

## INTRODUCTION

What we know of war is always mediated knowledge and feeling. The event itself, what Walt Whitman called the “red business,”<sup>1</sup> the actual killing, is beyond us. We need lenses to filter out some of its blinding, terrifying light in order to see it at all. I want to draw attention to these lenses as the elements which make understanding war possible at the same time as they limit what we see. These lenses are not fixed; they change over time, and following such transformations in the ways we have imagined war since 1914 is one of the aims of this book.

Some of these lenses are furnished by the languages we speak. Here too I claim that each language carries its own lexicon about war, in which are imprinted traces of the experience of armed conflict. Thus the way the French speak of war is not at all identical to the way the British or the Germans speak of it; within anglophone culture, distinctions persist too. The Irish vocabulary of war in the early twentieth century was very different from the English one.

Other lenses come with the nature of the creative arts – sculpture, painting, photography and film. All present highly mediated images of war which in turn circulate through language to constitute in part what Jan and Aleida Assmann term the “cultural memory” of war.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, “Drum-taps,” the Walt Whitman archive, published works, [www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1867/poems/159](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1867/poems/159). This and all the other Internet citations listed in what follows were used between 2009 and 2016.

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to the Assmanns’ approach, see: Jan Assmann’s seminal article, written with Aleida Assmann and translated by John Czaplicka, “Collective memory and cultural identity,” *New German Critique*, 65 (Spring–Summer 1995), pp. 125–33;

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My central premise, therefore, is that language frames memory. Here I use the term “language” to describe the ways different creative arts, including the art of speech, have framed our meditations on war. In the first part of this book, we start with configuring war, including painting and sculpture, before turning to photographing war, to filming war, and then to writing war. Each of these vast fields of creative activity has a history, and I try to describe thematic, spatial, and temporal variations in these mediated images of war produced in the century which has passed since 1914.

In the second part of the book, I examine what I term frameworks of memory, through which what Samuel Hynes termed our “war in the head,”<sup>3</sup> our imaginings of war, are set. The first chapter turns to memory and the sacred, and explores different patterns of recourse to images of martyrs and martyrdom as a way of understanding mass death in the twentieth century. The second is spatial in character, and refers to choices artists, designers, and architects have made when using the horizontal axis and/or the vertical axis to organize a site of memory or other kinds of monuments and commemorative works. Finally, I turn to silence, defined as a socially constructed space in which everyone knows what no one says. Silence, I believe, is a language of memory in its own right. Here the argument is based on a study of shell shock, occluded, ignored, and underestimated radically by officials and physicians, but present nonetheless in the lives of former soldiers. As in all the previous chapters, this story of silence, the suppression of troubling images and events, starts in 1914 and continues to our own times.

This study is perforce incomplete. There are other important fields – for instance, music – which require detailed examination by

and Jan Assmann, “Communicative and cultural memory,” in A. Erll and A. Nünning (eds.), in collaboration with S. B. Young, *Cultural memory studies: An international and interdisciplinary handbook* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 109–18. For the full range of reference in the Assmanns’ work, see Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2006); her *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1999; 4th edn. 2009); her *Geschichte im Gedächtnis. Von der individuellen Erfahrung zur öffentlichen Inszenierung* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2007), and Jan Assmann’s classic, *Moses the Egyptian. The memory of Egypt in western monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). Their scholarship is the gold standard in this field.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Hynes, *A war imagined: The First World War in English culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990) and *The soldiers’ tale. Bearing witness to modern war* (New York: Allen Lane, 1997).

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those qualified to do so. This book is more a series of reflections in cultural history than an authoritative and exhaustive study of any one of its branches.

In another important respect, this is a personal book. It is based on archival research, and substantial secondary sources, but given the fact that much of the material on which this book is based is visual and that many of these images are in the public domain, the choices I have made remain, to a degree, arbitrary. I believe this is unavoidable, and that other researchers addressing the questions I have posed would come to roughly similar solutions using other sources.

Still it is in the interests of full disclosure to admit that, using the experience of forty years as an historian, I have tried to understand, with whatever compassion I could register, the horrors of industrial war and mass death and to survey the diverse ways men and women have wrestled with the intractable task of conveying what twentieth-century wars meant to them and mean to us. I have reflected on a partial and limited selection of representations of war I have seen or read or traversed. Having made this journey over my academic career, I have concluded that there are a number of findings I can convey which may be of interest to scholars and laymen alike.

The first is that there was a shift from 1914 to the end of the twentieth century and after from representing war to representing warriors. Focusing on soldiers rather than on the larger framework of armed conflict opened up the possibility that soldiers themselves were victims of war, whether they were on the winning or the losing side. And this change coincided with a second significant development. Over the same period, representing war came to mean representing civilian victims of war and genocide. Taken together, these two trends in representation helped undermine the legitimacy of war as an instrument of political life. If war is inevitably a Pandora's box, which once opened, yields horrors no one had anticipated in full, then the resort to war is a resort to an unacceptable state of affairs.

