false consciousness. But unlike Mosse, Bushaway construes the British cult of the fallen soldier as a force of social integration and moderate conservatism instead of political polarisation and extreme nationalism. The elevation of the dead, Bushaway points out, inhibited criticism of Britain's social and political constitution.¹² By contrast, other scholars

¹⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, 'Kriegerdenkmale als Identitätsstiftungen der Überlebenden', in Odo Marquard and Karlheinz Stierle (eds.), *Identität* (Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1979), p. 259. More recently, Koselleck has developed his ideas in *Zur politischen Ikonologie des gewaltsamen Todes: Ein deutsch-französischer Vergleich* (Basle, Schwabe, 1998). See also Reinhart Koselleck and Michael Jeismann (eds.), *Der politische Totenkult: Kriegerdenkmäler in der Moderne* (Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1994). Two important works inspired by Koselleck are Meinhold Lurz, *Kriegerdenkmäler in Deutschland*, 6 vols. (Heidelberg, Esprint, 1985-7); Gerhard Schneider, '... nicht umsonst gefallen?' *Kriegerdenkmäler und Kriegstotenkult in Hannover* (Hanover, Hahn, 1991).

¹¹ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹² Bob Bushaway, 'Name upon Name: The Great War and Remembrance', in Roy Porter (ed.), *Myths of the English* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992), pp. 136-67. See also his more

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have revealed the multivocality of commemorative discourses. Alex King, in his exhaustive study *Memorials of the Great War in Britain*, finds that the dead were invoked in both conservative and radical causes. Moreover, he allows that bereavement remained a decisive factor: 'Personal feelings and needs were deeply involved in the practice of commemoration; but it was the organisation of public action which gave it form. At the same time, commemoration raised political issues which participants had to address.'¹³

This study aims to synthesise the two schools of thought outlined above. The commemorations I analyse colonised the grey area between the personal and the political. The survivors' decision to remember collectively, to act in public, originated in the overwhelming experience of war as trauma. While remembrance activities could not cure sadness, they helped with the management of bereavement. Narrowly political readings of war commemorations, treating them as monumental manifestos, have overlooked this aspect of their significance. Yet if mourning was profoundly personal, remembrance – through the establishment of social networks and the formulation of languages of commemoration – was a socially framed, value-laden practice and thus inherently political (in the broadest sense). The challenge is, however, to avoid the pitfall of equating political with politicised. To remember meant to affirm or reassemble community, to aver its legitimacy and morality, but not necessarily to engage in the partisan politics of the day. To be sure, the need of the bereaved for solemn, public acknowledgment of personal grief, on the one hand, and the interest of the state or its subsidiary

recent statement, 'The Obligation of Remembrance or the Remembrance of Obligation: Society and Memory of World War', in Peter Liddle, John Bourne and Ian Whitehead (eds.), *The Great World War 1914-45*, vol. II, *The Peoples' Experience* (London, Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 489–508. See also Nick Mansfield, 'Class Conflict and Village War Memorials, 1914–24', *Rural History*, 6 (1995), p. 84.

¹³ Alex King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance* (Oxford and New York, Berg, 1998), p. 6. British war memorials have been thoroughly explored in recent years; see especially Mark Connelly, *The Great War, Memory and Ritual: Commemoration in the City and East London, 1916–1939* (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY, Boydell, 2002); Angela Gaffney, *Aftermath: Remembering the Great War in Wales* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1998); Catherine Moriarty, 'Narrative and the Absent Body: Mechanisms of Meaning in First World War Memorials', D.Phil. dissertation, University of Sussex, 1995; Keith Gieves, 'Investigating Local War Memorial Committees: Demobilised Soldiers, the Bereaved and Expressions of Local Pride in Sussex Villages, 1918–1921', *Local Historian*, 30 (2000), pp. 39–58. For the purpose of comparison, see K[en] S. Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1998); Chris Maclean and Jock Phillips, *The Sorrow and the Pride: New Zealand War Memorials* (Wellington, GP, 1990).