This conclusion applies, as I state openly in several chapters, in some parts of the world and not in others. And yet, even if limited, this is a significant matter for us all. For the delegitimation of war is, to a degree, the delegitimation of the powers of the state, defined by Weber as that institution which has a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force. In 1914, war was a "normal" part of the political

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landscape; I claim that in some places this is no longer the case, and that what I term the arts of memory show that this is so.

In large parts of the world – Eastern Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Asia, and parts of the United States – what Judith Butler terms the “frames of war,” the discursive and visual fields in which armed conflict makes “sense,” are alive and well, and continue to justify, legitimate and at times glorify war and warriors. This is both true and at the heart of a real divide in which conversations about war take place today<sup>4</sup> in different locations. It is hardly surprising that those countries which still bear the marks and memories of the slaughter of the First World War have developed different “frames of war” than those whose memories were either occluded, as in Russia, or of less significance than those following the “good war” of 1941–45 in the United States.

My argument that language frames memory applies to many other phenomena than war. The same assertion would hold with respect to memories of love or childhood or politics.<sup>5</sup> Memories of war in the twentieth century are different, though, in that they deal with exceptional and extreme experiences of massive, industrialized, violence and mass death. As Primo Levi put it, the only people fully qualified to speak about these matters are the dead themselves. That does not justify silence among the survivors, but it does require us to admit that all attempts to configure war in our time, to transmit its terrifying meaning in full, are bound to fail. And yet, as this book shows, so many people have tried to do so over the last century, and I am one of those who still goes on trying.

Taken together, these chapters are intended to contribute to three separate fields. The first is the cultural history of modern warfare.<sup>6</sup> The second is what we now term “memory studies,”<sup>7</sup> a growing field

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), pp. xii in the introduction to the paperback edition.

<sup>5</sup> I owe much to Antoine Prost for his comments on this point.

<sup>6</sup> I define cultural history as the study of signifying practices in the past. The literature on this subject is so vast that it would be invidious to cite one or two individuals as leading players in the field. One way to gain an introduction is to read volume III, on civil society, of the *Cambridge history of the First World War*, edited by Jay Winter (3 vols.; Cambridge University Press, 2014). Each chapter has a bibliographical essay which refers the reader to the wealth of research available in this field. Many of these approaches have been applied to later twentieth-century wars and their cultural consequences.

<sup>7</sup> See the journals *Memory Studies* and *History and Memory*, based in Britain and Israel, respectively. See also, Jeffrey K. Olick, “Between chaos and diversity: is social memory

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on its own, but one which offers much to students of war. The third is the study of the history of concepts, or *Begriffsgeschichte*, pioneered by Reinhart Koselleck.<sup>8</sup> By exploring the words and images we have used over time to talk about war, we disclose some surprising trajectories of what I term languages of memory, and thereby deepen our understanding of how we have tried to make sense of armed conflict since the first fully industrialized war broke out in 1914.

Let me reiterate one central point. Languages, in the sense I am using the term, are as protean as war itself. We are dealing with two unstable, even dynamic and at times volatile, variables – war and language. A high degree of selection is inevitable, both in subject matter and in geographical reach. But even if the book were twice as large and if it were to take twice as long to write, the problem of the representativeness of the material I present here would still remain. In no sense could this book be comprehensive or exhaustive.

Still, it goes beyond the solely British, French, and German focus of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, which I published twenty years ago. It refers time and again to the Shoah, a subject I have not had the courage to treat until now, fifty years after starting my work as an historian. It deals with matters of perennial concern in our own turbulent times.

Leon Trotsky is said to have noted to those uninterested in the history of armed conflict that you may not be interested in war, but war is very interested in you. The cruelties of today's wars span the globe, and seem immune to containment by law, by force, or by persuasion. Anyone who thinks that I write here of a subject with purely academic interest, should think again. In sum, this book offers a pathway into the deep shadows twentieth-century war has cast on our imaginations, a pathway that I hope younger scholars will follow in the coming years.

studies a field?," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 22, 2 (2009), pp. 249–52; Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social memory studies: From 'collective memory' to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), pp. 105–40; and Anna Green, "Individual remembering and 'collective memory': Theoretical presuppositions and contemporary debates," *Oral History*, 32, 2 (2004), pp. 35–44.

<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to Koselleck and his school, see Sandro Chignola and João Feres Júnior, "In honor of Reinhart Koselleck," *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 2, 1 (March 2006), pp. 3–6; Kari Palonen, "The politics of conceptual history," *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 1, 1 (March 2005), pp. 37–50; and Reinhart Koselleck, Javiér Fernández Sebastián, and Juan Francisco Fuentes, "Conceptual history, memory, and identity: An interview with Reinhart Koselleck," *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 2, 1 (March 2006), pp. 99–127.