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6 The Great War and Medieval Memory

organisations in giving this some concrete political meaning, on the other, have frequently proved compatible.¹⁴

**European convergences, national peculiarities,
and sectional diversities**

This book ventures into a significantly underdeveloped field of historical enquiry: empirical comparative history. Notwithstanding decades of European integration and burgeoning globalisation, the overwhelming majority of historians today are still imprisoned in the national framework firmly established by the founding fathers of our subject in the nineteenth century. The shortcomings and distorting effects of a narrowly national approach are particularly apparent in the field of cultural history, for its categories have never been national in scope or content. Still, those who have embarked on comparative cultural history in search of a panacea have found themselves opening up Pandora's box. The archival holdings are vast, the secondary literatures rarely congruent, and languages unevenly mastered. Cross-national approaches involve a radically selective treatment of the past and its documentation. But language poses probably the greatest obstacle of all. Salman Rushdie's dictum that a culture is defined by its untranslatable words highlights the problematical situation facing comparative cultural historians who presume a primacy of texts and languages.¹⁵ In particular, the evocative rhetoric of medievalism tends to defy translation. I have attempted to

¹⁴ See Peter Fritzsche, 'The Case of Modern Memory', *Journal of Modern History*, 73 (2001), pp. 107–8; T[imothy] G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper, 'The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration: Contexts, Structures and Dynamics', in T[imothy] G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper (eds.), *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (London and New York, Routledge, 2000), pp. 3–85.

¹⁵ Jay Winter, 'Shell-Shock and the Cultural History of the Great War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35 (2000), p. 8. See also Pierre Bourdieu, 'Die Besonderheiten der Nationalgeschichten: Vergleichende Geschichte relevanter Unterschiede zwischen den Nationen', in Pierre Bourdieu, *Schwierige Interdisziplinarität: Zum Verhältnis von Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. Elke Ohnacker and Franz Schultheis (Münster, Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2004), p. 160. For a discussion of definitions and methodology, see Hartmut Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich: Eine Einführung zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main and New York, Campus, 1999); Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka, 'Historischer Vergleich: Methoden, Aufgaben, Probleme: Eine Einleitung', in Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka (eds.), *Geschichte und Vergleich: Ansätze und Ergebnisse international vergleichender Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt am Main and New York, Campus, 1996), pp. 9–45; Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor, 'Introduction: Comparative History, Cross-National History, Transnational History – Definitions', in Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor (eds.), *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective* (New York and London, Routledge, 2004), pp. ix–xxiv.

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render quotations from German sources into English, but the polyglot reader should consult the German originals provided in the notes.

The marginality of comparative research contrasts with the prominence of comparative assumptions and statements. A whole generation of critical German social historians has claimed that the German way of modernisation represented a *Sonderweg*, a ‘special path’, which diverged from the western democracies, notably Britain and France, and ultimately led to the Nazi dictatorship. Today, many historians believe the *Sonderweg* thesis to be dead, buried in the 1980s by British historians working on modern German history and its peculiarities.¹⁶ Yet Heinrich August Winkler has recently revived the idea in his magisterial *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, a history of Germany from the end of the Holy Roman Empire to the reunification. ‘There *was* a German *Sonderweg*’, he concludes, ‘It was the long path towards modernity taken by a country shaped and moulded by the Middle Ages.’¹⁷ Such a sweeping comparative conclusion to a mono-national study – quite illustrative of a number of works on the German *Sonderweg* – is both theoretically and methodologically problematic.¹⁸ First, it makes a normative presupposition, setting the exceptional (German) against the normal (western) model. Second, it is not the result of a thorough exploration of the comparative method, but of selective readings of Anglo-American and French secondary works.

The notion of a German special path of commemoration is also established in the corpus of the historiography of the First World War, although most authors eschew the *Sonderweg* terminology. George L. Mosse contends that the cult of the fallen soldier, while non-poisonous in the victorious countries, namely Britain and France, had not only greater urgency in defeated Germany, reinforcing fascism, but also a brutal edge, legitimising violence.¹⁹ While Mosse in his broad survey of four nations necessarily paints with bold strokes, narrower approaches singling out one specific feature for comparison have the advantage of drawing a more

¹⁶ David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984); Richard J. Evans, *Rethinking German History: Nineteenth-Century Germany and the Origins of the Third Reich* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1987).

¹⁷ Heinrich August Winkler, *The Long Shadow of the Reich: Weighing up German History* (London, German Historical Institute, 2002), p. 20, author’s italics; and his *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, vol. II, *Deutsche Geschichte vom ‘Dritten Reich’ bis zur Wiedervereinigung* (Munich, C. H. Beck, 2000), p. 648.

¹⁸ John Breuilly, ‘Introduction: Making Comparisons in History’, in John Breuilly, *Labour and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Essays in Comparative History* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 6–7.

¹⁹ Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, pp. 106, 124.

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nuanced, and perhaps balanced, picture. Nevertheless, a recent comparative study of French and German war memorials basically confirms Mosse's thesis. German memorials after 1918, this study concludes, were monumental manifestations of dull heroism, overt revanchism and martial manliness, whereas their French equivalents conveyed a broad spectrum of messages ranging from pacifism to patriotism. What is more, *monuments aux morts* were generally places where people assembled to grieve in public.²⁰ In a nutshell, it seems that the Germans mobilised and the French mourned. While victory meant cultural closure, defeat left a symbolic vacuum that the nationalists attempted to fill. The French side of this analysis owes much to the pioneering work of Antoine Prost.²¹ War memorials in France, Prost tells us, evolved into sites where the veterans could teach their children that war was an abomination, never to be re-enacted – in stark contrast, it seems, to their bellicose German counterparts, unwilling to accept defeat.

Historical comparisons, Hartmut Kaelble has noted, tend to concentrate on national idiosyncrasies and to overlook cultural convergences.²² Scholars disclosing the commonality of cultural history, however, often receive vicious criticism from their peers. Jay Winter has controversially drawn attention to the traditional overemphasis of the facts of victory and defeat. 'They mattered; but all too often victory had a taste of ashes.' He adds that 'all major combatants went through a "special" path, the path of collective slaughter'.²³ Victory was cool consolation for those who were in mourning. Among the major belligerents, Winter estimates, virtually every family had lost a father, a husband, a son, a brother or a friend. In fact, people were also shocked or sentimental about deaths of men they knew only slightly, or even not at all. The cultural history of the war is inseparable from its demographic history.²⁴ Death and

²⁰ Michael Jeismann and Rolf Westheider, 'Wofür stirbt der Bürger? Nationaler Totenkult und Staatsbürgertum in Deutschland und Frankreich seit der Französischen Revolution', in Reinhart Koselleck and Michael Jeismann (eds.), *Der politische Totenkult: Kriegerdenkmäler in der Moderne* (Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1994), pp. 29–30. See also Omer Bartov, 'Trauma and Absence: France and Germany, 1914–1945', in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939–1945* (London, Pimlico, 1997), pp. 353–4.

²¹ Antoine Prost, 'Monuments to the Dead', in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: The Reconstruction of the French Past*, vol. II, *Traditions* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 307–30. See also Antoine Prost, 'The Impact of War on French and German Political Cultures', *Historical Journal*, 37 (1994), pp. 209–17.

²² Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich*, p. 22.

²³ Winter, *Sites of Memory*, p. 227.

²⁴ Winter, *Great War*, ch. 9. See also Jay Winter, 'Forms of Kinship and Remembrance in the Aftermath of the Great War', in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (eds.), *War and*

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bereavement became the salient signatures of the then bloodiest war in modern history and its cultural repercussions. The exploration of mourning uncovers fully the European dimension of the Great War. Nonetheless, the codes of mourning can differ between nations since they are drawn from the respective national repertoires of cultural forms and practices. At the same time, national styles of commemoration were not independent of one another, and the historian has to consider the importance of intersecting memories originating in mutual observation and – positive as well as negative – inter-cultural transfer.²⁵ For example, the meteoric rise of the institution of the unknown soldier throughout (and beyond) Europe – with the notable exception of Germany – illuminates the high degree of cultural exchange in the inter-war period.²⁶

Even though the First World War was, by definition, a transnational event, commemoration was, on the whole, cast within the confines of national culture. The nation state has, therefore, remained the preferred analytical unit of cultural history. But increasingly, mono-national works employ an implicit or reflective comparative method, presenting national evidence in the light of international findings.²⁷ Adrian Gregory's powerful *The Silence of Memory*, an exploration of the British Armistice Day ritual between 1919 and 1946, uses comparison as a heuristic tool. It

Remembrance in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 40–60. A provocative reappraisal is offered by Adrian Gregory, 'Demobilizing the Nation: Remobilizing the Dead: The Persistent Mythologies of British Commemoration', paper presented at the conference on 'Demobilizing the Mind: Culture, Politics and the Legacy of the Great War, 1919–1933', Trinity College, Dublin, 26 August–8 September 2001.

²⁵ Stefan Goebel, 'Intersecting Memories: War and Remembrance in Twentieth-Century Europe', *Historical Journal*, 44 (2001), pp. 853–8. On the concepts of cultural transfers and entangled history, see Michel Espagne, 'Sur les limites du comparatisme en histoire culturelle', *Genèses*, 17 (1994), pp. 112–21; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, 'Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung: Der Ansatz der *Histoire croisée* und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28 (2002), pp. 607–36. On cultural exchanges between Britain and Germany in particular, see Rudolf Muhs, Johannes Paulmann and Willibald Steinmetz (eds.), *Aneignung und Abwehr: Interkultureller Transfer zwischen Deutschland und Großbritannien im 19. Jahrhundert* (Bodenheim, Philo, 1998).

²⁶ K[en] S. Inglis, 'Entombing Unknown Soldiers: From London and Paris to Baghdad', *History and Memory*, 5, 2 (1993), pp. 7–31; Volker Ackermann, 'La vision allemande du soldat inconnu: débats politiques, réflexion philosophique et artistique', in Jean-Jacques Becker et al. (eds.), *Guerres et cultures, 1914–1918: Vers une histoire comparée de la Grande Guerre* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1994), pp. 385–96.

²⁷ Rudy Koshar, *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870–1990* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 2000) is a good example.

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seeks to answer the question why war remembrance in Britain was markedly different from the French and German models described by Prost and Mosse respectively. In the end, Gregory rejects the idea of a unitary national version of Great War remembrance but underlines the plurality of British memories of war. Instead of presenting a state-bounded narrative, he highlights sectional diversities (such as class, denomination, gender and region) within the national community of inter-war Britain.²⁸

In sum, the comparative historian of the First World War seems to tread a tightrope between emphasising European convergences, national peculiarities, or sectional diversities within nations. However, the authors of *Capital Cities at War* conclude their collective research into the microcosms of wartime Paris, London and Berlin by reasserting that the ‘analytical force of the comparison is [. . .] to revise and rejuvenate, rather than to reject, national histories. For only after discovering convergences [. . .] can true national distinctions be made.’²⁹

Medievalism and the modern

Much recent writing of the Great War discusses to what extent the years 1914–18 marked a cultural disjuncture in contemporary history. What is at issue here is the significance of the war as the incubator of ‘modernism’, often understood as a new, iconoclastic language of truth-telling about war in art and literature. The controversy has been sparked off in 1975 by Paul Fussell’s classic *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Analysing the writings of (ex-)servicemen like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon and other, non-combatant writers like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Fussell comes to the conclusion that the war gave way to an attitude of ironic scepticism and bitter disillusionment.³⁰ Fussell’s contention that there was a fundamental link between the

²⁸ Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919–1946* (Oxford and Providence, Berg, 1994), p. 6. On regional peculiarities and comparative history, see Deborah Cohen, ‘Comparative History: Buyer Beware’, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C.*, 29 (2001), p. 26.

²⁹ Jean-Louis Robert and Jay Winter, ‘Conclusions: Towards a Social History of Capital Cities at War’, in Jay Winter, Jean-Louis Robert [et al.], *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914–1919*, vol. I (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 553. See also the forthcoming second volume.

³⁰ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 35. See Leonard V. Smith, ‘Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*: Twenty-Five Years Later’, *History and Theory*, 40 (2001), pp. 241–60.